

The
LAST MAN
ON THE
MOUNTAIN

THE DEATH OF AN AMERICAN ADVENTURER ON K2



"Jordan's skilled storytelling
brings Wolfe to vivid life."

—*Library Journal*



JENNIFER JORDAN

AUTHOR OF *Savage Summit*

The Last Man on the Mountain

Savage Summit



K2 base camp, 1939. (*Courtesy of the George C. Sheldon Family*)

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The Death of an American Adventurer on K2

JENNIFER JORDAN

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Charlie Houston

~~1913–2009~~

Last of the Golden Age

(I know that I can't keep dedicating my books to him, but I will always want to.)

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I have been a journalist for thirty years, but it wasn't until I began researching *The Last Man on the Mountain* that I learned that history is deeply flawed. Not necessarily wrong or deliberately misleading—I simply discovered the extent to which history is sketched by the pen of its writer. In the case of Dudley Wolfe, from his ancestors in seventeenth-century Maine to recent mentions of the infamous 1939 expedition in books and articles, I found errors, omissions, prejudices, selective arguments, and deliberate falsehoods. There was also the effect of high altitude I had to take into account. In few areas is history more skewed than in Himalayan climbing: witnesses often suffer oxygen deprivation and acute mountain sickness, adding to the fog through which history is remembered and written.

As a result, I had to deconstruct the account you are about to read to its essential pieces before reassembling it. Certain “irrefutable facts” were questioned and some interesting skeletons fell out of the closet.

Finally, I have employed a tactic used effectively by many writers, notably Sebastian Junger in his brilliant account of the *Andrea Gail's* sinking off the Grand Banks in 1991, *The Perfect Storm*, and I did it for the same reason: it is impossible to re-create the actual dialogue of the dead with no living witnesses to the event. Therefore, in the pages that follow there are two forms of the spoken word: direct quotes, which I gathered from journals, letters, books, and witnesses, and speech given in italics, representing thoughts and conversations based on the facts I could gather, but which to my knowledge is not verbatim.

Therefore, seventy years after his death, let me introduce you to the Dudley Francis Wolfe I discovered.

Jennifer Jordan
Salt Lake City
January 2011

The Last Man on the Mountain

The Godwin–Austen Glacier, K2, July 2002

Naked of life, naked of warmth and safety, bare to the sun and stars, beautiful in its stark snow loneliness, the Mountain waits.

—ELIZABETH KNOWLTON, *The Naked Mountain*



Dudley Wolfe’s skeletal remains found in 2002. (Jennifer Jordan / Jeff Rhoads)

On a sunny afternoon with a breeze light enough to bring fresh air into base camp but not so stiff that I needed a parka, I found myself carefully picking my way among the uneven rocks, ice towers, crevasses, and run-off rivulets of the Godwin–Austen Glacier at the base of the world’s second highest mountain, K2, in Pakistan.

A few years earlier, I had learned that only five women had reached the summit of K2, and all of them were dead. Three perished on their descent, and the two that had managed to make it off the so-called Savage Mountain alive had died soon after while attempting other 8,000-meter peaks, a legendary distinction which separates the fourteen Himalayan giants which stand above the mark from the countless peaks which sit below it. Just as hikers in the Rocky Mountains aim for all of Colorado’s fifty-three “14ers,” those mountains at and above 14,000 feet, high-altitude climbers aim for all fourteen of the Himalayan “8,000ers.” High-altitude mountaineering is not a sport for the faint-hearted, and K2 is not a peak for weekend warriors. As of the 2009 climbing season, 297 people have reached its summit, while seventy-eight have died trying.

That summer of 2002, when I made my second trip to the mountain, while our team climbed, I spent my mornings working on my first book, *Savage Summit*, and my afternoons walking the glacier becoming as familiar with the rocky, shifting river of ice as I was with the Wasatch Mountains in my own backyard in Salt Lake City. The glacier offered a fascinating array of odds and ends. Because of K2's topography and climate—steep rock walls and icy slopes, avalanches and hurricane-force winds—everything and everyone that has ever been on the mountain eventually ends up at its base. I rarely returned to base camp from my hikes without some relic, harmless or horrific, of climbers past.

That sunny July day, while some of our team rested in their tents waiting for the mountain to shed a layer of avalanches from the latest storm, I started out on my afternoon walk. Because I had fallen into a crevasse in 2000 on our first trip to K2, my partner, high-altitude climber and cinematographer Jeff Rhoads, worried that I would disappear into another, and whenever possible accompanied me on my walks. We got further away from our tents than we ever had before, venturing down the glacier rather than our usual up it, picking our way over rock-strewn ice through the maze of ice towers. Then, about a mile off track, we turned a corner and found ourselves standing in a frozen sea of debris. While I had stumbled upon climbing rubble all summer, even the occasional desiccated body, this collection of relics was different. Unlike the bright parkas and nylon tents used by climbers since the 1970s, here was evidence from another era. Slowly we picked up fragments of canvas, leather straps, hemp rope, a rusted crampon, a tin plate and pot, even a burner plate from an old Primus stove. Then, my eyes picked something out of the rocks and rubble that I knew shouldn't be there: a bone fragment. It looked like a white pencil stub, rounded by years of exposure to the rocks and sun. I picked it up and wordlessly handed it to Jeff, fearing the worst but knowing the truth.

"Yup," he said, rather casually, "definitely human. See the calcified marrow inside?"

I hadn't seen the marrow. He handed it back and said, "Probably a piece of the ulna." I gazed at the shard in my glove and pictured the once bronzed arm from which it had come. I placed it on a piece of torn canvas, unwilling to hold it any longer.

I rejoined Jeff in picking through the old wreckage. As he went off around an icy corner, I bent to look more closely at what appeared to be a shock of long white hair. Repulsed and yet fascinated, I was considering whether to pick it up when something to the right caught my eye. There, laid out on the rocks and ice, was the very recognizable skeleton of a human being: the pelvis, two femurs, and scattered ribs.

With tears stinging my eyes, I squatted to look at the bleached bones. Even though I had come to know that high-altitude climbing is the deadliest of adventures, having the evidence in front of me was shocking. I felt sad, not only for the person at my feet but for his or her family thousands of miles away, a family which never had the chance to say goodbye. It reminded me of a moment years before when I walked through a World War II cemetery at El Alamein in northern Egypt and saw a gravestone reading, "You are closer to my son than I will ever be. Please say a prayer for his Mother." Like that graveyard in Egypt, this one at the base of K2 echoed in silence. I cried then and I cried now at being so intimately connected to another person's loss.

Jeff's sharp whistle cut through the air. I whistled in response and stood up so he could find me. He appeared around an ice tower with a strange look on his face, and carrying something carefully in his hands. It was a weather-beaten canvas and leather mitten. On its cuff was a single name written in faded block letters: WOLFE.

Dudley Wolfe. We had found Dudley Wolfe, an American who had disappeared on K2 in 1939. After sixty-three years, K2's first fatality, and its most prolonged mystery, had finally been found.

An Invitation to the Ends of the Earth

So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle of life is itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go.

—GEORGE LEIGH MALLOTT



Dudley Wolfe at the helm of the *Highland Light*, August 1931. (Courtesy of the Dudley F. Rochester and Dudley F. Wolfe Family)

It was 1938 and Dudley Wolfe needed an adventure.

At forty-two, he had already done more than most men do in a lifetime, from driving an ambulance on the front lines in Europe during the Great War to hunting caribou in the Canadian Rockies and racing his custom-made schooners across thousands of miles of open ocean. But now, as he entertained guests in his New York penthouse with a slide show of his latest skiing and climbing trips through Europe, he realized he needed something more.

He looked over at his wife, Alice, as she walked through the dimly lit room refilling their guests' wine glasses. She was a strong, attractive woman who, although four years his senior, had bested him on the ski slopes more times than he could count. Their marriage had been a whirlwind of travel between her hunting lodge in Austria, his summer estate in Maine, and this apartment on Fifth Avenue overlooking Central Park. And while it had been a loving and comfortable marriage, it wasn't enough.

to sustain him for the long term. He had been single thirty-eight years before they married and he had come to realize that he preferred being on his own. Alone, but not lonely—independent. Free to pick up and go without explanation or apology. He hated to hurt her, but it wasn't fair to either of them to stay in a marriage simply for convenience and comfort. They both deserved to have passion. For nearly a year he had tried to explain to Alice why he wanted to end the marriage, but she was still very much in love with him and with their life together. She had finally and regretfully agreed that if he would be happier alone, they would separate. The divorce would be final in a few weeks.

Dudley turned his attention back to the images of his climbs on the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc, and the Italian peaks around Monte Rosa as they flashed on the screen at one end of the living room. He explained each picture and answered questions on how crevasses formed in glaciers, how heavy the nearly three-foot-long wood-handled ice axe was, how the steel crampons helped you climb ice walls, how the double-layer wool pants with long underwear underneath were perfectly adequate in subzero temperatures and hurricane winds, and, always, what he and Alice thought of the rumors of war in Europe.

When the last slide clicked out of its slot in the projector, the room went momentarily dark and there was a polite spray of applause. Then the lights came on and people rose from their seats, stretched, and headed to the bar for another drink, chatting about Europe and the mountains and Dudley's wonderful adventures.

Watching the small crowd of his and Alice's friends move about the room, Dudley saw that one guest had remained in his seat. Alice and he had met the man two years earlier at a cocktail party at the home of one of Alice's Upper East Side friends. Born in Dresden, Germany, Fritz Wiessner was a mountaineer who had come to the States a decade before and had amazed the American climbing community with his grace and skill on some of America's toughest cliff faces. As Dudley looked across the couch at Wiessner now, he liked what he saw. The man was competent, self-assured, educated, and built like a rock climber: short, lean, and strong. He reminded Dudley of his favorite climbing guide in the Alps—a man of purpose.

From the couch, Wiessner was taking in his surroundings. He too liked what he saw. The room was utterly white: white walls, white curtains, white floors, white leather furniture, white roses on the piano. Even the wine was white. The scene was a masterpiece of simple elegance. Then he turned to study Wolfe. The man was shy, gentle, and cheerful, and he was built like a football player with a barrel chest and thick, strong arms and legs. Quietly handsome with an infectious smile and impeccable grooming, Wolfe wore his money without embellishment. Sitting in Wolfe's lovely home high above Fifth Avenue, Fritz could see that Wolfe surrounded himself with the finest of everything: sterling silver ashtrays and candy dishes with "DFW" engraved into their bowls, starched Irish lace draping the grand piano, priceless oils by Cézanne and Renoir on the walls. Even the crystal wine glass Fritz held in his hand was exquisitely cut, hand-blown Austrian lead. Unlike other fabulously rich people Fritz had met, Wolfe didn't mention his wealth or the cost of anything. He was more refined than most, particularly most rich Americans, and Fritz appreciated that.

As other guests milled comfortably about the room, Dudley asked Fritz what he had been up to since they had last met. Fritz began with great enthusiasm to explain his latest endeavor, and Dudley listened attentively to every detail.

Wiessner was planning an expedition. Not just any expedition, but one to the top of the world—deadly region high in the Himalayan Mountains. After man had conquered the planet's poles, its oceans, and its deserts, he had turned to its roof as the last frontier on which he could stake his claim. While the sport of mountaineering had begun in 1854 when Sir Alfred Wills ascended the Wetterhorn (12,000 feet) in southern Switzerland, no one had yet conquered any of the Himalayan giants, although several early attempts had met with death: Alfred Mummery and two Sherpas on Nanga Parbat in

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