Storm stalls Everest team

The expedition searching for the bodies of British climbers George Mallory and Andrew Irvine had established five camps up the North Face of Mt. Everest and was working to set up a sixth when the mountain unleashed its fury. As expedition leader Andrew Harvard and journalist George Bell report in this update, filed Oct. 13, a mild fall in the Himalaya came to an abrupt end.

By Andrew Harvard
with George Bell

MT. EVEREST, Tibet – Our expedition has fallen victim to a sudden and severe blizzard that has pinned down climbers in scattered camps along the upper mountain trail and has made it impossible to advance above Camp Five at 25,500 feet.

The snowstorm struck the North Face six days ago and has dumped more than four feet of snow. At one point, the storm pelted us with golf ball-sized hail. Winds have been fierce and unrelenting, often exceeding 50 m.p.h. and wind-chill temperatures have dropped lower than 20 degrees below zero.

The blizzard caught us by surprise. The monsoon season had passed, and it appeared to be too early for the onset of the harsh Himalayan winter. When the first snow came, the 30 members of our climbing team were spread out along the 13-mile route from Base Camp at 17,000 feet to Camp Five. Some were transporting supplies to higher camps, others were settled in camps and engaged in tasks related to our upcoming search for the bodies of Mallory and Irvine, who disappeared in 1924.

As the ferocity of the snows increased, Westerners and Sherpas scrambled for the camp nearest them, and there they remained, with few exceptions, holed up in tents for six days.

After four days, we decided the expedition could lose no more time in stocking the high camps as a prelude to establishing Camp Six at 27,500 feet. This will be our highest camp and will be situated in the area where expedition chairman Tom Holzel's research indicates we have the best chance

> Frozen rain pelted the team, and the wind blew so furiously at the camp that a shovelful of snow, tossed into the air, blew horizonally out of sight.

to locate the bodies of the British climbers or artifacts from their summit attempt, an attempt many believe was successful.

It was decided that a team of seasoned Sherpas and expedition cinematographer David Breashears, the only American to twice reach the 29,028-foot top of Everest, would make the harrowing three-mile trek from Camp Four on the North Col to Camp Five to finish stocking the higher camp. That morning, eight of our most experienced Sherpas set out, each carrying a 45-pound load of supplies – tents, stoves, food, fuel, oxygen. The eight Sherpas were able to make Camp Five and return by late afternoon.

The next day cloud cover broke and, under blue skies, Breashears and three Sherpas, Nawang, Pasang Tsering and Dawa Noru, each carrying 60-pound loads, set out for Camp Five.

As the team continued, the wind suddenly picked up. At the 24,500-foot mark, Breashears noticed the Sherpa ahead of him was no longer standing straight up, but was tilted to the right in an attempt to counteract the wind, now blowing at more than 50 m.p.h. Two hours later the team arrived at Camp Five. The wind had intensified to 70 m.p.h.

Standing in the snow-swept camp, Breashears and the Sherpas debated whether to dig out the buried tents or erect a new one. They decided to set up a tent and began the arduous task of shoveling a level surface on the snow floor. Frozen rain pelted their faces. At that high altitude, each man had to pause after two or three shovelfuls to gasp for breath. The wind blew so furiously that a shovelful of snow, tossed into the air, blew horizontally out of sight. Finally, a two-man tent was erected and the four exhausted men piled inside.

Later that night the wind exceeded 100 m.p.h. "Then we began to hear sounds like pistol shots," Breashears said. "The outer fabric of the tent was being bombarded by three-inch-thick pieces of airborne ice." He slept very little that night, finally placing cotton in his ears to silence the howling wind.

Shortly before dawn, the wind slowed by about 50 m.p.h. The team brewed tea, packed, and began the descent to the North Col camp. Camp Five was now fully stocked.

If the weather clears up, we should be able to set up Camp Six within another week. From there we will begin our long-anticipated search for the lost climbers.

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MICHAEL ROBINSON CHAVEZ (ABOVE); PHOTO / BREASHEARS COLLECTION (BELOW)

EYES ON THE SKIES *From Boulder to Everest to Kilimanjaro, Breashears has tackled projects with a mix of intensity and discipline. "This is not a calm soul," he confesses.*

Driven to the SUMMIT

Climber-filmmaker David Breashears has made the most of the high life

By Nathan Cobb
GLOBE STAFF

ONCE HE gets to know you a bit, David Breashears will begin to reveal the bits and pieces of his unusual life, from a childhood darkened by a violent father to his ambivalence about the forbidding mountain to which his name has become tightly linked. He will talk about growing up scrawny yet becoming a legendary scaler of rock faces and icefalls. About a nomadic and relentless work style that saw him log some 200,000 air miles last year alone. And about summiting Mount Everest four times, the third in 1996, while making a remarkable large-format IMAX movie and unexpectedly finding himself witness to a stormy tragedy during which eight climbers perished.

MOUNTAIN MADNESS

Breashears filming scenes from "Cliffhanger" in the Dolomites, in Italy.

But sitting in a noisy local restaurant on a recent Sunday morning, precisely dissecting his toasted bagel with chive cheese and tomatoes, the 43-year-old climber-cum-filmmaker is reduced to quoting Yogi Berra in self-summation. Breashears carefully folds his narrow hands and leans across the small table. His metallic-blue eyes peer straight ahead. "When you come to a fork in the road," he declares evenly, "take it."

And so he has. Frequently. Next month, Breashears – who lives in Brighton as much as he lives anywhere – will embark on an 18-city tour to promote "High Exposure," an autobiography that chonicles his diverse climbing life. (The book was aided in no small measure by Jeff Long, a Colorado outdoor writer.) Once something of a young cult figure among the rock-climbing dudes of the Rockies, Breashears later became the first American to twice summit Everest and the first person to transmit live images

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Views from a life on high

■ BREASHEARS

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from the mountain's 29,028-foot peak. He has made an assortment of documentaries and won four Emmy awards. These days he is earnestly working to aid the Nepalese Sherpas who make Himalayan mountaineering possible, while planning another IMAX movie, this one about Mount Kilimanjaro.

Small wonder that last month, a poster advertising his slide presentation at the University of New Hampshire, for which he was paid $8,500, according to one of the organizers, touted him as "world famous." And oh yes: People magazine crowned Breashears – something of a Tony Perkins circa-1975 look-alike – the "sexiest explorer" of 1998.

A celebrity, right? "You're doomed when you start to believe that stuff," says Breashears, whose 5-foot-10, 160-pound frame does not suggest world-class physical feats. "Besides, people aren't interested in me. They're interested in the experiences I give them in my films. I'm just a window. A portal."

So don't expect any appearances on "Hollywood Squares," or any of the other trappings that often accompany fame. "I don't think he knows how to cash in on it," says his friend David Fanning, senior executive producer of the PBS television program "Frontline." "He hasn't made much money because he doesn't know how to sell himself." Breashears keeps a small office in the Victorian manse that belongs to a friend in Newton, uses a modest Brighton apartment as a sort of base camp, and lives nearby with his girlfriend, "Nova" TV producer Liesl Clark. He has no agent and no publicist. Why? "It's just such a bizarre thought," he answers, shrugging.

Nor has public acclaim altered his unwillingness to buy into the American dream. As in: purchase a house, settle down, etc. Sometimes he'll actually talk about buying a first home, but the conversations don't last long. "It creates anxiety in me," he says. "I have the means to do it, but it would mean giving up my vagabond nature. And it just hasn't mattered. If it mattered, I'd do it. I'll get to that point someday. But right now my work is my life."

There is something else. When Breashears was about 10 years old, his father, a demanding Army officer, became increasingly violent and eventually abandoned him, his mother, and his three siblings. It is a dark chapter with which he has since wrestled, and one that he feels helps explain why he does what he does. "I've chosen a life of climbing, a life of running away from commitment and stability," he says. "When your world falls apart like that – when someone you're supposed to admire becomes someone you fear – it can lead to a life in which it's hard to make attachments."

Close relationships have suffered. The foremost casualty was his four-year marriage to Veronique Choa, now a Virginia-based graphic designer, whom he met at the foot of Everest in 1986. Breashears was away working during much of the marriage – a documentary film on Tibet here, a movie about Peruvian mummies there – and he wasn't eager to carve out a real partnership when he was "home."

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Fear of large subjects

"To talk about large subjects freaked him out," says Choa, who considers her former husband a good friend. "These were subjects like, 'Where are we going to live?' and 'Are we going to have a family?' It put a lot of stress on him to think about those things. He avoided talking about them. ... I wanted a life, and a life with him. I wanted to share experiences. I did not thrive alone. I was unhappy."

(Large mountains, small world: Choa is now married to America Online president and chief operating officer Robert Pittman, who was formerly married to Sandy Hill, a socialite/climber who was part of the 1996 calamity on Everest and who earlier climbed the mountain with Breashears.)

Asked to choose some words to describe Breashears, Choa selects "neat," "meticulous," and "precise." "He should have been a surgeon," she muses. Others who know him well offer these descriptions: iconoclastic, focused, prickly, thoughtful, controlling, curious, disciplined, self-reliant, careful, practical, impatient, efficient. In the end, one word – *driven* – is mentioned more than the others, and Breashears does not disagree with it. "This is not a calm soul," he confesses.

"This is the boy who is going to prove himself to his father," offers Fanning. "He is going to climb his way out of the unhappiness of his childhood."

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MICHAEL ROBINSON-CHAVEZ

'People [are] ... interested in the experiences I give them in my films. I'm just a window.'
DAVID BREASHEARS

It is also the boy who takes no project lightly, especially if it involves unforgiving places. This is no risk taker, despite his chosen profession. He knows that the finish line of any climb is at the bottom, not on the top. Indeed, in 1994 Breashears turned back his Everest party of five climbers and four Sherpas at 24,400 feet because he didn't like the snow conditions ahead. Even when he reaches the summit, he wants to do it on his own careful terms. "He'll never put himself in harm's way," says his mother, Ruth Breashears, who lives in Denver. "He listens to the mountain."

John Ackerly, president of the International Campaign for Tibet, a human-rights-monitoring group, remembers one classic Breashears-led climb. It took place on Black Dike, a White Mountains icefall, during the winter of 1994-95. "Most people get up at dawn and are at the icefall at 8 o'clock," Ackerly explains. "But David was up at 4 a.m. and the icefall at dawn. So we were hiking before light in 20-below zero weather. We finished the climb at 9 a.m., and we were down by lunch. But David had wanted plenty of time to deal with whatever might go wrong, although nothing did. He's very practical. He thinks of everything."

Fanning sees his friend as a kind of misplaced 19th century character filled with old-fashioned virtues. "He's the guy you'd send to the furthest corner of the colonial empire to keep the flag flying," he says. "Because he'd do it."

Which is not to say that Breashears doesn't have a life. On the contrary, his intensity and curiosity have pushed him hither and yon. True, much of what he likes to do takes place outdoors – climbing the Whites or fly-fishing for striped bass off the North Shore. But he's also likely to whip up some Mediterranean or Oriental food to go with a bottle of Chilean red wine, crank up a Bruce Springsteen CD (or slip out to the opera), or open a thick historical tome.

PHOTOS / DUDLEY CHELTON

FINDING THE LINE

Breashears (above and right) in Colorado's Eldorado Springs Canyon, 1975.

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A European sensibility

"He's easily comfortable in a wider range of cultures than most Americans," says Andrew Harvard, an attorney who has climbed with Breashears on a dozen or so Himalayan expeditions. "In that sense he's like an educated European."

Yet Breashears never seriously considered college, opting instead to do his learning on the ledges high above Boulder, Colo. (He grew up in Army towns stretching from Greece to Georgia to Wyoming.) "He didn't have a bike or a stereo when he was growing up," his mother recalls. "All he wanted to do was climb." For a young misfit who didn't go to his senior prom or have his picture taken for the yearbook, climbing was a pathway to excellence and self-expression. His first job in films, some 20 years ago, was as a gofer in a documentary about climbing. He has since worked on an assortment of movies at a variety of levels – he shot footage for Sylvester Stallone's 1993 "Cliffhanger" – and has recently himself made films about such subjects as the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the ways that high altitude affects the body and mind, and the mapping of Everest. Breashears has been on Everest 11 times since 1981, usually with a camera.

He was there in May 1996, toting a 42-pound, $186,000 IMAX camera toward the summit, when all hell broke loose. On a night that still rattles with controversy, eight climbers in other expeditions died when they didn't get down from the top of Everest before both darkness and a serious storm hit. Camped at 21,300 feet – a perch where he had characteristically decided to wait because he liked neither the unstable weather nor the mountain's crowded condition – Breashears put the success of his own expedition in jeopardy to assist survivors and to donate 24 precious oxygen tanks to the rescue effort. Several days later, he and his party of four other climbers inched their way toward the summit, past Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, two guides who'd perished on that awful night and whose frozen bodies were now part of an open graveyard.

Standing on the top of the world, Breashears used his bare hands to load the final 500-foot roll of 65mm film into the camera – by far the heaviest single object that had even been slogged up the slopes of Everest – and finished a mountaineering movie that may never be matched. (The Sherpa on the summit with him was Jamling Tenzing Norgay, son of the first Sherpa to reach the top, in 1953, who was an inspiration for Breashears's youthful climbing.) Significantly, he had chosen not to film the earlier nightmare. Nor had he turned his camera on the corpses of Hall and Fischer. "He's always had a clear view of how to behave on the mountains, and what he did reflects that view," says Andrew Harvard.

"I usually think of that expedition when I'm driving my car, when there's nothing in front of me that has to be done," Breashears says. "And when I do think of it, it's never, *ever*, about being on top of Everest. It's about the sequence of events that led to those deaths. And how awful it must have been for those people.

"That was a transitional moment for me. A watershed. For one thing, I gained access to a part of my soul I'd built a wall around. I felt real sadness over those deaths, the kind of sadness I hadn't been able to feel when my father died.

"It's also made me feel more comfortable and more self-assured about who I am. Giving up those oxygen bottles and not filming what was happening ... In those moments, I was the person I'd hoped I would be.

"As a result, I have less of a need to ask myself, 'Can you do it? Are you good enough?' I have less of a need to prove myself. I'm less agitated and more calm. It's like letting steam out of a pressure cooker."

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Multitasking

Maybe so, but he's still David Breashears and he's still on the run. There's the upcoming book tour, the Kilimanjaro film project, the Sherpa cause. There's the dream of making a film archive of Tibetan life. Sure, he'd like to climb just for the fun of it – Look! No camera! – but where's the time for it? He runs regularly and works out at a local gym, but he frets that he's not in the kind of shape that would allow him to make a quarter-inch finger hold from an overhang. "I would never have fathomed that could happen," he sighs.

Everest? He talks about it like he might talk about a complex relationship with another person, someone he loves but knows he should avoid. He says he feels it's become a trophy mountain, its high camps and fixed ropes too often overpopulated by folks who have served no real climbing apprenticeship. "The Everest freeway," he calls the place, telling friends he'll never go back.

And yet ...

He did return in 1997 to make "The Death Zone" for "Nova," and still talks about the flutter he gets when he sees this dark icon rising into the clouds. That's when he'll say, "I've always felt drawn to Everest, felt a tug." And *that's* when he'll say, "I'm not finished there."