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Peter MacKeith: In memory of a mountaineer

by [Ellamarie Quimby](#) · January 24, 2017

An arctic adventurer's legacy lives on thirty years after his death. Peter MacKeith, a UAF doctoral student in the late 1970s, researched thermal drilling for exploring geological problems in mountains and glaciers but is often better remembered for his love of the outdoors. Born in England in 1949, MacKeith's research and interest in mountaineering took him to Afghanistan, Greenland, South America and Baffin Bay, before settling in Fairbanks to pursue his doctorate. In April of 1980, MacKeith lost his life during an ascent of Old Snowy, a peak in the Delta Range.

"Peter and I met in the winter of 1980 through mutual friends, planning for and participating in a small climbing expedition over spring break," Kate Bull, MacKeith's girlfriend at the time of his accident, said. Originally from the Boston area, Bull was an undergraduate in the Geology department at the time. Both Bull and MacKeith were members of local alpine clubs. Bull says she and MacKeith fell in love on that first expedition, a 5-person attempt at an unnamed peak on the north side of Black Rapids Glacier.

"[Peter's] climbs were not ambition-ridden or frenzied, but were rather more like elaborate encounter sessions, where friends could share each other's presence without society's handicaps," Carl Tobin, a friend of MacKeith's, said in an interview with the Sun Star in 2011. "Peter was a person who went into the mountains exclusively for enjoyment."

"The Delta mountains are a playground of sorts for the Fairbanks climbing groups," Jonathan Holmgren said. "We had all done various small climbs there, and the climb of Old Snowy on that trip was to have been another 3 or 4 day trip," Holmgren was another UAF student, and friend of MacKeith's who was present on that fatal trip.

MacKeith and Bull had made plans to climb Old Snowy on their own, camping at the base of the O'Brien icefall on their first night out. Holmgren and another climber, Tobi Norton, had planned to ski to the Thayer Hut, near the Castner Glacier in the Delta Range, and climb the peak's face the following day. The four met up while making their way to their destinations.

"It was a beautiful weekend in April. [It was] a climb we were really excited about doing, just the two of us," Bull said. "We were happy and excited and in love. Being in the mountains meant a lot to Peter, and we both felt on top of the world."



Peter MacKeith with his camera, straddling a stream on the surface of a glacier on the north side of Mt. Wrangell, the site of his Ph.D research. Photo by Daniel Solie, 1979.

Holmgren says that the following day, he and Norton saw Bull and MacKeith's tracks headed up the glacier through binoculars, but did not see the pair return that evening. When the couple had still not come back to their camp on the third day, Holmgren and Norton inspected their campsite and noticed that their tent appeared empty, with no sign of footprints in the area.

“A lot of this has become a bit blurry with the passage of time,” says Holmgren. He and Norton followed Bull and MacKeith's tracks up the O'Brien Icefall and into the Old Snowy basin. The two found Bull trapped between crevasses, about a mile from the base of the peak. Bull and MacKeith had fallen from high up the face of the climb on the previous day—MacKeith had suffered a significant head injury, and Bull had broken three of her limbs. Bull has spent the night at the base of the peak, using her pack as a bivouac sac.

“[Kate] crawled almost a mile back across the basin until she was trapped,” Holmgren said. “She had splinted her leg with one of the stays from her Lowe pack.” Bull says that she believed the two other climbers had gone home, and was deciding whether to sleep in the crevasse or attempt to find her way out of it when she was discovered.



Flying in a small plane, MacKeith caught Mt. Debora under the full moon bathed in fleeting alpine glow. Image courtesy of pilot Rod March

Norton and a military medic who'd encountered them at the Thayer Hut stayed with Bull next to the crevasse, while Holmgren and the medic's climbing partner skied for the road to call for help. Norton, Bull and the medic were airlifted out of the basin to the hospital, while the others skied out. According to the initial reports from the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, members of the Alaska Alpine Club recovered MacKeith's body. He was 30-years-old.

"In my twenties I often felt invincible and that bad things happened to other people, but I learned that it wasn't necessarily so," Holmgren said. "I learned to be appreciative of my good fortune and not to take it for granted."

Following MacKeith's death, his family established two memorial endowment funds. One endowment exists to fund climbing, overseen by the [Alaska Alpine Club](#). The Club awards grants from their fund to eligible members of the club based on proposals received. The group also renamed the Upper Canwell Glacier Hut after MacKeith, a former president of the club.

The other endowment funds the production of the [Peter MacKeith Memorial Photography Exhibition](#), this year presented in partnership by the Student Activities Office and the [Frozen Lenses photography club](#), to be shown in Arctic Java March 3-31. The exhibition is a juried show, intended to highlight amateur adventure photography. Any UAF student is eligible to submit up to three photographs for consideration. This year's juror is local writer and photographer Seth Adams, who specializes in outdoor adventure journalism.

"Peter was a life-loving, multi-talented man with a great sense of humor," Bull said. "I hope [he] is remembered for his skills in photography, mountaineering and geophysics, and for his love of the mountains, wildlife and the outdoors."

Original article at <http://uafsunstar-archive.com/peter-mackeith-in-memory-of-a-mountaineer/>