WALTER ABBOTT WOOD
1908-1993

Walter Abbott Wood was born in Hoosick Falls, New York in 1908. He was educated at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire and then for four years in Zürich, Switzerland, where he studied surveying and began his climbing career in the Alps. He had done some surveying in Kashmir and had climbed Ararat and some Mexican volcanoes before becoming a member of the American Alpine Club in 1932. The next year, he climbed with Noel Odell in Greenland. From 1935 to 1937 and again from 1941 to 1946 and from 1950 to 1955 he was a member of the American Alpine Club Council. He served as vice president from 1938 to 1941 and president from 1947 to 1949.

Although he also led expeditions to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia and to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, the region of his special interest was the southwest corner of Canada's Yukon Territory. The St. Elias Mountains (the Icefield Ranges) were the focus of his mountaineering and scientific interests for the rest of his life. His first ascents included Steele (16,644 feet) in 1935, Wood (15,885 feet) and Walsh (14,787 feet) in 1941, Hubbard (15,015 feet) and Alverstone (14,565 feet) in 1951. He was also the leader of the expedition that in 1949 made the first ascent of Vancouver (15,860 feet).

For more than twenty years, Wood led expeditions doing glaciological and survey work in the St. Elias Mountains, much of it requiring mountaineering or
glacial expertise. With the American Geographical Society and the Arctic Institute of North America, in both of which he served as an officer, he helped to found a station for high-altitude research on Mount Logan. He also established and helped support a research center for scientific studies of the St. Elias Mountains at Burwash Landing on Kluane Lake. He was still visiting the center and checking glacial movement when he was over 80.

In December, 1940, the American Alpine Club established a Defense Committee with Walter as chairman. The following summer, he led an expedition to the St. Elias Mountains that, among other activities, tested mountain clothing and equipment for the U.S. Army. In 1942, he was commissioned in the U.S. Army Specialist Corps. That year, he had already been a member of the Alaskan Test Expedition, which made the third ascent of McKinley while testing proposed Army items of mountain and cold-weather equipment. He was in charge of air dropping for the expedition and stationed in Anchorage, though he would have much preferred being on the mountain itself. Eventually, he served as military attaché in the American Embassy in Ottawa, Canada, where he had much to do with the organization of Operation Muskox, a winter test of American and Canadian over-snow equipment. Shortly afterward, he retired from the Army with the rank of colonel.

In 1951, Walter suffered a great tragedy when his first wife (the former Foresta Hodgson) and his only daughter Valerie died on a flight from the Seward Glacier to Yakutat, Alaska. Despite intensive searches, the place where the plane crashed has never been discovered. On the same expedition, as four of us were hurrying to learn if the plane had come to our Base Camp, I fell into a large crevasse, from which Walter and his son extricated me. Naturally for this I have always been thankful.

Between 1934 and 1975, Walter wrote many articles, notes and book reviews for the American Alpine Journal. He was also well-known in geographical circles. To my knowledge, nobody else has ever been president of the Explorer’s Club, the American Geographical Society and the American Alpine Club.

After Foresta’s death and three unsuccessful marriages, he married Renée Menassa, who was his devoted wife for 17 years. After a long illness, Walter died on May 13, 1993, leaving Renée, his son Peter, six grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and two stepdaughters. He was buried with military honors in Hoosick Falls. A memorial service was held later in New York City.

Walter’s formal manner sometimes deceived people. He had a good sense of humor and could be very outgoing. He was a man of great modesty and integrity.

Robert H. Bates