

TRAVELS NOW AND THEN

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GRAND TETON 2001

In the 1920's George Leigh Mallory was part of the British team that first tried to climb Everest and his death during the third attempt in 1924 created one of the most enduring legends of mountaineering. In 1999, a group of searchers found Mallory's body and revived the debate over whether or not Mallory and/or his young companion, Sandy Irvine, had made it to the summit. Let me hasten to say that this story is not a parallel to those dramatic events. Rather, I have always been intrigued by Mallory's insightful comment on the journey of the spirit that every mountain adventure creates. I am not sure that I understand why this observation is so true, but it is. One could argue that a mountain ascent is just another form of recreational exercise - like a game of tennis. But I cannot imagine that even the most imaginative tennis player comes anywhere close to the quasi-religious experience that Mallory identified. Perhaps it derives from a combination of a single lofty goal, spectacular scenery and hallucinations brought on by exhaustion. It is easier to describe by example.



Grand Teton from Jackson Hole

The Teton mountains are spectacular jewels of rock and ice that soar into the heavens above the flat plain of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in northwestern United States. I remember driving westwards through Wyoming in 1970 and, upon cresting the Togwotee Pass, seeing the magnificent Teton range for the first time. Piercing the western horizon, they were the most magnificent mountains I had ever seen, rugged pinnacles rising precipitously into the sky. Native Indians called them the "Hoary Headed Fathers", but when the French trappers of the Hudson Bay Company came this way they called them "Les Trois Teton" or the "Three Tits", a name which stuck and by which the South, Middle and Grand Teton are now known. In 1970, preoccupied with my family vacation, I little thought that someday I would return and attempt to climb the highest of those pinnacles, the 13770ft Grand Teton. This story is about a time in the year 2001 when I did return knowing full well that I would experience my own spiritual saga on the awesome Grand Teton.

The beauty of the Teton mountain range and the area surrounding it was recognized early in the modern era when the Grand Teton National Park was established in 1929. The mountains, glaciers, lakes and abundant wildlife made it a national treasure and, today, a particularly popular destination for hikers and climbers. But the mountain was climbed long before it was claimed by government bureaucrats. The

Grand was first conquered by William Owen, Frank Spalding, Frank Peterson and John Shive who reached the summit on Aug. 11, 1898, using a route that is known today as the Owen-Spalding route. Though most of this route is a matter of finding your way up steep talus slopes, the last *600ft* ascent of the summit block requires technical rock climbing know-how and technique, as well as the ability to handle exposure that can be several thousands of feet in places. The climbing skills required depend very much on the weather and the time of year. When the cracks, chimneys and crevices of the summit block are lined with ice or filled with snow they present a formidable climbing challenge. But in the late summer when the route is usually (but not always) free of ice most of the climbing challenges (only a few moves above 5.4) would be modest if they were at the level of the valley below. On the other hand the weather, route finding and massive exposure add considerably to the challenge. But the awards are spectacular views of these magnificent mountains from a truly remarkable vantage point.

Somehow I knew from the outset that the days we had planned in the Tetons, though spectacular and exhilarating, would also be tinged with sadness for they marked beginnings and endings. Some of these I foresaw, others I did not. The canvas was the mountain itself, magnificent and awesome, the greatest challenge I had ever faced. Throughout those days Mallory's words kept me wondering about the beginnings and endings.

Perhaps the first beginning had been many years before in 1992 when Doug Hart and I had set out on a great mountain adventure, the first of our several efforts to climb El Picacho del Diablo (see "Mountain of the Devil"). Doug's strength (as well as his sore feet!) were with me then, as they were now. It was very good to be adventuring with him again after such a long time. Doug and another former student, Sheldon Green, had been mountain climbing in British Columbia and had driven from Vancouver to meet us in the shadows of the Tetons. Two other veterans of past adventures, Garrett Reisman and Simone Francis, had come to our rendezvous from the opposite direction, from Houston, Texas. After teaching me the rudiments of climbing, Garrett had gone on to other missions as a NASA astronaut. It was marvellous to see Garrett and Simone again.

But, most of all these were watershed days for one of the central figures in our canyoneering adventures, Clancy Rowley. At the end of his years as a graduate student in California, Clancy had decided to drive to New Jersey where he was to take up a faculty position at Princeton - and he decided to detour via the Tetons. Clancy had been my trusted companion and fellow adventurer for an era of spectacular adventures. Together we had pioneered more than a dozen technical canyoneering routes in the San Gabriels; we had conquered Cathedral Peak in Yosemite, Weaver's Needle in the Superstitions and Picacho Peak in the California desert. We had traversed the wildness of the Wonderland of Rocks in Joshua Tree National Park and had explored the haunted Tenaya Canyon in Yosemite. In Utah we ventured into the deepest slot canyons of Zion National Park including the Zion Narrows, the Subway, Mystery Canyon, and Pine Creek. He had saved me by a fingertip in the wilds of the Sespe Wilderness and willed me the strength to climb out of the Grand Canyon. With my 60th birthday looming ahead, it was hard for me to envisage embarking on future adventures without Clancy. I would miss not only his strength, agility and climbing skills (for he had always led) but also his compassion, his understanding and his kindness. Though separated in age by more than 30 years, Clancy had become a boon companion. And so it seemed that the Grand Teton would also be a watershed moment for me.

Clancy had driven from Pasadena to the Grand Tetons and met me when I stepped off the plane at the small Jackson, Wyoming, airport. We headed into Jackson to get some lunch and there I experienced a series of incidents that reminded me of my own beginnings and shook me to my core. We were seated in a booth in a hamburger joint perusing some of the maps and guides to the Grand Tetons that I had brought with me. After a few minutes I became aware of the family of three seated in the adjacent booth. I think my subconscious registered first but it was several minutes before I became aware of a feeling that was simultaneously strange and yet also very familiar. It was not that I had ever seen these people before. Nor were they in any way remarkable. Rather I became aware that their accents could only mean one thing, namely that they came from within *10* miles of the rural backwater of Northern Ireland where I grew up. To most Americans it seems incredible that accents could change so rapidly with distance that people's homelands can be located with such accuracy. But there was no doubt in my mind. And so, at an appropriate pause in their conversation I intruded and enquired about where they lived. And, yes indeed,

they hailed from the village of Draperstown, only about five miles from my home village of Magherafelt and six thousand miles from where we were seated. We chatted about common acquaintances and it transpired that they had known my father when he was the surgeon in the local district hospital. Though they did not recognize my much altered accent, they were as astonished as I was by such a remarkable coincidence. And Clancy was speechless with amazement. For me the coincidence was also disequilibrating; it seemed a portent of other beginnings or endings yet to come.

And then something happened that truly disquieted me. Clancy had not taken part in the conversation but the woman looked at him and asked "And is this your son?". I was stunned as if by a gunshot. Ever since the terrible death of my 23-year-old son Patrick in a 1997 automobile accident, I have dreaded small-talk questions like "How many children do you have?". Somehow, I have learned to struggle through them. But this one truly stunned me since it was so unexpected. I mumbled something about Clancy being a student and then struggled with parting pleasantries so that I could breath the air outside. I would have been delighted to answer her question in the affirmative and would have done just that but for the shock of the moment and the embarrassment it would have caused Clancy. My mind raced with emotions and I was glad of the moments in the parking lot in which to recover some equilibrium.

In the subdued aftermath, we drove north past the airport and a few miles further into Grand Teton National Park. At the end of a dirt turnoff about *4m* north of the park entrance on Teton Park Road, we located the Climber's Ranch where we found bunkhouse accommodations for the night at the remarkably cheap rate of \$6 a head. The ranch was built specially for climbers and consists of a group of cabins with a central dining shelter as well as washing and bathroom facilities. The place has great atmosphere and camaraderie; others more knowledgeable about the Tetons are happy to give help and advice. In the early evening Garrett and Simone arrived with abundant pizza and beer and it was late before we began sorting out the technical equipment we would need to carry with us the next morning. Doug and Sheldon were already high on the mountain. Having obtained the necessary camping permit the preceding day, they could not resist taking off into these beautiful mountains. We had arranged to meet them at the Moraine campground the next evening.

Early the next morning the four of us drove a short way to the Lupine Meadows trailhead (elevation *6732ft*) with its large parking area and started off along the gentle trail that gave no hint of the enormous challenges ahead. The route proceeded south along the wooded edge of the meadow and then began a *1700ft* switchbacking ascent of a steep pine-forested slope. As we climbed our view of the Jackson Hole flatland broadened and soon the lovely, deep blue Bradley and Taggart lakes lay below us. As the trail turned west and began contouring into Garnet Canyon an even more spectacular scene opened up. Garnet is a delightful high country canyon with crystal cascades and small mossy meadows amongst massive boulders. And higher up we were treated to the first close-up view of the Middle Teton, looming over the head of the canyon and sliced through by a striking linear dyke. Continuing to climb, the trail eventually met with Garnet Creek at a place where there is a camping area known as The Platforms (elevation *8960ft*). This marked the end of the developed trail, and we stopped here to have lunch beside the sparkling stream.

Beyond the trails-end we clambered over and around a group of large boulders before reaching more level ground. The use-trail then followed Garnet Creek for about *0.5m* to a high alpine meadow with a popular campground known as The Meadows (elevation *9400ft*). Here, at the head of Garnet Canyon, we were close to the treeline with mostly glacier and rock all around. Two steep valleys, the North and South Forks of Garnet Canyon, descend into The Meadows. Our route through the North Fork switchbacked up a steep and partially wooded slope above the Meadows and climbed around to the right of a lovely waterfall known as Spalding Falls. These are fed by water from the Middle Teton Glacier still out of sight and high above us in the North Fork. Beyond Spalding Falls the trail crossed the stream at a camping area known as the Petzoldt Caves, a name that refers to campsites dug out under huge boulders. Here we passed the last trees at an elevation of about *10000ft* and began to ascend a steep, barren talus slope that eventually crested at the top of a great moraine. Created by the Middle Teton Glacier that deposited a massive rough platform of rocks, this moraine formed a mile-long horizontal perch in this otherwise vertical terrain high on the side of the Teton peaks. As the glacier retreated it left this perch bounded on the right and at the head by rock walls and on the left by the remnants of the ice. A series of

small tent-sized clearings sprinkled over the wide boulder field constituted the Moraine camping area. Each site was protected by camper-built rock walls that provide some shelter from the frequent winds.

We reached the bottom end of the Moraine camping area (elevation *10750ft*) about *6hr* and *6.2m* from the morning start. Here we expected to find Doug and Sheldon but they were nowhere to be seen. We made our way up the braided trails that led through this much-dispersed camping area, looking for them at every site. Reaching the bottom of the steep talus slope at the head of the canyon where the last sites were located we had to conclude that Doug and Sheldon had not yet arrived. We set up camp at this highest group of sites (elevation *11000ft*) and, fortunately, Doug and Sheldon arrived up shortly thereafter. They had detoured en route in order to summit the Middle Teton which they did successfully. Over dinner, we talked of plans for the next day and finally settled down for the night.



Lower Saddle from the Moraine



Ascending the fixed rope

We slept longer than we had planned and, after breakfast, began hiking about *7.30am*. At the top of the steep talus slope in the head of the canyon, was the first technical obstacle of the day, a *40ft* climb up an easy cliff using a very thick, fixed rope and many good footholds. From the top of rope climb, the trail switchbacked up about *200ft* to the broad Lower Saddle (*11650ft*) that lies between the Grand and Middle Tetons and is readily seen from the valley far below. Here we took advantage of the last available water on the ascent to pump several bottles from a trickle of glacial melt. Two Exum Guide huts and a number of windswept campsites (protected by stone walls) also occupy the Lower Saddle.

From the Lower Saddle we were treated to the first views west into Idaho. Below lay the broad South Fork of Cascade Canyon, another popular hiking route with a developed trail. The view to the south was dominated by the bulk of the Middle Teton, clearly a very difficult technical climb from this starting point. Looking north the trail proceeds northeastwards up the crest of a broad ridge toward the mass of the Grand Teton. Straight ahead we could clearly discern the broad horizontal band of black rock known as the Black Dyke running across the bottom of the mountain. When the trail steepened, we followed the use-trail straight up through the Black Dyke, directly toward a large cliff that blocks the route straight ahead. At the cliff, we turned left and followed a well-worn trail around the foot of the cliff and into a talus-filled gully. Just about *50ft* up this gully, after just one switchback, we encountered the trickiest navigational challenge on the ascent to the Upper Saddle. Called the "Eye of the Needle" in the guidebooks, we found the available diagrams and descriptions of dubious value. Only after several errors did we recognize the correct (and quite simple) route. After the trail arrives in the talus-filled gully and makes one switchback across it, you should look to the right and find a steep rock ledge that begins broad but narrows as it rounds a promontory. Like many folks we proceed up this ledge (it had a cairn on it) and then found serious technical challenges around the corner. Though we finally found our way past those challenges, we later recognized that we should not have ascended the broad ledge with the cairn.

Rather, we should have proceeded about another *20ft* up the talus-filled gully to a much less obvious ledge trail that proceeds right under an overhang to a bench. Known as the "Eye of the Needle" that bench is directly above the start of the broad ledge. On the way back down the mountain we chose to rappel down about *90ft* from the "Eye of the Needle" bench to the talus-filled gully.



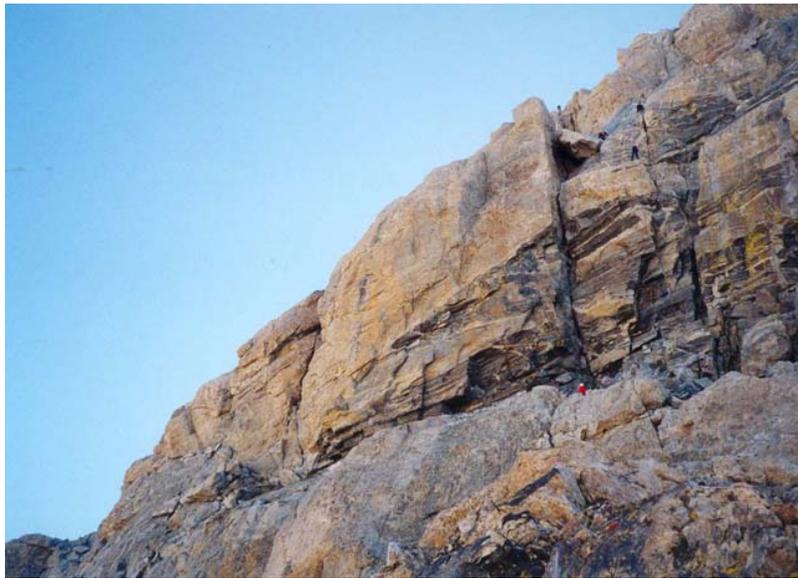
Looking up from Lower Saddle



View south from Upper Saddle

From the "Eye of the Needle" bench, the route up to the Upper Saddle (elevation *13100ft*) proceeded straight up a broad gully. Staying to the right at first and then crossing over toward the left, we relocated a well-worn trail in the talus slope that switchbacked up to the Upper Saddle. There we were treated to awesome views both to the south and, newly revealed, in the northern direction. To the south we could now see all the Teton peaks at the southern end of the range and, in the distance, the city of Jackson. To the north *12928ft* Mount Owen was half hidden behind the mass of the Grand and, below, an almost vertical *5000ft* drop into Cascade Canyon. Its waters fill Jenny Lake which, in turn, flows into Jackson Lake, visible to the northeast. And in between the awesome drop-offs to the north and south, was the massive cliff to the east, the vertical side of the summit block of the Grand Teton. Standing at the Upper Saddle, it was hard to see how there could be any way to surmount that huge summit block towering above us. Cliffs of over *100ft* rise vertically overhead as far as one could see on both sides. And the drop-offs to both the left and the right are huge.

However, from the Upper Saddle a use-trail climbs up a short talus-covered ridge running up to the base of the cliff around the summit block and thence to a rocky platform at the bottom of rappel descent of the cliff. We reached this waypoint (elevation about *13200ft*) about *3.5hr* after the morning start. Here we encountered other groups descending from the summit block by way of the two, side-by-side rappel routes about which more later. From here our chosen route was obvious for off to the left there was a narrow and narrowing ledge, the beginning of the Owen-Spalding route. About *30ft* from the bottom of the *120ft* rappel and just past a chimney called the Wittich Crack, we encountered the first technical and constitutionally challenging part of the route, a series of very exposed obstacles on a narrow, horizontal ledge. The first of these obstacles, known as the Bellyroll, is formed by a large slab that has detached from the rock face. Here we donned our harnesses and prepared for the technical part of the ascent.



Summit block from Upper Saddle

Roped up and belayed we made our way around this slab by hanging onto its top edge and using the modest footholds on its steep outer face. The length of this manoeuvre is only about *10ft* and it would have been easy were it not for the vertical drop of several thousand feet directly underneath! Beyond the Bellyroll, we accessed a small but comfortable shelf that quickly narrowed to a horizontal tube-like ledge known as The Crawl. I wiggled through The Crawl though others, on a belay, transitioned around in the same way that they did the Bellyroll. Again the exposure was enormous. As the tube of The Crawl widened again, there was another, detached slab similar to the Bellyroll. Just beyond that was the deep and easy Double Chimney (*5.5* at most). Entering the recess of that chimney meant some relief from the enormous exposure and allowed a little relaxation. About *20ft* of easy climbing lead to the top of the Double Chimney. There we emerged onto a recessed platform and paused to recover our equilibrium.

Sitting there in the sun, enjoying the panoramic view, we reviewed our next challenge. Other passing climbers reminded us that there are two ways to get from this platform to a long, broad and comfortable ledge that runs horizontally across the summit block about *50ft* above where we were perched. The first is the obvious Owen Chimney that runs up from the back of the platform. The second and quicker route is a series of angled ledges known as The Catwalk that proceeds around to the south. However, the Catwalk is very exposed, especially the first *20ft* around a promontory. We opted for the Catwalk. So I casually asked Clancy whether he wanted to proceed around the promontory with a belay line and was somewhat startled by the firmness of the negative response. Same response from Garrett. And so I suddenly realized that we had reached a crux in our adventure. If we were going to reach the top I would have to lead us there. And so we set up a belay line, I made my way to the apex of the promontory, climbed about *6ft* up the arete to another ledge and anchored myself to a convenient hole in the rock. Having converted the belay line to a handline, the others then made their way up to the anchor point and proceeded onwards along the Catwalk to its end at the broad ledge. Back at the anchor point Clancy and Garrett were the last to surmount the promontory hurdle. Their murmurs of admiration exhilarated me. Somehow, I felt a new beginning. I had for so long relied on these two to undertake the more dangerous tasks. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, despite my age, I had joined them as an equal in leading our group. Quiet satisfaction suffused me. I would lead this group to the top of the Grand Teton.

The three of us continued for about *150ft* up the angled Catwalk to the broad ledge at the point where the top of the *120ft* rappel is located. Some of the others had dispersed along the ledge looking for the next chimney, but we soon regrouped and set off on the final leg of our ascent. A short distance north along the broad ledge I located the obviously climbable crack know as Sargent's Chimney. To be certain that I had identified the right chimney I went a little further north along the ledge to where it ended in the much larger Great West Chimney and then I backtracked. In the absence of ice, Sargent's Chimney was a lovely (and fairly easy) free climb of about *120ft*. The exhilaration was still with me as I flew up it, leaving an extended line of my companions behind me. This was not just bravado; we had very limited

time left and I had to ascertain the correct route to avoid any further delays. At a bolted rappel point I exited chimney left onto another broad ledge, above which it was clear that the slopes would allow an easy scramble to the summit. Proceeding northeast I found a use-trail that bypassed a *25ft* slab and then a short final *20ft* chimney. Suddenly, I was on the *13770ft* summit of the Grand Teton. It was a moment of supreme accomplishment. Not only had I made it to the summit of this majestic mountain, but I had found in myself a strength and resolve that I did not know I had. And I had deployed both the strength and my leadership to bring all of our party to the top. It was indeed a special beginning for me.



On the summit of the Grand Teton



The 120ft rappel descent

But there was one serious problem. We had hoped to reach the summit by *1.00pm* in order to leave time for a comfortable, daylight descent. It was now *5.00pm*! I would seriously fail my friends if they were to be trapped on the mountain for the night. Therefore speed was of the essence. I could only enjoy the summit for a few minutes before starting down. Indeed, only Doug arrived while I was there. I regret that I did not share that special moment with Garrett, Simone, Clancy and Sheldon. All made it to the summit but only after I passed them on my way down.

Fortunately, we were skilled at setting up rappels and so the *100ft* rappel descent of Sargent's Chimney and then the spectacular *120ft* Owen-Spalding free rappel from the horizontal ledge down to the Upper Saddle area were carried out very efficiently. As we sat awaiting our turn at the top of the Owen-Spalding an elegant white glider circled us like a great mute gull acknowledging our accomplishment. We then hastened down the use-trail past the Upper Saddle and down the talus slope to the "Eye of the Needle" bench. Another efficient rappel took us into a talus-filled gully, from which a well-worn trail proceeded left around the cliff-base to the top of the Black Dyke. Though the light was fading as we climbed down through the Black Dyke and hiked down the ridge toward the Lower Saddle, our anxiety had eased for we were now quite certain that we could get back to camp from here in the dark. It was *8.00pm* and we had but a few minutes of twilight left as we passed tomorrow's hikers huddled around the Exum huts and made our way down to the fixed rope descent below the Lower Saddle. Here, with the end of the days exertions now palpably in sight, I began to feel very weary. But it was only a matter of minutes before we finally arrived back at our campground. I could only managed a cup of broth before I had to climb into my sleeping bag.

The third day dawned bright and beautiful and the exhilaration of the preceding day returned as we breakfasted and packed for the descent to the valley below. This was the easy part and we were all buoyed by the achievements of the day before. As any party is likely to do on a carefree descent we tended to spread out so it happened that I spent some time alone on the trail with each of my good friends. Doug seemed elated despite his sore feet and talked of times ahead. Simone and Garrett were already planning yet another extemporaneous detour on their way back to Houston. And Clancy and I

talked of the very different challenges he would face as a young faculty member at Princeton. We also talked of future adventures, they with the confidence of youth, me with an unspoken uncertainty born of my age and declining abilities.

It was Clancy who drove me to the airport that evening for my flight back to California. We said a quick goodbye for my emotions would not allow me otherwise. Everything that needed to be said had already been said and experienced high on the Grand Teton and on a kaleidoscope of other adventures over the past five years. A magnificent journey was spiritually complete. The beginnings and endings were now sharply in focus. George had it right.

*Last updated 1/15/02.
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