

IN MEMORIAM

BARRY CORBET 1936-2004

“Damn it,” Barry said. I’d just shared my latest ruminations on heroes, and declared him one of them. He squirmed, didn’t like it, said so. One thing that irks wheelchair users, he told me, is to be viewed by “normies” as needing their pity or admiration. “Hell, everybody’s got their handicaps, even you, my friend, though it may not be so obvious.” Touché. But it didn’t change my view of Barry. Barry is for me a hero and *not* because he ended up paralyzed from the waist down in a helicopter crash.

After that crash Barry came to view his life, perhaps much like his new body, as divided into two parts: the 32 years before his spinal cord injury (SCI) and the 36 after. For many years following the accident he more-or-less closed the door on part one, trying not to look back.

Part One began in Vancouver, B.C. in 1936. Barry graduated from Prince of Wales high school and left Dartmouth in his junior year to settle in Jackson Hole. He was a superb athlete, a scholar without degree, and a mountain-dwelling alchemist who could turn dreams into golden adventure:

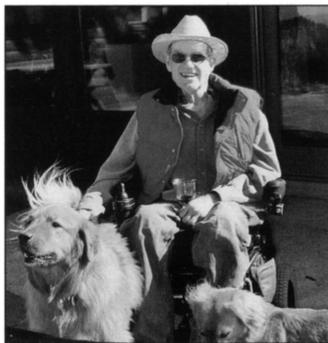
In 1958 he and three others (Bob French, Sterling Neale, Bill Briggs) pulled off the first ski traverse from the Bugaboos to Rogers Pass, now a classic known as *The Grand Traverse*.

The following year he, Jake Breitenbach, Pete Sinclair, and Bill Buckingham made the first ascent of the Southwest Rib of Denali, and he married an irresistible redhead, Mary (Muffy) French, a union that yielded three more redheads, Jonathan and twins Jennifer and Michael. Barry and Muffy divorced, remarried, and divorced once more. The lifelong relationship that followed proved to be more loving and nurturing than many marriages.

Barry entered my life during the 1963 American Mount Everest Expedition. We both cast our lot with a handful of others wanting to take the road “less traveled by”—Everest’s West Ridge. On May 21 Barry and Al Auten pioneered the route to our final camp at 28,300 feet. At the time of our summit push, Barry was going strong. He relinquished a place on the summit team with the parting bit to Willi Unsoeld and me, “...you’re both just about over the hump (36 and 32). This is my first expedition. I’ll be coming back again someday.”

Between 1958 and 1968 Barry guided for the Exum School, taught skiing in Jackson Hole, pioneered new routes in the Tetons, and started the area’s first mountaineering store, The Outhaus. Corbet’s Couloir at Jackson is one challenging, double-black-diamond bit of his immortality, though he points out that he was not the first to ski it. In 1968 he started Jackson Hole Mountain Guides.

On December 18, 1966, Barry, Pete Schoening, John Evans, and Bill Long became the first to stand atop Mount Vinson, Antarctica’s highest point. A few days later, Barry and John pulled off what Barry later regarded as his finest climb, the first ascent of nearby Mount Tyree—a bold,



Barry Corbet in 2004. Muffy Moore

way-out-there commitment.

In 1963, returning from Everest where his appetite had been whetted, he and Roger Brown started Summit Films, and Barry entered a whole new world of creativity. Most notable was his paradigm-changing film, *Ski the Outer Limits*, which touched new visual and spiritual levels in portraying the cutting edge of downhill skiing.

Part Two began May 2, 1968 when the helicopter from which Barry was filming fell to earth. In an instant his life was transformed. Much later he commented:

As my life's turning points go...it was spinal cord injury that turned me inside out and spat me out a different person. My life was no longer the road not taken but the road yanked out from under...I still have trouble reconciling the life before with the life after.

His newfound disability thrust upon Barry a challenge the likes of which he'd never imagined. He had to learn to get along with a new, less compliant body. He continued to make films, focusing increasingly on the lives of those with SCI. Options: Spinal Cord Injury and the Future, a book to tell his fellow "gimps" and "crips" that there's still life after injury, is now in its tenth printing. For a time that life included white water kayaking until his shoulders would have no more of it.

In 1991 Barry became editor of *New Mobility*, a magazine devoted to the lives, concerns, and challenges of those living with SCI or related disability. Through his monthly Bully Pulpit editorials and other writings, he became a powerful voice for demonstrating that "wheelers" had some different needs but also aspired to loving and challenging lives with full opportunity for creative contribution to our world. Though it's the last thing he sought, he acquired guru status as guide, editor, and mentor. He was an inspiration to many, not only those among the SCI community. Which brings me back to Barry as hero. In a recent essay titled *Heroes: Personal Ponderings* I wrote:

I have another type of hero where elements of selflessness and volition might seem less relevant at first glance, but it is just those aspects of the style of coping with adversity that defines the heroism of these ordinary heroes.... For me, though Corbet doesn't buy it—which adds challenging seasoning to our friendship—he is a model for my hero as survivor. Barry's been a paraplegic for the second half of his life, and it's never a life that's easy. But you get on with it.... What he has done is not unique, but he has pulled it off with style and creativity that adds to my admiration for him, even as I cannot truly imagine what it would be like to be in his place. When we talked recently about heroes, Corbet had this to say: "To me, a hero is someone who makes the world better or sacrifices his own interests for a greater, nobler cause. By that definition, we're all heroes some of the time, but almost none of us consistently. And by that definition, mountaineering is pretty much nowhere." Yes, Barry!

Over the years as a para, Barry's body began to wear down, wear out, and just hurt: pressure sores, bladder infections, compressed nerves, decaying shoulder joints. But the spirit grew even as the body shrank. He wrote in *New Mobility*:

Disability shreds all our presumptions of freedom, authenticity or confidence. It writes its own rules. So my idle dreams of lofty mountain sanctuaries are nothing but that. Most

of us must find our adventures elsewhere.

And we do. Lionel Terray, a famous French mountaineer, called his chosen sport “the conquest of the useless.” People with disabilities, I submit, are engaged in the conquest of the ordinary. We find adventure in reaching the unreachable object, in scratching the unscratchable itch, in making the impossible transfer. We find it every time our adaptive equipment breaks down or an attendant flakes out. We find it in confronting patronization and discrimination, in righting wrongs, taking stands and rousing the courage to be who we are. Adventure stalks us, insists that we participate. Like it or not, most of us get all the adventure we can handle.

Of course we don’t often choose our adventures, but does anyone? We like to think we do, but the best adventures befall us, not we them. And there’s no escaping the greatest adventure of them all—being part and parcel of the solar wind and the play of starlight, of the pull of tides and the convergence of hearts, of the splendor of life that is denied to no one. Once we accept the gift, the adventure has begun and cannot be abandoned.

A parallel trick of living with a disability...is to see all and everything as an adventure, one that endows every moment with all the most adventuresome qualities—uncertainty and risk, richness and joy, deliberation and derring-do.

But damn. Chimborazo, Cerro Torre, Alpamayo. The Annapurnas, the Karakoram, the Hindu Kush. Can’t you hear the mermaids singing?

There were still mountains in the heart. Four years ago, Barry began to open the door to let part one of his life back in. This from the 25th Annual John Young Lecture at Craig Rehab Hospital, in which he inventoried a few of his life’s missteps:

Another mistake was this dumb division of my life into two separate lives. To a large degree, I rejected what I was calling my first life. I didn’t maintain a lot of my best friendships. I dropped my old interests. I didn’t exactly withdraw from life, but I did start over. I’ll always be poorer for that.

With the benefit of hindsight, it’s easy to see that there is no first life, no second life. There’s this life, and it’s everything we ever hoped for. It’s the brass ring we thought we had missed, the imperfect paradise we thought we’d lost.

I just can’t tell you how very imperfect it is, or how very tired I get of being disabled. Of all the crap that comes with it, of the constant financial drain. I can’t tell you how much I wish I could take a vacation from all of that.

But none of that matters. In spite of all the change and difficulty, life doesn’t change. Life is still complete and terrifying and drop-dead gorgeous, and I have just as big a piece of it as anyone else.

Well, if Barry had any defense against being one of Hornbein’s heroes, he sure blew it with his dying. He was living on the thin edge of having to give up the self-sufficient life he’d pulled off for most of those 36 years. Last August Barry was found to have widespread cancer. He elected to forgo dubiously helpful treatment. I’ve imagined that he saw this cancer as his exit permit. With his family and other loved ones tied into the metaphorical rope, a climber one time more, he started up that final pitch. On a sunny, mild December afternoon, with loved ones around him, he finished the climb with the same style and dignity with which he

confronted all else in his life. It was the 38th anniversary of the day he had ascended to the highest point on the Antarctic continent. He left unresolved the mystery whether the white mountain he saw most days looking north from his bedroom window was Longs Peak or...?

A few days later a letter arrived in the mail:

Dear Friends-

...As many of you already know, my life is now over.... I'm a little saddened to be leaving a little earlier than expected, but feel no sense of tragedy. I've lived a lot longer than I ever could have or would have predicted thirty-six years ago after the helicopter crash.... I've had love overflowing, impassioned careers, a life of adventure and everything I've ever wanted. Nothing missed and no regrets. Live on in peace, health and happiness. Look for the meaning where you can, and cherish mystery when you can't.

Barry

THOMAS HORNBEIN, AAC

WILLIAM PRESTON "BILL" ELFENDAHL 1914-2004

Bill Elfendahl, 89, Boeing engineer, one of REI's founders, mountaineer, skier, sailor, and Scout leader died June 7, 2004, in Seattle following a stroke.

He was born November 30, 1914, in Alameda, CA, the son of Gertrude Louise Baxter and Preston Henry Elfendahl. He graduated from Seattle's Garfield High School in 1931. In 1936, Bill earned a degree from the University of Washington in Mechanical Engineering and was a Lieutenant in the ROTC. Despite the memory of his cousin's death in a 1930 airplane crash, and resulting family objections, Bill pursued his dream to help people fly and to bring them together.

Bill was employed by The Boeing Company from 1936 until 1979—43 years—and retired third in seniority worldwide. He began as a draftsman in "The Red Barn." His first design job was for an airplane restroom door handle. He helped design the seaplane underbody of the Boeing Clipper. His first chance to fly came in 1940 over Spokane when he was assigned to assist with repairs on a Douglas UC-78 trainer. When he was sought by the War Department for WW II, Boeing intervened. Engineers were desperately needed to set up the B-17 Flying Fortress production line. After WWII, Bill was on the maiden flight of Boeing's Stratocruiser, directed Flight Test Instrumentation & Research Laboratories, helped design the 707 & 747, served as president of Boeing Supervisors' Club, and was a clown for Boeing's annual family holiday circuses.

Bill was very active with The Mountaineers, leading climbs, building lodges at Mt. Baker, Stevens and Snoqualmie passes, assisting Mountain Rescue Council, and sharing "Camp Crafter" trips with his young family. One of the founders of REI in 1938, he carried card #16. He and his friends began importing mountaineering equipment from Europe, which was unavailable in the US. His rock climbing tools are displayed in the Seattle store's entry.

An editor of the American Alpine Club's *Climber's Guide to the Cascade & Olympic Mountains of Washington* (1961), Bill yodeled from the summits of many, many mountains in



Bill Elfendahl in 1949. Tom Miller