



AAC Publications

Lowell Thomas Jr., 1923 – 2016

Lowell Thomas Jr., an Honorary Lifetime Member of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska and longtime AAC member, passed away in Anchorage on October 1. His long life was filled with extraordinary adventures and accomplishments. He was born in London, England, where his father, world-renowned journalist Lowell Thomas, was embarking on his career as a war correspondent. Lowell Jr. grew up in New York State and graduated from Dartmouth College, where he was a member of the ski team. In World War II he was a fighter-pilot flight instructor in the Army Air Corps, and flying came to play a central role in the rest of his life.

Lowell made his first trip to Alaska in 1940, as a teenager, when he was part of the team led by Bradford Washburn that made the first ascent of Mt. Bertha (10,182') in the Fairweather Range. Lowell and his father traveled and filmed in pre-communist Tibet in 1949, and were perhaps the last Westerners to meet the teen-age Dalai Lama before the Chinese invasion and the religious leader's exile to India. Lowell wrote a bestselling book, *Out Of This World*, and later produced a movie by the same name, in order to raise awareness of the Tibetan people and culture.

In 1954 and 1955, Lowell and his wife, Tay, flew their Cessna 180, "Charlie," around the world, from France to Morocco, across Africa, and into the Middle East and Afghanistan, where a visit by private single-engine aircraft was nearly unheard of. In 1958, Lowell and his family flew their 180 from the East Coast to Alaska, and they decided to make Anchorage their home.

Lowell was elected to the Alaska State Senate in 1961 and became that body's prime sponsor and advocate in passing the bill that, in 1970, created Chugach State Park, Anchorage's spectacular, 495,000-acre "backyard." He was elected lieutenant governor in 1973, serving with Gov. Jay Hammond, perhaps the only time in U. S. history that bush pilots occupied the top two offices in any state.

After leaving politics, he obtained a commercial pilot license and purchased Talkeetna Air Taxi in 1981. He began flying climbers in and out of the Alaska Range in his trusty, ski-equipped Helio Courier, earning a reputation as the consummate Alaska climbing-support pilot: very highly skilled, cool and professional, cautious and bold at the same time, and having vast knowledge of Alaska's mountain weather and terrain. In Lowell's flying career he made a total of seven forced landings, but he never once even scratched his aircraft.

Lowell was also a winter mountaineer, particularly in the Tordrillo Range, across Cook Inlet from Anchorage. In addition to flying numerous climbing parties into this seldom-visited area, he made two first ascents: Mt. Gerdine (11,258'), in 1963, and Mt. Torbert (11,413'), in 1964. If the long-term weather forecast looked favorable after flying climbers to the mountains, he would tie his Helio Courier down at the landing area and join in the climb—always with an eye peeled for any change in the weather that might prevent a takeoff.

Lowell contributed to *Tordrillo: Pioneer Climbs and Flights in the Tordrillo Mountains of Alaska, 1957–1997*, written by his longtime climbing friends Rodman Wilson and Paul Crews Sr. When Lowell finally sold Talkeetna Air Taxi in 1994 and retired from commercial mountain and glacier flying, he was 70 years old, but he continued to fly, with less stress and for his own enjoyment, until age 86. In 2012, he donated his beloved Helio Courier to the Alaska Aviation Museum. He told this writer at the time that he had decided to donate his plane because, if he sold it, a buyer might use the plane for

aerial wolf hunting, a practice that Lowell abhorred.

Lowell served on boards or gave support to many organizations, including the Alaska Conservation Foundation, National Parks and Conservation Association, the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and the Anchorage Rotary Club. In 1997, he helped endow Alaska Pacific University's Nordic skiing program and worked to secure federal funding for the refurbishment of the U.S. biathlon training center, overlooking the Girdwood valley.

Certainly, Lowell Thomas Jr. led a life well-lived, both long and adventurous.

– Tom Meacham

Images



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