

SCALING THE WORLD'S MOST CHALLENGING SUMMITS IS DANGEROUS TO SOME. TO DAVE HAHN, IT'S JUST A MATTER OF WALKING UPHILL A LITTLE LONGER THAN USUAL.

# KING SHEER FEAR OF THE HILL

BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE

PHOTO: MATTHEW TURLEY

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**WAS A LONG, COLD NIGHT IN MAY 1994. CROUCHED ALONE IN A SNOWSTORM 8,500 METRES UP ON THE NORTHEAST RIDGE OF MOUNT EVEREST – WITHOUT OXYGEN – DAVE HAHN HUNG ON FOR FIRST LIGHT, DESPERATELY WILLING HIMSELF TO STAY AWAKE AFTER 48 HOURS OF CONTINUOUS CLIMBING. HE WAS CLOSE TO SUMMITTING THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PEAK, BUT HE KNEW THAT IF HE FELL ASLEEP HE WOULD PROBABLY SUCCUMB TO HYPOTHERMIA AND DIE. DESPITE HIS DESPERATE SITUATION, HE FELT TRULY EXHILARATED. HE KNEW HE WAS GOING TO MAKE IT.**



After this first and most harrowing success, Hahn went on to climb Everest a further ten times, more than any other non-Sherpa, establishing himself as one of the world's leading high-altitude climbers. The lanky 47-year-old has also conquered the 4,897-metre Vinson Massif, the highest peak in Antarctica, a record 26 times. Add to that 18 ascents of Mount McKinley (also known as Denali) in Alaska and more than 250 scalings of Mount Rainier in the US state of Washington and you have one extremely busy - not to mention competent - climber.

When asked about his accomplishments, Hahn is surprisingly modest. "Nobody would rightly rank me with great climbers," he says, claiming he is just a good guide. He classifies climbers as the ones "looking for challenges in unclimbed faces and ... doing things that haven't been done before." But Conrad Anker, who first climbed with Hahn in Antarctica in 1997, begs to differ. "For the kind of work he does - high-altitude guiding - he's one of the best," says Anker.

Hahn climbs year-round, but when it's time to rest he can usually be found at his rambling old adobe house outside Taos, New Mexico. The whitewashed plaster walls are hung with relief maps and photos from his climbing expeditions, and the décor is accessorised with ice axes and old oxygen cylinders he's collected from his trips. He particularly treasures a weathered cylinder used on Sir Edmund Hillary's historic 1953 ascent of Everest.

## ROUTE TO THE TOP

Hahn grew up in Kingston, New York, where his father, a former climber in Yosemite National Park, took him camping in the nearby Catskill and Adirondack Mountains. As a teenager he visited his mother's hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and scaled the craggy 3,255-metre Sandia Crest. He returned to New Mexico after college to work as a ski instructor, but had an epiphany in 1985 when he enrolled in a mountaineering course run by the Mount Rainier guide service. "After that I knew exactly what I was going to do," he recalls. "I knew I was going to get on with the guide service."

On his first attempt at climbing Mount Rainier, a 4,392-metre peak with extensive glaciers fed by North Pacific storms, Hahn and his companions were turned back by bad weather and avalanche conditions, but he completed the route later that summer. He joined the guide service in 1986, the same year he first climbed 6,193-metre McKinley.

Over the next 20 years, Hahn perfected his skills as a guide on some of the world's most difficult mountains - including Everest. Clearly in love with climbing, Hahn enjoys the sheer beauty of wild places and how it changes the way he looks at the world and his fellow climbers. "I always have liked being on a team. When a team works well and accomplishes something, it's satisfying."

His teams have included some of the world's greats, but the one man he counts as a real inspiration was the



**"AT THE END OF A DAY OF JUST GUIDING ... I FEEL LIKE KING OF THE WORLD"**



PHOTOS: ALAMY; JIMMY CHIN

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Hahn says his success as a guide is because he always reminds himself to be scared of death.

a lot of people who climb really well, but somebody I would actually view as a hero ... Alex was unique," he says.

Hahn's own career has had its share of heroics. On one Everest expedition, he and his team came across three Siberian climbers suffering from altitude sickness at 8,626 metres. "We gave out Decadron (anti-oedema) pills as if they were candy at a Halloween party," he wrote later. They also gave them precious water and oxygen, and helped them down. Further up, they found Guatemalan climber Jaime Vinals and his American

late Alex Lowe, a legendary pioneer climber who died in an avalanche in 1999. "I've met

guide, Andy Lapkass, who had spent the night near the summit without oxygen or shelter. After first aid, they escorted the dazed climbers back to camp, although Hahn thought at the time that "the chance of getting the two climbers down alive no longer existed."

**A**nd in May 2007, Hahn was heading to the summit of Everest on the Southeast Ridge when he and his Sherpa came across Nepali climber Usha Bista, who had been abandoned by her team at 8,321 metres. She was showing signs of cerebral oedema, or brain swelling. Hahn gave her drugs and oxygen and organised a daring rescue. "I grabbed her by her legs and started dragging her down, because we had to get her to lower altitude,

otherwise she would have died," Hahn says. Amazingly, Bista recovered with few lasting effects. Hahn's commitment to safety, and the lives of other climbers is echoed most succinctly in a quote to MountainZone.com: "I am most proud of ... the four times I've turned around within a thousand feet of Everest's summit."

#### CLOSE CALLS

Despite his impressive rescue credentials, Hahn has also been on the receiving end. In 2002, a helicopter he was in crashed on Mount Rainier while on its way to perform a rescue on Liberty Ridge. The helicopter's tail rotor hit some ice and, Hahn recalls, "We ... corkscrewed back into the glacier." Despite the crash landing, he was remarkably unscathed and was able to help the injured climber. A military chopper airlifted everyone to safety. A few days later, an avalanche swept the wrecked helicopter into a crevasse.

But apart from a few knee operations, Hahn has managed to avoid serious injuries during his career. His biggest health scare came in his late 30s, when he was nearly forced to retire after discovering he had celiac disease, a gluten intolerance that degrades the digestive tract. He developed serious anaemia, which impaired his oxygen-carrying capacity and robbed him of energy at high altitude. Today he controls his condition by monitoring his diet and avoiding foods containing wheat, barley, rye and oats.

Through it all, Hahn says he remains motivated by the challenge of taking on something bigger than himself. "I don't need to go to Everest every year," he says.

He says that, just as when he started climbing, he still lives for the challenge of the mountains, for going to places that fascinate him, and for the natural beauty.

"At the end of a day of just guiding, in difficult mountains, I feel like king of the world," he says. "It's that satisfying." ■

## FINDING MALLORY

The body lay where it had fallen, high on the northern flank of Mount Everest, face down on a steep slope. Dave Hahn trained his video camera as teammate Jake Norton turned over a label sewn into the corpse's tattered shirt collar. It read: "G. Mallory."

"Oh my God!" Hahn exclaimed. Seventy-five years after George Mallory and Andrew Irvine's ill-fated 1924 summit attempt, Hahn had joined an expedition seeking clues to their fate. It was May 1, 1999 and standing there at an altitude of 8,229 metres, he had helped bring new evidence to one of climbing's most enduring mysteries: Had Mallory and Irvine made it to the summit, nearly 30 years before Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay?

Hahn and fellow climbers Norton, Conrad Anker, Andy Politz and Tap Richards had fanned out across the

Northeast Ridge, where Mallory and Irvine had last been seen on June 8, 1924.

Anker had spotted the frozen body, but at first everyone had assumed it was Irvine's because it lay hundreds of metres below where his axe had been found in 1933. "It felt like being in a time machine ... it's not real common that you come across another climber wearing gear from the 1920s," Hahn says. They searched Mallory's pockets, looking for a camera Irvine was known to carry in the hope it would hold clues. "We found a bunch of letters and notes wrapped up in a bandana," Hahn says, but no camera. Before descending, they covered Mallory's body with rocks.

"I think we're all pretty well convinced that they had their accident on their way down, that they were together," Hahn says. "What we weren't able to tell the world is whether they made it to the top."



When discovered, Mallory's body and personal effects were remarkably well preserved despite the altitude. It was a moment Hahn describes as both "magically confusing" and "adrenaline-surgings."



PHOTOS: JIMMY CHIN

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

● Babu Chiri Sherpa: first and only climber to sleep on summit, 1999

● Erik Weihenmayer: first blind climber, 2001

● Stefan Gatt: first to snowboard from summit, 2001