

Jackson man to film great-grandfather's Everest attempt

By JOHN KOZIOL Union Leader Correspondent Mar 21, 2014



As part of a documentary that appeared on the PBS program "NOVA," members of the 1999 Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition make their way up Mount Everest in search of evidence two mountaineers in 1924 may have been the first to summit the world's tallest mountain.

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JACKSON – A local man is headed off to Nepal on Friday to film what is expected to be the successful ascent of the world's tallest mountain by the first great-grandfather and oldest American to complete the climb.

Thom Pollard, who lives in Jackson and is creative director of Eyes Open Productions, based in North Conway, will accompany Jim Geiger of Sacramento, Calif., when, sometime in May, Geiger hopes to step onto the summit of Mt. Everest at 29,029 feet above sea level.

Pollard has already been on Everest once before, in 1999 when he was the high-altitude cameraman for the Mallory-Irvine Expedition, whose goal, as later presented on the PBS documentary program "NOVA," was to find an answer to one of mountaineering's lingering mysteries: whether George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, on or about June 8-9, 1924, had actually reached the top.

The expedition found Mallory's body, Pollard said on Wednesday, but nothing to prove or disprove that Mallory and/or Irvine had first accomplished what Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conclusively did on May 29, 1953.

The winner of an Emmy Award and a CINE Golden Eagle, Pollard didn't get a chance to summit Everest 19 years ago, but he would like to this time.

Along with a colleague, Pollard passed up the initial opportunity to instead search for a camera that Irvine had been carrying. The theory was that had Mallory and Irvine made it to the summit, they would have documented it photographically, and, assuming that Irvine's camera was intact after 75 years, there was the chance that the film could be recovered and developed.

The Mallory-Irvine Expedition didn't find the camera but did find Mallory's body at 27,000 feet.

"We basically covered him with whatever rocks we could find up there and we had a memorial service for him right on the spot," said Pollard. "We read psalms from the Bible, according to the wishes of his descendants."

Pollard, who grew up in western Massachusetts and moved to the White Mountains in the 1990's, is looking forward to a much happier outcome on Geiger's trip up Everest, adding that the working title for the film he will shoot is "Over the Hill." Funding for the venture, Pollard explained, was provided by a businessman Geiger met after he had climbed Mount Vinson, which at 16,050 feet, is the highest point in Antarctica.

Geiger, who is a life coach and whose goal is to climb the highest summits on each of the seven continents, had, after Mount Vinson, achieved 6/7ths of his dream and now has the chance to make it a reality.

While operating independently with two Sherpas and another climber, the Geiger expedition will be part of a larger group led by International Mountain Guides of Ashford, Wash., said Pollard, and it will not be doing "anything out of the ordinary," which means, he said, that "We are using oxygen and will clip into whatever ropes there might be for icefalls."

At 68, Geiger "wants to be the oldest American to climb the 'Seven Summits,'" Pollard said, adding that Geiger is trying to achieve something bigger than just personal recognition.

"Jim wasn't trying to throw his hat into the ring to be the most unique guy but Jim does inspire people to do the things they dream of and, being 68, he's giving people a lot of hope that 68 is not over the hill."

Although they've met only once, Pollard said he had "an immediate connection" to Geiger, who, after securing the financial resources for his Everest climb, began looking for somebody to produce the documentary of his ascent.

Geiger found producers, who, because they're not mountaineers, turned to another person, who just happened to be a friend of Pollard's. The friend, said Pollard, "insisted they had to call me before they did anything else and these guys called me a month later and we talked for a couple of hours and that was the genesis of the whole thing."

Once Geiger and Pollard get to Nepal, they'll prep themselves for Everest by first climbing Lobuche, height 20,161 feet, before making incrementally higher ascents up Everest, each time sleeping further up than before and in that way acclimating themselves to the high elevation.

Around May 10, Pollard thinks he and Geiger will be "in position to start heading up for the summit, so we conceivably could be on the summit from May 13 or 14," although, he noted, they've also given themselves a two-week window in case the weather is bad, so that the summiting could occur as late as May 28.

"Honestly, when I went to Everest in 1999 and passed on my summit day, I was 100 percent sure that I would be back in 2-3 years to summit and I never imagined that 15 years would go by," said Pollard, who added that what he's learned in repeatedly climbing Mount Washington and in being a videographer for Lincoln-based Ski NH, which promotes both alpine and Nordic skiing in the Granite State, will help atop Everest.

"I love working for Ski NH. It's a great job for me. I get to go out and film in the cold with people who are loving what they're doing and in all honesty, it's prepared me for filming a place like Mount Everest."

Karl Stone, who is Ski NH's marketing director, said Ski NH loves working with Pollard as much as he enjoys working for it.

"We're just absolutely thrilled that he has the opportunity to do something that is a dream of his," Stone said of Pollard, adding that Ski NH was proud to be associated with someone whose professional credits, among others, include NOVA and National Geographic.

"He does all of our shoots and does an excellent job. It's obviously a lot less challenging" than Everest, said Stone, "but he's a professional regardless of the project. He doesn't complain about the cold."

A father of two boys who'll be staying with family members while he's in Nepal during the attempt, Pollard acknowledged that there are risks to climbing Mount Everest, but he chooses not to dwell on them too much.

"My belief is we're all going to come down safe and not even have frost-nipped fingers but there are five to six days when you're out on the edge on the summit and crossing the icefall; there are just some things that you don't have control over. And, as much as I'm looking forward to this expedition, I'm as much looking forward to having those things in the rear-view mirror."

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