



AAC Publications

Paul B. Crews, 1917 – 2017

Paul Beatty Crews, pioneer Alaskan climber and founder in 1958 of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska (MCA), died in Anchorage on July 20. He was just 18 days shy of his 100th birthday. He had led an active, exciting, and inquiring life, and as a natural leader he became a focal point for Anchorage climbers in an era when homegrown expeditions tackling unclimbed peaks in Alaska were still relatively uncommon.

Paul was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, and moved with his family to Bremerton, Washington, while still very young. As a young man, he was introduced to the Olympic Mountains through the Boy Scouts. With his civil engineering degree from Washington State University, Paul served as an ordnance officer in the South Pacific in World War II. He first visited Alaska on an engineering project in 1951 and moved permanently with his family to Anchorage in 1952, founding a well-respected local engineering firm. Paul was the organizer and first president of MCA (1958-'59) and its first Honorary Lifetime Member.

In Alaska, Paul renewed his prewar love of mountains and made the first ascents of a number of peaks, primarily in Anchorage's backdrop Chugach Range: West Twin Peak (1954), Byron Peak (1958), South Suicide Peak (1958), Bashful Peak (1959), Mt. Gilbert (1961), and Mt. Eccles (1963). Paul also made first ascents of Mt. Gerdine (1963) and Mt. Torbert (1964) in the Tordrillo Range on Anchorage's western skyline. A sailor and private pilot, he was a co-author of the 1999 book *Tordrillo: Pioneer Climbs and Flights in the Tordrillo Mountains of Alaska, 1957–1997*, documenting the climbing history of this little-visited area of glaciated summits.

Paul's expedition leadership proved to be vital in the successful rescue of the "John Day Expedition" from Denali in May 1960. The roped Day party of four, which included Pete Schoening and Lou and Jim Whittaker, suffered a fall at 17,000 feet below Denali Pass on May 17, while descending the West Buttress Route from the summit. Day sustained a broken leg, and Schoening a likely concussion and later frostbite. Paul's MCA expedition, descending just ahead of the Day party, observed the fall, and Paul immediately re-ascended to aid the injured climbers. In the first use of a radio high on Denali to manage a rescue, Paul coordinated the eventual recovery of Day by helicopter from 17,000 feet (a Denali altitude record at the time). Schoening was rescued by helicopter three days later.

Paul was a skilled woodworker, handcrafting musical instruments including violins. In his later years he enjoyed retracing legendary 19th-century Arctic explorations, making several summer trips aboard former Soviet icebreakers into the High Arctic. He was an avid cross-country and alpine skier to his 90th year.

– Tom Meacham

Images





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