

Eric Simonson rests on Everest's East Rongbuk Glacier, where his team found its first clue that related to lost Everest pioneers George Mallory and Sandy Irvine.

MASTER

of the

MOUNTAIN

By Bruce Rushton

Before Eric Simonson made history atop the world on a mountain called Everest, he climbed in Scouting to become an Eagle.

This time, nothing would keep Eric Simonson from the top of Mount Everest. Twice before, the

mountain had defeated him. In 1987, during his second attempt, he thought long and hard before turning around with the 29,035-foot summit less than 300 feet above. He and his partner had run out of rope. While he was pretty sure he could make it up, descending without a safety line was another matter. He wasn't interested in a one-way trip.

Now, four years later, things were different. Climbers before him had sacrificed fingers, toes and sometimes their lives. Simonson knew that he too had reached that point at which men desperate for the top have taken off gloves and boots to gain better holds,

despite subzero temperatures that can freeze flesh solid. "I was very, very determined to make the summit," he recalls. "Maybe I would have

taken my gloves off. I don't think I've ever felt quite that way before or since then."

That's what the world's highest mountain will do to a man, especially on the upper slopes known as the Death Zone, a place where scarce oxygen forces climbers to bring their own supply. Blinding storms sneak up suddenly.

Simonson reached the summit with fingers and toes intact that day in 1991. He couldn't know that an even greater challenge lay ahead.

So determined was Simonson that he barely paused when he found an old oxygen tank about 1,000 feet



Not Mount Everest—yet. Simonson prepares for a 1965 Scout outing.

Courtesy of Eric Simonson

Courtesy of Eric Simonson



EVEREST PIONEERS

George Leigh Mallory (below, right) did not know Andrew "Sandy" Irvine (left) when their fateful expedition began and the photo below was taken in 1924, but they soon became friends.

They were less than 1,000 feet from success and making steady progress when a fellow climber who stayed behind at high camp last saw them.

Thanks to an expedition led by Eric Simonson, the world learned that Mallory died after breaking a leg in a fall. He was found facedown on a steep slope with his arms stretched above him. His fingers were dug into loose rock, as if trying to pull himself to the summit. Irvine was never found, nor his camera ever recovered. No one knows if they made it to Everest's summit.

below the summit. "I picked up the bottle and said, 'Huh, that's an old bottle,' and I pitched it," he says. "All you want to do is get to the top. I decided it was too heavy to carry. After I got home, I kicked myself for being so stupid."

Simonson had stumbled across a clue in one of mountaineering's most enduring mysteries. The bottle was from a 1924 British expedition. No one knows whether George Leigh Mallory and his companion Andrew Irvine made it to the top—most deaths on Everest occur during descent—and no one knows how they died (see "Everest Pioneers"). The two climbers vanished into clouds

within a few hours of the summit, the closest any human had come to the top of the world. No one climbed as high again until 1953, when Everest was conquered by New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, a native of Nepal, where Everest is located.

In 1999, Simonson returned to Everest to search for Mallory and Irvine and solve the mystery.

packer when his father took him to a lecture by Whittaker. Simonson's dream was born as he listened to Whittaker, an Eagle Scout, and others from his team describe their adventures.

"I'll never forget it," Simonson says. "I was 10 years old. I got books at the library about the history of Everest."

Simonson joined Scouting a year later. It proved the perfect bridge between family camping trips and brutal climbs above treeline. "Scouting really provided an opportunity to take that next step," he says. "We tried to do a camp-out every month. In Washington State, that can get grim. I can remember some wet, rainy days in February."

"Basically," recalls boyhood friend Alan Billingsley, "every single weekend, he and I and another friend went hiking and climbing." Billingsley, who joined Scouts with Simonson, presented him with the Distinguished Eagle Award during the 2001 National Scout Jamboree.

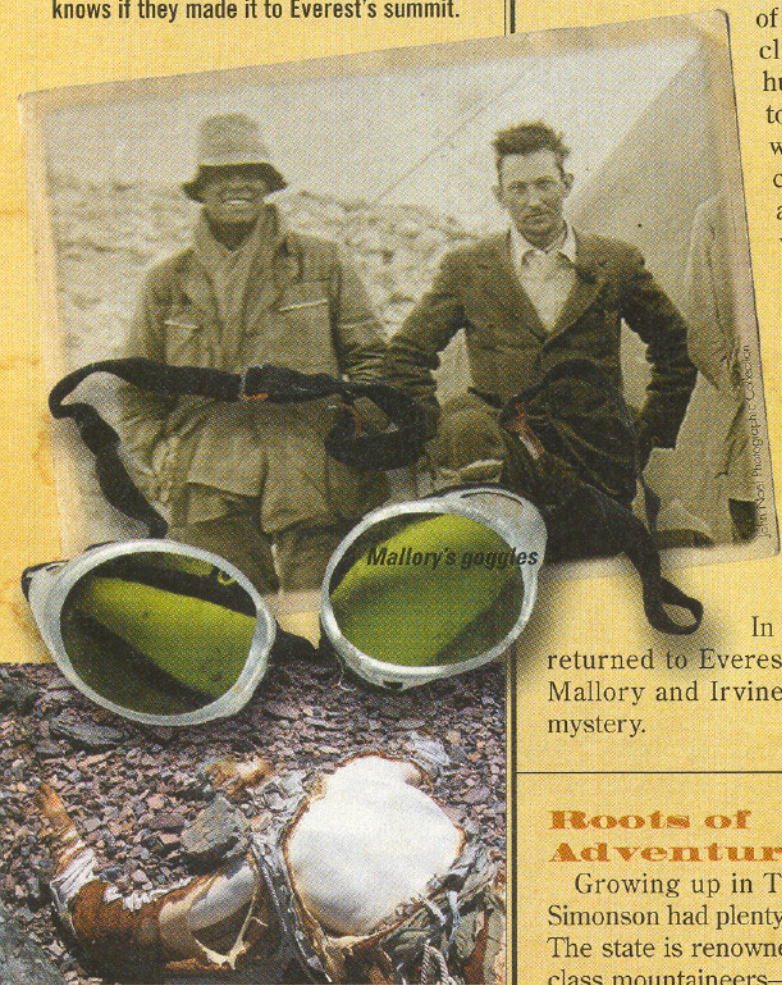
Simonson made Eagle at 14, three years after becoming a Scout. "I didn't feel like I hurried," he says. "Once you get involved in something, you want to keep moving."

All the Wrong Moves

Simonson climbed his first mountain when he was 15. At 14,410 feet, Mount Rainier is the tallest mountain in Washington and no cinch for anyone.

"I puked two times on the way up," Simonson recalls. "When we finished, I went into a full body cramp. I basically did everything wrong. I was not eating enough. I was not drinking enough water. I hung in there, but that taught me something: When you go out all day long, you've got to be aware of where your gas gauge is."

The agony was worth it. More



Mallory's goggles

Roots of Adventure

Growing up in Tacoma, Wash., Simonson had plenty of role models. The state is renowned for its world-class mountaineers—Jim Whittaker, the first American to climb Everest, in 1963, lived in Seattle, less than an hour's drive from Simonson's home.

Simonson was a beginning back-

In 1999, the world saw photographic evidence of the outcome of one of mountaineering's greatest mysteries: The body of George Leigh Mallory. Simonson's team buried Mallory on the mountain.

Goggles: Mallory and Irvine Expedition/Jim Fogarty/Jason Higgins/Robert David Horn/Tenzen Agency

than 30 years later, he sports a big grin when recalling that first climb to a mountaintop. "I was very happy," he says. "Very proud and very happy. It doesn't subside. It was a very strong feeling of satisfaction I kept with me long after. That really fired my imagination to go and do more."

Learning by Experience

Mountaineering may seem a lonely pursuit, but Simonson loves the camaraderie. "You can learn more about somebody going out with them for a few days on a climb than you can in years in the city," he says. "The stressful environment really brings out people's true nature. I haven't seen it all, but I've seen a lot."

Including death.

During Simonson's first Everest trip in 1982, fellow climber Marty Hoey plunged off the mountain's north face, never to be seen again. Nonetheless, the team, led by Lou Whittaker (Jim's twin, and one-time Star Scout), pressed on. But Everest proved too tough.

"That was a real blow," Simonson says. "Marty was a close friend to all of us on the team. I basically hit the switch and did not grieve. I did grieve later—it was about a week later that it really hit me. Climbing really makes you appreciate your friends more. You can't take your friends for granted. Or life itself."

At 47, Simonson is more careful than ever, especially since the birth of his first child two years ago. But he can't make a mountain risk-free. "To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't want to," he says. "Life would be pretty boring if we were always 100 percent safe. The point is, you want to be smart about it."

Being afraid is part of the game. Better to worry before crossing an avalanche zone than panic halfway across when the slope slides. "I like to think fear's your insurance policy," he says. "There's a difference between fear that paralyzes you, which is bad, and fear that makes you think."



File photo

Eric Simonson has led expeditions up mountains throughout the world as well as a special research team on Mount Everest.

Courtesy of Eric Simonson



ERIC SIMONSON AT A GLANCE

BORN: March 13, 1955, Evanston, Ill.

LIVES: Tacoma, Wash.

HEIGHT: 6 feet 4 inches.

WEIGHT: 200 lbs.

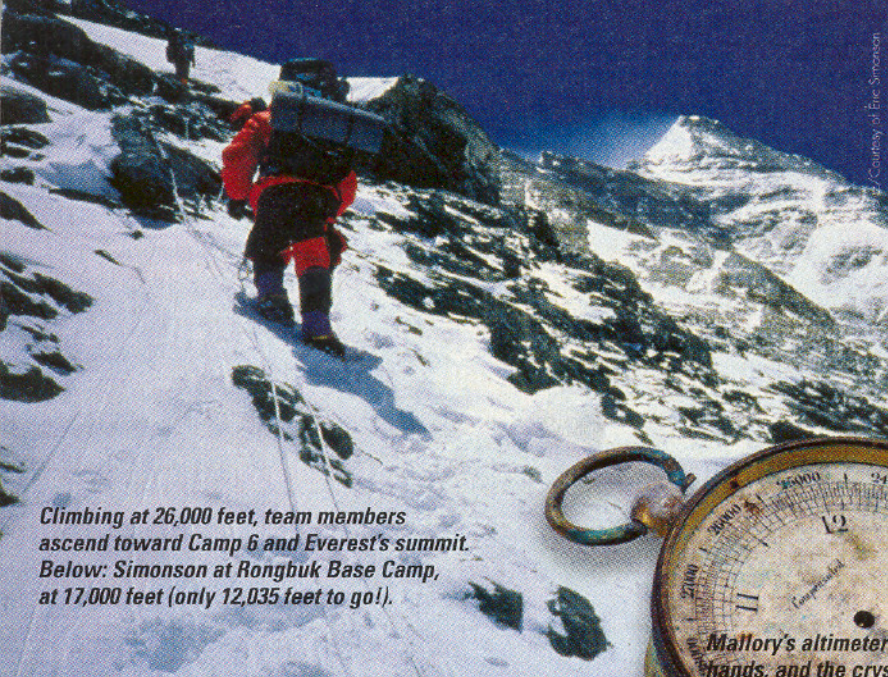
FAVORITE FOOD: Rocky Road ice cream.

CLIMBING HIGHLIGHTS: Led 85 expeditions around the globe and has climbed the highest mountain on every continent, including one summit each of Asia's Mount Everest (29,035 feet; world's highest) and Cho Oyu (26,906 feet); 16 times atop Alaska's Mount McKinley (20,320 feet; North America's highest); three times up Antarctica's Mount Vinson Massif (16,860 feet); 17 summits of Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro (19,339 feet), and 271 times up Washington State's Mount Rainier (14,410 feet).

Simonson has co-written two books, both published by The Mountaineer Books. "Ghosts of Everest: The Search for Mallory and Irvine," published in 1999, is the official team book about the expedition that found Mallory's body. The book gives historical details about Mallory's 1924 and previous expeditions along with stunning photographs of Mallory's remains, which the team buried on Everest.

"Detectives on Everest: The 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition," published in August 2002, recounts the expedition's return to Everest in 2001 trying to answer—Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they fell to their deaths? The expedition found the site where Mallory and Irvine spent their last night at 27,600 feet. The writers interweave the story of the 1924 expedition with that of the 2001 expedition, giving the reader an appreciation for the dangers mountaineers on Everest have always faced.



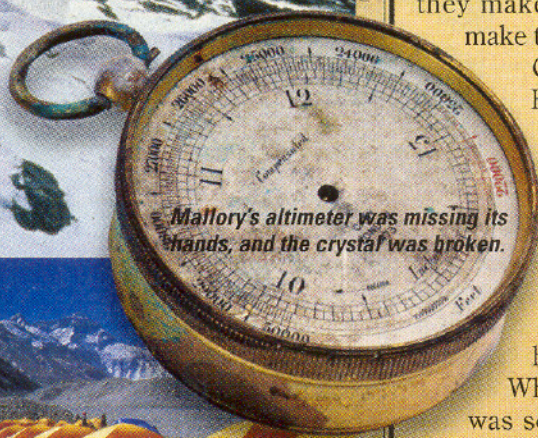


Mallory and Irvine Expedition/Jim Fogado/Johnson Agency

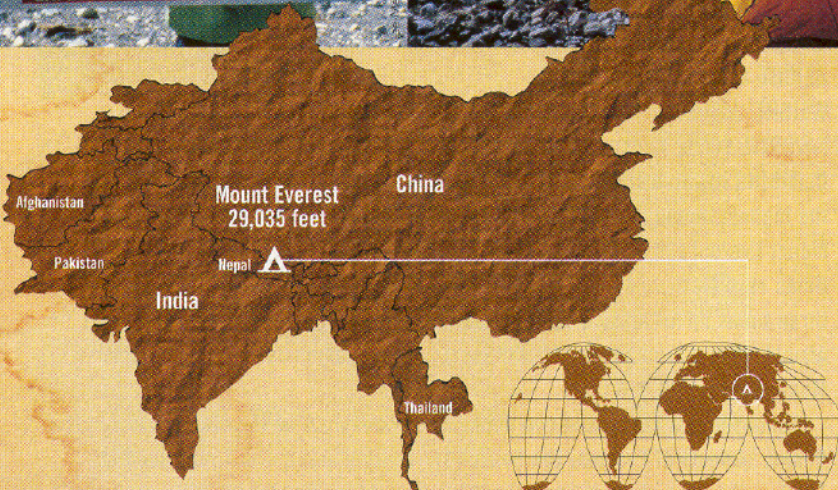
Climbing at 26,000 feet, team members ascend toward Camp 6 and Everest's summit. Below: Simonson at Rongbuk Base Camp, at 17,000 feet (only 12,035 feet to go!).



Courtesy of Eric Simonson



Mallory's altimeter was missing its hands, and the crystal was broken.



LAST ONE TO THE TOP

In Tibet, the world's tallest mountain is known as Chomolungma, or Mother Goddess of the World. To others, it is Mount Everest, named in 1865 after British surveyor Sir George Everest, who helped map India.

Located in Asia on the border between Tibet and Nepal, Mount Everest continues growing at the rate of a few millimeters a year. These days, it's not unusual for a hundred or more climbers to scale Everest each year. But the mountain remains dangerous. More than 1,300 climbers have summited, but more than 160 have perished in the attempt.

Thirteen climbers died in four expeditions before Everest was finally conquered in 1953 by Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal.

Solving Mysteries, Saving Lives

As a guide, Simonson roams the world climbing peaks. In 1999, he led an expedition in search of truth: He returned to Everest to find Mallory.

"The big motivator for me was this was a mystery for 75 years," he says. "Did they make the summit? Did they not make the summit?"

Climbers who disappear on Everest, or those found near death on the upper reaches, are usually left alone. But this was different.

"It's for the sake of history, trying to find the truth," Simonson says. "I think Mallory and Irvine would have wanted us to find out. What made that trip so satisfying was so many people gave us zero chance."

Simonson's expedition found Mallory's body on the first day of searching. Part of the mystery was solved: Mallory died in a fall. Searchers also found the oxygen bottle Simonson had left behind eight years earlier. Simonson and his team returned in 2001 to look for Irvine and the camera he carried. The team found neither, but they accomplished something more important.

Five climbers had been forced to spend the night without tents in the Death Zone. Other climbers trying for the top didn't stop to help. But Simonson, leading his team via radio, rescued the five, who they found could barely move.

"The consensus of all of us, including myself, is you can't just walk past them," Simonson says. "You've got to try." Four of the five stricken climbers survived.

And so does the mystery of Mallory. Was he first to stand atop the world? Simonson isn't sure whether he'll return to Everest to find out, but he's not disappointed. After so many years, Simonson has learned a different definition of success.

"It's not about making it to the summit," he says. "It's about taking a shot." ♣