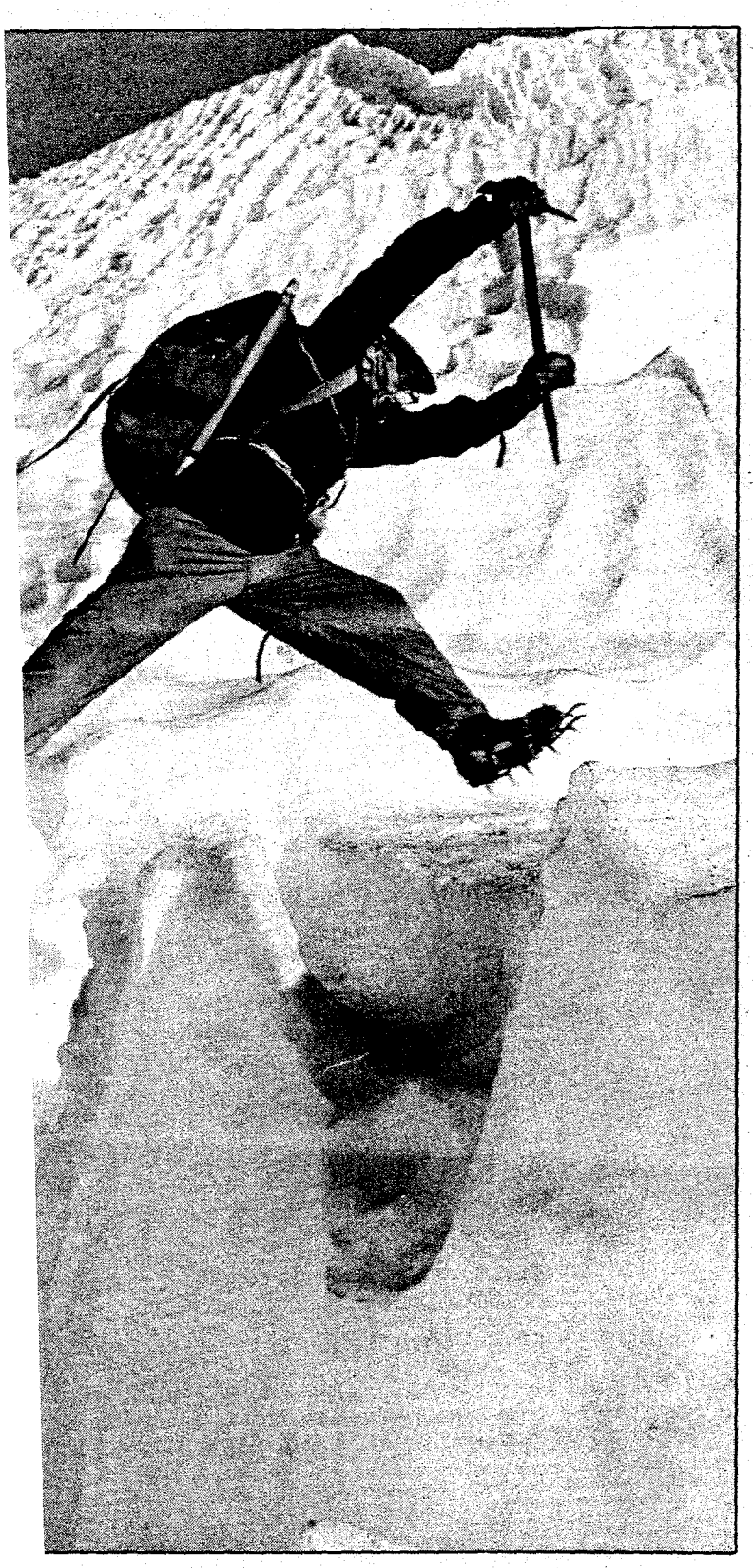
# INDOMITABLE

# INDOMITABLE OME DAIBER



**WRITTEN BY BEN GROFF**
**PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIANNE HAGAMAN**

*So long as we are, death is not; and when death is present, we are not. In other words, between death and us there is no rapport . . .*

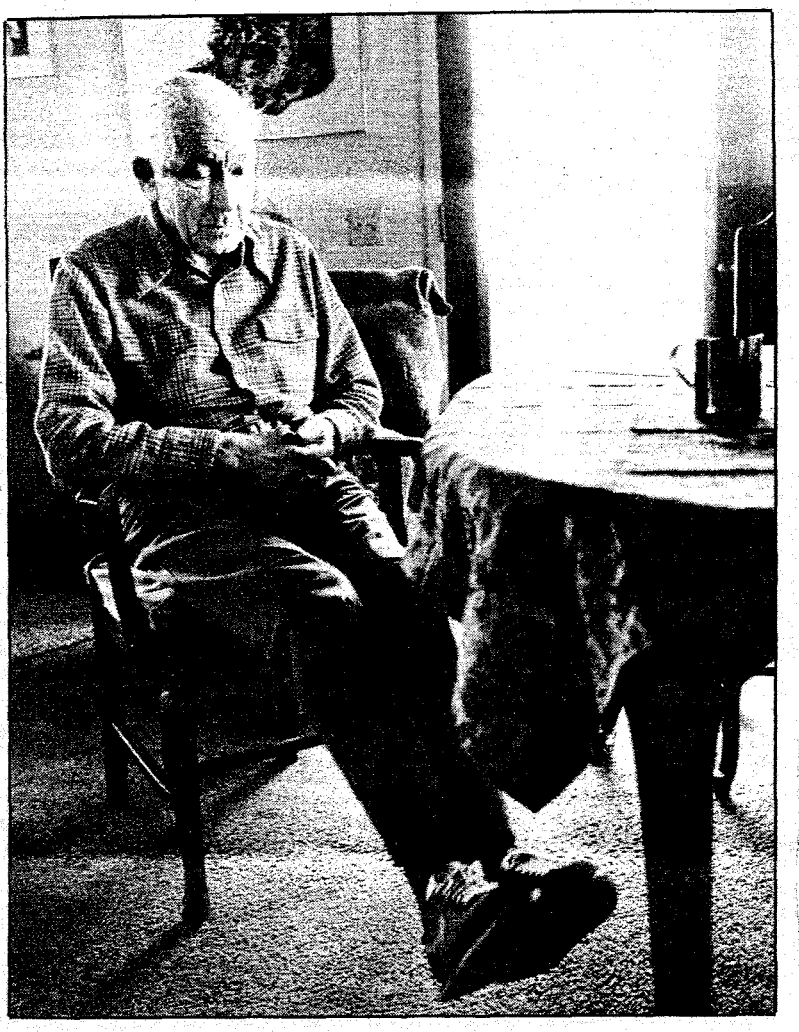
**Thomas Mann, "The Magic Mountain"**

Death and Ome Daiber are not on speaking terms — one of the very few subjects under the sun of which that can be said. And this despite the fact that the ebullient 79-year-old Seattle mountaineer has lately seen more of the inside of hospitals than he ever had cause to imagine.

I encounter an urgently impatient Ome — once again a temporary prisoner of Virginia Mason Hospital, this time for the mop-up of a small stroke. He has promptly recovered to his normal state of garrulous eccentricity — trying to belt prostheses to the ends of his amputated legs ("don't call them stumps; trees have stumps") with fingers not unaccustomed to straps and buckles, to hardware, to accoutrements, to the cold steel and tangled leather, say, of a pair of crampons donned in a gorge in the middle of the night. But if he takes his time now, checking and rechecking the bindings carefully, it is not because it is dark and his hands are numb, but because he is nearly blind.

In recent years, diabetes has withered his eyesight; his legs were lost not to any hazard of the mountains but, ironically, to arteriosclerosis. Although he does not climb any more, he is still a climber — one for whom every problem is an opportunity for achievement. Now, the artificial legs finally in place, he is ready to prove something to somebody one more time.

He struts jauntily around the curtain that separates his bed from his neighbor's. There, a much younger man lies emaciated and fetally curled beneath a tumble of covers in a small clearing in the middle of a thicket of pumps and poles and tubing, as delicate and frail as a newborn thing, a fawn, perhaps, so rapidly breathing, although his yellow, staring eyes, one senses, are prepared for a different sort of passage. Ome grins at him, does a terrifying dance



step on his metal and foam rubber feet, and throws out his arms palms up in the classic vaudevillian's gesture: Ta-daa! "Where you from, young fella?" he shouts exuberantly.

"Darrington," the astonished roommate whispers.

"I've been to Darrington! I've flown over Darrington! I've climbed out of Darrington! I've climbed Whitehorse; you know Whitehorse?"

The younger man's camouflaged eyes are wary and still.

"Get up from that bed or you'll be there forever!" exhorts Ome in his friendliest scoutmaster manner. "Look at me. I'm ready to climb Mount Si this summer, and don't think I won't!"

Arise, and walk. The roommate's reply is heroically forebearing. "What I've got," he explains, "you don't get over."

Ome assimilates this information in silence. Probably he understands, but can't think of what to say. It has never been his style even to try. It would not be wrong to observe that this warm and furious man is unfamiliar with death, despite the number of cadavers he has carted out, over the years, as a search and rescue leader, from high places of the Northwest wilderness, every one of them representing to him personally a particular mistake, possibly trivial, and a failure of the most abominable kind — but never a portent.

Instead he confronts mortality with that almost brutal ferocity of denial which is, after all, the voltage of the life force. This is his limitation and his power, and it turns him now, almost brutally but with a sense of mission, away from his wasted roommate.

He proceeds, the slightest hint of the Tin Man in his gait, out into the hallway, ready for his greatest ascent, which will always be, until the very end, about to begin.

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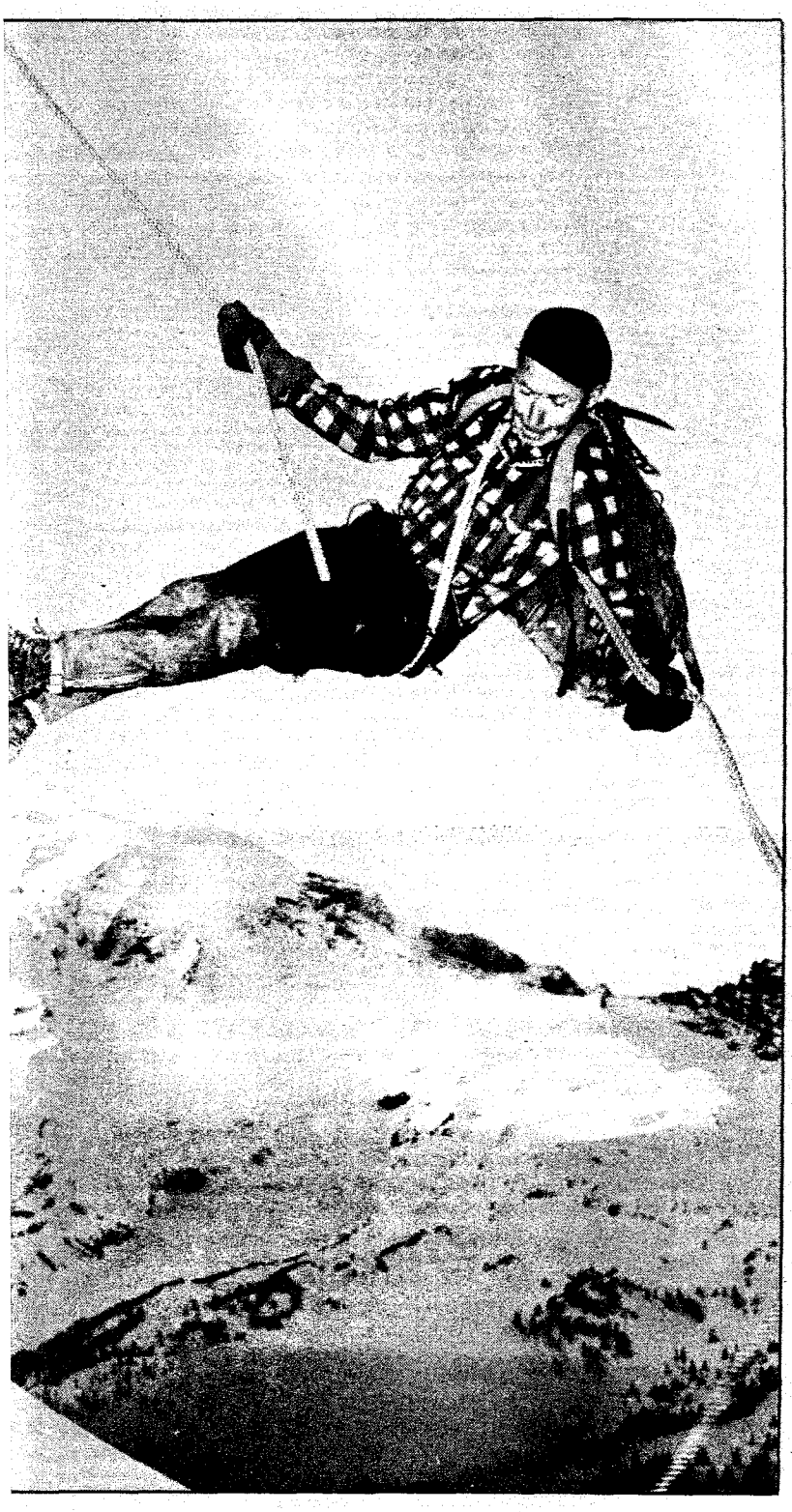

***Top left** — Daiber lifts his artificial limbs up and down to show how maneuverable they are. He lost his legs to arteriosclerosis. **Above** — An agile Ome Daiber repels on Pinnacle Peak in 1956. Mount Rainier is in the background.*

September 30, 1935. Already two freezing days on the mountain, three men in their 20s had clawed and scramble their remarkable way, foot by foot, to the upper extremity Liberty Ridge, the great thrusting arete that splits the nor wall of Mount Rainier right down its ice-swept center. Nov towards evening, a last formidable problem barred their wa Athwart the top of the ridge, from vertical face to vertical face, smiled a crevasse, unbridged, overhanging, its uphill verge considerably higher than the climbers' heads.

I imagine them scratching those heads for only a minute, then Jim Borrow and Arnie Campbell hoisted Ome Daiber, crampons a all, onto their shoulders. At the count of three, they pushed and h jumped — upwards — plunging the pick of his ice ax into the brow the overhang, his front points stabbing, riveting him to the ice wa like a cat on a smooth tree trunk. Then he was up, and able to ha the others after him, and together they strolled the rest of the way Liberty Cap.

"That night on Liberty Cap we saw the sun go down," Ome relates. "We could see the shadow of the mountain, way to the ea clear to the horizon, and that shadow resembled somewhat the penumbra of the earth. We could see ships in the sound, and the ro and gold of the setting sun cast its light on other peaks to north a south, I mean Hood and I mean Adams and I mean Baker, clear into Canada. To the east this great shadow looked so solid, as if y could walk on it, then along the eastern horizon there developed a thin black line. This thin black line got deeper, and finally it came over our heads and closed, and we were in darkness. And we wer much impressed."

In darkness they passed over to the true summit, crossed the crater, and under its rim made a second bone-chilling bivouac. At first light they descended, on frozen boots, to Paradise.

Ome Daiber was just 27, and the peak experience of his life w behind him; but he would never know it. He would not want to. A if you made a point of it, he would expressly deny it, and threaten punch you in the nose, and he would mean it, too.

So I ask him. "What's the best thing you think you've done in your life?"

His snowy eyebrows shoot up in an expression of tolerant disdai and he considers for an unusually long time. "Good heavens," he says at last. "I haven't any idea. I try to live it, straight."

He does not use the past tense.

Ome in his living room is an active volcano that starts eruptii before the tape recorder can be turned on. Rooted to a wooden chair, he is nevertheless in perpetual motion, bouncing his prostheses metronomically on the rug or wavi simian arms in the air for emphasis. There is a geologic quality to his monologue; it is tidal, it is glacial, it is ponderous and cruelly unstoppable, heaping up in its path vast rubb moraines of names, dates, addresses, occupations and distant in-laws. The large head is loosely moored, pleading frequently with f corners of the room for inspiration or support; the face is a crevasse-field of wrinkles in the process of avalanche; the eyes ar clouded but still cleave you like a hatchet.

After Liberty Ridge — an epochal first ascent that was not repeated for 20 years and remains one of the choicest plums of Northwest mountaineering — there were uncounted climbs in the Cascades and Olympics and, notably, in the St. Elias Range of northwestern Canada. Meanwhile, Ome worked as a surveyor, as clothing and equipment manufacturer, as a carpenter, as a largely frustrated inventor. During World War II he recruited and designe equipment for the 10th Mountain Regiment and the Alaska Command; afterwards he raised a pair of daughters.

He remains an unassuming and hugely gregarious man whose prominent mention in Steck and Roper's "Fifty Classic Climbs In North America," as, indeed, the selection of his long-ago achievement as a "classic," prompts from him one possibly disingenuous remark: "I didn't know it."

What he does not trouble to disguise is his pride in Mountain Rescue, the volunteer organization of expert climbers, first of its

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kind in this country, spearheaded and godfathered by Ome Daiber (along with Wolf Bauer and Otto Trott) in 1948 out of 25 years' experience in wilderness first aid — and in bringing back the bodies.

He thumbs lovingly through his Rube Goldberg album of patents and near-patents, most of which protected ingenious minor improvements in mountain clothing design; of those that never got off the drawing board — a cold-air "breather hood," for example — he sighs and says with deep-felt regret, "This one would've saved a lot of lives." He reserves his wildest fist-pounding invective for volunteers who will go out to rescue a climber, but not a hunter — and calls all such ruck, amazingly, with infinite disgust, "environmentalists."

"Now listen, buster!" he hollers at me. "You can't discriminate between people in need of help. Even that horse's ass Hitler, the murderer, I'd rescue him, too, if I had to." In his hectoring voice, the voice of the true believer, lies the fervor of his life's true calling. This is a charismatic man who draws strength from his simplicity, who makes complexities appear small-minded, who speaks often of the need for "strict rules," whether in governing the wilderness, raising a family or living a life — never mind that an unbelayed leap from a handstand at 14,000 feet on Mount Rainier breaks every climbing rule I can think of.

Ome laughs. "I was blessed with quick reflexes and the ability to move," is his airy and completely inadequate explanation. I think rather he was blessed with indomitable *elan*, and that he experiences something which a lot of people who think more deeply than he does may be missing: simple joy.

Which makes me curious to know whether his frequent run-ins with dead climbers in the course of mountain rescue ever gave him any of the ultimate sort of broodings.

"Nope." And I figure you can't get much simpler than that; or can you? He faces age and the prospect of a steepening climb towards a more and more doubtful finish with a mountaineer's tenacity and with humor, that form of courage which doesn't know its own name and pretends it is too dumb to care. When pressed, he grows irritable, as if in dropping the pretense he sees that it's really you who are too stupid to understand; so he repeats in a louder, and, when further probed, still louder voice, so that finally he is screaming at you, "Look, I don't know how to quit!" and there is a touch of supplication beneath the righteousness.

But nobody knows how to die. Some people just know, so much better than others, how to live.

Four months after Liberty Ridge, Ome Daiber was again on Mount Rainier, in the dead of winter, with darkness coming on fast. Only this time he was not there for himself, but for the sake of a frozen corpse and an unspoken ideal. In the climax to a celebrated rescue effort that involved great personal risk, Ome led a small party to 13,000 feet, where they retrieved the body of a young solo summit climber, Delmar Fadden, and painstakingly lowered it down the Emmons Glacier through the frostbitten chill of a late January night.

He barely mentions this episode to me; but before leaving his house I pause to take notice of one more faded photograph which hangs on the wall at the bottom of an unlit stairwell. It is an image of the summit of Mount Rainier, from the roll of film that remained in Fadden's camera at the time of his death. At the bottom is an inscription to Ome Daiber from the victim's mother and father, carefully chosen words of gratitude and sad thanksgiving, which conclude: "There is but one great society — the noble living, and the noble dead."

Half a century later, Ome Daiber sits cheerfully swinging his "legs" back and fourth, like a teen-age girl, on the edge of his bed in a hospital room, reminiscing, while, beyond a partitioning curtain, another chance young man whom Ome cannot save lies slowly dying of cancer. Outside, the sudden rose and gold of a setting sun casts its light on the First Hill towers like alpenglow on a cluster of peaks. Something stirs; Ome halts the juggernaut of memory for a moment and glances out the window with eyes too blind to read a newspaper but never too blind to see a mountain range.

"Looks like the Andes," he says. Where he has never been.

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