



AAC Publications

Nicholas Clinch, 1930 – 2016

Nicholas Bayard Clinch III was born in Evanston, Illinois, on November 9, 1930. Nick grew up mainly in Dallas, with high school years at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, influenced by his father's and grandfather's careers in the military. His father was a pilot and colonel in the U.S. Air Force.

A number of Nick's preteen summers were spent at Cheley Camps near Estes Park, Colorado. There, as junior counselors, our lives intersected and our lifelong friendship began. We were both 16, our birthdays three days apart.

Nick received a B.A. in political science from Stanford University in 1952, followed by a law degree three years later. His education superseded classrooms, as his muse became the mountains that he shared with other members of the Stanford Mountaineering Club and the Sierra Club. Their playground took them from the Sierra and Yosemite to the Coast Range of British Columbia in 1954 and the Cordillera Blanca of Peru in 1955. After graduating from law school, Nick put in a stint with the U.S. Air Force, based in Iceland; he retired to the reserves as a major in 1957, setting the stage for a future life of mountain exploration.

In 1958, Nick collected some friends and acquaintances to pull off the first ascent of Gasherbrum I (a.k.a. Hidden Peak, 8,068 meters) in the Karakoram, the only one of the 8,000-meter peaks first ascended by Americans (Kauffman and Schoening). With his appetite for expedition organizing whetted, Nick was back to the Karakoram in 1960, now, "having done the high one, to attempt the hard one." This was Masherbrum (7,821 meters). I was invited to come along as climber and doc, my first big expedition experience. With no lack of thrills and spills, Willi Unsoeld and George Bell pulled off Masherbrum's first ascent, followed a couple of days later by Nick and Pakistani teammate Jawed Akhter Khan in a 24-hour saga that tapped the depths of Nick's reserves. They topped out as the sun set on K2, then descended through a moonlit night. Nick was never a physically strong climber, but this climb is testimonial to uncommon tenacity and skill.

In 1966, 50 years ago, the American Alpine Club asked Nick to fuse competing teams from the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast into a unified effort to attempt the first ascent of Antarctica's highest peak. The expedition not only made the first ascent of Mt. Vinson, it then proceeded to top off about everything else in sight, including the committing ascent of Mt. Tyree by Barry Corbet and John Evans.

Eight years later, the now "over 40 gang" (Clinch, Dick Emerson, Hornbein, but without Unsoeld, who was guiding a circumnavigation of Nanga Parbat) planned a "family" expedition to the Karakoram with wives and a couple of able offspring. The mountaineering goal was to climb Paiju, a beautiful peak at the bottom of the Baltoro Glacier, followed by an exploratory first crossing southward out of the Baltoro. We aborted our attempt on Paiju after the death of a Pakistani teammate in a fall, then wended our way up the Baltoro and Yermamendu glaciers and over the Masherbrum La, descending upon the surprised citizens of the last village on our Masherbrum approach 14 years earlier.

The expedition to Ulugh Muztagh, in 1985, was perhaps the most exotic and certainly the most remote of all of Nick's creations. He and Bob Bates consulted with Eric Shipton on the biggest unexplored blank left on Earth's maps. With Nixon's opening of communication with China, this expedition became the first joint Chinese-American mountaineering effort. Ulugh Muztagh is a

mountain in the Kunlun Range south of the Takla Makan Desert, first spotted by Saint George and Teresa Littledale in 1895 during their attempt to reach Lhasa in Tibet. They reported its height to be about 25,000 feet, possibly the highest volcano on earth. The major challenge, even a century later, was simply to reach its base over hundreds of miles of roadless high-altitude desert. Bates, trained by Brad Washburn, measured its altitude as 6,973 meters (22,877 feet), and our two MIT geology types decreed it not a volcano. Annual precipitation was but a few millimeters a year.

When the team arrived at base camp, they were greeted by a mountain of hard ice and incipient crevasses. Ulugh Muztagh was modestly steep and very cold, even to Clinch and Schoening, veterans of the Vinson Massif. One unique element of the expedition was the political dynamic between the Han military commander of a team of athletic, inexperienced young climbers from Xingjian interacting with a laid-back team of consensus-seeking Americans, a poorly miscible clash of cultures. Five young Chinese, supported from the highest camp by Schoening and me, attained the summit. They opted for a night descent by a way that seemed less steep. Two of the climbers fell, sliding long distances down the ice, sustaining moderate injuries and immoderate frostbite. The Americans then gave up their own summit aspirations to rescue and treat the two injured climbers. Upon returning to Urumchi, the success was celebrated, and, with a modicum of disbelief, the concern by the Westerners giving up their summit to aid the two injured Chinese was duly appreciated.

With Ulugh Muztagh, Nick and team had so endeared themselves to their Chinese hosts that they were pretty much given carte blanche to return, freed from the bureaucratic hassle faced by most expeditions. Nick had found a photo in a 1926 *National Geographic* depicting an alluring peak named Kangkarpo, rising above the Mekong River where it descends from the Tibetan Plateau and cuts through the Himalaya toward the Indian Ocean. The first two of four trips to the range targeted its highest summit, Kangkarpo (Meili), with an altitude of 6,740 meters. Attempts in the spring of 1988 and fall of 1989 were turned back by a surfeit of snow falling both from the sky and, potentially, the slopes above. Two more trips to more modest objectives in the area in the early 1990s met with fascinating exploration and similar outcomes. Kangkarpo remains unclimbed. These were the final chapters of Nick's expedition-creating life.

Nick became a member of the American Alpine Club in 1954, at a time when it took nominations by two members and no blackballs. He went on to serve as its president from 1968 to 1970. Nick was a visionary who saw the need for the AAC to transition from an exclusive club to a national organization and voice for American mountaineering. It took a decade of patient planning to finally open membership to all comers, during the term of his partner-in-change, Jim McCarthy, as president. Nick brought not only vision but also patient backroom plotting to this evolution. He had an uncommon gift of unassuming and caring leadership. Bill Putnam, in a 2011 presentation to the AAC board, referred to past presidents, "...the very best of whom is seated right down here, Nicholas Bayard Clinch, in my opinion of our history—adjusted for inflation of both dollars and egos—the club's foremost expedition leader, wisest councilor, and greatest benefactor."

Nick was always there for others and nurtured many younger climbers. Quietly, he was always plotting how to effect change in a way the old guard could accept. This was a role he loved to play, not only within the AAC but also during his terms as a board member at REI, and, I suspect, during his time as executive director of the Sierra Club Foundation.

Another outcome of Nick's vision and priceless negotiating skills was the creation of the Grand Teton Climbers' Ranch in 1970. Here, Nick was in his element, seeking and obtaining enthusiastic support from his friend Horace Albright, former head of the National Park Service, to convince then-head George Hartzog and others that this was too good an opportunity to let pass. It is fitting that the club opted at its annual meeting in 2017 to name the ranch's main building the Nicholas B. Clinch Historic Lodge.

Along with many expedition accounts and other writings, Nick was the author of two books, *A Walk in the Sky*, published 24 years after the ascent of Hidden Peak in 1968, and with his wife Betsy, *Through*

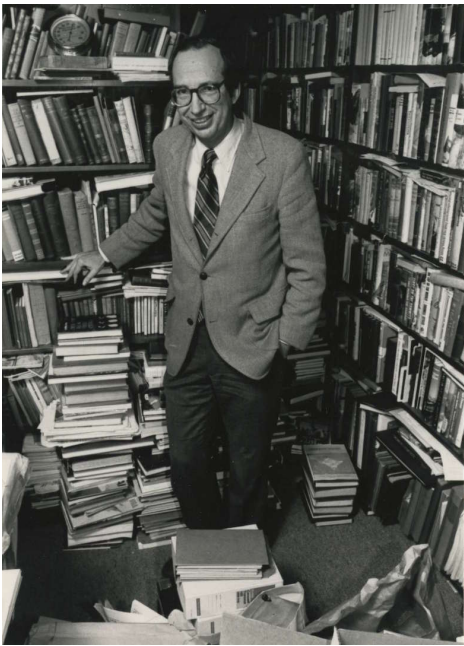
a Land of Extremes: The Littledales of Central Asia, published in 2008.

Nick had a gift for storytelling and inexhaustible (and at times exhausting) humor, which served to shield his inner dreams and doubts. The only one I knew who could outdo Nick as a talker was Betsy. Once I was visiting Palo Alto home when their planned book on the Littledale explorers was still gestating. Their detective work in finding Littledale archives was extraordinary, and mostly Betsy's doing, enabled by her years as a National Geographic Society researcher before they met. Late one evening I asked a question. About an hour later, after midnight, as I snuck away to bed unnoticed, they were still totally absorbed in intense exchange with each other. When Nick was in Seattle for REI board meetings, he stayed with my wife, Kathy, and me. Sometimes, when I was out of town, she would find herself listening to Nick's tales (not always for the first time) as she brushed her teeth, he leaning on the bathroom doorjamb.

Nick died from an untreatable sarcoma of a leg. On November 30, in full dress uniform, he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery near his father and grandfather. Nick, among many other things, was a quiet patriot who believed in his country as well as its and the world's wild places.

– Tom Hornbein

Images



Nick Clinch

Article Details

Author	Tom Hornbein
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	367
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	In memoriam