

Vail Daily obituary: William Bird Mounsey, 1918-2012

November 14, 2012

Bill was born on Oct. 17, 1918, to Rev. Ernest and Marie Mounsey in Lake City, Minn. e was immediately baptized as the flu epidemic was stealing young souls. This would set the tone for the rest of his life – hit the ground running and be prepared for anything that the fates would throw at you.

Bill was equally comfortable in a tent as he was in a house. He spent many of his nights around campfires. His crackling flames stretched from the lakes of the north to the beaches of the South Pacific, to the crags of the Alps to the potholes of desert southwest, and to the meadows of the Rockies. He presented noble ideas like water conservation and wilderness and fought grand missions for American ideals while also cherishing mouse tracks in sand dunes and hummingbird nests tucked along riverbanks. A tireless problem solver and a soldier to the end.

Bill attended Howe Military School where he earned top honors as a marksman and a through and through soldier. As Europe showed indications of war, Bill enlisted in the Army in 1940, a natural conclusion for attending Shattuck and Howe Military Schools. It was also at these intuitions that Bill gained an appreciation of the written word that would linger with him through the years. In his first military service, Bill was Col. Teddy Roosevelt Jr's courier as a buck private. Bill's propensity for leadership was recognized by the colonel who wrote him a letter of recommendation to be in the first Officer's Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

It was during this time at Fort Benning that he began to pester a beautiful young woman who worked at Montgomery Ward. His persistent badgering ultimately won him a date with Louise Lafon. They had a relationship that is sought after by many yet obtained by few. They shared a deep understanding of each other and unquestionable love. The love notes they exchanged during the war years lasted until their very last days together. They were married in 1941 on New Year's Eve as World War II gained insidious traction and Pearl Harbor caused real fears of young love being interrupted. As two distinct theaters of war developed, Bill was transferred to a new unit being formed to address winter warfare – the Tenth Mountain Division. With new daughter Diana in tow, Bill and Louise traveled to Colorado. At Camp Hale, Bill instructed the troops in winter survival skills.

In a military twist of administration, Bill was assigned to the Pacific Theater and went from snowy combat training to jungle warfare. For the next two years Bill island hopped, with the Ameri-Cal Division, working closer and closer to Japan. When asked for volunteers whom would serve an additional tour, Bill volunteered because "MacArthur asked me to do it." While fighting the dirty, hand-to-hand combat the jungle created, Bill was awarded a bronze star for heroic and meritorious achievement and earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge First Award. The First Award indicated his willingness to serve an extra tour and it was this literal badge of honor that he proudly wore, daily, in later years to signified his role in active ground combat. A career army man, he was proud of the simple star on the badge that indicated his willingness to volunteer for service. Later, he formed the Colorado Combat Infrantrymen's Association Company: HQ11CO.

As Bill marched north towards Japan, with his men, he accepted the surrender of Cebu City. He acting in ranks he never achieved, because the officers above him were killed, and eventually accepted the next mission of invading Japan as a diversionary tactic. While these preparations were being made, the atomic

bombs were dropped and Bill entered Japan as part of the first occupational force instead of what would have very likely been a suicide mission.

Bill returned state side and focused on his family. They called many places home over the next years as they explored the states together and then, as Bill returned to active duty for the Korean War, they followed the orders of being career military. During these happy times Bill and Louise also had three more daughters – Sharron, Maureen, and Heidi.

In 1964 Bill retired from the military, with the rank of major, and moved to Colorado. Already with a lifetime lived and accomplishments gained, Bill started into what will be his legacy – wilderness. Bill sought out the Wilderness Society upon his move to Colorado partly as a soldier trying to quiet his heart and partly as a man before his time foreseeing the importance of preserving nature. His passion for the outdoors and tireless drive resulted in testifying before Congress in favor of the Wilderness Act, being solicited to draw the boundaries for many of the Colorado wilderness areas, and starting the University of the Wilderness in 1964. The University of the Wilderness strove to get folks into the woods and wilds and therefore gain appreciation for conservation. He helped found the Wilderness Workshop in the early 1960s and worked for the Colorado Open Space Council.

Through almost ceaseless letter writing and an acute attention to details, he joined the fight for protecting the wilderness areas he helped create. The Holy Cross Defense Fund used every means possible to fight against the mammoth water powers of the front range cities of Colorado. A David and Goliath fight, eventually a handful of well-intentioned everyday-social-activists beat back the water boards and defended the Holy Cross and Eagle's Nest Wilderness areas.

Bill's dedication to his missions, from the Pacific to Evergreen, shaped the world around him and others. In 1975 he received the Environmental Award from the Rocky Mountain Center on the Environment. In 2011, he and Louise received the Evergreen Audubon Founder's Award for their commitment to the natural world.

Bill passed away on Nov. 11, 2012, Veterans Day. Bill is survived by the love of his life, Louise Mounsey, his four daughters, Diana, Sharron, Maureen and Heidi and their spouses, as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren scattered across the West. He is also survived by great expanses of wilderness and a message of conservation.

Some men are remembered by monuments, statues and graveyards; others by ballads, legend and myth. William Bird Mounsey is best remembered by his bride of 71 years as: "Bill had large hands. Powerful hands. Worn hands that showed his strength." Those hands with cracks and scars told of a life well-lived and a legacy earned.