



AAC Publications

Robert Craig, 1924 – 2015

In 1953, when Bob Craig joined the famed Anglo-American expedition to K2, most mountaineers in the United States were amateurs. Climbing mountains was a seasoning that complemented another life, in which they pursued their big dreams and goals. Bob exemplified this juxtaposition in spades.

Robert W. Craig was born in California in 1924. As he entered his teens his family moved to Seattle, where, as a Boy Scout, Bob discovered mountains. He and a fellow student at Garfield High School, Fred Beckey, began climbing together. The two pulled off first ascents in the North Cascades, including classics like Nooksack Tower and the north face of Shuksan. A crowning achievement, in 1946, was their journey to the Stikine Icecap in Alaska, along with Cliff Schmidtke, to make first ascents of Kates Needle and Devils Thumb. As a cutting-edge climb in a wildly remote place, the Devils Thumb was notable for its out-there commitment and likely helped earn Bob's ticket to K2. Bob also climbed the Muldrow Glacier route on Denali with Brad Washburn, in 1947, and made the fourth ascent of Shiprock with Harvey Carter in 1953.

Bob garnered combined bachelor's degrees in biology and philosophy from the University of Washington, initial hints at the wide range of his intellectual curiosity. With the onset of World War II, Bob passed on enlisting in the 10th Mountain Division to follow in his father's footsteps in the U.S. Navy. He participated in the Pacific War. Once the radiation had cleared, he was among the first to view the total devastation of the Hiroshima bomb crater. This experience left a lasting imprint, influencing his later concerns about the use of nuclear energy. Following the war, Bob was completing a Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia when the Korean War diverted him to the Army's Mountain and Cold Weather Command as a civilian adviser.

In the early 1950s, Bob landed in Aspen as #009 in the Colorado Professional Ski Instructors Association. Shortly before Bob and his teammates left for K2 in the summer of 1953, Walter Paepcke, the visionary behind the modern Aspen incarnation, said to him something to the effect, "If you come back, let me know. I may have a job for you."

Beyond the mountaineering done by Bob and his K2 teammates, they will be best remembered as members of a unique band, "the brotherhood of the rope," as Charlie Houston described their bond. (Charlie and Bob wrote a mountaineering classic, *K2: The Savage Mountain*, that tells the story in full.) In 2003, Stephen Venables, the first Briton to climb Everest without supplemental oxygen, captured this special essence in an article for the *Sunday Times*, 50 years after the K2 expedition:

In this year of anniversaries, Everest has taken pride of place beside the coronation, but the mountain endeavour we should really be celebrating was an attempt 50 years ago on K2, the world's second-highest peak. The Anglo-American K2 expedition was a modest, shoestring affair. It set off quietly and returned to no fanfare. They didn't even make it to the summit. But that is not the point, because during the first two weeks of August 1953, on the slopes of what became known as the Savage Mountain, eight men enacted one of the great survival tales of all time. That seven returned was miraculous. Even more remarkable was the fact that in trying to help down the eighth, chronically ill man they demonstrated qualities of skill, courage, and sacrifice far more inspiring than any summit.

Bob Craig did come home from K2, and Paepcke got his man: Craig became the first director of the Aspen Institute. Over the next decade, he built the institute into a think tank where executives and others in leadership roles gathered to learn and exchange ideas. Craig's proudest accomplishment

was creating with physicists George Stranahan and Michael Cohen the Aspen Center for Physics. Bob married Carol Gallun and soon became a father of three: Kathleen, Jennifer, and Michael. He bought land in the valley north of Aspen with fantasies of becoming a gentleman rancher. At the request of his father-in-law, who felt that mountaineering and responsibility for family were not miscible, Bob stopped climbing for so long as this marriage lasted. He turned down an invitation from Norman Dyhrenfurth to join the 1963 American Mt. Everest Expedition. It's fun to fantasize what seasoning he might have brought to that endeavor—and better yet to imagine him as a member of our West Ridge team.

Bob and Carol separated in 1969 and divorced not long afterward. In 1974 mountains were back in his life. Bob and Pete Schoening led a contingent of young American climbers to participate in an international gathering of teams in the Soviet Pamirs. The title of Bob's book, *Storm and Sorrow in the High Pamirs*, captures the essence of this endeavor involving teams from many nations scattered about on peaks designated by their Russian hosts. Terrible weather, an earthquake, and avalanches resulted in many deaths. An avalanche buried Bob and Gary Ullin in their tent. John Roskelley and John Marts were able to dig Bob out, but Gary, lying next to him, did not survive.

In 1975, Bob's friend Bob Maynard, then head of Keystone Resort, lured him out of a ranching/designer phase in his life to create the Keystone Center, which Craig ran until 1996, along the way creating the Keystone Symposia and the Keystone Science School. Bob saw this as an opportunity to bring together individuals with diverse expertise to address major issues affecting society and the health of the planet. When it comes to immortality, here is one legacy that will live on beyond its creator. He remained involved with the Keystone Center's destiny until his death.

In 1983, Bob, then 59 and serving as president of the American Alpine Club, finally got his crack at Everest. Galen Rowell asked him to lead a team of top American climbers in an attempt to climb the true West Ridge without the use of supplemental oxygen or Sherpa support. Reflecting on his presidency of the AAC at the time, Bob had this to say about the expedition: "If I made one fundamental mistake during my term (and I'm sure I made several) it was to accept leadership of an innovative Everest West Ridge expedition—oxygenless, porterless, and, I later concluded, a bit mindless."

Though they did not succeed in summiting with this bold endeavor, I like to imagine that in the aftermath he was finally ripe for the most precious adventure of his life, a more than 30-year love affair with Terry McGrath, who at the time they connected was running the Hibberd-McGrath art gallery out of the Ski Tip Lodge, just down Montezuma Road from Bob's home. "We went 18 years without getting married, because I was so gun-shy from having, in my view, failed in my first marriage," Bob said. He survived his shyness and they married in 1999. Witnessing the patience, caring, humor, and love of their relationship has been a special gift for many.

I never shared more than a metaphorical rope with Bob, though our paths came close to connecting in 1952 on Longs Peak, where we both have routes bearing our names. (Craig's Crack is just right of Fields Chimney on the lower east face.) The first time we met was in the mid-1960s on Aspen Mountain, where I became acquainted with Bob's distant backside (a relationship unaltered as we skied and aged together these latter years). Our friendship really blossomed during the Terry era, as we shared dreams and meddlesome fantasies, not least as members of the board of the Altitude Research Center Foundation at the University of Colorado Medical School—this was a precious opportunity for me to see the old pro in action and to take note. Bob's board memberships were as wide-ranging as his interests.

The lives he touched ranged from young to old, from dirtbag climbers to politicians, statesmen, scientists, and others involved in shaping the destiny of our place on this planet. Bob Craig was a visionary, someone who had the chutzpah to try to make a difference. He had the wisdom to take chewable bites of big challenges. He was a guru and guide to many, a thoughtful, caring, giving, and kind person. Bob exemplified Harry Truman's statement, "You can accomplish anything in life,

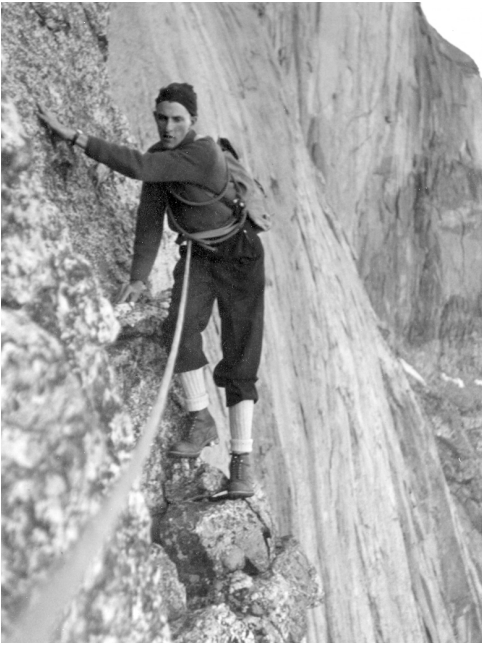
provided that you do not mind who gets the credit.”

I am one among many who regard this gentle giant of a man as a role model. I am convinced that at least some of the seeds for these attributes were planted by his love affair with mountains—those years of risk-taking, of putting life on the line as a climber of big mountains, not least the challenges he and his companions faced trying to save a teammate on the world’s second-highest mountain in 1953.

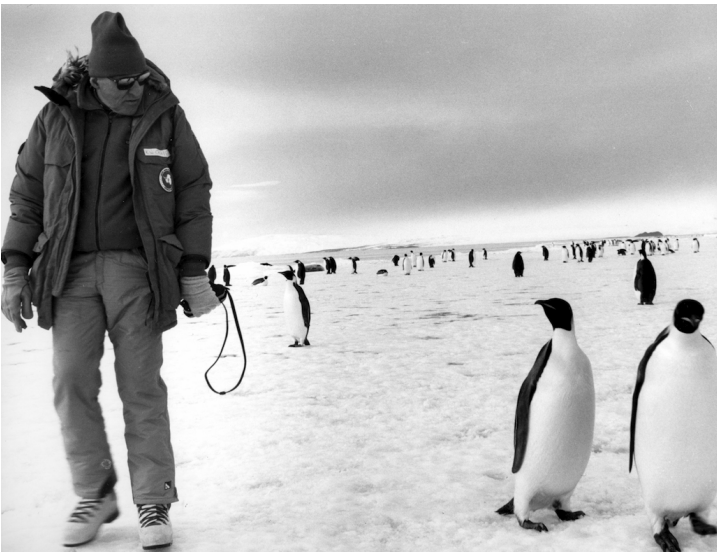
Bob has moved into my memories compartment now. When missing him becomes too hard, in my mind’s eye I conjure up one image that remained so precious a gift, even in those final days before he decided it was time to say “enough” and bid farewell to his ventilator and loved ones. That is, his smile. It starts with a captivating grin that is complemented by twinkling eyes and a slightly quixotic gaze, but it moves right to the top of his head as a feast of furrows, inverted smiles, extending from ear-to-ear beneath thinning hair, magnifying what the mouth began. It’s an unforgettable, whole-body experience.

– Tom Hornbein

Images



Bob Craig climbing on Longs Peak.



Bob Craig in Antarctica.



Robert Craig.

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