

Gottlieb Braun-Elwert 1949–2008

If I was to choose one word to describe Gottlieb, it would be the word passionate. He would be the most passionate man I've ever known: passionate about his much-loved family, passionate about our beautiful country and working to protect our natural environment, and passionate about the safety of others in the mountains world-wide.

—Miranda Beuzenberg

The safety of others in the mountains was the hallmark of the guiding career of Gottlieb Braun-Elwert. A superb safety record culminated in Gottlieb guiding Prime Minister Helen Clark and her party back to the safety of the Rex Simpson Hut in the Two Thumb range above Lake Tekapo before he collapsed and died of a ruptured aorta. A snowstorm covered all tracks to the hut in the space of an hour, leaving the mountain pristine as the milestones of a man leaving a legacy of memorable accomplishments emerged.

A former nuclear physicist, Gottlieb came to New Zealand in 1978 as a UIAGM qualified mountain and ski guide. With 46 years of mountaineering and 36 years of professional guiding experience some of his notable climbing achievements include: the first ascent of entire Peuterey Ridge of Mont Blanc (1973), ascents of all New Zealand 3000 metre peaks with Erica Beuzenberg during a single winter (1989), a winter ascent of Cerro Fitz Roy (Supercanaleta 1993), three winter crossings of the Patagonian Ice Cap (1994, 1995, 1996), Cerro Aconcagua (2001), 27 ascents of Aoraki Mount Cook and eight ascents of Mount Tasman. In May 2002 he traversed Denali (Mount McKinley).

Gottlieb also pioneered many ski touring routes in Europe and in New Zealand. Having proven himself as a top climber, Gottlieb's most treasured mountain memories are of those trips made with family, his wife Anne, and daughters Elke and Carla, 'Every moment is firmly etched in my memory. Those times are like a garden to wander around in when you walk the rocky roads of life,' he wrote.

Instrumental in helping the NZMGA achieve UIAGM status, Gottlieb worked on training programmes for new and aspiring guides. Internationally he led the way in supporting women to gain full qualification as UIAGM guides. Meantime Gottlieb and Anne set up the operation of their own company, Alpine Recreation Ltd based in Lake Tekapo. Fulfilling his dream to live and work in the mountains Gottlieb explored many mountain areas, establishing alpine and nordic ski-touring as a viable guiding option for the first time in New Zealand. Gottlieb quickly established a good track record with the Department of Conservation, and supported by the Chief Ranger of the time, Ray Slater, he gained permission to build Caroline Hut on the Ball Ridge in Aoraki Mount

Cook National Park. He had previously designed and built the Rex Simpson Hut, now on Conservation land in the Two Thumb Range. These huts formed a strong base for the work of Alpine Recreation.

With the desire to share his love of the mountains ever-present, photography was a life-long passion and in June this year Gottlieb presented a world class exhibition at the national convention of the New Zealand Photographic Society. This illustrated key values he held strongly: including 'natural quiet' and the preservation of natural landscapes for all to enjoy. As an active member of the Canterbury-Aoraki Conservation Board he enjoyed dialogue with Ann Brower about tenure review and showed steadfast resolve in the face of those critical of his forthright and well-founded views on natural heritage.

Although he remained a lifelong citizen of his birthplace, Marburg-Lahn in Germany, Gottlieb endeared himself to all those in New Zealand who share his passion, respect and love for mountain areas. Mark Solomon, sent this tribute in acknowledgement of Gottlieb's support of Ngai Tahu's Aoraki Bound students:

Tihei mauri mate!

Kua hika atu ra te totar haemata te waotapu-nui-a Tane

The great Totara has fallen in the mighty forest of Tane

Kua ku katoa mai ka manu it e kaherehere hei taki mona

The bird song is silenced in mourning of his passing

Kua araitia a Aoraki mauka e te kapua o te pouri
Mt Aoraki is hidden behind clouds of darkness

Mariki noa ona roimata hauaitu it e kau kino o maumahara

Where frozen tears are shed in the pain of memory

Aoraki mauka Aoraki takata
Aoraki mountain, Aoraki man

Hoki atu ra to wairua kit e akitu o Aoraki
Let your spirit return to the highest peak of Aoraki

Kit e otika o te taktak kit e huika o te kahraki, ka oti atu ko koe

To the threshold of the spirit world, the meeting place of the heavens, where you shall rest in peace

—Stella Sweney

'Axel, you will be fine—you will love it,' were Gottlieb's words when he invited me to join him on an expedition to Denali to attempt the South Buttress route. 'Remember the main thing is secure footing and good route selection and besides we will be using skis for much of the time anyway and you will certainly be fine on those. Come on let's order you a good down jacket!'

That was Gottlieb! He inspired and offered to share his knowledge to make things happen. I had never been on



a 'real expedition' and here one of the most experienced guides in New Zealand offers me to come on one with him, share the tent for maybe 30–35 days and learn some of the stuff you need to know about such high and cold mountains as Denali 'on the go'.

Once we were there, up on the mountain, I never for a single time felt pressure or expectations that I had to perform in a certain way. Gottlieb made me into a real climbing partner by utilising my strengths and combined them with his experience to make us one of the most harmonised teams on the mountain. He was a rare natural as a mountaineer. On that trip Gottlieb demonstrated to me what being in the mountains really should be.

The weather patterns of the season did not allow us to climb the route we had planned, and we did not try to push—just to call the expedition a success. Gottlieb gained my utmost respect on the day we attempted to climb Denali from the 14,000 foot camp (a big day with about 2000 metres of climbing). He was not feeling that well on the day and told me he had to go back at Denali Pass. But he also encouraged me to continue by myself and told me he would be 'on the watch'. How many other mountaineers of his calibre have died, because they could not admit to having 'bad' days as well—in particular when out with a far less experienced climber.

In that regard it is really sad that Gottlieb died so early, but at least it happened in the hills and he was not killed by some foolish mistake. Nature just called it quits for him—by giving him a weak spot that nobody could have even guessed. But then Gottlieb was a physicist as well and would have accepted that the same nature that created the motifs for his photos was capable of 'randomly distributing' faults into our bodies. We all would have deserved to have Gottlieb around for very much longer. Now we must continue the work he has started.

—Axel Reiser