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LEGENDARY MOUNTAINEER DIES AT 81
SEATTLEITE 'OME' DAIBER INSPIRED - AND SAVED - MANY A CLIMBER

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For nearly 40 years, the cry "Call 'Ome' DAIBER" rang out whenever a mountain climber or hiker was lost or injured in the Cascade or Olympic mountains.

Daiber invariably responded in the only way he knew: He would drop the carpenter tools with which he earned a living, push away a half-eaten meal or climb out of bed in the dead of night to assemble gear in the Bothell-area home he stocked like an Alpine hut.

Daiber, a mountaineering legend, died Sunday in a local nursing home at the age of 81. At the end, the man who always said he expected to live to 100 had lost his eyesight, both legs and his ability to speak.

But every mountain-rescue unit that goes out in answer to a call for help is carrying on the tradition he began.

Built like an Alpine fir - short (5 feet 6 inches), weathered and resilient - Daiber could scramble around on snow and ice for hours, then hold a news conference to let the public know what had happened up on the mountain.

For years, virtually every major mountain-rescue story in the Northwest began or ended with the words, "A party led by Ome DAIBER . . ."

In 1948, DAIBER co-founded the Mountain Rescue Council with Dr. Otto Trott and Wolf Bauer. The Seattle-based Mountain Rescue Council became a model for similar councils all over North America.

During World War II, he advised the Army on mountain and winter warfare. In 1957, he was the first recipient of the University Sertoma Club's Service to Mankind Award.

In January 1936, DAIBER led his most famous mountain-rescue attempt, in search of Delmar Fadden, who was attempting to become the first person to climb to the summit of Mount Rainier in winter.

Fadden had been dubbed the "lone wolf" mountaineer by the press after he hiked across the Olympic Mountains, without benefit of trails, in 28 days in 1932.

When Fadden disappeared, the story was front-page news for days. Daiber led a party of climbers up the mountain, issuing daily bulletins on their progress.

Fadden's body was found, face down, on a glacier at the 13,000-foot level. He apparently had fallen and died of hypothermia.

Evidence was later found proving he had reached the 14,411-foot summit.

On their way back down, DAIBER and his fellow climbers narrowly missed death themselves when they took a long fall. During his many mountain rescues, DAIBER suffered several injuries. For almost a year after his foot was crushed by a rock, DAIBER defied his own advice by performing all mountain rescues in tennis shoes rather than hiking boots. He said the hiking boots hurt his foot too much.

The same year DAIBER brought down Fadden's body, he led the first successful climb of Mount Rainier's Liberty Ridge.

In time, Daiber's name was inextricably linked with mountain disasters. But not all the stories had sad endings.

Often, DAIBER would walk off a mountainside, all smiles, with a climber who had been missing. Sometimes the climbers he helped carry out recovered to climb another day.

At a mountaineers' banquet some years ago, DAIBER listened impatiently while a fellow climber tried to analyze why mountain-rescue volunteers ventured onto treacherous slopes in terrible weather.

In the words of Trott, Daiber's longtime friend, "with Ome, silence was impossible." And so, DAIBER arose and told the group: "We go for one reason: to save a life. Who among us hasn't been a damn fool at some point?"

Daiber retained a boyish enthusiasm well into middle age.

He would clap his hands with joy as he described a long-ago sunset seen from the summit of Mount Rainier.

He would chuckle and begin reciting verses from "The Cremation of Sam McGee." And despite his small stature, he would hurl a challenge to younger and larger men to engage him in a footrace, arm-wrestling or a punch to the solar plexus to determine who was in the better shape. He usually won.

Daiber grew up in West Seattle, scaling a vent pipe to the roof of his two-story home when he was 7. He soon graduated to fir trees, climbing to the top while his young friends sawed on them from below.

Not until the tree started to fall would young DAIBER begin his descent.

When he first went to elementary school, he was known by his given name - George. But one day, finding that he had left his lunch money at home, he approached the lunchroom cashier to say, "Owe me 25 cents so I can buy lunch." The cashier replied, "If I loan you 25 cents, you will owe me."

"OK," said DAIBER. "Just owe me a quarter so I can buy lunch." The cashier told the story all over school and soon young DAIBER was signing "Ome" to all his schoolwork.

When he was 13, DAIBER joined Boy Scout Troop 284. He rose to the highest rank, Eagle Scout, and in the process discovered his life's calling. He performed his first rescue during a Scout hike in the Olympic Mountains. The leader severed an artery in his thigh while cutting a slab of chocolate.

While others panicked, DAIBER calmly stopped the bleeding, bandaged the wound and helped the leader back to camp.

Daiber continued his association with the Boy Scouts during the years, operating the Seattle-area Boy Scout Trading Post in the old Arcade Building before going into carpentry and contracting.

After the death of his first wife, Elsbeth, in a plane crash on Lake Union in Seattle, DAIBER scattered her ashes over the snows of Mount Rainier, where they had climbed together. Several years later, he married Matie Johnson, whom he met during a climb in Wyoming's Grand Tetons.

Before World War II, DAIBER and a friend, Arnie Campbell, manufactured packboards and ski jackets. Daiber was credited with several mountaineering inventions, including a sleeping bag with sleeves for arms and legs.

The outdoors was his life.

He hiked 1,300 miles with a National Geographic survey team in the Yukon and Alaska. He taught climbing courses for the Seattle Mountaineers. He lectured on first aid and was a Ski Patrol leader.

In 1948, he and about 10 other members of the Mountain Cabin Memorial Association held a memorial service for Washington state's war dead on the summit of Mount Rainier.

In July 1972, he was named honorary leader of a mass climb of Mount Adams. He made his last serious climb three years later, at age 67, when he joined a U.S.-Japanese team going up Mount Rainier.

Daiber used to say when someone died on a mountain, "All any of us can hope and pray for is that when the time comes, it comes quick and easy."

But the end was not swift for DAIBER. Suffering from diabetes, he lost his eyesight five years ago. A year later, the legs that had carried him to the tops of scores of mountains were amputated. Daiber continued to talk with friends on the telephone daily until a stroke robbed him of his speech last June.

Besides his wife, Matie, DAIBER is survived by two daughters, Gretchen DAIBER of Seattle and Joanne Warsinske of Kirkland, and three grandchildren.

A memorial service is scheduled for 10 a.m. Saturday in the Rhododendron Room of the Mountaineers Building (formerly The Norselander), 300 Third Ave. W. A potluck will follow.