



## AAC Publications

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### **Allen Steck: A Mountaineer's Life**

By Allen Steck

**A MOUNTAINEER'S LIFE. Allen Steck. Patagonia, 2017. 255 pages. Hardcover, 255 pages, \$35.**

Readers of this treasure of an American memoir, packed with fascinating color photographs, have to wait until page 58 to see a picture of the author himself (one with his face showing). And typically, that picture shows Allen Steck in a group of grinning climbing buddies, just back from a 1950 trip to Mt. Waddington in British Columbia, where they made various first ascents and had an all-around good time.

It's not that Steck was shy or without ego as a young climber. It's just that his natural habitat is with people. This book is full of accounts of friendships, his partners described astutely and with feeling. At the same time, Steck's character comes quietly through: steady temperament, always on for the hardest pitches, super-sharp mind. Like Fred Beckey, his great North American contemporary, Steck in his prime was masterful both as a rock climber and as an alpinist. The unassuming way he recounts his self-education as a climber, from first scramble up an ice chimney near Mt. Maclure in the Sierra to massive walls in the Austrian Alps and the Dolomites, then back to California for the iconic Steck-Salathé Route on Sentinel Rock, then to Waddington, then the Cordillera Blanca in Peru, then Makalu for the first American attempt on an 8,000er, makes it seem like just about anybody could do it.

That's not true. Steck is now officially old—91 as this book was being published—but his writer's voice is that of a man in his physical and mental best years. Partly that's because some of these chapters were written some time ago, as articles in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* or the *AAJ*, but the chapters written just last week have the same authoritative grip on reality, the same mortal seriousness leavened with absurd humor. A Steckian sentence has color, high focus, balance, and liveliness. It has a lot of the qualities you imagine he had as a climbing partner. An absurdly lethal, as yet unrepeated, ascent such as the 1965 climb of the Hummingbird Ridge on Mt. Logan was only possible because someone was keeping it all together, refusing to freak out as the team of six pals took 37 days inching farther and farther out on a thinly corniced knife-edge, way beyond the point of no return. Steck refuses to make himself the hero of this epochal story, and that's surely correct—there were six madmen-heroes. But again, I say, someone was refusing to freak out, the implacable calm was emanating from somewhere.

This is one of the most enjoyable, best-written, thrilling, and immediate works of climbing history I've read in the last decade.

– Robert Roper

Images



**A MOUNTAINEER'S  
LIFE ALLEN STECK**  
FOREWORD BY STEVE ROPER

## Article Details

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