



THE ULTIMATE FAMILY

/// HIGH ///

LAST YEAR, A CANADIAN FATHER AND HIS CHILDREN SET OUT TO MAKE HISTORY BY REACHING THE SUMMIT OF **MOUNT EVEREST**. BUT FOR A FEW HOURS, IT LOOKED AS THOUGH THINGS HAD TAKEN A DEVASTATING TURN

BY KATE BARKER



ALMOST THERE: CLIMBING THE FINAL SUMMIT RIDGE TOWARDS THE TOP OF THE WORLD. LEFT: TEAM MALLORY—ADAM, DAN, LAURA AND ALAN.

IT WAS BITTERLY COLD AND EERILY DARK as the four members of the Mallory family started out at 8:30 p.m. on their final push toward the summit of Mount Everest. From the South Col, they had a long, tough climb ahead, likely at least 12 hours. But for Dan Mallory, a 57-year-old insurance company owner from the small Ontario village of Utopia, it seemed as if his long-time goal of climbing the world's highest peak with his three children—Adam, Alan and Laura—might soon be realized.

Then, about 15 minutes later, Laura Mallory stumbled in the darkness. After spending five minutes on her knees, the 20-year-old knew it was over. Her altitude-wracked body just couldn't go on. While her father and older brothers plodded

methodically upwards, a dejected Laura returned to the South Col to spend the night alone in her tent at 26,300 feet.

It appeared to be the end of the family's dream.

DESPITE SHARING THE SURNAME of famed British climber George Mallory, Dan Mallory did not have an auspicious start to his mountaineering career. In 1986, the then 35-year-old and his wife Barbara visited Venezuela's 16,427-foot Pico Bolivar, in the hopes of glimpsing Halley's Comet. The peak in the northern Andes was considered a prime vantage point to witness that portentous chunk of rock and ice as it took its centennial dip into the inner solar system. But the high altitude hit Dan hard. He spent a miserable night just below 16,000 feet wrapped in both of their sleeping bags while Barbara hunched anxiously

over him. Neither Mallory even peeked outside the tent to watch history sail on by above them.

Still, 14 years later, Dan came up with a bold New-Millennium plan: to climb the Seven Summits—the highest points on each continent—with his family. The idea, he says, was to do something memorable with his three children—who then ranged in age from 12 to 17—before they all moved on to their own lives from their Barrie-area home. To some, it undoubtedly seemed like an outrageous idea. At the time, the Mallorys' climbing experience consisted of little more than that ill-fated trip to Venezuela and some scrambling in the Rockies. But Dan—an accomplished endurance athlete, who has, among other things, completed the Hawaii Ironman—wasn't about to let inexperience get in the way.

The Mallorys' bid for the Seven Summits began in earnest in 2002, when Dan climbed 22,841-foot Aconcagua—the highest peak in South America—with his eldest son Adam. Two years later, Dan and his son Alan made it to the top of Alaska's 20,320-foot Mount McKinley, one of the more challenging summits on the list. The following year, Dan and his wife Barbara topped out on Kosciuszko, the highest point in Australia. And in 2006, Dan and Laura reached the top of both Kilimanjaro and Mount Elbrus—the highest point in Europe. Dan decided that their next goal should be the biggest of them all—the 29,035-foot Everest. And he wanted to climb it with all three of his children.

Adam says that initially, when his father came up with the Seven Summits plan, the idea of climbing Everest seemed almost impossible. "Everest is such a big thing. For a while we thought we can't do Everest. It's too much. But we started looking into it and thinking about it, and realized it's not out of reach. It's just tough."



HOME AWAY FROM HOME: THE MALLORYS IN BASE CAMP. LEFT: DAN MALLORY DEALS WITH SOME TRICKY FOOTWORK IN THE KHUMBU ICEFALL. OPPOSITE: LAURA MALLORY MAKES HER WAY THROUGH THE ICEFALL.

DAN, ADAM, ALAN AND LAURA Mallory arrived at Everest Base Camp on April 20, 2008, 10 days after the rest of their Summit Climb teammates. Team leader Dan Mazur says

their introduction to the rest of the group was a tad awkward, since Summit Climb was already tight after trekking in together. "It was kind of like being at a party with friends," jokes Mazur, "then suddenly a bunch more people show up at dessert." Mazur is a veteran American mountaineer who runs Summit Climb as a commercial money-making expedition. (All told, the Mallorys' Everest bid cost them about \$160,000.) While Summit Climb provides logistical support and all-important Sherpa expertise and assistance, it doesn't employ guides to take clients to the peak, but rather, has experienced mountaineers along as leaders on the expedition. The other climbers are expected to have the proficiency necessary to make it under their own steam safely up and down the mountain. That was precisely the way Dan Mallory wanted it. "We told them we didn't want a guide and that we wanted to control our own timetable," says Dan. "We had enough experience and confidence in our abilities that we didn't need or want someone telling us what to do." Dan Mazur certainly thought the family was up to the challenge. The group consisted of 18 climbers and two leaders, and according to Mazur, the Mallorys fell solidly in the middle of the pack.

The Mallory family spent most of the first week at the 17,700-foot Base Camp simply getting used to sucking in half the amount of oxygen available to their lungs at sea level. Laura passed many hours in the relative heated comfort of her team's large walled mess tent, socializing with other members of the climbing team. She struck up an easy friendship with Linda Tan, a 29-year-old financial planner with an insurance agency from Singapore. "I immediately liked her," Tan recalls. The two of them would hang out in the mess tent talking, "about life," Tan laughs, "about what kind of guys we liked." Laura also hit it off with Eric Otto, who, having just turned 20, would soon





distinguish himself as the youngest Canadian to summit Everest. “We definitely became friends because of the age factor,” Otto says. They also discovered they were both enrolled at the University of Western Ontario for the next school year. The two enthusiastically discussed the mountain at length, comparing game plans, but saying little of their own darker, private misgivings. “Everyone has a certain fear of the mountain,” Otto explains. “But you try not to dwell on it.” Before the climb, Laura had intentionally avoided reading the dramatic accounts of disaster on the world’s highest peak, fearing that if she knew too many details, it would dissuade her from trying.

After the first week, it was time to move up the mountain to become acclimatized to higher altitudes. Which meant first passing through what is generally considered to be the most dangerous part of the standard South Col route—the Khumbu Icefall. The icefall occurs just above Base Camp at 19,000 feet, where the Khumbu Glacier nosedives off the mountain in a tangle of cracking ice and crevasses.

On April 28, the Mallory family got an early start for their first trip through the icefall. Dan says that travelling through it with his family was unnerving. “I was quite apprehensive. It’s full of these big chunks of ice as big as a house that could roll on you at any moment. And it takes hours to get through it.” They eventually reached Camp 1, perched just above the icefall at 19,900 feet.

The next day, they set off for Camp 2, which sits at 21,000 feet near the base of the Lhotse Face. Dan says that as they travelled up the sheltered valley called the Western Cwm, the temperature was “scorchingly hot.” They returned to spend the night back at Camp 1, before climbing down to Base Camp the following day.

The Mallorys remained in Base Camp for the next week,



FAMILY TIME: ALAN, LAURA AND DAN TAKE A BREAK IN THE WESTERN CWM, WITH THE LHOTSE FACE BEHIND. ABOVE: XXXXX MOVING UP TOWARD CAMP 4. OPPOSITE: DAN, ADAM AND ALAN ON THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST.

recalls of the long ordeal. His snail’s pace was made doubly worrying by the fact that he crossed it in the glaring mid-afternoon sun, when the towering seracs on the water-

fall of ice are even more unstable. The ladders used to bridge the larger crevasses caused Adam the most concern. “It was so late in the day, I had to check each anchor to make sure I couldn’t just pull it out with my hand because the sun heats it up and the aluminum just melts the ice all the way down to the bottom.” It was dark by the time Adam, with the help of a Sherpa, made it safely back to Base Camp. (He would soon recover and subsequently make his own way up to Camp 3.)

Meanwhile the rest of the family arrived at the bottom of the Lhotse Face and prepared to climb to Camp 3, perched on a small ledge high on the near-vertical slope. “It is very intimidating,” says Dan. “It is very steep at the start. And you’ve got a lot of

“I HAD ONE PERSON COME UP TO ME AND SAY, ‘YOU MUST NOT LIKE YOUR KIDS,’ ” SAYS DAN MALLORY, OF HIS DECISION TO CLIMB EVEREST WITH ALL OF HIS CHILDREN. “BUT THE KIDS HAVE PROVEN THEMSELVES TO ME.”

and then on May 8 set out on another acclimatization trip that would take them as high as Camp 3, which sits at 23,500 feet. Sickness had plagued the family since their arrival in Kathmandu, where Dan had picked up a persistent lung infection that would dog him throughout the expedition. Somewhere between Kathmandu and Base Camp, a bug had also begun to brew in Adam Mallory’s gut. As the family was making its way up the mountain, it hit Adam full force. The 25-year-old had to descend from Camp 1 back to Base Camp for antibiotics while the others ascended. If Adam couldn’t shake this sickness in a hurry, it was doubtful he would be able to summit. “It took me 10 hours to move from Camp 1 down through the icefall,” Adam

debris falling down from above. A couple of years ago a chunk of the ice face came loose and came down and hit a climber right at the base of it and took his head off. So those things go through your mind when you are starting up there.”

Dan and Laura had just begun moving up the first section of the fixed roped climb when they heard someone above yell *Rock! Rock! Rock!* “It just flew and went screaming down the one side of us,” Laura says. Literally shaking, she didn’t have time to steady herself before another warning sounded from above. *Rock! Rock! Rock!* This time, the boulder just missed them on the other side. “I looked at Dad and said, ‘I think we have climbed high enough for today.’ ” They made it up to Camp 3 several days later.



AFTER ANOTHER WEEK OF REST in Base Camp, the weather forecast looked promising and all the teams began preparing themselves for their summit attempts. On May 21, the Mallorys set out up the mountain again, this time hoping to make it all the way to the top of the world.

Laura Mallory left Base Camp with more than just the usual pre-summit jitters. For a few days, she had not been feeling well. Then, with the exertion required to get through the ice-fall, she took a turn for the worse. Climbing through Camp 1 on the way to Camp 2, she was stricken with diarrhea that was laced with blood. Fearing an internal bleed, the second-year nursing student consulted with Eric Otto's older brother Christian—the expedition doctor—on the radio. Laura was beginning to question her ability to continue. Otto thought she would be okay to climb, but advised her to rest and take some medicine at Camp 2. Laura and her father sat down together to discuss her situation. "I told him I didn't know if I could continue and he said, 'Well, you have to make that choice for yourself,'" Laura recalls. Dan told Laura he knew that she was strong, but at the same time, he didn't want anything bad to happen to her.

Dan says he placed a great deal of faith in the decision-mak-

ing ability of each of his children on the mountain. Too much faith, some thought. "I had one person come up to me and say, 'You must not like your kids,'" he says, of his decision to climb Everest with all of his children. "But these kids have experienced many athletic endeavours," he explains. "They have proven themselves to me." Dan trusted Laura to make the right choice for herself. In the end, she decided to just keep going. "It's not such a hard walk to Camp 2," she rationalized. Her father led the way, but was unaware that his slackened pace was still too fast for his daughter. She dug deep to keep up, and then alarmed them both by spewing blood on the mountain.

At Camp 2, Laura hoped to improve with rest, and while the vomiting did subside, she still felt weak. In the morning, she stood uncertainly outside her tent, fearing she was too wasted to make it to the mess tent on her own. She asked Alan for help, but became impatient waiting for him. So she fumbled along, tent by tent, without assistance. "I finally made it to the mess tent by myself, just because I'm stubborn," she says. Then Laura stood swaying in the entranceway for several minutes. She was there so long, the other climbers wondered why she didn't move. What they didn't know was that suddenly, Laura couldn't see a thing. Wavering on the edge of consciousness, she concen-



MAGIC MOMENT:
LAURA MALLORY
BECOMING THE
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trated on breathing until her vision finally returned and she could take a step forward. Laura never let on to her mess-tent companions what had happened.

The family remained at Camp 2 for two nights, initially for Laura's benefit, and then for Alan's, who also felt poorly. On May 23, they set off together for Camp 3, but Laura knew she would be travelling much more slowly than the rest. She made better time than she expected, coming into the camp tethered high on the Lhotse Face just an hour behind the others. The family spent the night together at 23,500 feet, care-

had left trying to get some food and water into her depleted system and sleeping. Her brothers and father were doing the same. "At that altitude," Laura explains, "you just have to take care of yourself."

They were now officially in the Death Zone.

AT 8:30 P.M. ON MAY 25, Dan, his family and two Sherpas left their tents on the South Col for the final summit push. Dan felt strong, but apprehensive. He was concerned about Laura and uncertain if he himself had the wherewithal to face the

THE TEAM LEADER STARTED TO ORGANIZE A SEARCH PARTY. MEANWHILE, DAN MALLORY WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WORDS HE COULD POSSIBLY USE TO TELL HIS WIFE THAT THEIR DAUGHTER WAS DEAD

ful to travel between tents wearing crampons and hooked into a safety rope, to make sure they didn't slip down the steep icy slope.

In the morning, they set out breathing supplemental oxygen, traversing the upper part of the Lhotse Face. After crossing the tricky rock ridges called the Yellow Band and the Geneva Spur, Dan, Adam and Alan reached Camp 4 on the South Col at about 2 p.m. By then, Laura had fallen far behind. It took everything she had to haul herself up the fixed ropes just beneath the South Col. When she finally arrived at the 26,300-foot Camp 4, it was between 4 and 5 p.m.—only a few hours away from the time the family was planning to begin their summit attempt. Laura spent the little preparation time she

challenge ahead. "We were kind of in our own little worlds," he says. For about 15 minutes they travelled together, but then the exhausted Laura stumbled and turned back for Camp 4. She was alone, as both of the Sherpas had continued on ahead with her brothers and her father for the summit. Laura was disoriented, and for a horrible few minutes, she wondered if she was ever going to find the camp. Then her hand brushed against nylon—a tent, at least, if not her own. She soon located her own small dome, the only thing protecting her from Everest's freezing winds, and prepared to bed down for the night. First, she had to make a difficult call. Dan Mallory's radio crackled in the night.

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“Dad, I’m sorry. I don’t think I can go today.”

“That’s fine.”

Dan was torn between his concern for Laura’s welfare and his dream of climbing Everest as a family. After a brief exchange in which he learned that his daughter was back at Camp 4 in the comparative safety of her tent, he signed off. “I hated to say that,” Dan later admits. “I really wanted us all together.” But he knew that Laura had made the right call. Then he turned his full attention to his own challenge.

Six hours later, Dan Mallory faced a moment of reckoning on the mountain. Just below the Balcony, at 27,550 feet, he and his sons entered a cloud band. Dan’s goggles fogged so completely that he couldn’t see. The wind also kicked up. Everything was suddenly covered in a layer of frost. Then his ascender unit for the fixed rope jammed. Dan and Adam struggled to claw snow and ice out of the unit’s teeth with their bare hands in order to free the mechanism. It would work for a few minutes, then seize right back up again. “That was the only time I thought I might have to turn back,” says Dan. “I was thinking, *God, if you have anything else to throw at me, I have pretty much hit my limit.*” Fortunately, the group soon got above the cloud band where the ascender unit worked again. Dan felt in that second he was going to make the summit.

Alan was the first member of the family to set foot on the top. There was no great revelation for the 23-year-old, no wondrous epiphany. His one overwhelming desire was to sit down. “I was just glad we were going to get off this freaking mountain.” Dan was more able to savour the moment. “I couldn’t believe we were there,” he remembers. They were all freezing, but briefly risked exposing bare hands to the winds in order to take pictures and a video. Dan called Barbara on the sat phone and even reached the president of the Rotary Club in Barrie, telling him he had placed the club’s flag at the top. After about 20 minutes at the summit, the family began their descent. Alan had just manoeuvred down the tricky section known as the Hillary Step, when he collapsed on all fours, gasping for breath. A strange, deep, cold stole over him. His limbs began to shake and he lost basic coordination. It took a huge

effort to simply rise from the ground. Alan’s oxygen tank had run out.

He managed to go a little further until he flagged down Sange Sherpa who gave him his own oxygen cylinder, for which Alan was immensely grateful. Alan asked Sange to turn up the gas, to three litres per minute. He wanted a burst of rejuvenating air to flood his failing system. Sange obliged, then hastened on, heading lower to a spot where there was a cache of extra cylinders. Without oxygen, Sange wouldn’t fare much better than Alan for very long at that altitude. Alan waited a moment, then continued down. He should have felt better quickly, but he actually started to feel worse. He could hardly hold onto the rope. There was a 7,000-foot sheer drop on either side of him and his crampons skittered uselessly along a thin ridge of rock. One terrifying thought screamed loudly and clearly from the core of his steadily clouding mind: *I’m going to die up here.* Alan was convinced that he was experiencing high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE), a potentially fatal condition in which blood leaks into the brain. But when Alan told his father he thought he had HACE, Dan was skeptical. They decided to turn Alan’s regulator to full blast—four litres per minute—to see if that made a difference, before resorting to a steroid pill. When Dan went into Alan’s pack, he discovered the regulator had been mistakenly screwed shut. Alan hadn’t been getting any gas at all. Soon, Alan was feeling the positive effects of more oxygen, and was able to descend without further incident. The Mallory men made good time back to the South Col, with Dan leading the way. They arrived at about 2 p.m.

LAURA MALLORY had woken up on the morning of May 26 feeling strong. At around the time her family reached the summit, she wandered over to Linda Tan’s tent, surprised to find Tan and Pasang Sherpa inside brewing tea. Tan had been summit-bound at the same time as the Mallorys, but turned back in the night, knowing she didn’t have the strength to make it. Laura told Tan that she would like to make another attempt for the peak that evening. But there was disappointing news from Base Camp. Nobody was available to accompany Laura to the top, and soon she would have been lingering in the Death Zone too long to attempt a summit bid. After two days above 26,000 feet, even while breathing bottled oxygen, the human body starts to wither as systems

shut down, leading to eventual death. Laura couldn't wait for the next wave of climbers to ascend. Her only chance, it seemed, had been lost. Then Tan suggested that Laura take Pasang with her. Laura balked, saying there was no way she could accept such a generous offer, but Pasang was keen to go and Tan was insistent. "I didn't see why I shouldn't give her the chance," Tan says. Then there was the question of available oxygen. Fortunately, there were extra oxygen canisters at the South Col and Laura managed to cobble enough together for her and Pasang to make a bid for the summit.

When Laura excitedly helped her brothers back into their tent on the South Col that afternoon, she was bursting to talk to them—about their triumph and her plans to ascend that night. Alan could barely acknowledge her. "Just undress me," he croaked. She obligingly took off his crampons and boots and tucked him in. All Adam could manage to choke out when he arrived a few minutes later was a weak mantra, "Give me some water, give me some water." Then he disappeared into the comforting nest of his sleeping bag. Laura asked her father what he thought of her plan to make a summit attempt that night. Completely spent himself, Dan advised her to go for it, provided she felt physically capable, before he too crashed.

Laura and Pasang Sherpa set out from the South Col at 7 p.m. on May 26. After his initial rest, Dan spent an anxious night on the South Col, wondering how his daughter was faring high above him. He estimated it would take Laura longer than the usual 12 hours to reach the summit, so he mentally added a few extra hours to her climbing time. By 9 a.m., Laura had been gone 14 hours, more than enough time, Dan reasoned, even in her weakened state, to make it to the peak. Dan switched on his radio expectantly. Nothing. At 9:15, he called her. Dead air. Dan continued to hail his daughter, every 15 minutes, for the next seven hours.

AS TIME SLIPPED BY with no word from Laura and Pasang Sherpa, the mood at Base Camp became grim. Eric Otto, ecstatic but exhausted from reaching the top of the mountain a few days earlier, was preparing to leave Base Camp for the long trip home when he heard that Laura and Pasang had not yet made contact. "I had no idea what was going on," Otto says. "They could be just fine, I thought, or they could be lying in the snow up there. You don't know what to

think." Dan Mazur, the team leader, started to organize a search party. Meanwhile, Dan Mallory was trying to figure out what words he could possibly use to tell his wife that their daughter was dead.

Twelve thousand kilometres away, Barbara Mallory was completely unaware what was happening on the mountain. She knew that her husband and sons had made it to the top. When she didn't hear from Laura, she assumed her daughter had turned around and had not attempted the summit. Barbara was out running errands when her cellphone rang. All she heard at first was static on the other end. Immediately she knew it was the sat phone.

"Mom, Mom! I did it!" Laura Mallory told her.

Laura and Pasang Sherpa had crested the ultimate lookout on Earth at 9 a.m. on May 27, 2008, right when Dan expected. At the age of 20, Laura Mallory became the youngest Canadian woman to reach the peak. And the Mallorys became the first family of four to summit Everest on the same expedition. "It was amazing," Laura says. "It was beautiful. But I barely had time to appreciate it."

The climb above the South Summit—at 28,500 feet—had been a visible struggle for Laura. An American climber had paused at the Hillary Step to help talk her through it. "I was sort of lost at that point," Laura admits. Once at the summit, Pasang was anxious to hustle her back down. He attempted to radio Base Camp, but the batteries were dead. It wasn't until the pair reached the South Col at 3:30 in the afternoon that the world learned they were safe and sound.

Laura Mallory attributes her summit success in large part to the generosity of fellow climber Linda Tan and to the help of Pasang Sherpa. But her father explains there's a simple reason why his daughter was able to fulfill the family dream. "Laura is the strongest of all of us," he says.

The Mallory family still has Antarctica's Vinson Massif on its climbing itinerary, as soon as it can raise the necessary funds to make the trip. And once Dan Mallory has bagged that elusive seventh summit, he intends to climb the highest peak in every province and territory. For more information, malloryexpedition.com. e

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