

# Did Mallory beat Hillary up Everest?

New film revisits fateful 1924 trip, writes **SHEREE BEGA**

**J**OHAN MALLORY leans heavily on his walking frame as he points to two striking photographs that have framed his life. On one wall hang a black-and-white portrait of his dashing British explorer father and alongside it a sun-lit portrait of the formidable mountain that claimed his life and became the greatest mountaineering mystery of our time.

Mallory was almost four when his father, George, and his climbing partner, Andrew Irvine, vanished into legend a few hundred metres from the summit of Mount Everest on June 8, 1924.

More than 80 years later, the mystery endures – did George Mallory and Irvine, clad only in gabardine and hobnailed boots, conquer Everest almost 30 years before Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953 – or did they die trying?

Mallory, who turned 90 in August, and who has spent most of his life in South Africa, believes they did reach the summit of the highest mountain in the world, one which has brought tragedy and triumph, to his family.

Almost 70 years after his father disappeared, John Mallory's Australian-based son, George, became the first South African-born person to reach the roof of the world.

He placed photographs of his grandparents on its summit, completing this "unfinished business".

Even now, John Mallory mourns the father he barely knew, who led the pioneer British expeditions to conquer Everest – its icy surrounds uncharted territory in the 1920s –

and who was regarded as the greatest mountain climber in the world at the time of his death.

His neat house at a retirement home near Hartbeespoort Dam is filled with paintings of mountains – Everest looming largest among them – and his bookshelves are packed with tomes on exploration, several based on his father's exploits, including *Paths of Glory*, Jeffrey Archer's latest offering.

The frail Mallory's memory is astonishing.

"I don't really remember my father. He must have left home when I was three-and-a-half."

"An expedition to Everest in those days was about a six-month business. You went by boat to either Bombay or Calcutta, and by train to Darjeeling.

"From there you walked all the way into Tibet and around to the Everest side. That would be about a month each way walking.

"I've read all that has been written about him, obviously. Certainly, once he got into mountains, you couldn't stop him.

"I remember my aunt telling me a story of my father when he was about eight. He had done something naughty and was sent up to his bedroom and locked in. Half an hour later, his mother saw him climbing on the church roof.

"There was something in him that just had to climb things."

His father's death left his two older sisters inconsolable and his mother, Ruth, "absolutely shattered".

"My sisters and I were dragged to the mountains at an early age.

"My father had died by then, but my mother felt we should have the chance to do what he loved so much and we got taken up to North Wales and started on our climbing careers.

"But at the time I would've been going to the Alps and getting serious about mountaineering, World War II came."

He was dispatched as a water engineer for the Royal Engineers in India and moved to South Africa in the early 1960s, married a South African, Jennifer, and built homes in Soweto at first.

Most of his career was spent working for the Department of Water Affairs.

Jennifer died in 1999, just before adventurer Conrad Anker discovered George's body, frozen white by the cold, in the Everest "death zone" in the same year. Irvine's body has never been found.

In 2005, John Mallory married his second wife, Marie, who died two years ago.

Life is lonely now, with four of his five children living abroad, and only one son left in Pretoria, he says.

Last year Mallory compiled a slide show of his "treks" to Nepal and put it on DVD. He watches it often. It's the place to see the tallest mountains in the world, he says.

In 1995, in his 70s and after two hip replacements, he reached Everest's base camp.

"I went with my first wife, who had Alzheimer's, but who walked much better than I did. It was rather tough going. I'd been there eight years before and did much the same route. I found it was taking me just exactly twice as long and I was



**DID HE?** George Mallory

twice as tired."

Just days later, his son scaled Everest's summit, a year before Cathy O'Dowd's fateful expedition.

"But George's climb didn't get the sort of publicity you'd expect for the first South African-born person to reach the summit."

In many ways, his son is in his grandfather's class, he says.

"George had read a lot of the history of climbing Everest, particularly of the people who didn't come back, and came to



**NO DOUBT:** John Mallory believes his father made it to the top of the world's highest peak.

PICTURE: CARA VIERECKL

the conclusion most didn't come back because they hadn't moved fast enough and didn't have enough stamina."

Several years ago, Mallory's daughter, Kathy, who studied medicine at UCT, fell off Table Mountain while hacking out alien vegetation on a steep cliff.

"It didn't stop her getting married, nor having two children," says Mallory.

In 1947, his sister Clare's husband also died in a mountaineering accident.

She believed her father had made it up Everest, because he had promised to leave a photograph of his wife on the summit and when his body was found it was missing. His snow

goggles were found in his pocket, suggesting he descended after dark when he died.

The enigma of George Mallory, already immortalised in the public imagination, has now been made into a film.

Narrated by Liam Neeson, *The Wildest Dream*, a documentary drama, was screened in UK theatres on September 24 and is scheduled for release in South Africa soon.

Billed as a story of obsession and breathtaking adventure, it charts Anker and British rock climber Leo Houlding seeking to retrace Mallory's and Irvine's footsteps in the ill-fated 1924 expedition.

They don't replica clothing

and pursue the original North East ridge route the pair took, which involves a free climb of the crucial 24.7m steep cliff known as the Second Step, which Mallory and Irvine would have been forced to climb decades earlier near where they were last sighted.

Today, Everest's climbers use a ladder affixed to the rock.

Mallory believes his father was capable of this climb.

"I think he probably made it to the summit. I think he was so darn determined that having got that far he would've gone on, to heck with the safety of coming down after dark.

"Regrettably they've never found Irvine's remains or the

camera that might prove whether they made summit.

"If they were only on the Second Step around midday they wouldn't have got up there until shortly before sunset. This has been the fate of a lot of climbers since then who'd gone up the top just too late in the day to get down again.

"That they got down as far as they did is quite incredible. They had no torch. How would they have found their tent back at base camp?"

Mallory, though, believes his father should have descended earlier – and lived.

"I don't believe climbing any mountain, even Everest, is worth losing one's life for."