

5 questions for climber John Harlin III

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While attempting the first direct ascent on the Eiger, the most dangerous wall of rock and ice in the Alps, famed alpinist John Harlin II fell to his death when his rope broke. It was 1966 and Harlin's son, John Harlin III, was 9 years old.

Forty years later, Harlin III successfully summited the infamous 6,000-foot north face of the Eiger, where his father lost his life. With his climbing partners Daniela and Robert Jasper, he reached the summit in 21/2 days and returned via an easier route in five hours.

The Alps, an IMAX-theater film opening Jan. 11 at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, captures Harlin's dramatic quest to climb the mountain that had haunted his dreams. With a breathtaking Alps backdrop, Harlin narrates his amazing and inspiring story, which includes his wife, Adele, a Denver native, and their daughter, Siena.

Harlin, editor of the *American Alpine Journal*, also completed a memoir this year, *The Eiger Obsession: Facing the Mountain that Killed My Father*. He recently spoke with freelance reporter Janet Reese about the film.

1 Why were you compelled to climb the Eiger?

There have been many climbs I've wanted to do or would like to do, but the north face of the Eiger is the only climb I've ever felt I had to do. My father was the first American to climb that wall, and he died doing a new route on the Eiger four years later. That mountain has shaped my family's destiny, and ever since I became a serious climber in my early 20s, I've felt compelled to climb it and confront my fears.

2 What was your scariest moment?

The scariest moments were during the weeks, days and hours before we started up the wall. I was more nervous about this climb than I've ever been. But once I was actually on the route, I focused on the climbing itself, not my fears. That's one of the great joys of climbing: that it takes all your attention, focusing you on the moment. There wasn't room for all the baggage that I felt about my father's death. There was only room to enjoy the act of climbing. Also, I made sure that the conditions on the mountain, and my physical and mental conditioning, were the best that they could be.

3 How did you connect with MacGillivray Freeman Films, which produced *The Alps*?

I had been intending to climb the Eiger for many years, but bad weather and travel schedules had kept me from succeeding. The film company learned about my goal from a mutual friend, and thought it provided the human story needed for an IMAX-theater film about the Alps. At first I hesitated, because for me the climb was purely personal and I did not want any publicity for it. Then I realized the film would honor my father, keep his memory alive and be a legacy for my family. We are very proud of the film they made.

4 How was the story filmed?

The giant IMAX cameras, tripods and heavy film canisters were flown into various positions by helicopter. A special gyroscopically stabilized camera mounted on a helicopter was used to film many of the spectacular climbing scenes and the fantastic high-mountain scenery in the Alps that only a climber would ever see if it were not for this film.

5 When you finished the climb, how did you feel?

The final ridge to the summit seemed like the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. I had just climbed the mountain that had been haunting me for 40 years, which felt great in its own right, and I felt liberated from the demons that compelled me to make this climb. Ironically, though, instead of immediately feeling closer to my father, I was focused on my wife and daughter. It meant vastly more to me to fulfill my dream with their close support than it would have if they'd not been with me. That's really the message I want people to take from this film: to recognize how we shape and are shaped by the ones we love, and to encourage people to fulfill their dreams together.