



AAC Publications

Kim Schmitz, 1946 – 2016

Kim Schmitz was a force of nature and life. I first met him in the Tetons, in 1979, during a trip to climb the east ridge of the Grand. He came roaring out of his tent cabin on the old Guides' Hill and his presence was stunning. His piercing steel-blue eyes and a jaw like Jack Palance, along with his towering physique, were frankly alarming and intimidating.

I knew of his climbs of Yosemite walls in record speed or first ascents with Bridwell (such as Zenith on Half Dome). His recent expeditions to Nepal and Pakistan were already legendary, including the first ascents of Great Trango Tower and Gaurishankar. On Uli Biaho Tower, he had completed what's probably the world's first Grade VII wall, with Bill Forrest, Ron Kauk, and John Roskelley, during an 11-day epic.

Since I had only been climbing for six years, I looked at Kim as some kind of god; I could never imagine being that good and strong and accomplished. But he was viewed no differently by the other guides of Exum. Even Chuck Pratt knew he was the best of them all.

A few years later, in 1981, I went to China to attempt Mt. Siguniang with Kim, Jim Donini, and Jim Kanzler. We were the second American expedition to China after the first peaks were opened to foreigners in 1980. Kim had been on that initial trip, to Minya Konka (Gongga Shan), but had suffered a broken back in a fall while descending on snow with Yvon Chouinard, Rick Ridgway, and Jonathan Wright, who was tragically killed in the fall. A year later Kim was on our Siguniang expedition, strong and resolute as ever. Our expedition did not reach the summit of the unclimbed peak, but Kim and I became fast friends by the end of the trip.

The following summer I was invited to become an Exum guide, and Kim became my mentor. I lived in my parents' Sears and Roebuck family camping tent out back in the trees but shared Kim's cabin for meals. I cooked for both of us, and he showed me the ropes at Exum. We would climb on our days off so I became familiar with routes to potentially guide. I would "audit" his guided assignments on bigger routes on the Grand. I soaked up Kim's knowledge of the range and his climbing acumen. He was fast and efficient and bold as a guide. He loved climbing, so guiding was a way to fulfill that need and make money at the same time. All Kim did was guide and climb. I remember him telling me he had been on an either a wall or an expedition on his birthday, in June, every year since he was 16 that first summer at Exum.

In 1983, Kim's life changed forever because of an accident while guiding on the Jensen Ridge of Symmetry Spire. We'll never know for sure what happened, but he was running the rope out, without a belay or protection, on "easy ground" around the fourth pitch. We all guided then in Nike Air Max's with 5.10 rubber soles. He lost his balance—he said because of "back pressure" on the rope, even though he had told his 21-year-old client not to touch the rope. He grabbed a hold to regain his balance and it broke, and he plummeted 80 feet onto the ledge next to his client, shattering both legs and severely breaking his back and teeth, with a 150-stitch head wound to boot. The Jenny Lake rangers saved his life through heroic and fast action. After 26 reconstructive surgeries and years of PT, he returned to guide at Exum for a short time later in the '80s, but it proved to be too painful for him to guide both safely and with any real level of enjoyment.

The remaining years of Kim's life saw enormous growth of character and being as a result of the constant challenges he faced medically and psychologically. Climbing and guiding had been his

whole life, and now he was faced with having to define himself in different ways. But he never stopped being the climber I'd met in 1979 for the first time. He faced prostate and colon cancer and MRSA. On his most recent birthday, last June, he had been in the hospital for eight to ten weeks with a blood infection that wouldn't go away. We spent the day together, and I sprung him out of the hospital and took him out to eat.

I was struck that day with the realization that I had always looked up to the climber and the person that Kim had been. But what I realized then was that I admired most the person that he had become after his life-changing accident. Gentle, thoughtful and non judgmental was his mantra. He was the most well-read person I think I have ever known, enjoying a wide spectrum of books. He wasn't bitter and embraced what was good about each day. We should all take Kim's struggle and example to heart. Life's turns take us down new, unexpected paths. Kim's difficult path was to a form of enlightenment I could only hope to achieve someday myself.

– Jack Tackle

Editor's note: Readers may also be interested in a superb story about Kim Schmitz's final days by Wyoming writer Angus M. Thuermer Jr. Find it [here](#).

Images



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