



AAC Publications

Robert Schaller Jr., 1934 – 2014

Robert T. Schaller Jr., M.D., died of pneumonia on December 7, 2014, in Kirkland, Washington, surrounded by family. He had delighted in his medical practice and in mountaineering. He was a leading pediatric surgeon in the Seattle area until arthritis forced him to give up operating, but he continued to teach and to work on his surgical slide archive for Children's Hospital in Seattle.

Jane Green and Rob Schaller met and married at Harvard Medical School in 1958. That fall, Jane took Rob on his first mountain trip, to the White Mountains, where Jane had climbed as a camp counselor. In 1960 they chose Seattle for their internships, to go where the big mountains were. They enrolled in the climbing course at the University of Washington led by Pete Schoening, including a climb of Mt. Rainier. Rob went on to India, Alaska, Pakistan, and Nepal. He was a miler, a marathoner, had captained the Yale track team, and was set for the challenges of mountaineering.

I first climbed with him in May 1968. Dee Molenaar and Lee Nelson organized a climb of Liberty Ridge with Sandy Bill, Warren Bleser, Dave Mahre, Rob, and me. Dee was the first to get permission to attempt the ridge before the official season. Dee wanted to show that early ascents were feasible. This he did. The climb was a delight, save for a storm and unplanned bivouac on Columbia Crest. A clear dawn and downhill run to Camp Schurman restored our spirits. Lee and Warren filmed parts of the climb for Don McCune's "Exploration Northwest" (a DVD is available.)

In 1968, Rob was in the final year of his residency in general surgery and I was completing my thesis at the university. When conditions were good and he had his 12 hours off, I would come by at 6 a.m. and we would climb Chair Peak, the Tooth, or whatever. In the winter or early spring no one was around and the snow was untouched. We often carried a rope but seldom used it, pleased to find enjoyable ways to the summits.

Early in the season Rob and I were where traversing northeast face of Forbidden Peak. The route was snowed up. There weren't any anchor points, the traverse exposed, and we opted for speed over belaying. Two-thirds of the way to the north ridge, we looked at each other and the route and turned back. Why risk spoiling such a beautiful day? Rob was the perfect companion—whether going up, pinned down in a storm, or turning back. We also turned back after the wettest night I can recall during an abortive attempt to do new route on Rainier with Jim Wickwire.

In 1965, Rob was recruited by the CIA as a climbing doctor for a joint U.S.–Indian effort to place a listening device on an Indian peak with a view toward missile tests in China. The monsoon forced retreat and the device was left high on Nanda Devi. The 1966 recovery team included Rob, Barry Corbet, and Tom Frost. Tom and Rob made a summit try, but Tom fell sick and dropped out and Rob went on to make the first solo ascent of the peak—part of a then-secret operation. Climber and lawyer Jim McCarthy said this "might well have been the singular [climbing] achievement of the '60s, if it had been known."

Rob joined the 1975 and 1978 expeditions to the northwest ridge of K2. After Jim Wickwire bivouacked at 27,700 feet while descending from the summit, he survived thanks to exceptional care by Rob. Accounts of these expeditions tell of the care Rob provided villagers, porters, and climbers. They speak of his ironing out differences between team members to hold the expeditions together.

Rob and I stayed in touch, visiting when I went to the Northwest to climb. In 1996, Norm Breslow organized a trek to Mera Peak in Nepal. I called to see if Rob might join us. He was eager and his wife, Theresa, was supportive. Norm, Jon Wellner, Rob, and I made a 23-day trek early in the post-monsoon season. There were few other trekkers, and high on Mera we were wading through virgin snow. I was reminded of winter and spring trips with Rob in the Cascades; everything was fresh and delightful. The scenery and the stars at high altitude were familiar to Rob but new to me.

There was no better person with whom to share a pleasant day or to shiver alongside through a cold bivouac, or to share a rope, or to pull you through in a desperate spot. Those with whom he shared his gifts will count themselves lucky and remember him for the rest of their lives.

– Peter Renz

Images



Rob Schaller on Ptarmigan Ridge.





Rob Schaller in Nepal, 1996.

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