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#55
Special Edition

China Lake Mountain Rescue Group
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Carl Anthony Heller
November 4, 1922 – January 3, 1984

Carl loved the mountains. Not in the sense that one loves a person, of course, but as an experience. Carl loved attaining the summit - any summit - by any route. He loved rock climbing. He loved winter mountaineering, expeditionary climbing, hiking cross country and even on trails. He loved the beauty, the companionship of his friends, the challenge. He loved the rainbows and he loved the storms. He loved the birds, the flowers, the trees. Ask him the name of a particular blossom and he would give you a lesson in botany. Mountaineering can be a complete experience, and Carl Heller was a complete mountaineer.

Carl discovered the joy of climbing over 30 years ago, and he engaged in it at every opportunity. He ascended all the significant peaks in California several times each, and many of the lesser ones. He climbed from Maine to Alaska; in Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile and Argentina. In an age where first ascents are rare, Carl holds a number of first ascents. He has written, or contributed to, many climbing guidebooks.

What does it really mean to 'Love the mountains' as Carl did? It is the purity of the air, the ice, the rock. It is the challenge of the ascent: you against. . . your own limitations. It is the physical, the mental, the spiritual, and the emotional struggle for success, and indeed sometimes for survival. It is the escape from an eight-hour day, a forty-hour week, an ordinary existence.



"Carl experienced it to the fullest. But moreover, he gave it to us. Carl always looked for people to share his trips, especially young people. New acquaintances as well as old friends. He was anxious to share it with, and teach it to, all others. And teach he did!

"On climbs, in mountaineering classes, on rescues, and at social gatherings. By example, by the way he talked as well as what he said, through his mannerisms and tone of voice. In dozens of ways, at every occasion. You couldn't spend five minutes with Carl without learning something new, OR gaining greater insight about something old. And in the process, your respect for him grew one more notch.

This is his legacy. He did not bequeath it in death, but in life. While he was here, he recreated within so many of us his love of the mountains. We have been changed in a fundamental way, and we have Carl to thank.

"Carl was a proper climber, and the dignity as well as the safety of the ascent was very important to him. He believed that mountains are sometimes won, but never conquered. The climber's attitude, mood, and style are as important to the quality of the climb, as the conditions that the mountain imparts.

"We will continue to visit the mountains, and especially when the sun finally bursts through a storm, or when a tiny hold is finally found on an otherwise blank face, it will be easy to believe that Carl is somehow there to lead, encourage and comfort us. As he did in life.

"But what is undeniably true is that for those who were Carl's disciples, the ability to survive that storm, to find and use that tiny hold, indeed to enjoy the climb and to live a better life – is due to Carl's training, guidance and encouragement when he was alive.

"Much mountaineering literature and poetry exists. Many memorable quotes have been written. I've searched for one that describes how I feel about Carl Heller, or perhaps one that summarizes how he felt about mountaineering. It is a measure of the man that no single one seems to suffice. But perhaps by combining words by Muir, Houston, and others I can come close:

There are many who climb quietly for joy, peace, release of tension, for the pleasures of fitness and to bask in beauty. Others test limits of nerve, strength and skill in a way denied to the earthbound. But you cannot climb long for the one Reason, without developing a fondness for the other. The important thing is to begin, in the first place. Go into the mountains and get there good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine through the trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.'

"Carl Heller loved the mountains, and we loved Carl. Goodbye, good friend. . . and good climbing. . ."

Carl's memorial service was particularly meaningful. The eulogy was given by several of his friends and colleagues. Bob Rockwell told of the pleasures Carl received, and gave, as a mountaineer. Dolph Amster worked with Carl, and shed light on his contributions as a chemist. Ron Atkins was active with Carl in scouting as well as in mountain rescue and summarized his activities there, and with the American Red Cross. Kern County Sheriff Larry Kleier applauded Carl's leadership in rescue activities. Al Green told of his impact on the members of CLMRG, shared some personal experiences, and described Carl's last months.

The essence of Carl's eulogy is presented here in this Special Edition of the Talus Pile.

Carl Heller was born in New Rochelle, New York. As a Captain in the Marine Corps, he saw considerable combat action in the South Pacific and participated in the occupation of Japan. After the close of World War II Carl attended New York University, receiving his doctorate in chemistry. He pursued his career, in federal service, at the Naval Weapons Center, China Lake, California.

Carl was an excellent chemist. He established the Instrumental Analysis Branch, and was its first and only head. He held several patents.

"If the measure of a man is what he leaves behind him, we need a very large measuring stick, indeed, for Carl. The Branch he nurtured now enjoys a nationwide reputation for outstanding research in a difficult field. At least 43 publications in over a dozen scientific journals bear his name. His work has been presented before numerous learned societies. For these and other accomplishments he was presented the U.S. Navy Meritorious Civilian Service Award.

"I also had the privilege of cooperating with Carl in another aspect of his multifaceted life. At my urging, I might almost say nagging, he volunteered to lead a strenuous week-long hike for a group of Sierra Club members. There transpired a sequence of events which, in a sense, epitomizes Carl. When the participants first heard what he planned for them - as he reported to me - he had a near rebellion.' But the group did cross the pass and did scale the peak. And when it was done, they thanked him. Thus, did he demonstrate clearly his ability to challenge people with the seemingly impossible and to support them as they achieved it.

"Courage has been defined as 'grace under pressure.' If this be so, then Carl was one of the most courageous persons I have known. It befell to me to share a few private moments with Carl over the past months. Carl lived an exciting, active life. He lived his life to the fullest. But, to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare: 'Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.'"

When Carl saw a need in the community, wherever it arose, he was eager to help. He founded Explorer Post #291 for the local teenagers. While he never married, he was a father figure to many youth.

Females were not included in scouting when Carl began the post. He petitioned the Boy Scouts of America to allow female participation in Explorer Scouting, unheard of at that time. Today all young women nationally have this opportunity. In recognition of his contributions to Scouting, Carl was awarded the Silver Beaver Award by the Southern Sierra Council of the BSR. This is the highest honor a council can bestow upon an individual.

"Post 291 activities were centered around Carl's love of the mountains and outdoors. Hiking, canoeing, camping, skiing, and occasionally climbing mountains were the principal activities. The original public service function was that of conservation. By the time I became involved with the post, it had evolved into principally an Explorer Ski Post. The function now is to teach young people how to ski, get them proficient in First Aid, and train them as Ski Patrol members. Carl was involved with the National Ski Patrol, and coordinated their activities at Shirley Meadows. Many of his Explorers participated in this activity.

"Skiing, climbing and backpacking are all fun things to do. Carl's message, example and legacy to the young people that participated in the post was that it was a privilege, that privileges were to be earned, and that you should give more back to the activity than you took from it. You should assume responsibility for yourself and your organization. This I believe was Carl's basic philosophy. Give back more than you take. The Rescue Group and the Explorer Post are just two of many examples where Carl led by example, and imposed this philosophy.

"Carl touched the lives of many people, often in ways that they were unaware of. He was a remarkable, giving person. He is gone now. He will be missed. But he will be remembered for his many living contributions to the people of the Indian Wells Valley."

At the time of his death Carl was serving as chairman of volunteers for the American Red Cross in the Indian Wells Valley; he had attained a national reputation in that organization for service as an instructor-trainer for First Aid classes. For many years he was the only person in the Valley who was qualified to train new instructors.

He derived much pleasure from the many memorable Sierra Club trips which he led over the years. He also enjoyed folk dancing each Thursday night as an active member of the Desert Dancers.

Carl Heller's activities with search and rescue were not limited to field operations. His part in the formation of the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group is well known. He was also active in the affairs of the California Region of the Mountain Rescue Association, and had served as its president. He was instrumental in setting state policies and testing procedures for search and rescue teams in California. He was known throughout the National MRA organization.

Albert Schweitzer said "There is no greater religion than human service."

"Carl Heller's life was a testimony to human service. He touched so many lives in a positive and creative way. The few minutes that we spend here today cannot do justice to his many contributions.

"Carl founded the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group over 25 years ago. He was its first Leader and remained patriarch until his death. Carl and his friends introduced me to mountaineering and to mountain rescue, an experience which has been a continual source of challenge and enjoyment for me. Carl took me under his wing and by orchestrating events got me to do things that I would never have volunteered for.

"His leadership and guidance were always quiet and subdued, yet he was insistent and you knew that he was in charge. He was a leader with a brilliant mind, able to evaluate each situation and evolve a plan and objectives. **His** strength and character came through even when he was not in the lead, but in the background. It was to his great credit that he recognized the wisdom of delegation. He insisted that others assume the leadership role and in so doing forced each of us to greater heights. We're each proud to belong to 'Carl's' Rescue Group'.

"The past few months have proved Carl's incredible strength and determination. I had the rare privilege to spend a lot of time with Carl. He chose to stay here at home, because he wanted to be close to his friends and wanted to remain involved in his work and activities as long as possible. He did that with many conversations and he always made his friends feel comfortable. If Carl was too exhausted or in pain he would apologize - for not being good company - and say that he needed to rest. He never complained OR expressed any anger, resentment or fear about his illness or his probable death. He accepted it as a challenge that could happen to anyone. For months, after he had been essentially written off, he was still exercising and taking of getting better. He was forced by his deteriorating strength to continually modify his routine but he didn't stop. At first after his operations it was a walk around the block, then part way around the block, then around the outside of the house, then up and down the hallway, -then rocking in a chair, and finally ten breaths on his lung exerciser.

"We can still learn from Carl - to accept -such a cruel disease and to challenge it to the very end - Carl found opportunity even in this. He said to me, 'this really isn't so bad; I have time now to talk to my friends, listen to music and to read'.

"It is a privilege to have known such a man and an honor to be counted as one of his many friends."

A MEMORIAL

Carl Heller had a lifelong association with the mountains. He derived many pleasures from them, and brought countless pleasures to others in this process. His efforts have resulted in the saving of many lives through mountain search and rescue. It is natural to consider a memorial to Carl, and the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group believes that a mountain peak named "Mt. Heller" would be entirely fitting. This is not a simple accomplishment and we are aware that many similar requests are made and turned down each year, but we feel that Carl's qualifications are most appropriate. Over the coming months, and probably years, we will be working toward this goal.

During his 25 years of mountain rescue operations, Carl had flown on many military helicopters. At 0900 hours on 13 January 1984 his ashes were dispersed in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, from a U.S. Navy Huey based at China Lake.