

CBC documentary to revisit First Canadian ascent of Everest

BY AMANDA FOLLETT

CANMORE LEADER STAFF

Canmore resident John Amatt was in his mid-20s when he left his teaching job at The Banff centre to organize and embark on an expedition to Mount Everest.

Though he would never summit the world's highest peak, the 1982 ascent put the first two Canadians on the top of the world and would ultimately change the direction of Amatt's life forever.

"It was a life-changing experience. You can't go through something like that and come out the other end unchanged. I certainly was," says Amatt, who, when he realized interest in his trip to the Himalayas refused to die, began a successful career in motivational speaking.

"That was the beginning of a journey that's continued ever since."

Though climbing mountains is the obvious subject of an upcoming CBC documentary about the first Canadian ascent of Mount Everest almost 25 years ago, the story that lies within is the expedition's life-changing element and where it took its members.

Crews with Toronto-based Nomad Films Inc. were in the Bow Valley recently to interview a handful of team members still living in the area, including Calgary-born Laurie Skreslet, who on Oct. 5, 1982 became the first Canadian to summit Everest, and Canmore resident Pat Morrow, who followed him to the top two days later.

The one-hour documentary not only uses original video footage, still photographs and audio recorded radio transmissions to tell the story of the successful but tragic ascent, it traces the climbers from that fateful expedition to where they are today.

While some would return to their original careers — many of them in the mountains — others would see their lives changed forever.

"It's a very interesting metaphor for life and it really was a story about life that just happened to occur in the arena of Mount Everest," Amatt says. "I had no idea that I'd be speaking about Everest 25 years later. When we went to that mountain it was never in the books"

Though ultimately successful in putting the first, and then second, Canadians atop the world's highest mountain, two separate accidents killed four team members and ultimately redirected the team's approach on the mountain. Three Sherpas were killed in an avalanche and two days later cameraman Blair Griffiths was killed in an icefall.

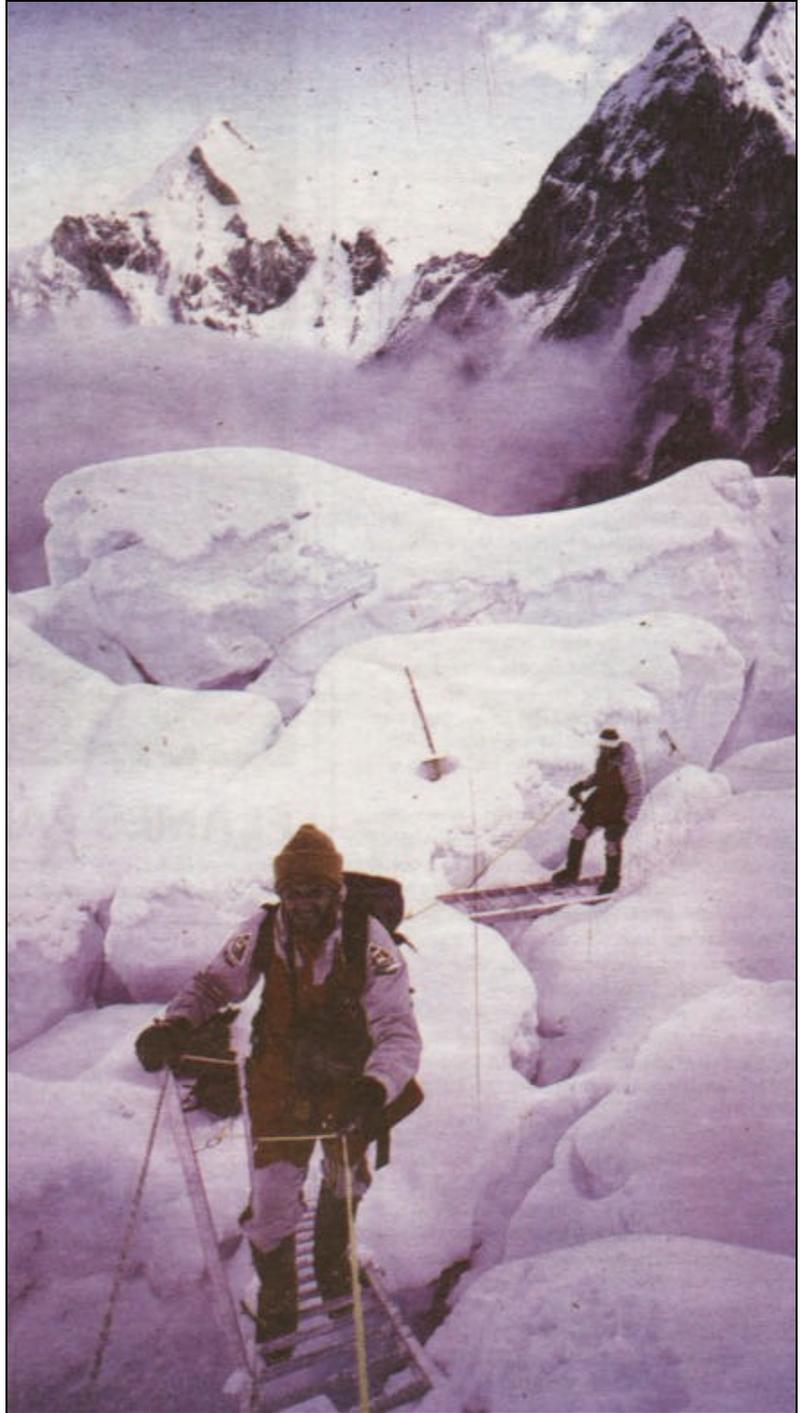


Photo by Pat Morrow

John Amatt, front, and Dave Read, members of the 1982 Canadian Mount Everest expedition, negotiate the mountain's perilous Khumbu Icefall. Film crews have been in the Bow Valley recently interviewing a handful of locals who were involved in the expedition for a documentary to be aired on CBC.

'82 Everest footage to be transferred to DVD for CBC documentary

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Since they were donated to the Banff Centre 10 years ago, historic film, video footage and still photography have largely collected dust in the Mountain Culture department.

It wasn't until recently, when the CBC put the wheels in motion for a documentary that traces members of the 1982 expedition from the high slopes of the world's highest mountain to their current lives, Banff Mountain Film Festival manager Deb Smythe had the opportunity to unearth the treasures.

"That collection included everything from one-inch video tapes, which are rare as hen's teeth and very hard to work with, to diaries, photographs, slides, some 16-millimetre film and some videotapes," says Smythe, who has been working with CBC to transfer precious video over to DVD.

"The great thing is that in exchange for us lending them these unique tapes, we're working with them to have the entire one-inch collection transferred to DVD. It'll be amazing because what it's going to do is stabilize this very precious collection for future use."

Video footage of the expedition was primarily shot but Canmore resident Pat Morrow and then shipped to Jim Muir here in Canada, who held onto the archives until donating them to Mountain Culture a decade ago.

Smythe says she's not aware of them being used for any other projects since, and Nomad Films Inc.'s Mark Johnston, who is producing the documentary, says the historical footage will make a great addition.

"What's really wonderful about it, what will make it a really terrific film, is having all this footage they shot on really experimental, quarter inch Hitachi video in '82. It had really never been done," he says, adding that stills and audio recording of radio transmissions will also be a bonus.

"Combining all these elements together I think is going to make it a really, really compelling story of what happened in '82 and what's happened to them since.



Photo by Pat Morrow

Laurie Skreslet, left, stands with Canmore resident Pat Morrow and Morrow's two sons, Ryan and Rob, in Kathmandu after becoming the first Canadian to ascend Mount Everest

Journey to Everest holds Universal audience appeal

Though tragic, Amatt says the events that saw some team members killed and others pull out of the expedition may also be what led to the team's success. The last-minute change in direction meant the climbers were forced to take the traditional route.

Had they not, Morrow and Skreslet may not have found their way to the top.

"It was devastating, but there was always this sense that out of this adversity will come something successful," Amatt says. "It was, I think, the ability of the team to pull together after the accidents and to adapt by changing the plan considerably and going up a different route — it was that that led to the summit."

In addition to Griffiths' footage, the documentary will feature video shot by Morrow, who continues to produce films while living in Canmore and last year won the Banff Mountain Film Festival's People's Choice Award.

But while Morrow is involved in the upcoming production, many of the 1982 team members are scattered around the world and would rather continue chasing their alpine pursuits than find fame for their achievements through television exposure.

"It was 25 years ago and they weren't in it to be filmed, they were in it to climb," he says. "They weren't in it for the glory then and they aren't in it for the glory now."

Also interviewed locally for the documentary were Canmoreites Lloyd Gallagher,

Tim Auger and Dave McNab.

The film will be aired in conjunction with a four-hour drama about the same event, which is being produced by Calgary-based Screen Door Films and is currently shooting in the Banff area.

"We're doing a companion documentary that tells the story not only of what happened then, and we have all the footage they shot, but really the story of what's happened to the guys since," says producer Mark Johnston.

"It's combining them telling the story in their own words of what happened in '82, between seven and 10 of the climbers, and then following the two summitters on this journey to re-live what happened."

Key characters in the film will be Morrow and Skreslet, who return to Nepal and Everest basecamp in June with camera crews to revisit the journey and reconnect with old friends, including the Sherpas who stood on the summit with them.

"Those types of journeys are about considering your life — what you've done, what you're going to do, what you leave behind," Johnston says.

"These are things that all of us deal with in our lives, about what have we done with ourselves and where are we going and what are we going to leave. These are things that all audiences can identify with and I think by revisiting all this, it gives people perspective."