



## AAC Publications

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### **Richard Pownall, 1927 – 2016**

**On my first trip to the Tetons, in 1955, I met three already iconic climbers: Dick Emerson, the climbing/rescue ranger, and Willi Unsoeld and Dick Pownall, both Exum guides. I never imagined the four of us would reconnect eight years later as members of the 1963 American Mount Everest Expedition.**

Dick Pownall was born in West Branch, Iowa, in 1927. He climbed on local trees and windmills, and in his teens he happened to read an article about climbing mountains and thus changed his venue. The following year, thanks to his uncle, who was superintendent of Grand Teton National Park, he worked on the Tetons trail crew and met his mountaineering mentor, Paul Kenworthy. In 1947, Glen Exum offered him a job as a climbing guide and Dick made the first of some 150 ascents of the Grand, mostly while guiding.

During these years, he also pioneered a few dozen first ascents, including the first complete climb of the north face of the Grand, in 1949, with Ray Garner and Art Gilkey; Dick led the crux Pendulum Pitch in the dark, and they bivouacked on top. The next year, he and Mike Brewer pulled off a major enchainment in 14 hours: Nez Perce, Cloudveil Dome, South and Middle Teton, and the Grand, a big chunk of the link-up now known as the Grand Traverse. Later that summer, he and Leigh Ortenburger made the first direct ascent of the south face of the Grand. In 1959, Dick, fellow guide Willi Unsoeld, and Pete Schoening pulled off the Cathedral Traverse: Teewinot, Mt. Owen, and the Grand. During this time, Dick met and married Nancy Flint, and together they raised two children, Betsy and David.

After obtaining a B.A. in education from Iowa State University in 1954, Dick enlisted in the Army. He was stationed in Salzburg for three years and climbed in the Dolomites with Hans Kraus, Bonnie Prudden, and Gino Solda, among others. Dick was invited to join the 1953 K2 expedition, along with his Teton rope mate Art Gilkey, but his request for leave was denied. Instead, he obtained his mountain fixes in the Dolomites and on an exotic search for Noah's Ark, near the top of Mt. Ararat, in 1964.

Dick's contributions to the 1963 Everest expedition exemplify Norman Dyhrenfurth's skill in assembling a compatible team of summit-motivated climbers who could subjugate their personal aspirations to the goal of getting one or two teammates to the top, a precious ingredient for the large, expedition-style undertakings of that era. Dick was profoundly challenged by the death of his rope mate Jake Breitenbach, who was buried beneath a falling serac in the Icefall on the second day above base camp. Recounting the immediate aftermath of Jake's death in *Everest, the West Ridge*, I wrote:

"For Dick Pownall, this was something new. He was a powerful, confident rock climber, accustomed to maintaining complete control of his environment. Never in all those years of guiding had he seen an accident. Now a mountain had moved; unfeelingly it had moved. Jake was dead. It could just as well have been he; for all his considerable strength and skill, survival on this mountain depended upon chance. Man was at the mercy of his environment. It wasn't an easy lesson to learn. We could see his shock and wondered when he would come out of it and resume his interest in climbing."

Though, as Dick said, Jake's death "spoiled the expedition for me," he returned to the fray, supporting the South Col effort. He declared he would go through the Icefall twice more—once up, once down. He and Lute Jerstad were the first to reach the South Col, on April 16, earlier than any prior expedition, and he was a member of the quartet that made the second summit attempt. As the first team was

descending from Camp 6 after Jim Whittaker and Nawang Gombu summited on May 1, the second team, including Dick, unhesitatingly aborted their own summit plans to assist their exhausted companions down the mountain.

After Everest, Dick bid good-bye to Teton guiding, returning to his career as an educator and teaching in the western suburbs of Denver. He taught math and physical education, and became a counselor, assistant principal, and a principal. For me, now living in Colorado, encountering his former students and hearing their unsolicited comments about how he touched their lives has been pure pleasure.

The Pownalls bought land on Rock Ledge Road in Vail, and Dick skied, taught skiing, and served on the Vail ski patrol for many years. He also started a mountaineering school in the nearby Gore Range. During this time, Dick and Nancy divorced, and in 1979 Dick and Mary Rheinberger married. After he retired in 1982, they moved full-time to Vail, where they became a vital part of the permanent community, officiating at ski races and contributing in many other ways. Dick had become one of the old-timers who imbued a place they cherished with a bit of their own persona. In 2002, at the age of 75, Dick returned to the Tetons for one last climb of the Grand (though he toyed with the idea of another climb when he turned 90).

For Dick, as for most others on the 1963 Everest team, one consequence of the expedition was to be stamped with a bit of fame. Dick lived modestly with this recognition, incorporating it into his mission to inspire and challenge of young people, whom he taught not to be afraid to dream. He was fundamentally a teacher, whether as a guide on mountains, of young minds in Jefferson County classrooms, or on the steep, deep slopes at Vail. He was low-key and soft-spoken, causing one to listen when he talked. He did not pontificate, just exemplified.

At a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary event for the 1963 expedition in Jackson Hole, Dick's response to the question of what he took away from his experience on Everest was preciously put: "I'd like to think it gave me a sense for the importance of life, and friends, and activities that would contribute to a better life for everybody." And it did.

Dick died December 6, 2016, of complications from Parkinson's disease. Once more he was a role model, adapting to increasing disability while still savoring the richness of each day. And still being a role model for so many whose lives he touched.

– Tom Hornbein, with a belay from Fred Wolfe

## Images



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