



AAC Publications

Helmy Beckey, 1925 – 2019

Helmut Fritz Beckey, known as Helmy, was born in Seattle and died in Munich, Germany, at age 93. In his youth, he established first ascents and new routes throughout the Cascades and elsewhere.

Helmy learned the basics of climbing as a member of the Mountaineers, where his aptitude was recognized early. In 1940, he and his brother Fred, who was two years older, made two extensive excursions into the Picket Range. The teenagers climbed the west ridge of Mt. Thompson and made the first ascents of Forbidden Peak, Phantom Peak, Whatcom Peak, Mt. Challenger, Crooked Thumb, Luna Peak, Mt. Fury's East Peak, McMillan Spire's West Spire, and Inspiration Peak.

In 1941, along with the numerous first ascents and new routes in the North Cascades he did with Fred, Helmy joined Lloyd Anderson, Lyman Boyer, and Tom Campbell in the Bugaboos of British Columbia, where they completed the first ascent of the South Tower of Howser Spire.

In the summer of 1942, Helmy and Fred embarked on a six-week expedition into the Coast Mountains of British Columbia. Here, the teenage brothers famously climbed the remote and challenging Mt. Waddington. It was only the second ascent of the peak, which had repelled a multitude of summit attempts.

Fred Beckey wrote in the 1943 AAJ about the descent: "Helmy was hit on the knee by one of a flurry of rocks that sped down the mountain side. All hope of reaching camp that night was gone because of a heavily bleeding cut. This was Helmy's 17th birthday present, donated by Mt. Waddington." The trauma Helmy sustained to his leg on Waddington necessitated several surgeries, which kept him out of World War II. The injury plagued him the remainder of his life.

The two brothers continued doing new routes in the Cascades for some years. Meanwhile, Helmy became the first paid employee of the Recreational Equipment Cooperative (REI). As a teenager, he worked in a tiny attic space in the home of Lloyd and Mary Anderson, the co-op's founders, filling orders for, in his words, "climbing odds and ends". He also translated documents written in German that came with shipments of climbing equipment from Europe.

Helmy was valedictorian of his high school class at West Seattle High School. He entered the University of Washington, where he intended to study medicine like his father. However, after a year at the university, he decided to pursue opera instead of medicine, and he moved to California in 1945. He had been advised that the opera program at the University of Southern California was the best on the West Coast at that time. He also was a competitive skier and loved to swim.

Committed to the care of his mother, he quit his university studies early to find full-time employment, in order to help her financially. He moved her to California in the 1940s to live with him, and this freed his brother Fred to climb and pursue his passions. For many years, he worked as a pharmaceutical salesman for Pfizer in the Los Angeles area. In 1974, Helmy took his savings and emigrated to Germany to finally follow his dreams and pursue an opera career full-time. He sang in opera houses in the Munich area; he was considered a "heroic baritone."

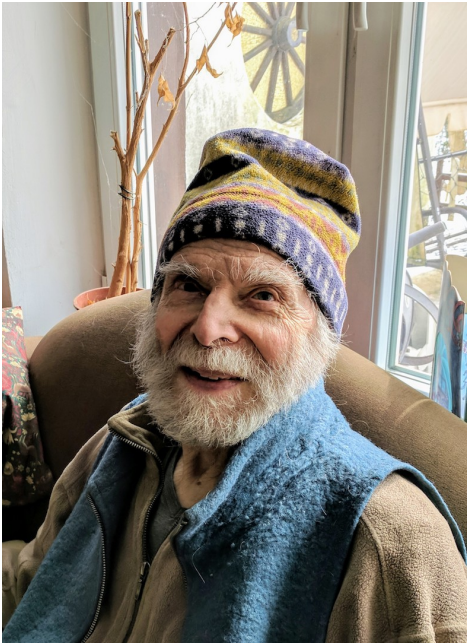
Although the Beckey brothers were known to bicker, they remained fiercely close, loyal, and protective of one another through their lives; they wrote or phoned each other monthly, even when they lived on

separate continents. Fred made many trips to Germany to visit Helmy, the most recent in 2015. (Fred Beckey died in 2017.)

“Looking back on my life,” Helmy wrote to Fred in 1980, “I find that the happiest times I had was when I was climbing with you. Such adventures like the North Pickets, the South Pickets, Twin Spires, and Mt. Waddington were really remarkable, especially because of our youth.”

– Megan Bond

Images



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