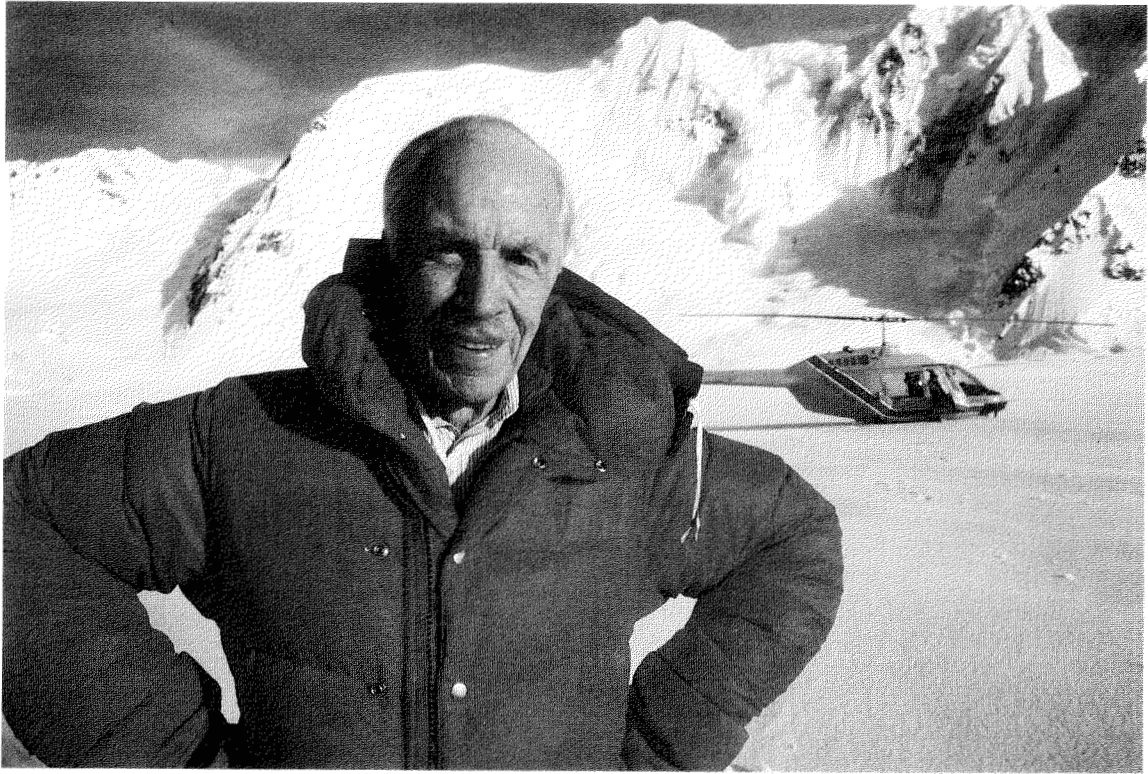


WALTER ABBOTT WOOD (1907-1993)



Walter Wood in Kluane National Park, 1985. Photo by Karen Kuehn.

Approximately 70 years ago a young man developed a deep and very personal relationship with the mountain world and a keen interest in the scientific investigation of its natural wonders. While in his mid-twenties in Switzerland, Walter Wood began his mountaineering career and, subsequently, his studies of photogrammetry; a life-long love affair with the mountains and their secrets had begun.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s Wood not only completed an exacting course of study at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich, but also became a world-respected alpinist with more than 100 major ascents in the Alps of France and Switzerland as well as scores of others in high mountain regions on four continents.

His successful academics and his mountain prowess led Wood to the American Geographical Society in New York City, where in the 1930s he directed the Society's Department of Exploration and Field Research. It was at the AGS that he conceived of and developed a program of exploration and scientific research that was to evolve during the rest of his life.

With the love, inspiration and support of his wife, Foresta, he organized and led expeditions in 1935, 1936, 1939 and 1941 to unexplored areas of the St. Elias Mountains of Canada's Yukon Territory. Each of these expeditions had well-defined scientific goals; the pioneering and development of expeditionary logistics was also a major consideration in Wood's planning. Mountaineering, of course, was embraced in each of his expeditions; major first ascents included Mt. Steele (5070 m), Mt. Walsh (4500 m) and Mt. Wood (4850 m).

In the 1930s and 1940s, transportation into the mountains from Burwash Landing (Yukon Territory) was provided by pack horses. It took many days of very hard going over trailless rugged terrain and the swollen rivers of glacial melt-water to reach the targeted areas of expeditionary research and mountaineering objectives. The scientific field programs were composed of Wood's surveying and mapping observations as well as glaciological, geological and botanical studies — all integral parts of these expeditions that later would expand in concept and application to a wider range of study of the "total environment" of this high mountain region.

During World War II, Walter Wood played a leadership role in the development of military logistic support techniques in the high mountains and participated in the training of mountain troops, first while at the U.S. Army's Arctic, Desert, Tropic Information Center in Minneapolis and later in cooperation with Canadian military personnel, when he was assistant military attaché in the United States Embassy, Ottawa.

The Wood Yukon expeditions of the 1930s had been forerunners to a far more sophisticated scientific examination of the St. Elias Mountains in the decades following World War II. After a last brief return to the St. Elias by pack train in 1947, Wood launched in 1948 Project Snow Cornice under the auspices of the Arctic Institute of North America. Snow Cornice was a multidisciplinary scientific study of an area of the St. Elias located to the south of the region explored by his earlier expeditions. Base camp was a Jamesway hut

erected on a nunatak on the upper Seward Glacier just west of the towering north face of Mt. Vancouver (4785 m). Satellite field camps were established as ground control for photogrammetric survey stations and for the conduct of glaciological, seismic, meteorological and botanical studies. The entire field operation was supported by a ski-wheel-equipped single engine Norseman aircraft, which flew from Yakutat, Alaska, to a "landing strip" on the Seward Glacier at an elevation of about 1800 m, a distance of about 145 km. This was, indeed, a far cry from the horse-powered expeditions of the 1930s.

Project Snow Cornice encompassed four field seasons: 1948, 1949, 1950 (winter) and 1951. Along with the scientific programs, several successful mountaineering first ascents were recorded, including: Mt. Vancouver (1949), Mt. Hubbard (4576 m) and Mt. Alverstone (4440 m) in 1951. Each of these three peaks was at the time of the successful ascent the highest unclimbed peak in North America. Wood, although he did not reach the summit of Mt. Vancouver, was a member of the climbing team, and he did reach the summits of Mt. Hubbard and Mt. Alverstone.

After the experience and knowledge gained through the Wood Yukon expeditions of the 1930s and Project Snow Cornice, along with dramatic advances in technology, Wood in 1961 founded the Icefield Ranges Research Project (IRRP), again under the auspices of the Arctic Institute of North America together with the American Geographical Society. His scientific and logistical attention was refocused back to the northern side of the St. Elias, where he had started in 1935. A major base camp was established at the southern end of Kluane Lake. This facility continues to serve as the focal point for a continuing series of landmark research programs and logistics accomplishments for more than three decades. From a high altitude research station on Mt. Logan, established for physiological studies and supported by STOL Helio Courier aircraft, to limnological research at Kluane Lake, scientists and their students have been studying the "total environment" of the St. Elias Mountains and adjacent

areas. Almost every year during the history of the IRRP, Wood returned to update his survey stations and to guide and mould the project into a unique scientific resource.

In recalling and recounting the highlights of these expeditions and field research programs, it is easy to take their success for granted. At the same time, we should be very much aware that although the successes shine brightly, they came as the result of not only a great amount of hard work, but most especially because of the extraordinary vision, organizational ability and leadership of Walter Wood. Wood, as a geographer, was a great believer in coordination and cooperation among sciences and scientists. He always seemed to find a way to achieve an expedition's goals and keep all personnel happy, if not exhausted, even when bad weather or high demand on hard-pressed logistics resources could have caused significant problems. He was a marvellous leader of both his scientific and his mountaineering companions. He was a step ahead of his time — a leader whose modesty always downplayed his own conception of what he had accomplished.

Walter Wood, aside from his scientific and mountaineering activities, held positions of respect and authority in his professional world. He was president of the American Geographical Society, the American Alpine Club and the Explorers Club. He was the director of the New York office of the Arctic Institute of North America and served for several terms on the Institute's Board of Directors from 1949 to 1975.

Walter Abbott Wood was born in Hoosick Falls, New York, on 23 December 1907; he died in Palm Beach, Florida, on 18 May 1993. Outside of his professional life, he had his skiing, photography, fishing, reading and, of course, his family. We think of him fondly as "Dan Dan" (a nickname bestowed on him by a great granddaughter) — someone who represented the best in leadership, achievement, generosity and kind thoughts.

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