

DARYL MILLER – MRA’S NEWEST HONORARY MEMBER

By Mike Gauthier; Former Chief Climbing Ranger, Mt. Rainier National Park

At Timberline on Mount Hood last June, U.S. Park Ranger Daryl Miller joined an elite group of the North American rescue community in becoming one of only three people (Butch Farabee and Jed Williamson are the others) honored for a Life Time Achievement Award from the Mountain Rescue Association. To get there indicates a tremendous commitment to public service, promoting safe climbing and rescue practices, and a proven ability to perform well again and again in searches and rescues in the Alaska Range and on Mount McKinley, North America’s highest peak. But before I tell some of Daryl Miller’s story, let’s lay out a few of his notable achievements:

- The Department of the Interior awarded him the *Medal of Valor* for a technical rescue at 19,800 feet on Mount McKinley in 1991;
- Daryl performed the highest helicopter short haul (14,200 feet to 20,320 feet on Mt. McKinley) in 1993;
- In winter and spring of 1995, he and Mark Stasik completed the first winter circumnavigation of Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker on foot;
- He is the first North American to receive the International Alpine Targa D’Argento Solidarity Award (presented by Italy’s president);
- He has worked closely with the US military, Alaska State Troopers, Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, Parks Canada and the local Alaskan Pilots to coordinate rescues efforts throughout Alaska;
- At 49 years old, he entered the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and finished with top honors in fitness;



DARYL MILLER AND MARK STASIK AFTER THEY COMPLETED THE FIRST WINTER CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF MT. MCKINLEY AND MT. FORAKER MASSIFS ON FOOT.

In all, Daryl Miller has been a part of over 200 rescues in the Alaska Range, as well as over 50 other emergency incidents from aircraft crashes and searches for lost hunters, to river rescue and flood response.

If it had to do with rescue and emergency services in Denali National Park and Preserve, Daryl Miller got the call for nearly two decades.

ABOUT DARYL MILLER RODEO CLOWN/RANGER

By Mike Gauthier; Former Chief Climbing Ranger, Mt. Rainier National Park

During the winter of 1992, my friend Keith Nicholson landed a climbing ranger internship on Mount McKinley with the National Park Service (NPS). The previous summer, he had worked on Mount Rainier and we ended up sharing an apartment in Seattle while dreaming about our next climbing trip. Eager for more, Keith moved out and made his way to Talkeetna, Alaska, where I would begin to hear stories about this park ranger he met named Daryl Miller.

As it turned out, the spring of 1992 was a particularly bad year for climbers in the Alaska Range. It seemed that every week or so, another rescue or recovery operation was narrated in the national headlines. In all, 13 climbers died and many others had close calls with frostbite, blizzards, storms, altitude sickness and long falls on steep hard ice.

Keith would phone regularly and describe dramatic mountain rescues under horrendous arctic conditions – Daryl was always involved. Whether on the glacier, in the helicopter or managing the operation, Daryl Miller solidified his status as a climber and talented mountain rescuer on Mount McKinley that year. But looking back at his life before 1992, this should have come as no surprise.

Daryl Miller's route to Denali reads like an adventure novel. A prank gone awry bumped him out of high school with an ultimatum from dad: *"Go to high school or join the*



NO FOOLIN' – RETIRED DENALI NATIONAL PARK SOUTH DISTRICT CHIEF RANGER DARYL MILLER DURING HIS RODEO CLOWN DAYS.

Marines." So from that Marine Corps crucible, Daryl learned to harness his zeal and courage with discipline and humility. It was the sixties and he landed in Vietnam, twice, where he saw combat firsthand. But there were other assignments. For a while, he helped load and transport wounded and dead soldiers. And later in the U.S., he served with a special military contingent that escorted the bodies of deceased soldiers home. Tough, emotionally challenging assignments, yet through it all, Daryl maintained his positive outlook and robust love for life.

Along the way were a number of sidebars (some slightly comedic) that helped to balance the intensity and further accentuate Daryl's unique and enduring charm. For example, while stationed at the

Marine Corp Recruit Depot on Parris Island, he worked part time with a traveling cage fighting show that pitted men against chimpanzees. The deal was simple, "town toughs" and bullies were offered \$100 for every second they could hold a chimp to the ground; each audience member paid a buck to watch. Of course no one ever won the \$100, as Daryl snickers and recalls the action, "Yeah, I watched Congo, Butch and Joe beat up a lot of Marines, and the manly bullies from around the different towns "

Eventually though, Daryl returned to the west fueled by his strong desire to pursue an adventurous life on the land. He tried his hand at dodging rodeo bulls to save cowboys in Montana but found it safer to climb mountains which he did from Alaska to Argentina. For work, he sharpened his leadership skills as a NOLS Mountaineering Instructor until he landed a prestigious position as the Outdoor Program Field Director for Colorado State University. But even that did not satisfy Daryl's wanderlust and after a few years, he moved on to guide Mount McKinley (which he admits he didn't like) and then onto living out of a T-Pee in the Utah desert. It wasn't until 1991 that the NPS finally lured him to Alaska as a climbing ranger, with a promise from the District Ranger that he wouldn't be stuck in the office.

This was not the typical trajectory of a park ranger, yet it was those experiences that prepared Daryl so well to lead the climbing rangers on Mount McKinley. And in the business of 'rangering', it was arguably one of the best jobs in the NPS. From that demanding 1992 rescue season onward, Daryl Miller's name became synonymous with high-altitude mountaineering rescues in North America.

Throughout the 90's, I would see Daryl on my climbing trips to the Alaska Range. From a climber's perspective, he was a trusted voice with firsthand experience about the harshness of the Alaska Range. He personalized the face of the Park Service and attracted famous climbers like Alex Lowe and John Roskelley to his mountaineering patrols.

His reputation as a rescuer was already legendary, but it was his kindness and generosity that connected so many people to him. At the time, Daryl lived in a little red house on 2nd street which became a famous haunt for Alaskan climbers. On sunny days, mountaineering luminaries could be found drinking beer and barbequing in his yard because with Daryl, dirt-baggers always had a place to crash. On one occasion when the weather had been poor in Talkeetna for days, he counted 35 climbers accumulated at his place waiting for flights into the mountains.

And for those close to Daryl in the NPS, he was the rudder that guided the South District of Denali. Each day, he'd set the operational tone by arriving early and preparing the office for the daily activity. His warm personality and charm coupled with Marine Corps discipline left a legacy of firm patience and understanding for those fortunate enough to work with him, which is what a young and ambitious Keith found in 1992.

Later that summer after the rescues were over and the high camps put away, Keith and Daryl embarked on an extended backcountry patrol east of the park. It was mid-September and after a few days, the weather turned remarkably fierce. Overnight, the temperature plummeted and it snowed over 5 feet. This seriously complicated their intended route and soaked the pair to the bone. For the next few days, Keith questioned if they should call for a help because they were moving so slowly without snowshoes, but Daryl wouldn't go for it. As long as they could move and had supplies, they were going to

walk out on their own. In the end, Keith credited Daryl with saving his life and getting him out of the mountains, but Daryl brushed off the compliment.

And there, is Daryl. He eagerly shares his natural strengths, ambition and talents, and that often empowered and encouraged others to carry on and succeed. Leadership and strength, coupled with humility and kindness - virtues respected around the globe and part of why the Mountain Rescue Association chose him for such an honorable distinction.

For all of your hard work and contributions to mountain climbers, rescuers and the National Park Service, but mostly for your enduring spirit and friendship, we thank you very much Daryl Miller. We thank you for leading the way and for unselfishly providing safety for so many others and for being our friend.

There are many stories about Daryl on the web and in books, and below are two excellent chronicles about his adventures. If you're in Anchorage, look for Daryl at the Bird Learning and Treatment Center where he volunteers and cares for injured and stranded birds and animals.

An Alaska life lived large, by Craig Medred for the Anchorage Daily News -
<http://www.adn.com/outdoors/story/683375.html>

The Man and the Mountain, by Andy Hall for Alaska Magazine (page 22 on) -
<http://www.onlinedigitalpubs.com/publication/?i=16542>