



## AAC Publications

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### **Norman Dyhrenfurth, 1918 – 2017**

**Norman Dyhrenfurth died September 24 in Salzburg, Austria, just short of a century old.** He is best known as the creator and leader of the 1963 American Mount Everest Expedition (AMEE), which has been regarded by him and others as the *magnum opus* of his life as mountaineer and cinematographer. For those of us who were privileged to be actors in the 1963 AMEE drama and to contribute to its outcomes, what he pulled off was clearly the overriding yet underappreciated component of the expedition, setting the stage for its many accomplishments.

Norman was born on May 7, 1918, in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland), the youngest of three children of Himalayan explorers Günter Oskar and Hettie Dyhrenfurth. The family moved to Austria when he was five years old and then to Switzerland two years later. His father, a renowned German-Swiss geology/geography professor and mountaineer, led the 1930 International Himalayan Expedition to Kanchenjunga that succeeded in climbing nearby Jongsong Peak and a 1934 expedition to the Karakoram. His mother, a tennis champion who acquired a love of climbing by marriage, was the first woman to climb higher than 7,000 meters, summiting Kashmir's 7,442-meter Sia Kangri in 1934.

Having left Germany for Austria just after World War I, his family foresaw the storm clouds of another war emerging in the 1930s. His mother, who hailed from a family of prominent Jewish industrialists, emigrated to the U.S., followed by Norman in 1937; both became dual Swiss-American citizens. She urged her family to join her, but Günter wouldn't follow for lack of a professorship. Norman wound up spending three decades in the United States.

In his 20s, Norman found work as a ski instructor in Franconia, New Hampshire, and as a mountain guide in the Tetons. His Army service won him U.S. citizenship and some trusted government jobs; his climbing and cinematography took him from the Tetons to Alaska with Bradford Washburn. In his 30s, he served as head of the cinematography department at UCLA, where he became acquainted with some of Hollywood's leading lights. However, Norman's heart, like his father's, remained in the mountains.

In the fall of 1952, Norman was hired as cinematographer for the second Swiss attempt that year on Mt. Everest. Three years later, he was back in Nepal, leading an attempt on Lhotse, his first experience as expedition organizer. After serving as cinematographer for the successful Swiss expedition to Dhaulagiri in 1960, Norman applied for and was granted a permit to attempt Everest in 1963. Thus was AMEE born. Norman spent three years doggedly laying the groundwork to realize his dream. He solicited sponsors, set up science experiments, crafted military-scale logistics, and put together the climbing team.

Several ingredients were critical to AMEE's success. Most of all was Norman's determination, chutzpah, and organizational talents. To go beyond what had been done before, he envisioned ascents of Everest, Lhotse, and Nuptse, synchronized with scientific research that complemented, rather than competed with, the mountaineering objectives. His efforts to obtain support from the White House elicited a polite rejection letter from President John F. Kennedy. Norman, undeterred, used President Kennedy's best wishes for a successful effort as leverage to gain backing from the National Geographic Society and other supporters. His tenacity and style, aided by luck, won the day.

Norman's next *tour de force* was in choosing a team. While looking for strong, motivated climbers, he

avoided prima donnas, those whose summit-at-all-costs ambitions ran counter to the essence of expedition-style mountaineering. Many came to the team as strangers, but they bonded well on the long walk in from Kathmandu. His success in this effort became even more apparent as the expedition unfolded, morphing into two teams, the South Col'ers and the West Ridgers, each competing for Sherpa carrying power, supplies, and priority. The situation was rife for problems, but the two teams managed to disagree in mature, agreeable ways, by no means a universal in Himalayan climbing history. Far more a facilitator than a military commander, Norman encouraged the team to resolve differences through open discussion and consensus.

On May 1, 1963, the day the expedition put the first American, Jim Whittaker, on Earth's highest point, Norman, at 44 the expedition elder, achieved an altitude well above 28,000 feet, returning to base camp near frazzled exhaustion.

The first of Norman's post-AMEE years were spent in the U.S., where he worked as a cinematographer, notably involved with Clint Eastwood's *Eiger Sanction* in 1975 and with Fred Zinnemann's *Five Days One Summer* in 1982, starring Sean Connery and also filmed in the Alps. However, Norman's hopes that the Everest expedition would open doors to major recognition and employment never came to pass. On the personal front, Norman's marriage ended in divorce in 1966. He returned to Europe and spent the final decades of his life in Salzburg with his partner Maria "Moidi" Sernetz, herself an accomplished golfer and skier. Both enjoyed good health into their 90s. Next to their apartment, Norman kept a small, tidy home office—more of a tiny museum—where he showed visitors the news clippings, awards, and other memorabilia from his adventures.

Norman's dream, I suspect, proved a life-changing event for all of us on the AMEE team. In a way, it's as if, when we got back from Everest, the expedition was just beginning—traveling uncharted territory but propagating among the team continuing and at times deepening relationships as we confronted the various challenges of life. That is an unanticipated, inextricable piece of Norman Dyhrenfurth's dream. Thanks, Norman.

– Tom Hornbein, with significant contributions from John Heilprin

## Images



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