

Robertson to refer to Sligger's letters in 1969 implies that when Sligger died in 1934 his correspondence with Mallory was returned to Ruth. If so, this correspondence may survive today in the Mallory family collection, now lodged in New Hampshire.

One conundrum remains. Did Mallory ever visit the Chalet des Anglais? It would be delightful to know that he did, particularly as one of us was an undergraduate at University College, Oxford, one of three colleges which use the chalet, while the other, a fellow at University College, still organises the college's summer chalet parties. We feel we have established that the Sligger-Mallory friendship was based not on their shared interest in mountains but on the practicalities of academic life. Even so, is it not likely that Sligger would have thought to enhance their friendship with an invitation to the chalet, given that Mallory was climbing in the Alps around the time that they first met<sup>13</sup>? Sadly, we have found no evidence this ever took place.

In addition to the record from his photograph albums, so meticulously maintained, Sligger kept a diary at Chalet des Anglais in which each visitor noted the dates when they stayed. Mallory's name does not appear and it is highly unlikely that Sligger would have allowed a distinguished climber to be at the chalet without recording that fact. Whether or not an invitation was ever formally made, it may have been tacitly accepted by one or both of them that the study and hill walking Sligger offered at the chalet would have been too tame an environment for so accomplished a climber.

There is an intriguing footnote to the Sligger-Mallory friendship. On the chalet bookshelves are a number of books belonging to Mallory's Pen y Pass climbing partner Cottie Sanders, later Lady Mary O'Malley and the novelist Ann Bridge. They include *The Climbs on Lliwedd*, the 1909 Climbers' Club guide by J M Archer Thomson and A W Andrews. There is a note by Cottie on page 27 recording that she climbed *Central Route* (also known as *Route One*) with Mallory on 3 January 1911, which accords with the roster of his ascents in the various biographies. So, we speculated, were Cottie's climbing books passed on to Sligger by Mallory when Cottie was obliged to withdraw from the climbing community on the insistence of her husband, Owen O'Malley<sup>14</sup>? This theory does not stand up either, as some of Cottie's books date from after Mallory's death on Everest in 1924. By whatever route this lady climber's books arrived at the Chalet des Anglais, it was not through the agency of the friendship between George Mallory and Francis Urquhart.

### Acknowledgements

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13. P and L Gillman, *The Wildest Dream: the biography of George Mallory*, London, Headline, 2000, p63.

14. P and L Gillman, *The Wildest Dream: the biography of George Mallory*, London, Headline, 2000, p106.

MICK CONEFREY

## Filming the Summit of K2



Mario Fantin, expedition photographer and cinematographer, wearing an oxygen set at Rawalpindi airport before or after his flight around K2. Apart from summit day, this is one of few times the K2 team used oxygen, because their plane was not pressurised. (All images courtesy of the Italian Alpine Club)

At around 6pm on 31 July 1954, two Italians, Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli arrived at the summit of K2 after a long gruelling day. After shaking hands and taking off their oxygen sets, they set about recording their achievement on film. The results were spectacular but no one realised the strange role the film would play in the many controversies that developed after the expedition.

Almost all the previous K2 expeditions had also taken a film camera: Vittorio Sella in 1909, Charlie Houston in 1938 and 1953 and the hapless Dudley Wolfe in 1939. But in each case, most of the footage was shot on the approach march or low on the mountain. In 1954, the Italians wanted to do it differently. A year earlier, Ed Hillary and Tenzing had reached the summit of Everest, but a last minute packing crisis had forced them to leave their cine-camera on the South Col. All they came back with was a roll of colour stills. If all went well Compagnoni and Lacedelli would be the first to bring back moving images from the summit of an 8,000m peak.

It was never going to be easy though. In the first instance, commercial producers were reluctant to risk their cash on an expedition that had no guarantee of success. And even if the money could be raised, there were significant logistical problems of filming on K2, which everyone knew was going to be a hard climb.

The solution was for the Italian Alpine Club (CAI), the expedition's sponsor, to go into partnership with Marcello Baldi, a documentary maker



A photomontage illustrating how still photographs taken by Mario Fantin at base camp were subsequently hand-tinted for film posters: the oxygen bottles are blue in the German version, red in the Italian.

from Trentino. He would write and edit the film and shoot some additional material in Italy. Most of the expedition filming would be done by Mario Fantin, a well-known climber and cameraman from Bologna.

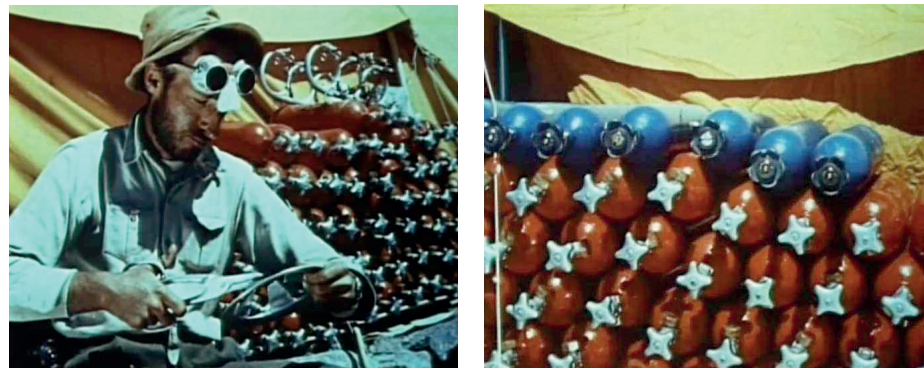
Predictably, like cameraman Tom Stobart<sup>1</sup> and John Hunt on Everest, Mario Fantin argued a lot with expedition leader Ardito Desio. Desio wanted the best possible outcome but he didn't want the filmmaking to get in the way of the climbing, and didn't want Fantin to go beyond camp four. In order to get footage higher on the mountain, Fantin trained several of the climbers and equipped them with a small, easy-to-operate 16mm camera.

The end product, *Italia K2*, was released in Italy in the autumn of 1954, and was a big success. As with *The Conquest of Everest*, which showcased George Lowe's cinematography on the Lhotse Face and the South Col, the high-altitude footage shot by Compagnoni and the others got a lot of attention.

Unfortunately, as with so many other aspects of the expedition, the film soon generated a lot of arguments. First off, Ardito Desio accused Mario Fantin of using some film stock destined for the geographical survey that followed the ascent of K2. Desio was wrong but he only retracted his accusation after Fantin began court proceedings to clear his name.

A second and much longer argument also went to court. The plaintiff in this case was Achille Compagnoni. He had suffered severe frostbite to three fingers and argued that his injuries were caused by filming on the summit; he should therefore be given a share of the profits. Some claimed Compagnoni had been put up to it by Ardito Desio, who by then had fallen out with the Italian Alpine Club and the majority of the team, but whatever the truth, Compagnoni lost his case.

These early controversies soured the aftermath of the expedition but were as nothing compared the bitter argument between Walter Bonatti and



Three freeze frames from *Italia K2*. Above: Pino Gallotti surrounded by oxygen bottles and (above right) a pile of oxygen cylinders at base camp. Most were red Dalmine bottles, a smaller number were blue Dräger bottles. Each had a distinctive valve. The third freeze frame (right), from footage shot on the summit, shows that both Dalmine and Dräger bottles were taken to the top.



Achille Compagnoni, which ran for decades. Essentially Bonatti argued two things: firstly that Compagnoni had deliberately placed the top camp higher than had been agreed, and secondly that Compagnoni and Lacedelli's account of their oxygen running out on the way to the summit was false.

Bonatti's first point was impossible to prove conclusively, it was essentially one man's word against another's. Compagnoni insisted that it made sense to place the last camp as high as possible, Bonatti insisted that this was not what had been agreed, and that Compagnoni had deliberately endangered his life and the life of Mahdi, the Hunza porter who had helped him carry up the summit team's oxygen. Neither man ever conceded the point.

The second controversy was different. It was not a question of motivation but of fact, and if Bonatti was right, then the story that Lacedelli and Compagnoni told about their oxygen running out on the way up to the summit, was a lie. In the years that followed, the 'oxygen controversy' became a kind of proxy for the dispute about the positioning of the high camp. If Compagnoni had lied about the oxygen, it would destroy his credibility. This time though it wasn't just a question of one man's word against that of two others. There was independent evidence: namely the film and photographs taken by Compagnoni and Lacedelli on the summit.

In first post-summit press release, written on 2 August, before the summit pair returned to base camp, Desio had outlined the bones of the story:

1. See Dennis Gray's article on Stobart in this year's volume, pp206-11.

'At six o'clock yesterday afternoon, two of us finally reached the summit of K2!!! They got back into camp at 11 pm and left two oxygen sets with two bottles on the summit. For the last hour they had no oxygen.'

In the official expedition book, *The Conquest of K2*, Compagnoni and Lacedelli explained that they had carried their empty sets to the summit because they thought it was so close and that it was too awkward to remove them. They were very vague on detail though, never specifying where or when the oxygen actually ran out. In statements to the press in autumn 1954, Compagnoni was consistently inconsistent: sometimes he said 100m below the summit, sometimes 200m. When he wrote his own personal account in 1958, he wrote 'at around 200m, perhaps higher'.

Bonatti rejected this, appealing to common sense and mathematics: why would any climber carry 19kg of empty oxygen bottles to the summit? Their Dräger oxygen sets, he argued, were designed to supply at least ten hours of oxygen. Compagnoni and Lacedelli had taken nine and a half hours to get from their oxygen dump to the summit, so there must have been at least half an hour of oxygen left.

After so many previous controversies, the Italian press was not that interested in this latest spat, but in 1994, one of Bonatti's supporters, Robert Marshall, published an article in which he argued that that he had definitive proof that Bonatti was right. He had found a photograph showing Compagnoni on the summit wearing his mask, proving, he claimed, that the oxygen had lasted all the way to the top. 'How ironic,' he wrote, 'that in the end their own photographs should provide the most damning evidence imaginable.'

Marshall's claim got a lot of publicity but the summit pair insisted he had misunderstood the photograph, arguing that Compagnoni had only temporarily put his mask on to warm the air he was inhaling. This claim was partially backed up by Erich Abram, the team's oxygen expert who said in a 2003 interview: 'It was almost habitual to wear a mask, with the tube separated from the cylinders and tucked inside the clothes to make the incoming air a little less icy.' It certainly was the case that it was possible to breathe through an oxygen set even when the bottled oxygen wasn't flowing. On Kangchenjunga in 1955, Joe Brown recorded an unlucky Sherpa who spent several hours climbing with an open-circuit oxygen set, not realizing that the oxygen valve was closed.

Though a lot of attention was paid to the stills, no one seems to have consulted the expedition film. This offered some striking visual evidence of a different kind: almost two minutes of colour footage shot on the summit. This showed something that the stills did not: that one of their oxygen sets was loaded not with Dräger cylinders, in factory blue, but with red Dalmine cylinders, which were prone to leakage and had a lower capacity.

When I wrote an article about this in 2014, it caused a minor storm in Italy. Luigi Zanzi, one of the 'three sages' who investigated the story for a CAI enquiry in 2004, said that the colour of the cylinders was insignificant and in last year's *AJ* Eric Vola suggested that the summit film footage was actually black and white and only subsequently colourised. So what's the truth?



Two images that show the colourisation process. The original is black and white. In the hand-tinted version, a poster for the film, the oxygen bottles are incorrectly coloured red. It is clear that these should be blue Dräger bottles by comparing this image to what's actually seen on film.



Vola's point is easily answered: the records of the CAI confirm the summit footage was indeed Kodachrome 16mm colour reversal, subsequently blown up to 35mm for cinema projection. Vola's confusion comes because some of the black and white stills were indeed colourised and used on posters for the film. It's extremely time-consuming to do this accurately for a single still, so to colourise 115 seconds of film, comprising 2,760 individual frames would have been unthinkable and particularly hard as everything on the summit was shot hand held.

Zanzi's point is more complicated to answer but has a much greater bearing on the controversy. The colour matters because it shows that at least two of the oxygen cylinders used by Compagnoni and Lacedelli should not have been there. Dalmine was an Italian company with no track record in climbing equipment. As Erich Abram, the team's oxygen expert revealed in 2003, their bottles had very poor seals, some losing up to 30% of their contents. Somehow in the confusion of the last few days on the mountain a number of these were taken up instead of Dräger bottles.

So does this resolve the controversy definitively? No, but if they took up cylinders which were prone to leak, it does add credence to Compagnoni and Lacedelli's testimony that their oxygen ran out early and at the very least shows two things: firstly that at the climax of the K2 expedition things did not go according to plan, and secondly just how difficult it is to recall precise details many years after an event. Today Compagnoni does not have many fans so it is easy to forget that immediately after K2, he spent over 14 weeks in hospital in Italy, being treated for frostbite and complications



An original black and white still of Compagnoni on the summit and the hand-tinted version. Note that his windproofs are incorrectly coloured blue: they were in reality khaki.

due to pneumonia and pleurisy. He hallucinated on the way up to the summit and had a breakdown when he got there, both signs of hypoxia. If it hadn't been for Lacedelli's cool head, he might never have returned.

In a way though, it's what the film doesn't show that is most significant. Bar a few shots of oxygen cylinders at base camp and porters humping them up the mountain, there is no footage at all of anyone climbing on oxygen, apart from a single shot at the climax. This is not because the editor wasn't interested, or because no one filmed them: it's because the Italian team simply didn't use oxygen for climbing, apart from on the summit day.

The 1953 British Everest team had tried out their oxygen sets in North Wales and on the march in to Everest and from the Western Cwm upwards. They were familiar with their faults and foibles and needed to be because the equipment frequently went wrong. Compagnoni and Lacedelli had no such training. The oxygen sets they used on the summit day spent the previous two nights out in the open and unlike Hillary and Tenzing, they were not able to check or prepare them. Is it really so hard to accept that they were telling the truth, that either equipment or user error caused the oxygen to run out early?

There's no film of the moment when this happened, but there is one piece of visual evidence, which offers a clue. In Lacedelli's memoir, *The Price of Conquest*, he recalls that some time after their oxygen crisis, the clouds cleared and they were able to see down into their eighth camp where Walter Bonatti and Pino Gallotti were stationed. Seeing his friends below gave him the courage to carry on. The same moment is recorded in Gallotti's diary, where he remembered being dragged out of his tent by Isakhan, one of the Hunza porters, pointing at two figures on the summit ridge. It was around 5.30pm, about half an hour before they reached the summit. This makes sense of Desio's first press release and Lacedelli's memoir, released many years later where he recalled the oxygen running out between 50m and 100m from the summit. Gallotti burst into silent tears of joy, knowing that victory was assured. If he could have seen into the future, and all the angst that would surround the expedition, he might have wept differently.

ERIC VOLA

## The First Ascent of the Barre des Écrins



A portrait of French army surveyors: 'ingénieurs géographes'.  
(All illustrations courtesy of Editions du Fourmel)

During the 150th anniversary of the first ascent of the Barre des Écrins, climbed on 25 June 1864 by Edward Whymper and party, a claim was made that a French army officer had climbed the mountain 11 years earlier and the credit should go to him. Lieutenant Meusnier was one of the French army's cartographers who in 1853 were mapping the Briançon area. The new theory was based on a digitised document published by the Institut Géographique National (IGN) in 2012. It is a draft of the 1/40,000 Briançon map, which includes an abbreviation of the word 'Signal' beside the name 'Les Écrins', what we now call Barre des Écrins. In 1853, before the Treaty of Turin of 1860 sealed the French annexation of Savoy and with