



## AAC Publications

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### Ed Webster, 1956–2022

**Like his many friends around the world, I was shocked and dismayed when I heard the news that Ed Webster had suddenly passed away at age 66, on November 22, at his home in Harpswell, Maine.** Ed was a giant among climbers, a man who was driven to stand on sandstone summits in the Utah desert, and to scale the treacherous slopes of Chomolungma, the Goddess Mother of the World, the rock and ice peak of Everest.

Ed first harbored the dream of climbing that mountain as an 11-year-old boy shinnying up tall backyard trees at his childhood home in Massachusetts. The dream was further fueled in 1967 by the first climbing book he ever read, *Everest Diary* by Lute Jerstad, the story of the 1963 American expedition. Webster later wrote in his book *Snow in the Kingdom*, a riveting account of his attempts to climb the world's highest mountain, "For most of the climbers that go to Everest, perhaps like me, it has been a childhood dream. You have this gut feeling, this conviction, your life is incomplete if you don't go to Everest someday to try to climb it."

Born in Lexington, Massachusetts, on March 21, 1956, Edward Russell Webster became obsessed with rock climbing as a teenager, scampering up trees and routes on crags at Quincy Quarries and Crow Hill. He quickly ventured to the Adirondacks and the White Mountains in New Hampshire. After high school, he headed west to Colorado College, a private liberal arts school in downtown Colorado Springs.

Ed, with his likable personality and passion for the vertical, was quickly accepted into the Colorado Springs climbing family and joined the hardcore crew establishing new routes at Garden of the Gods, Turkey Rocks, and farther afield at Black Canyon of the Gunnison and the red-rock canyonlands surrounding Moab. Some of Ed's regular rock partners in those halcyon days included legends like Bryan Becker, Jimmie Dunn, Steve Hong, and Earl Wiggins. Jimmie introduced me to Ed in 1975, and we became fast friends through a shared love of climbing history, adventures in the desert or on mountains, and a zest for living in the moment.

Ed's notable ascents in the 1970s and 1980s include the first ascent of the definitive Indian Creek route: *Luxury Liner*, better known as *Supercrack*, with Wiggins and Becker. He put up the classic *Lightning Bolt Cracks* (5.11-) on North Six Shooter with Pete Williams, and the *Poseidon Adventure* (5.10 R) on the Lighthouse with Jeff Achey. Webster soloed the first ascents of *Brer Rabbit* (VI 5.10+ A2) on Cottontail Tower in the Fisher Towers and *Primrose Dihedrals* on Canyonlands' Moses tower. He returned for the first free ascent of *Primrose Dihedrals* (5.11+) with Steve Hong. In Colorado's Black Canyon of the Gunnison, he put up classics like *Scenic Cruise* (V 5.10d), *Hallucinogen Wall* (VI 5.10 A3), *Comic Relief* (III 5.10), *Journey Home* (IV 5.10b), and *Lauren's Are te* (III 5.8 R). He and Becker climbed a new route on Mt. Robson, and Ed put up dozens of routes in the White Mountains, at Cathedral and Whitehorse Ledges, when he worked as a climbing guide in North Conway, New Hampshire.

All those climbing adventures, a lifetime of classic ascents for most people, were only the prelude for what Ed called his "storm years on Everest" in the late 1980s. During this period, he attempted the West Ridge Direct in Nepal and soloed a new route up Changtse, the mountain's north peak, in Tibet. In 1988 he returned a third time, with Robert Anderson, Paul Teare, and Stephen Venables, to attempt a new route up the remote 12,000-foot Kangshung Face on Everest's Tibetan side. Their audacious plan was to ascend the mountain in the purest style, with no radios, bottled oxygen, or Sherpa

support. Just four men climbing into the unknown.

The quartet successfully climbed a loose rock buttress and glacier to the South Col, a new route they dubbed Neverest, a play on the words “never rest.” On May 12 at the windy South Col, Teare, wracked by cerebral edema, retreated down the mountain, while Webster, Anderson, and Venables headed up the standard route, reaching the South Summit in the late afternoon.

Ed later told me it was the most dangerous day of his life. He lay hypoxic in the snow below the summit and hallucinated Tibetan monks chanting beneath fluttering prayer flags. “If I continued, I knew I would die. So, I turned around and went down,” he said. He and Anderson spent a cold night in an abandoned tent without sleeping bags. The next morning Ed pulled out his camera, and with only thin liners to protect his hands, shot ten photographs of first light glowing on the surrounding peaks. His fingers were frostbitten in the -40° dawn, leading to the amputation of all five fingertips on his left hand and three on his right. Venables, who made it to the summit and then bivouacked in the open, joined the two others as they staggered down to the South Col, and Ed, despite his injuries, led their epic descent back to base camp. Reinhold Messner later called their adventure, “the best ascent of Everest in terms and style of pure adventure.”

Besides his Everest opus, *Snow in the Kingdom: My Storm Years on Everest*, Ed wrote two guidebooks, *Climbing in the Magic Islands*, a guide to Norway’s Lofoten Islands, and the classic *Rock Climbs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire*. An accomplished photographer, his images were published in many national magazines, websites, and books. Webster also was a consummate historian of climbing and climbers, collecting information and photographs of Everest and New England climbers. Webster interviewed Fritz Wiessner at length several times and was writing his biography at the time of his death.

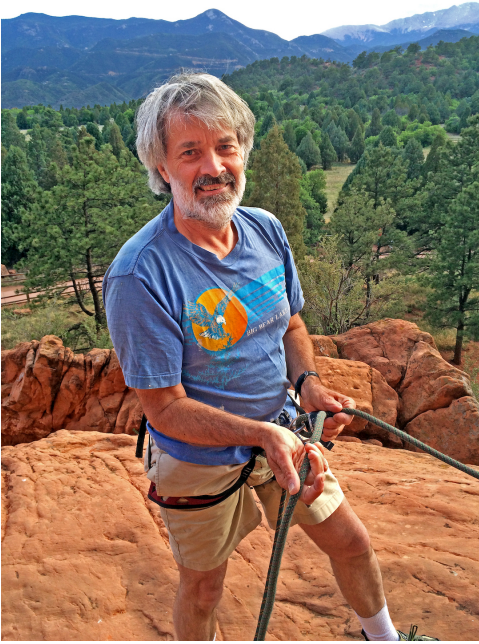
The breadth of a person is only partially defined by their achievements. With his gregarious, kind, and friendly demeanor, Ed made friends everywhere he went. In the months since his passing, a dozen people have told me, “Ed was one of the best friends I ever had.” Ed also lived with the dichotomy that so many of us balance—a thirst for adventure and living on the edge on one hand, and the quest for home, family, and love on the other. After his great adventures, he found serenity at his Maine home with his beloved wife, Lisa, and daughter, Joyelle. On a road trip to Moab in 2018, Ed told me, “They complete me.” While we traveled, he dutifully called home every evening to relate the day’s adventures and make sure all was quiet on the home front.

The last time I climbed with Ed was during that 2018 visit. One evening in Colorado Springs, Ed, Jimmie Dunn, and I drove to Garden of the Gods to crank a few laps on Cowboy Boot Crack in the fading light. At the cliff base, Jimmie said, “Here are the Three Saints again, having fun on the rock. It doesn’t get any better than this.”

Moving over stone, we begin to understand both the frailty and the miracle of human life, of our consciousness and being, of a sensual touch, the brightness of a summer afternoon, the cheerfulness of a warbler’s song, the piney scent of a mountain breeze. Life is amazing. And, at the end of days, death will be an amazing passage too. Ed Webster, our dear friend and climbing partner has traveled to the other side of the veil. Gone but forever etched on our hearts and minds, his spirit surrounding the mountains and cliffs he loved so dearly.

— Stewart Green

## Images



Ed Webster in the Garden of the Gods, Colorado, in 2018.



Ed Webster in the Indian Creek, Utah, area in 2008.



Ed Webster in Indian Creek, Utah, in 2008.



Ed Webster in the Island in the Sky, Utah, area in 1979.





Ed Webster climbing in Colorado Springs in 2008.



Layton Kor and Ed Webster in Kingman, Arizona, in 2009.

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