

# Ome to the Rescue

**O**ME DAIBER reminds one of an alpine fir—short, weathered and resilient. He is tough as a knot and the sap still runs at age 62.

For 40 years, the words, "Call Ome Daiber," have been sounded whenever a mountain climber or hiker has been lost or injured in the Pacific Northwest.

Daiber invariably has responded the only way he knows: by dropping the carpenter tools with which he earns his living, by pushing away a half-eaten meal or by climbing out of bed in the dead of night and assembling gear in a Bothell-area home that is stocked like an alpine hut.

Over the years, most of our mountain-rescue news stories have begun or ended with these words: "A party led by Ome Daiber..."

Daiber does not think of himself as particularly heroic, and he emphasizes that every mountain rescue is a team effort and there are many skilled men on the mountainside doing just what he is doing. Still, it is Daiber — in youth, in middle age and now in his 60s — who never has shirked the pleas for help.

Thinking back over the rescues, Daiber recalls the difficulties of searching in the fog, of friends who almost got killed themselves lowering bodies down steep slopes, of laboriously cutting ice steps up mountains, of digging snow caves and huddling in his sleeping bag while a storm raged outside.

Sometimes he walked off the mountains with a "missing" climber at his side, all smiles. Frequently, the climber was carried out, a little the worse for wear but alive and determined to climb another day. But there were the grim times—too many of them—when a body was found in a crevasse, or broken against a pile of boulders or frozen stiff from exposure.

Daiber is no stranger to tragedy. His first wife, Elsbeth, and another woman died in a seaplane crash in Lake Union 32 years ago. The airplane was piloted by Bradford Washburn, explorer, author and mountain climber, a man whom Daiber still regards as a close friend. Elsbeth's ashes were scattered over the snows of Mount Rainier in memory of the happy times when they had scaled its slopes together.

But Daiber was lucky. A few years later, while leading climbing parties in the Wyoming Tetons, he met a young woman climber, Mattie Johnson, and they were married. Says Daiber, "I am one of the fortunate men to have known and loved two wonderful women."

Daiber grew up in the Alki area in a big, old-fashioned house whose peaks and cornices challenged the wiry, fearless boy christened George Daiber. Mrs. Daiber and neighbors frequently gazed in horror

as the boy climbed "right up the face of the house to the roof."

Daiber joined West Seattle's Boy Scout Troop 284 in 1921, and his horizons soon were extended from house climbing to Olympic and Cascade Mountain trails and snowfields. He discovered the heady feeling of breaking out of the timberline, into a flower-filled meadow, breathing the sweet, pure air and squinting up at jagged peaks dusted with snow. They were there, and, by golly, Ome Daiber was going to get to the top and look around.

Wasn't he christened George? He was. But sometime in elementary school, Daiber went through the school-lunch line and found himself short of money. He approached a cashier he knew and said, in that sometimes mixed-up way he has with words, "Owe me a quarter!" "I'll loan you a quarter and you'll owe me," the cashier said, with a chuckle. "O. K., just owe me a quarter so I can buy lunch," Daiber repeated.

The young cashier repeated the story all over school. Soon everyone was calling George "Owe Me." And young Daiber began using the tag on all his schoolwork, spelling it "Ome." Years later, he went to court and had it changed officially.

Daiber's first "rescue" was in 1926 or 1927, when he was an assistant hike leader out of Camp Parsons, the famous Boy Scout camp on Hood Canal. The hike leader severed an artery in his thigh while cutting a slab of chocolate with his knife. It was Daiber's first opportunity to use his first-aid training in an emergency. The patched-up leader and party dropped down from a high ridge to the Dosewallips River Forks, where they met another party of hikers packing out a young man who had been injured by an ice avalanche. Daiber supervised the journey out to the road.

Daiber continued his association with Boy Scouts over the years, operating the Trading Post in the old Arcade Building before going into carpentry and contracting. He helped outfit several Mount Everest expeditions, and one of the few regrets of his life is that he never was able to go on an Everest climb in his prime, "Because I really wanted to be the first one up there."

By the early '30s, Daiber and some of his friends had formed an informal "ski patrol," a weekend operation in which they carried first-aid kits into the mountains and ministered to injured skiers.

Years later, this humble beginning resulted in the formation of the Washington Mountain Rescue Council. And, as usual, Daiber was one of the men in the middle.

Newspapers, radio stations, sheriff's offices, national-park and forest-service employees all had Daiber's telephone number. He was the man to call when there was trouble.



# Don Duncan's *Driftwood Diary*

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"I had a list of good climbers, and Mattie and I would get on the telephone and call them and then we would go out and do what had to be done," Daiber says.

No, Daiber never got lost. He did, however, get hurt a couple of times — once when a boulder crushed his foot, another time when some rocks rolled under him and he was pitched down a bank. And one time he saw two of his rescue-party members, both with the National Park Service, lose their footing on a glacier and rocket past him toward what he thought was certain death.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'How am I going to tell their wives?'" Daiber said. "We hurried down after them and, miraculously, found them alive, with just scratches and bruises, after a climb of about 400 feet."

For one to climb alpine is foolhardy, he says, to hike or climb past his exhaustion point is asinine. And the best way to avoid succumbing to exposure is to protect at all times the "vulnerable areas" — wrists, neck, hands, ankles, knees and behind the knees.

For one whole summer, Daiber went against his own advice and performed all rescues in tennis shoes. The foot crushed by a rock hurt terribly when he tried to walk in hiking boots, so he was forced to use "tenny runners" to save lives.

"It wasn't easy," Daiber says with a chuckle, "but you can say that I went the last one up the mountain despite those tennis shoes."

Daiber 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 1948. In 1957, Daiber was the recipient of the University Sertoma Club's first Service to Mankind award.

Today Daiber teaches classes in alpine survival at the University of Washington, and he will take part in a glacier-research project on Mount Rainier in the summer.

Daiber had spun his yarns for several hours and it was growing late. We returned to our automobiles, and Daiber's was about four blocks away. Did he want a ride? "No, I'll run." And he did—flat out, like a kid of 16, with the same wiry strength George Daiber used to display when he scrambled up the side of his house.

To list all those whom Daiber and climbing companions have brought down sheer cliff faces, snowfields and glacial ice — dead and alive — would require several pages and bring heartache to some. It would serve no good purpose.

But it wouldn't be wrong, perhaps, to note that our most famous mountain-rescue figure never has had a mountain named after him. Surely there must be some peak nearby that could be renamed Mount Daiber.



Ome Daiber