

The life and climbs of Fritz Wiessner

by Ed Webster

A Man for all Mountains

No less a figure than Reinhold Messner once called Fritz Wiessner the most pivotal mountaineer of the 20th Century. Wiessner had a profound impact on each of the different schools of the sport, from rock climbing to Himalayan mountaineering. In a sad irony, he is probably best known for his tragic, but nearly successful, expedition to K2, which he has called "the hardest struggle, the highest hope, and the greatest disappointment of my climbing life."

A German climber transplanted to the United States, Wiessner had a long life marked by controversy, achievement, disaster, a contented family and business life, and an insatiable appetite for climbing. After advancing free climbing ethics and standards early in the century in Europe, he introduced new codes to America in the 1930's. Wiessner also applied high standards to the mountains, in the Alps, the Tetons, and in Canada and the Himalaya.

There were few climbing areas and mountain ranges Wiessner did not visit, as numerous *Wiessner Routes* and *Wiessner Cracks* attest. His many partners were equally prominent: Willo Welzenbach, Lionel Terray, Bill House, Hans Krause, and Henry Barber, amongst others.

His boldness and creativity had its cost. Wiessner was blamed for the death of Dudley Wolfe and three Sherpas during the closing days of the 1939 K2 expedition. In the resulting dispute, Wiessner resigned from the American Alpine Club, although he was unanimously voted an Honorary Member in 1966. Nevertheless, the K2 tragedy always haunted him—a troubled undercurrent to an otherwise contented old age.

"The mountains have given me my greatest joys and most profound sorrows," Wiessner once said, "but always it was men who failed me."

Wiessner was set in his ways from an early age, an original thinker unaffected by the boundaries imposed by others. He was a stern person; but, learning of another's accomplishments, he became increasingly accepting, and generous in his respect. Having made a personal connection, he was very gracious. That rapport, however, might be a year or two in coming. In the mountains or on the rocks—in his element—Wiessner was overwhelmingly self-assured, at times vital, even jaunty.

In his last three decades, he took a patriarchal interest in younger climbers. He loved to reminisce to them, telling stories of color and character. He spoke of Terray and other ropemates as if he'd seen them the day before. Wiessner often said that younger climbers respected him and his climbs, and knew him to be a good man.



Wiessner after his induction into the German Army at age 18 (above), and still going strong in his beloved Shawangunks at 86 (right), on Rear Exposure (5.6).

Born on February 26, 1900, in Dresden, Germany, Wiessner taught himself to climb at the age of 17. His playground was the Elbsteingebirge, the vertical sandstone towers south of Dresden. In the mid-1920's, Wiessner helped pioneer the controversial concepts of free climbing: avoiding the use of pitons or the rope for progress. "I felt very strongly on this subject and climbed without aid whenever possible," he wrote.

In the Tirol region he made the first ascent of the *Southeast Face* of the Fleischbank in 1925—then proclaimed as the hardest rock climb ever done. Other "last great problems" in the Dolomites of Italy soon followed, including the first ascent of the *North Face* of the Grosse Furchetta. These two climbs sealed Wiessner's reputation as the best rock climber of the decade.

Photo: Wiessner Collection



Additionally, two of Wiessner's best-known firsts were Mount Waddington in Canada's Coast Range and Devil's Tower in Wyoming. The two were thoroughly different in character: success on Waddington proved Wiessner's mountaineering skills, while his 1937 free ascent of Devil's Tower demonstrated he was America's best rock climber.

In 1936, Waddington (13,260 feet) was regarded as the foremost problem in North America. Thirteen attempts on it had failed. As Wiessner, Bill House, Betty Woolsey, and Allanson Wilcox prepared for the climb, so did two other parties. Led by William Dobson and Bestor Robinson, they included some of the best climbers from British Columbia and the Sierra; and since some of them had been on previous attempts, Wiessner's group agreed to wait at basecamp while the others made their attempts. Then, when three separate efforts failed, Bill House and Wiessner got the green light. Woolsey and Wilcox provided support as the climbers attempted to ascend a couloir, only to be turned back by rotten rock.

The next day, they climbed directly up the sheer *South Face*. Toward the end of the 13-hour push, the keyed-up Wiessner changed into rope-soled shoes and gave House his boots, ice axe, and a 300-foot rappel rope. A chimney led to the summit ridge, then he continued through three overhanging, highly technical pitches to the mountain's highest point, which he later described as "covered with two feet of icy, wind-blown snow crystals — a spot just large enough so that one man could stand upon it."

Devil's Tower was an altogether different proposition. Partnered by House and Lawrence Coveney in 1937, on the first attempt Wiessner lost a contest between his face and a gooseberry bush. The next day, armed with a sickle, the trio progressed smoothly until confronted by a formidable 80-foot crack. Tense but determined, Wiessner organized several thick, knot-

Near Nanga Parbat basecamp in 1932: Captain Claire, Randall Herron, Elizabeth Knowlton, Willy Merkl, Peter Aschenbrenner (standing, left to right), and Wiessner, Felix Simon, and Willy Bechtold (sitting).

ted slings and a few pitons for protection. He led on a double manila rope.

Wiessner climbed with his usual rhythmic, flawless technique, though his breathing sounded like a locomotive. Soon Coveney and House's intense silence gave way to spontaneous, but soft-spoken, words of admiration. "We knew that we were watching an exhibition of leading such as few climbers ever see," Coveney later wrote.

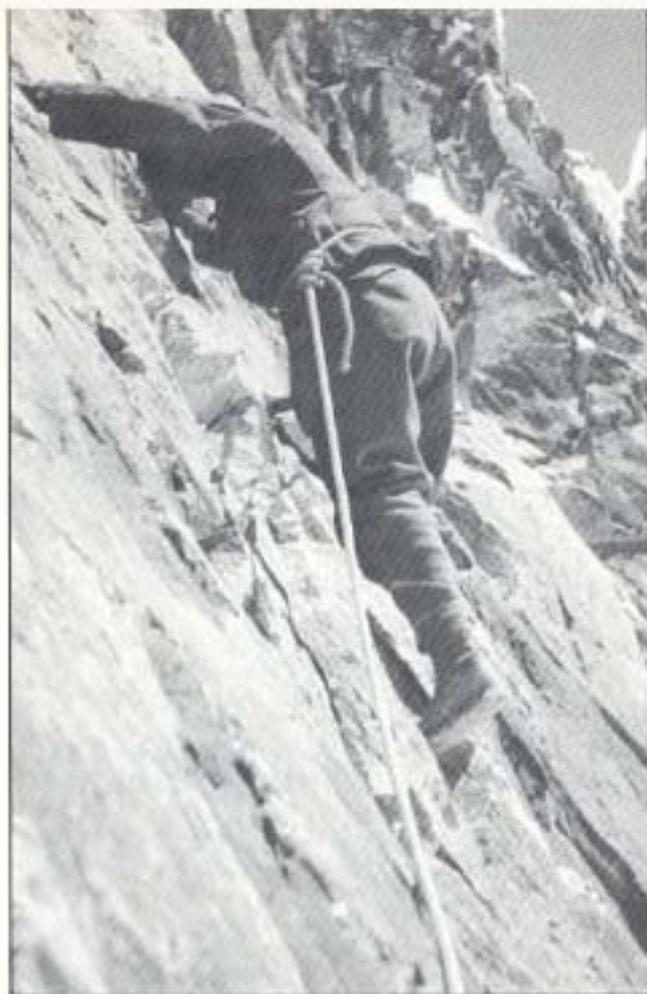
Wiessner disappeared over the top of the crack, then a garbled shout blew back. House had heard that shout before, on Waddington. "It means we are going to the top," he said.

After Devil's Tower, Wiessner turned to loftier summits. Vittorio Sella's superb photographs of K2 strengthened Wiessner's wish to climb the giant peak. The American Alpine Club sponsored an expedition under Wiessner's leadership, which finally obtained a permit in the fall of 1937. Unfortunately, by that date, Wiessner could not afford to take the necessary amount of time away from his small chemical company.

As a result, in 1938 Charles Houston led the first American K2 expedition. After much difficult climbing up the *Abruzzi Ridge*, including House's lead of the now-infamous House's Chimney, Houston and Paul Petzoldt reached a high point of 7925 meters.

Wiessner tried hard to convince House and Petzoldt to return to K2 with him in 1939, but with no success. "Now it was up to me," wrote Wiessner.

His 1939 team consisted of Chappel Cranmer, Eaton Cromwell, Jack Durrance (one of America's best skiers and climbers), G.S.C. Trench, George Sheldon, and



Wiessner on difficult rock high on Mt. Waddington in 1936 — note the rope-soled shoes.

Dudley Wolfe. Wiessner, then 39 years old, was leader. The 13 Sherpas would include Pasang Kikuli (the Sirdar, or Sherpa leader), Pasang Kitar, Pinsoo, Dawa, Tendrup, Pasang Lama, and Tsering. Chandra Pandit, an Indian schoolteacher, came as interpreter.

"Will this be the crowning achievement of my climbing career?" Wiessner wrote in his diary upon his first sight of K2. "Everything that I have learned in my long years in the mountains; whatever degree of strength, energy, endurance, and instinct that they have given me, is dedicated to this effort — cool and deliberate, but with a warm heart!"

On the mountain, progress initially went well. Then Cranmer suffered a near-fatal illness, probably pulmonary edema; Durrance, the expedition doctor, tended him devotedly. As the team gained a foothold on the *Abruzzi Ridge*, two storms moved in. During the second, Wiessner and several Sherpas gained some ground, climbing to about 7400 meters by July 5.

On July 8th, the weather cleared, but no support came from below. Wiessner descended to Camp II to investigate. Cromwell, Durrance, Trench, and two Sherpas remained tentbound; Sheldon had descended to basecamp with frostbitten toes.

"I gave them hell," said Wiessner. "I just couldn't conceive that they hadn't come up to bring the supplies." The team then divided into three groups: Durrance, Wolfe, and Wiessner up high; Cromwell and Trench at Camp IV or lower; Sheldon and Cranmer, injured, at basecamp.

On July 13 and 14, Wiessner, Wolfe, and Lama climbed to Camp VII at 7525 meters, and Camp VIII at about 7711 meters. Durrance became ill and turned back just above Camp VI, but the group decided that, health permitting, he should return to oversee the

camps or even to join in the summit bid. In any case, he was to send the Sherpas and their loads up to resupply Camp VII. But Durrance did not recover at Camp VI, and descended, insisting that Pasang Kikuli and Dawa accompany him. Making matters worse, Cromwell and Trench also left their supporting role at IV. Unknown to the three summit climbers, eventually there would be neither Sirdar nor Sahib above basecamp to oversee the Sherpa load-carrying.

Wiessner and his teammates had built up a series of fully stocked camps: tents, sleeping bags, and provisions stood ready at camps II, IV, VI, and VII. Wolfe settled in at Camp VIII with additional supplies. Heading for Camp IX (7940 meters) with Pasang Lama, Wiessner felt all bases were well covered. "We would be safe even if communication (was) completely severed," he wrote.

On July 19, in surprisingly warm temperatures Lama and Wiessner left Camp IX at about 9am for a summit push. Unable to determine if the prominent ice cliff before him was avalanche-prone, Wiessner chose a gully to its left. The steep, icy couloir ended in an overhang; he climbed the 5.6 rock in bare hands. From his new vantage point, he could see that the right-hand alternative would have been safe as well as easier to climb, a recent avalanche having scoured its upper slopes clean.

He and Lama had perhaps 800 feet more to go along a fairly straightforward snow ridge to reach the summit. Foretelling a future trend in Himalayan mountaineering, Wiessner intended to climb all through the night. He speculated that they could descend in sunshine the next morning.

But as the afternoon waned, the situation had become increasingly tense, with Pasang Lama murmuring and praying constantly. Now he held the rope tight and said, smilingly, "No, Sahib. Tomorrow!" With a heavy heart, Wiessner gave in.

"Pasang could not grasp that it would be easier to go to the summit than to risk rappelling in the dark," he observed heavily later.

The descent was hellish. Night fell as the two rappelled past an overhang. Suddenly the ropes caught in the crampons tied to Lama's pack. In freeing the rope, he knocked off his crampons, losing them into the void below.

At 2:30am, the pair reached Camp IX. The next day warm sunshine revitalized them, and Wiessner sunbathed nude. On the following morning the snow was rock-hard; the two could have made good time upward on the right-hand ice gully, but without crampons, would now have to cut hundreds of steps. There was no choice but to descend. As Wiessner and Lama approached Camp VIII, Wolfe greeted them.

"Those bastards! They never came!" said Wolfe of Durrance and the Sherpas. "I'll give it to them when we get home." Descending to resupply at Camp VII, the trio was crossing an icy slope when Wolfe stepped on a coil of rope, pulling Wiessner off. Seconds later, all three men plummeted down the slope.

"I thought to myself, God damn it! Here I have this thing in the palm of my hand," Wiessner recalled. "I knew what was below us — a 6000-foot drop." He gouged in his ice axe, dug in his nailed boots — and stopped. Wolfe and Lama fell the full rope length, halting 60 feet above the dropoff.

"How did you do that?" an incredulous Wolfe exclaimed to Wiessner. Lama looked up at him as if he was some sort of a god, and even Wiessner, who



Wiessner in Dresden in 1973.

mer had left for Askole July 18th. According to Wiessner, the climbers at basecamp "were too lazy to check out the word of one Sherpa, Tendrup," who had witnessed the supposedly disastrous avalanche.

In the hospital suffering from frostbite and exhaustion, Wiessner answered the investigating committee's questions and gave them his expedition papers, including Durrance's congratulatory note — which subsequently vanished. Cromwell and Durrance were also questioned. Finally, the AAC Board of Directors stated in a letter that the exhaustive K2 report would not be published. Wiessner, who had made 13 question marks on his copy of the report, felt the whole affair had been whitewashed. On December 26, 1940, in a brief letter to AAC President Henry Hall, Wiessner resigned from the Club.

Wolfe's decision to remain at Camp VII has remained controversial for nearly 50 years. In *The American Alpine Journal* in 1985, referring directly to the K2 incident, Charles Houston wrote, "After a bold bid for a very high summit a climber found his companion sick and unable to descend. With their only Sherpa, he went down to the next camp for help, but finding no one there or at any of the lower camps, the two were slowly drawn down the mountain, reaching Basecamp exhausted."

Yet Wiessner says Wolfe was not sick. Only several days later, after Wiessner and Lama were forced into their harrowing descent, did Wolfe become weak. Lama confirmed to Pandit that Wolfe was healthy when last seen, saying, "Because we had been sure to win the mountain, Mr. Wolfe had been standing outside of his tent when we descended, and he waved to us." Wiessner says the pair did not descend "for help" either, but to resupply and to locate Durrance and the Sherpas.

It becomes a poignant footnote that, had Wiessner and Lama made the top, the event would have changed the course of Himalayan mountaineering. Not only would K2 have been the first 8000-meter mountain climbed, it is the hardest of those in that category. In fact, no 8000-meter peak would be climbed for another decade, until the ascent of Annapurna in 1950. Finally, Wiessner and Lama would have made their ascent in admirable style, carrying no oxygen. Indeed, for them to have reached such a high point is extraordinary.

Wiessner never really got over K2, which would remain an inflammatory subject his whole life; but climbing was, conversely, his best solace. He never returned to the high mountains, perhaps because he could not trust a partner again to the degree necessary there. Still he certainly never lost his zest for rock climbing, nor for hard alpine climbs. He climbed frequently in the Gunks, and in Mexico, England, France, Italy, and, of course, Dresden. He made ski-mountaineering ascents, and in 1960 completed his ascents of all 4000-meter peaks in the Alps. Soloing hundreds of 5.3's in the Gunks, which he was to continue into his 70's, was another Wiessner trademark. "I like to be alone in the peace of nature. The joy of nature," he said.

In 1945 he married Muriel Schoonmaker, with whom he had two children. In 1952 the family moved to Vermont.

At 86, Wiessner climbed several 5.6's in the Gunks and in Eldorado, though arthritis in his knees made reaching footholds a struggle. The tenacious Wiessner had always said, "You've got to fight it," and, truly, he did. In 1987, Wiessner suffered a series of crippling strokes that partially paralyzed him, and would eventually take his life.

On a cold February day, Wiessner sat in his wheelchair beneath Vittorio Sella's black-and-white prints of K2. Dusty mountaineering books lined the shelves of his study. Outside, above the drawn shutters, birds fluttered in the treetops. Watching them, Wiessner's eyes darted back and forth in silent admiration.

He was the embodiment of the mountaineer Elizabeth Knowlton described in *The Naked Mountain*. "To those men who are born for mountains, the struggle can never end, until their lives end," she had written. "To them, (mountaineering) holds the very quintessence of living — the fiery core, after the lesser parts have been burned away."

"I think a lot about climbing still," Wiessner said, "but not during the daytime. I think about it mostly at night, and on special occasions. I think about climbing when I am fed up with life in general. When I wish I could go over to the rocks or the trees. I enjoy my dreams about climbing."