



## AAC Publications

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### **William Thomas, 1926–2013**

William Hewitt Thomas, an American Alpine Club member for over 50 years, died October 19, 2013, in Carlsbad, California. He was 86. Bill served the AAC for many years, reviewing research proposals as a member of the Scientific Committee.

Bill became interested in both mountaineering and science as a teenager in Riverside, California. When he was not in school, working for the USDA Salinity Lab as a technician, or experimenting with growing beans with nutrient solutions in the garage, Bill learned the rudiments of technical climbing at Tahquitz and on trips to Southern California's Mt. San Jacinto and to the Sierra Nevada.

He graduated early from high school in 1944 and enlisted in the Army Specialized Training Reserve, studying electrical engineering. In the program he met Willi Unsoeld, who became a climbing partner and lifelong friend. Bill and Willi refined their roped climbing on campus buildings, local crags, and caves. They headed for the hills at any furlough—hitchhiking from Kentucky to Colorado to climb Longs Peak, and later to a three-week exploration of the Selkirks.

After his discharge from the Army, Bill entered Pomona College, where he earned a B.S. in chemistry in 1948, then entered graduate school at the University of Maryland, earning an M.S. and a Ph.D. in plant physiology, with thesis research on nitrogen metabolism in algae. In 1954, wishing to return to the West and its mountains, Bill accepted a one-year position as a phytoplankton researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla. He was there for more than 50 years.

Upon moving to San Diego, Bill became very active in the local chapter of the Sierra Club, particularly the Rock Climbing Section. He met Sara "Topper" Sussman on a club outing, and they were married in 1956. Both were instructors in the chapter's basic mountaineering courses. Bill and Topper made numerous climbing and backpacking trips to the eastern Sierra Nevada, and also enjoyed skiing the one rope tow at Mammoth. Bill also rock climbed throughout Southern California, primarily at Tahquitz, and made significant mountain ascents in the Sierra, Cascades, Tetons, Wind Rivers, and Rockies. Outside of the U.S., he climbed in Mexico, Canada, and Europe.

Beginning in the 1970s, Bill combined his marine phytoplankton work with his love of the mountains and began to study red snow algae. Although he retired from Scripps in 1988, he continued to maintain a lab and renewed his research on the red snow algae of the eastern Sierra Nevada. He often laughed that he'd finally found a way to "do oceanography in the mountains." Bill and Topper made annual research trips to the eastern Sierra until Topper's death in 2000.

Bill is survived by his wife Helen Burke Thomas of San Diego; daughter Ann Thomas and son-in-law Ben Levy of Andover, Massachusetts; and son Alan Thomas, daughter-in-law Victoria Gellert, and grandchildren Kai and Nikko of Anchorage, Alaska.

Alan Thomas

## Images



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