

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the death of Scott Duncan. He was one of Canada's most accomplished long-distance traverse ski mountaineers when he died at just 25 years of age. This article will be printed on a plaque to be mounted at Duncan's namesake hut that affords shelter at the south end of the popular Wapta Icefield traverse, as part of the Alpine Club of Canada Mountain Culture Committee's Historical Plaque Project.

Scott Duncan Hut a fitting tribute

BY JACQUELINE LOUIE

Scott Ralph Duncan was driven to climb, ski and explore the world's most remote peaks at the farthest reaches of the earth, from the Rocky Mountains to the far North, from the Himalayas to Patagonia, and countless other wild places.

A prolific ski mountaineer, Duncan was a veteran of several grand ski traverses in the late 1970s and early '80s, including the Northern Rockies in 1978, the Southern Rockies in 1980, the Northern Selkirks in 1981 and the Northern Caribos in 1982. His last big trip was a month-long expedition in the Yukon's Saint Elias Range in May 1984, skiing 380 kilometres and climbing three big peaks along the way: Mounts Steele (5,073 metres), Wood (4,842 metres) and Macaulay (4,690 metres).

"A completely epic journey start to finish—perhaps our finest high-level ski traverse," recalls Steve Smith, who, together with his brother Phil, was among Duncan's closest companions in adventure. "We set out and returned to the Alaska Highway on our own steam, each of us carrying our share of a 35-day supply of food and fuel to complete the expedition without caches or air drops.

"If you were going to climb a big mountain somewhere, for Scott half the climb was getting there. He was hooked on that. It was not an obsession, it was more like an addiction. He was a real purist. He'd be out there building igloos and camping in snow shelters. He was completely competent and confident in the mountains."

Those expeditions, all self-supported without caches and without communications, were in a different era as far as remoteness goes, adds Ilya Storm, another friend and expedition companion. "There was a remoteness in the wilderness that doesn't exist any more."

Storm describes Duncan as "wise beyond his years in terms of being careful. He approached the mountains in a measured way with his decision making, yet he was still a real adventurer."

Born in Calgary on July 16, 1960, the youngest of six children, "Scott was a congenial, sensitive guy, always a deep thinker," says his older brother, Roger Duncan. "He was a pretty grounded guy. He had a real appreciation for, and was really almost religiously inspired by nature."

With a smile, Roger recalls the time Scott took him up to the Bow Hut. Scott was 17; Roger was 19, and it was his first time on backcountry skis. Their party left at 11 p.m. and headed across Bow Lake under a full moon. "I had been struggling, falling down more than I was standing up," Roger recalls. "When we got up to the headwall, I heard Scott on the other side of the canyon singing away—he was always singing—and realized that my hell was his heaven."

Scott played the piano, the harmonica and the melodica, an instrument that resembles a long flute with wide keys. "It's a cross between an accordion, a piano and a harmonica," Roger says. "Scott loved it because he could stick it in a pack and take it wherever he happened to be."

"Scott was always singing, always whistling, always humming," Smith



"I want to show you my myriad friends: the dippers and varied thrushes—their clear, powerfully mellifluous song at first light, coming at you from a high canopy of cedar and hemlock giants, stops me still; yellow-legged sandpipers and red-tailed hawks and grey-backed toads; 500-year-old lichens of brilliant phosphorescent greens, yellows, oranges; fields of anemones, forget-me-nots, drabas and paintbrush; tasty sorrel and yarrow and glacier lilies—maybe even the sight of an 800-pound silvertip grizzly frolicking in a sunny meadow—a humbling and majestic sight indeed!"

—Scott Duncan, 1985

Scott Duncan in the Tombstone Mountains.



recalls. “He had a pretty good voice. It didn’t matter where we were, there would always be a song going.

“He was also a bit of a practical joker. He liked to poke fun and would definitely not give you a break. If there was something in your personality that was ridiculous, he made sure you knew he thought it was pretty ridiculous. He was the kind of guy who would find a way to get you laughing at yourself, and he did a lot of that.

“He really cared about people. He was a guy who was really loyal as a friend, and someone you could talk to about anything.”

A poet, a man of letters and a philosopher, Duncan attended the University of Victoria and University of British Columbia, and was establishing himself as an adventure photographer when he went to work at a camp in northern Alberta in the summer of 1985. A chance encounter with a bat resulted, three months later, in an unexpected diagnosis of rabies. Scott Duncan died Nov. 26, 1985, at the age of 25.

In the outpouring of shock and grief that followed his death, the Alpine Club of Canada’s then president Peter Fuhrmann communicated with Duncan’s mother, Betty, about building a hut at the southern end of the Wapta Icefield traverse. Putting in a hut would “enable parties exiting the Wapta to get an early start and descend this route while conditions were well frozen,” notes Chic Scott in his book, *Summits & Icefields*.

Duncan’s family and friends quickly rallied behind the idea of building a hut



The Scott Duncan Hut, located on the northwest shoulder of Mount Daly in Banff National Park, sleeps 12 and is open year round.

PHOTO BY JACKIE CLARK

as a memorial and tribute to him.

Designed and built by Bernie Schiesser and Eric Lomas with the help of ACC volunteers, primarily from the Club’s Rocky Mountain Section, the Scott Duncan Hut has been operated by the ACC since its installation in 1988.

“It’s a vital link in terms of completing the Wapta Traverse,” says Carl Hannigan, ACC Vice President of Facilities.

Located at 2,773 metres on the northwest ridge of Mount Daly with a panoramic view of the surrounding area, the Scott Duncan Hut was built with funding from the Duncan family, friends and the ACC.

“It was something the family could get behind, and a lot of friends of the family,” Roger says. “It provided a real safety feature in the chain of huts. We were really proud and excited to be a part of that, and to have his name remembered.”

Alpine Club of Canada member Jacqueline Louie belongs to the Calgary and Rocky Mountain Sections.

I remember taking this pic of the boys... The three of us had just stumbled into a long hidden cache of gear, dating back to the G. I. Bell’s Clemenceau expedition of 1951, which included—amongst other things—titanium pitons, old carabiners and crampons, and some really dodgy food that we declined to eat, fearing botulism or something worse...

—Phil Smith



Scott (left) with Steve Smith on their trip to Clemenceau in August 1978. PHOTO BY PHIL SMITH



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