



AAC Publications

Jim Detterline, 1956 – 2016

For months I have been mired in sadness after learning of the untimely and shocking death of my good friend Jim Detterline. Jim was best known as the legendary Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) climbing ranger who climbed 14,259-foot Longs Peak more times than anyone else in history. His contemporaries fondly nicknamed him “Mr. Longs Peak,” because his familiarity with the mountain remains unmatched. His passion for the mountain is best described by his statement, “Longs Peak is a high that cannot be topped.”

Jim died in October after a rock climbing accident near his home in Allenspark, Colorado. He was 60 years old. Jim was last seen by his wife, Rebecca, on October 23 before she embarked on a backpacking trip. His body was discovered on October 25 by two of his closest friends, who also rented the basement of his house. It was determined that he had fallen from a 35-foot cliff that is about a half mile from the Detterlines' home. The climbing gear recovered from the site indicates that he intended to rope-solo the formation.

A funeral was held at the YMCA of the Rockies on November 1, attended by an estimated 1,000 people. Tom Hornbein, Jim's longtime friend, who was part of the 1963 American expedition to Mt. Everest, spoke at the ceremony. Jim's brothers, Peter and Jon, told tales of Jim's childhood and lifelong adventures. Family, friends, and fellow national park employees gathered for several hours to remember this remarkable man.

Born and raised in eastern Pennsylvania, Jim learned to love the mountains at the encouragement of his father, Rev. Milton E. Detterline Jr. They explored the Appalachian Mountains with Jim's brothers, setting the groundwork for a life in the outdoors.

Jim was well educated, with a bachelor of science in biology from Moravian College in Pennsylvania, a master's degree in vertebrate zoology, and a Ph.D. in invertebrate zoology, both from the University of Memphis in Tennessee. As a herpetologist, he kept many reptiles as pets, including several species of turtles, a caiman, snakes, a chameleon, and other creatures. He saved an African spur tortoise from the major Colorado flood in 2013.

Jim began his National Park Service career in 1982 as a backcountry ranger at Dinosaur National Monument. He later moved to Death Valley National Monument (now a national park), and then settled at RMNP, where he worked from 1984 to 2009. He worked for more than 10 years as a Longs Peak supervisory climbing ranger, and he climbed Longs a whopping total of 428 times. I was lucky enough to share eight of these successful summit trips with Jim, as well as innumerable failures in which we went out to attempt the peak but got thwarted for various reasons, mostly due to high winds and unstable snow conditions. These “failures” were some of my favorite times with Jim, as we laughed and shared stories and reveled being in the elements. Outside of our time shared on Longs Peak, Jim and I spent many, many hours rock climbing, ice climbing, and mountaineering in RMNP and elsewhere in Colorado.

Considering he had climbed Longs Peak more than anyone, Jim started late. His first summit of Longs was in 1985 when he was 29 years old. It was his fifth attempt on the mountain. He and Duane Kitzis climbed the Casual Route, and midroute, on lead, Jim got struck by lightning and temporarily blinded. After their epic but successful climb, Jim wrote, “The Diamond had been a great adventure with a great partner. It had been well worth the many unsuccessful attempts and the suffering of the

struggle. I was more fascinated than ever with the many high-standard routes on the Diamond, and I was also interested in the diversity of Longs Peak's routes, which ranged from a long hike, to easy rock routes, to classic moderate rock routes, to the best alpine ice route in the park, to difficult winter ice routes, and to the world-class routes of the Diamond. Little did I know then that Longs Peak would become my favorite place on Earth!"

Jim celebrated Longs Peak in everything he did. He organized four public events that he called "Longs Peak Reunions." He got the idea in September 1990, when three legendary guides from the 1930s, all of whom worked at the former Boulder Field Shelter Cabin, reunited at the Longs Peak Ranger Station while Jim was on duty. Jim overheard them talking and learned that Dr. Hull Cook, Everett "Ev" Longs, and Clerin "Zumie" Zumwalt were standing before him. He immediately threw a pizza party at his nearby residence, and they enjoyed "an afternoon of fellowship." That meeting inspired Jim to organize the Longs Peak Reunions of 1991, 1993, 2001, and 2015.

Jim loved statistics and goals. For several years he prided himself on climbing ice for at least 100 days between January 1 and May 15. His love of ice climbing compelled him to write the South's first ice climbing guidebook, *Shades of Gray: An Ice Climber's Guide to Dixie*, which was published in 1990.

Jim's keen interest in the rescue field stemmed from a highly publicized August 1980 incident in which he and his partner had to be rescued from a precarious position on the north face of the Grand Teton during an icy summer storm. By the time the rescuers reached the men, they had been outside for five days. The rescue inspired Jim to help others by becoming a rescuer himself, eventually participating in over 1,200 search and rescue missions over two continents.

Jim climbed fervently and passionately, all over the globe. He started technical rock climbing at Pennsylvania's Ralph Stover State Park in 1974. He soon incorporated ice climbing into his resume in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains. He climbed all over the United States and completed numerous first ascents. Internationally, he climbed rock and big peaks in Mexico, Venezuela, Africa, Brazil, Peru, and Norway. During a 1991 trip to Pico Bolivar, Venezuela's highest peak, and Pico Abanico, he also participated in paragliding but crashed, breaking his leg in five places.

Jim attempted Denali three times but never made it to the summit. In his 2012 attempt, his crew had poor weather and difficulties with one of the team members. In his 2014 attempt, Jim had assigned himself the duty of team medical officer, and he chose to forgo the summit to assist an ailing partner down the mountain.

He was a talented trumpet player who played with the Estes Park Village Band for many years, as well as with the Estes Park Jazz Big Band, Riverside Ramblers Dixieland Band, and the Estes Park Orchestra/Oratorio Society. He graciously volunteered to play music for weddings, funerals, and all kinds of community events. Jim was hearing impaired, but it didn't slow him down. He was an effective advocate for those with hearing loss and routinely helped children with hearing problems.

Jim took me under his wing in the mid-1990s, taught me how to ice climb, and instilled a great respect and sense of admiration for Longs Peak in my soul. He encouraged me to pursue the female ascent record on Longs Peak, which became a reality in August 2015.

Jim had many stories to tell. Thankfully, he recorded many of them in his unpublished book, *From Zero to Hero and Back Again*. I have read this book and it is enviably well written. In the introduction he states, "There is a fine line between being a 'Zero' and a 'Hero.' I don't believe that anyone actually desires to be a Zero. And most persons who outwardly desire to be Heroes are incapable of becoming such, as the very nature of being a hero generally precludes those who lust for the status. Although I have been cited both as a Zero and as a Hero, I didn't ask for, nor aspire to either title. I simply tried to do my best when faced with certain critical situations."

Jim was presented the Department of the Interior's Medal of Valor for a 1995 rescue in which he saved two people from drowning in a rushing river near Horseshoe Falls in RMNP. This was the rescue for which Jim was most publicly lauded, but he mused that his "most difficult rescues were not those we had been commended for." He went on to say, "The Horseshoe Falls rescue, for example, took place in only 10 minutes, compared to the continually dangerous and frigid all-night rescue of Matt McClellan from the Narrows of Longs Peak in 1991." He always made it a point to spend extra time with families of hikers and climbers he rescued. His "Chronology of Selected Rescues on Longs Peak" details 27 impressive events in which Jim was instrumental in bringing about the best possible outcome in dire situations.

In his career, Jim dealt with 75 fatalities. His first experience was in 1979 when a man fell at the Great Stone Door at Savage Gulf Natural Area in Tennessee. On June 10, 1984, a man fell 300 feet off MacGregor Slab in RMNP, and Jim responded to the incident. Of these two cases, Jim said, "In reflection, one can't condemn either one of these victims with tons of hindsight (he should've done this, he should not have done that) because both of these victims knowingly accepted the risks they took through their own free will. I can only thank the good Lord that He was more forgiving with my risk-taking experiences. I had the opportunity to become safer and less bold, but the dead man didn't get that opportunity. That fine line between success and failure is so delicate in climbing. The dead man probably enjoyed what he was doing as most all climbers do. It's all part of life on the thin edge."

Jim's dedication to search and rescue was never more apparent than in January 1996, when he was involved in a daring project to recover evidence of a small aircraft that crashed into the north face of Mt. Ypsilon in RMNP. Jim risked his life to visit the highly technical and unstable crash site in order to provide both the NPS and the deceased man's family with answers.

Jim married Rebecca Stegura Detterline on November 17, 2012, and I am so grateful that she came into his life. She brought him immeasurable joy, and the last few years of his life were spent with someone loving, kind, generous, and witty.

Although Jim never had children, he loved kids and always took a keen interest in my daughter, Ellie. She climbed Longs Peak for the first time when she was six years old, and then again this past summer at the age of seven. The last time she saw Jim, he got down on his knees and gave her a hug. "I'm so proud of you!" he told her. "Do you know how old I was when I first climbed Longs Peak?" Ellie stared up at Jim with interest. "Nope," she said. "I was 29!" he exclaimed. She let out a squeal of delight and told him, "I beat you!!!" Jim threw his head back, laughing. "You sure did!"

After he retired from the NPS in 2009, Jim worked as a wrangler at Meeker Park Lodge, as a guide for Estes Park Mountain Shop, and as the site operator for a government contractor analyzing ozone and other atmospheric gasses at the base of Longs Peak. He was also adjunct professor of biology at Larimer Campus Front Range Community College, Fort Collins, where he assisted the Department of Outdoor Recreation with snowshoeing and hiking courses. Additionally, Jim served as a volunteer fireman with Allenspark Fire Department.

Jim was the kindest and best of men. I am so fortunate to have known him so well and to have been able to share so many amazing and beautiful adventures with him. He will continue to inspire me, and thousands of other people, to be the best we can at all we do in life. Jim always put his best foot forward and encouraged others to do the same. I will always miss him.

– Lisa Foster

Images



Jim Detterline



Jim Detterline below Longs Peak.



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