

NH filmmaker reflects on Everest avalanche

By JOHN KOZIOL Union Leader Correspondent Jun 2, 2014



Thom Pollard, a filmmaker from Jackson, talks recently about his experience as director of photography for "Over the Hill," a documentary that was supposed to tell the story of the oldest American ever to summit Mount Everest but which, after an avalanche claimed the lives of 16 Sherpa guides, became a film about "virtue, family and respect."

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JACKSON — When documentary filmmaker Thom Pollard went to Mount Everest in March, he was there to record what was supposed to be the ascent of the world's tallest mountain by the oldest American ever.

But after an avalanche on April 18 killed 16 Sherpa guides, Pollard ended up with a different film, one about "virtue, family and respect" that is now serving as a catalyst for him to complete another work about an avalanche on Mount Washington, that, fortunately, had a much happier ending.

The creative director of Eyes Open Productions based in North Conway, Pollard, who is an easy-going and gregarious 52-year old, spoke recently about his trip to Nepal where he was the director of photography for "Over the Hill," which was to tell the triumphant tale of Jim Geiger of Sacramento, Calif.

At 68 and a great-grandfather, Geiger hoped his summiting of Everest would be an inspiration and proof that age need not be a limitation to accomplishing great things. After the avalanche in the Khumbu Icefall, however, Geiger returned home.

Pollard remained in Nepal, and the men who are producing Geiger's film subsequently asked him to return to Mount Everest to speak with families of the Sherpa who were killed to film an ending to "Over the Hill," albeit not the one anyone, certainly not Pollard, expected.

Born in Wilbraham, Mass., Pollard attended Boston University on a swimming scholarship and graduated with a bachelor's degree in film. As a reporter for WWLP-TV Channel 22 in Springfield, Pollard shot, wrote, and edited his own news stories.

Later, he began producing documentaries and sent them to numerous entities, among them the Public Broadcasting Service, which in 1999 tapped him to be the high-altitude cameraman for a "NOVA" documentary about the Mallory-Irvine Expedition.

Some mountaineering historians believe that on or about June 8-9, 1924, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine summited Everest, something that Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conclusively did on May 29, 1953.

The "Nova" team found Mallory's body, but not Irvine's nor the camera that Irvine was reportedly carrying that might have had images of the men at the "Top of the World."

Fifteen years later, when Geiger went looking for a documentary filmmaker, he was directed to Pollard.

At first the summit effort went well, Pollard said.

An ordained minister of the American Fellowship Church, Pollard officiated the marriage ceremony of an American couple at Base Camp, elevation 17,200 feet. He was eager to get to the summit where he planned to spread the ashes of his late father George and brother Jeff. Physically, Pollard said he felt well and had "no doubt" that both Geiger and he would get to the summit.

In anticipation of summiting in mid- to late-May, the Geiger team on April 17 did the first of its three height-acclimation "rotations" by climbing 1,000 feet up to the Khumbu Icefall, where, a day later the Sherpas were killed when large towers of ice formed by the Khumbu Glacier known as seracs, fell, causing the avalanche.

A number of Sherpas were also injured in the avalanche, including one who was with the Geiger team and suffered a broken leg.

The avalanche occurred around 6:30 a.m. Nepal time, and about an hour later, while on a video-phone call with his son Sam who was back in New Hampshire, Pollard suddenly realized that something terrible was unfolding around him.

The first clue was a flurry of helicopters flying into and over the Base Camp, toward the Khumbu Icefall, said Pollard, and it was followed by reports from descending climbers that there had been multiple fatalities in an avalanche. Pollard immediately began documenting the recovery of the bodies and, as one of the more mature climbers in the Base Camp village, he also did double duty as a grief counselor for some climbers who were overcome by what they had experienced.

Amid the swirl of emotions, Pollard said he and others at Base Camp began to "hear some of the rumblings" from the Sherpa community, which had concluded, out of respect for the three Sherpa whose bodies had not been recovered, that there would be no more attempts to summit until the bodies had been found.

The company that oversaw the various expeditions at Base Camp, decided to pull out, and the Geiger team left at the end of April, with Pollard's final act being to sprinkle his father and brother's ashes.

"I've seen a fair amount" of bad things and "witnessed death before," said Pollard, who added that while his reaction to the avalanche deaths was a "balanced one," the avalanche and its aftermath was "by far, the most tragic event I've been connected with."

Just a year earlier, on Jan. 17, 2013, Pollard was nearly part of another avalanche tragedy, this time in Huntington Ravine on Mount Washington, when a group of climbers, including Keith Zeier, a former Marine who lost a leg in a roadside bombing in Iraq, got overtaken by an avalanche as they were getting ready to crest the ravine. No one was killed, but three people were injured.

The film being shot for "Ascents of Honor" by Pollard, who was above the avalanche, was never completed, but it will be now, he said, due in large part to his wanting to "pour the energy" of what he had witnessed at Mount Everest and to transform it into "something local."

The Everest avalanche was a transformative event, said Pollard, who added that he felt the real emotional impact while standing weeks later in the kitchen of the family of a Sherpa who had been killed and seeing his wife and newborn child.

"In the snap of a finger, 47 children were without a father," Pollard said, urging anyone who wanted to help the Sherpa and other local peoples who are hurt or killed while supporting mountaineering expeditions, to make a donation to the Juniper Fund.

Pollard said he will always remember what happened on Mount Everest on April 18, 2014 and he's accepting of, even comfortable, with that fact.

"One thing you can never erase from your memory is watching those bodies being removed," one by one, by helicopter, dangling from a long line, said Pollard, adding that a simultaneous memory he will keep is that of everyone at Base Camp – climbers and Sherpas alike – united as one by sadness and compassion for their fellow beings.

Because Mount Everest is the place where both awful and wonderful things happen, sometimes not far apart, the peak still holds a powerful attraction for Pollard.

Asked whether he wanted to return to Everest, Pollard gave an immediate, unequivocal answer:

"Absolutely, in a heartbeat I'd go back." But for now, Pollard conceded, "I don't know how it's going to happen."