



AAC Publications

Dee Molenaar, 1918 – 2020

Dee Molenaar, an international mountaineering legend, geologist, and artist, passed away on January 19, 2020. He was 101.

Throughout his life, Dee demonstrated great generosity, getting as much satisfaction from helping others achieve their mountain goals as he did from achieving his own. His bravery and selflessness were legendary. Dee's résumé included pioneering routes on Mt. Rainier, completing the first ascent of Canadian peak Mt. Kennedy with Senator Robert Kennedy, and sharing a microphone with Sir Edmund Hillary during a radio broadcast. He also served the mountaineering community for many years as a climbing ranger at Mt. Rainier National Park. His dedication to sharing his love of "The Mountain" with others is reflected in his book, *The Challenge of Rainier*, considered the definitive climbing history of the peak.

Born to Dutch immigrants in June 1918, Dee spent much of his youth discovering the mountains of Southern California. He ventured northward to explore the glaciated peaks of the Pacific Northwest, where he served as a park ranger and guide at Mt. Rainier National Park.

During World War II, Dee served in the U.S. Coast Guard in the Aleutians and Western Pacific. In 1950 he earned a degree in geology at the University of Washington and served as civilian adviser in the Army's Mountain & Cold Weather Training Command at Camp Hale, Colorado. His career in geology took him across the western U.S.; he retired from the U.S. Geological Survey in 1983.

Dee climbed peaks throughout the western U.S., Canada, Alaska, Himalayas, New Zealand, and Antarctica. He participated in major expeditions to Mt. St. Elias in Alaska in 1946, Mt. Kennedy in the Yukon, and in the 1953 American expedition to K2 in the Karakoram Himalaya. Dee was the last surviving American member of the K2 expedition—he was one of the six men saved by "The Belay," when one climber slipped at nearly 25,000 feet and pulled off the others, all of whom were held by an ice axe belay manned by Pete Schoening. Many years later, in a letter to Charles Houston, leader of the expedition, Dee wrote, "K2 1953 was the high point of my life in so many ways, and nothing will equal it."

Dee was also a member of the Mountain Rescue and Safety Council, a group formed by members of the Mountaineers that eventually grew into the national Mountain Rescue Association. An essential item in Dee's pack was a box of watercolor paints. He painted mountain landscapes from Death Valley to Mt. Rainier. While hunkered down by a severe storm on K2 in 1953, he painted the highest watercolor in history, spending 10 days painting the peak from memory. With precious fuel for melting snow running low, his teammates made him drink the remaining water colored with pigments. His artwork and maps have appeared in books, exhibits, and art shows all over the world, and some of his sketches appeared in the first edition of *Mountaineering: Freedom of the Hills*, published in 1960.

Dee was an Honorary Member of the American Alpine Club, and in 2017 he was bestowed with the Mountaineers' Lifetime Achievement Award. Tom Hornbein, a longtime climbing partner of Dee's, spoke at the Mountaineers' ceremony about their friendship and the influence Dee had on his life. The very morning of the gala, Dee inspired Tom to climb nearby Tiger Mountain in the rain. As he was hiking, Tom thought, "What kind of an idiot does this?" When he got to the top, Tom found he was "in the company of a whole lot of idiots!" Dee loved that story. As history has shown, a life spent in the outdoors is a life well-lived.

– Kristina Ciari and Mary Hsue

Images



Article Details

Author	Kristina Ciari and Mary Hsue
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Book reviews