



AAC Publications

Roger Payne, 1956-2012

Roger and I first tied in together in 2002 at the base of a huge unclimbed ridge in Arizona's Grand Canyon. Our friendship was thus forged on an alpine-like ridge deep in a ditch in the desert (AAJ 2003). Two years later Julie-Ann joined us for another long new ridge route, this time on the great south face of Mont Blanc. The final few hundred meters of the descent involved hiking down the very same slope on Mont Maudit that gave way nine years later, on July 12, burying Roger under a vast tonnage of snow that also killed his two clients and six other people.

A great light was extinguished under that awful slab. Roger shined with a brilliance that should have burned a hole right through the snow. Never has a death crushed me more than his. It hardly seems possible. Not Roger. Poor Julie-Ann. Theirs was one of the finest relationships I've been privileged to witness.

I'm writing this in Leysin, where Julie-Ann just handed me a DVD with a film of the funeral. With a shock I noticed that the funeral took place in the same little church where my father was memorialized 46 years earlier. Outside stood a line of Swiss guides in uniform, just as they had for my father. In 1966 my father's best friend and Eiger partner spoke on that dais. In 2012 it was Iain Peter, Roger's own Eiger partner (1980).

Roger climbed Mont Blanc 112 times, the vast majority as a guide. He had earned his full guide's certification in 1983 and had been teaching avalanche safety ever since. As president of British Mountain Guides, he developed new guide training programs. His mountain experience was as vast as anyone could wish for, with over 20 major expeditions as well as ascents of most of the famous hard Alps classics (Walker Spur, Central Pillar of Freney, and others). There's no one I'd have trusted more with my safety. And yet a randomly crumbling serac tipped over onto a great wind slab of snow on one of the most popular routes up Mont Blanc, and now Roger is gone.

Every year after Roger and Julie-Ann married brought another expedition together: Peru, Nepal, China, Tibet, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Alaska. While they would each climb independently when the occasion warranted, mostly they were a team, on the mountain and off. Perhaps the highlight of this long career was their 2003 first ascent of Mt. Grosvenor (6,376m) in China's Daxue Shan range, by its difficult north face with a traverse and descent of the east ridge (AAJ 2004).

From 2004 on they focused on Sikkim, with annual climbing trips leveraged with efforts to develop international tourism that would help the local people and their economy. Roger's involvement with international development began in the early 1990s, when he and Julie-Ann combined the installation of village micro-hydro projects with attempts on K2 and Broad Peak in Pakistan. They've worked with and produced reports for the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Conservation Union, and the World Commission for Protected Areas.

Roger's off-mountain career revolved around climbing. In 1989 he became the National Officer for the British Mountaineering Council, and six years later its general secretary (executive director). In both roles he orchestrated huge changes at the organization, including developing international climbing competitions. His experience with competitions served him well when he became the UIAA's first "sports and development director." He left the UIAA in 2005 to devote himself full-time to guiding.

Conversations with Roger were always as bright as the mountain air outside his living room in Leysin. He'd often recite a few lines of memorized poetry. Year after year, there was one passage I was sure to hear, from Geoffrey Winthrop Young, and we'd toast it with a clink of our glasses:

What if I live no more those kingly days?
their night sleeps with me still.
I dream my feet upon the starry ways;
my heart rests in the hill.
I may not grudge the little left undone;
I hold the heights, I keep the dreams I won.

Images



Roger Payne (1956-2012) at Cosmique Hut.

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