

Home is Where the Mountains Are

The Remarkable Life of Sharon Wood



by Lynn Martel

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Cover photograph: Sharon Wood and Alison Andrews on Air Voyage at Lake Louise, Alberta.
Photo: Pat Morrow

Title page photograph: Makalu at 7320 metres.
Photo: Carlos Buhler

Back cover photograph: Sharon Wood on the summit of Everest, 9 p.m. May 20, 1986.
Photo: Dwayne Congdon

Introduction

The more one gets to know Sharon Wood, the more one begins to understand the complexity and depth of her nature and the degree to which mountaineering ambitions have shaped her character and identity.

Curious, self-willed and independent as a child and fierce in her pursuit of individuality as an adolescent, Sharon searched in some of the wrong places for authenticity until she introduced herself to the Rocky Mountains. Here she discovered a passion equal to her intensity and emotional courage. In mountaineering she confronted a challenge equivalent to a view of the world she wanted to validate through experience. She began exploring herself through the solution of ever more complex and demanding climbing problems. This exploration became an outward symbol of an inward march upon her own physical and emotional identity. While engaged in this intense inward expedition, she discovered others who were not afraid to put their lives in the balance in exchange for a glimpse of their deeper selves.

Sharon's life became an ever more engaging series of conversations with the vertical and often dangerous world of the high peaks. With each conversation she and her friends were brought closer to the purest expression of being. The on-going conversation Sharon Wood has had with the mountains, and with those who have explored their deepest selves in climbing with her, has shaped a generation of Canadian alpinism. Though Sharon Wood's fame has grown in domains far beyond the mountaineering community of which she still remains a vital part, she is the first to acknowledge that her climbing accomplishments are but outward symbols of a far greater existential achievement that could only have been made possible through the company of similarly committed others.

In the manner of the great climbers who established mountaineering as a tradition, Sharon Wood and her circle do not trumpet the outward symbols of their success. Words are as nothing compared to deeds. Actions stand for themselves. What you do, not just what you say, defines who you are. Their lesson is the lesson the mountains have been trying to teach us from the beginning. While the summit matters, certainly, the most important prize we bring back from any peak is humbleness in the face of the true nature of the world that, if we are fortunate, may over time manifest itself as a form of personal grace. It is not the peak that we conquer. Our triumph, ultimately, is over our selves.

It is a great honour to have Sharon Wood as the Patron of the 15th Annual Mountain Guides' Ball.

Bob Sandford
Vice President, Mountain Culture
The Alpine Club of Canada

Approaching life's great climbs

As millions of Canadians from Newfoundland to Nanaimo followed the hardships, the controversy, the tragedy and the ultimate triumph of the 1982 Mount Everest

Expedition, which culminated in Laurie Skreslet and Pat Morrow becoming the first Canadians to stand on the world's highest summit, a twenty-five year old Sharon Wood watched along with them, but with more than a passing interest.

As she followed the unfolding events from her Canadian Rockies home halfway around the world, Sharon saw in the men who re-grouped, changed their intended route and carried through with their dreams a strength of character that sparked her soul. She recognized the intensity of their experience and as she watched her friends rise to the challenge presented them, she knew she had to find her own opportunity to rise.

Sharon Wood on top of
Yamnuska
Photo: Laurie Skreslet



I was very attracted to the intensity and the strength of character that was coming through these men, my friends and peers, because of this hardship. And I wanted that. I wanted some of that. I wanted the intensity. I wanted the opportunity to rise as they did.

Sharon Wood was born in Halifax Nova Scotia in 1957, the youngest of four children. In 1964 the family moved to Vancouver, following work opportunities for her father, a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot. A man of strong character who rose to become Lieutenant Commander of an aircraft carrier, Sharon's father instilled in her from an early age the importance of embracing her own individuality. An energetic and athletic child, Sharon participated in sports including

field hockey and track and field, but she much preferred individual outdoor activities – skiing, hiking and cycling. By the time she was ten, her father would let her skip school to ski with him on powder days. He took her on her first technical climb when she was twelve, joining a guided party up Sky Pilot, north of Vancouver. That climb was the most exhilarating experience of her adolescence and Sharon knew she wanted more.

I remember vividly, the first time I hiked above the alpine, with my father. Him not being comfortable there, not liking it above treeline. And me, standing on the barren, glacial scraped rocks and opening my mouth and letting the wind pass through me, sing and speak through me.

But first she had to find it

As a teenager Sharon was intense, insatiably curious, bold and restless. While she explored urban adventures, she knew in her soul that she didn't belong in that environment, that her real home was somewhere else. Acknowledging an unrelenting draw toward mountain adventures, at sixteen she ventured past the confines of Burnaby and moved to the tiny mountain town of Jasper Alberta, which she had once glimpsed through train windows on her way to Edmonton and which her older sister had briefly visited and afterward described to Sharon as a seemingly magical place nestled in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Sharon understood the mountains to be a place that people deliberately chose to be, and in her own search for home the mountains incessantly pulled her. Though young, she was intrepid, working as a tour boat guide on Maligne Lake. Later she slung beer in the winter so she could ski. She also worked as a lift operator at Jasper's Marmot ski hill where she met veteran mountain guide Hans Schwarz, whom she and a group of friends hired to teach them the basics of rock climbing. Sharon was captivated by the intense combination of physical and mental gymnastics climbing demanded of her. Immediately following the weekend of instruction with Hans she bought climbing equipment and sought out anyone who was willing to hold the end of the rope.



Sharon Wood on
Huascaran Sur
Photo: Carlos Buhler

I realized, I think this way. I get it. It just fits. This works for me. My brain wants to engage in this kind of weird problem solving activity of climbing.

At seventeen, she signed on for a three-week Outward Bound course. Too young for the co-ed program, she was restless in the company of women who weren't as experienced or as strong as her. To her frustration, the course focussed on group process, teamwork and leadership skills, not technical climbing. Rather than spend another day stumbling about in the mountains with her group, Sharon mutinied and returned to base. During the inevitable scolding she expressed her disappointment in the lack of physical challenge, so her instructors sent her out with Laurie Skreslet. Laurie had a natural way of helping others realize they could be more than they were and he made Sharon feel special, detecting in her a best that she was yet to realize.

It was obvious to me the moment I saw her that she was committed, grounded, determined, focussed, persevering...overflowing with potential. —Laurie Skreslet

Through Laurie and the other instructors, Sharon connected with the Outward Bound atmosphere and asked if she could work as an instructor. Audacious, but not yet experienced, she was awarded the position of assistant cook, which gave her access to what she really wanted – to spend time and climb with the instructors. For the first time in her young life, she felt at home. In those instructors she saw strong individuals, all very unique and sometimes eccentric, but all possessing admirable

qualities including strength of character and an understated view of difficulty or hardship. They were generous in the time and investment they made in their students' development and that of even Sharon, the assistant cook. They embodied the philosophy of Outward Bound founder and self-proclaimed "Living Spirit", Kurt Hahn, who premised, "We are more than we know, and once we discover this, may we never settle for less." Sharon too came to embody this premise and would never settle for less.

What happened in Outward Bound is I did see models there. I did see – that's what I want to be when I grow up. I saw a pack of instructors that were living a life and being the way I wanted to be. That was the first time I remember being in a group of people that felt like home.

Sharon Wood and Barb Clemes posing with Owens River sign



Working as a lift operator through the winter, she enrolled in first aid courses that would qualify her to progress to the position of professional ski patroller. A friend told her about a summer camp that taught rock climbing in the Canadian Rockies. She applied for work and was accepted, so she headed to Camp Chief Hector to work as a climbing instructor and camp counsellor, where she met Dwayne Congdon, Chris Miller, Dave McNab and Marnie Virtue. During the off-season Sharon and the other fledgling outdoor instructors began designing and teaching pilot mountain skills courses for adults, including ice climbing and general mountaineering – the genesis of what would become Yamnuska Mountain School. Recognizing that she was barely a step ahead of the skills she was teaching motivated Sharon to master those mountain crafts.

And she climbed

She climbed the Rockies' highest, Mount Robson (3954 metres), with Chris Miller. In 1977 she accepted an invitation to join an all women's trip to Canada's highest, Mount Logan (5959 metres). They succeeded in reaching the west peak and the experience was instrumental in preparing Sharon for future expeditions. It was also instrumental in establishing a place for herself in the climbing community, as she was introduced to the members of the Calgary Mountain Club, whom she recognized as kindred spirits, and she was readily welcomed into the fold.



Climbing on Makalu
Photo: Carlos Buhler

It was pretty exciting for me. There was this whole group of weirdoes and deviants in this one place, and they were all talking about climbing and trips. Everybody had dreams, aspirations and ambitions and they met every Wednesday night. And I was in.

Through the CMC she met John Lauchlan and other climbers with whom she shared many epics, adventures and dreams. She embarked on spring and fall trips to Yosemite, where in 1979 she climbed The Nose on El Capitan with Albi Sole, persevering with her hands wrapped in gauze and tape after burning them on a rope when she took a fall.



And she learned

She learned long glacier slogs, such as Logan's King's Trench, weren't for her, recognizing that she was much more interested in pursuing more technically engaging routes. She was humbled on The Nose, where she learned one big wall climb was enough for her, but was grateful for the unrelenting thousands of feet of exposure that raised her comfort level on subsequent climbs. Later she appreciated how hammering in countless pitons for aid climbing on The Nose coupled with efforts on earlier traditional climbs would serve her well on bigger alpine objectives.

Sharon Wood climbing
Bourgeau Falls

I was not the least bit interested in the first woman theme. In the first women's expedition to anywhere. I'd gotten all that out of my system in 1977. I was more interested in just doing amazing things with good partners.

Then in February 1982, the Canadian Rockies' climbing fraternity was rocked to its core when John Lauchlan died while soloing Polar Circus. Arguably the country's top climber at the time, John was driven to excel in all pursuits and in his short life nurtured a legacy of inspiration for others to draft. His death caused Sharon to realize something important. She wasn't living up to her potential. She decided she would climb harder and that she would earn her certification with the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides. Later that year, as she watched the events of the 1982 Everest expedition unfold, she saw how she

could challenge her potential. Complacency was not an acceptable option for Sharon who recognized that when things got tense, she rose to meet the challenge. She wanted that opportunity to rise. She applied herself to alpine climbing and in April 1983 with Gregg Cronn she climbed the formidable 3720-metre Cassin Ridge on McKinley (6198 metres), North America's highest peak, hunkering down under a boulder in their tent at 5800 metres for a day and a half waiting out a storm. The sampling of the severity of high mountain conditions tested her ability to rise to the maximum.

There is some appeal to me in climbing whether it's a waterfall, a technical rock climb, a big face or best of all, the biggest mess of all, where you combine alpine climbing with altitude, what really fascinates me is thriving, learning to feel comfortable in the most inhospitable places in the world, to feel at home there.

Middle:
View from high on
McKinley's Cassin Ridge
Photo: Sharon Wood

Climbing in the Bugaboos,
North Howser Tower
in the background
Photo: Baiba Morrow



In June of that year she took her first ACMG exam, becoming the first woman to earn her ACMG Assistant (Summer) Alpine Guide's badge. She subsequently became an Assistant Ski Guide and a couple of summers later was the first woman to pass the Alpine Guide's exam, becoming an ACMG Alpine Guide. Earning her guide's certification confirmed to Sharon that she was as competent as her peers. The skills, relationships, respect and awareness she gained through these courses and exams were invaluable assets in the repertoire of experience she took on to future alpine challenges.

In 1985 Sharon tentatively welcomed a new career opportunity when Canadian Mountain Holidays hired her as a helicopter ski guide. As the sport grew in popularity, so did its female clientele resulting in the



Sharon Wood on Pilsner Pillar
Photo: Carlos Buhler

industry's need for female guides. Although she had no intention of becoming a winter guide, Sharon welcomed the opportunity to increase her mountain skills. Immersed in the helicopter ski industry, she quickly grew to respect and revere the seasoned ski guides. They were keen observers and practitioners of a very complex combination of science, art and psychology, adept at covering large expanses of mountain terrain in winter conditions safely, all the while delivering quality experiences to their guests. As Sharon pushed her personal limits through her ACMG exams and on increasingly challenging alpine climbs, she thrived in situations of extreme adversity and her confidence grew with each accomplishment.

I realized that the messier it got, the more involved the climbing became, the better I got, a rendering the impossible possible, was my arena. The climbing and these different experiences was an ascent to a place of greater self-confidence.



From the beginning of her climb through the ACMG ranks, Laurie Skreslet was instrumental in encouraging Sharon to pursue her guiding certification and perhaps gain the experience, skills and credibility to earn a place on Canada's next team to attempt Everest. She learned of plans for the 1986 Everest Light Expedition and was interested in participating. A group of climbers who'd been part of the 82 Everest expedition had decided to return to the mountain driven by a strong conviction that they could climb it in a bolder, better style that reflected their potential. They would return with a smaller, cohesive group of climbers who shared a similar philosophy, a similar history and the vision to climb Everest in a style they could feel proud of. They would climb it via a new more difficult route, with a much smaller team, fewer resources and without Sherpas. She was attracted to the way the team was assembling and these men were her peers and friends. She wanted in.



Laurie Skreslet
Photo: Sharon Wood

When times are difficult you're forced to rise to a situation where there's a level of commitment that is imposed upon you that you have no choice but to accept. That's what attracted me to Everest – I had this dream of performing better, physically and mentally than I ever had before. I knew that I had to choose something that would compel me, and that would commit me, to a situation where I would be forced to do that.

Below left to right:

Back: Laurie Skreslet, Kevin Doyle

Middle: Barry Blanchard, Dan Griffiths, Dwayne Congdon, James Blench, Dave McNab

Front: Jim Elzinga, Sharon Wood, Chris Shank, Albi Sole, Bob Lee

Far Right: Jane Fearing, team cook



The Everest 86 team members were voted in through a consensus vote. The top three criterion were: the individual's past record as a team player, the skills the individual brought to the team and the climber's willingness to buy into a bold vision that didn't promise great odds of success. Sharon's team experience was furthered by an invitation to go to the Himalayan, 8481-metre, Makalu, the fifth highest mountain in the world. In the

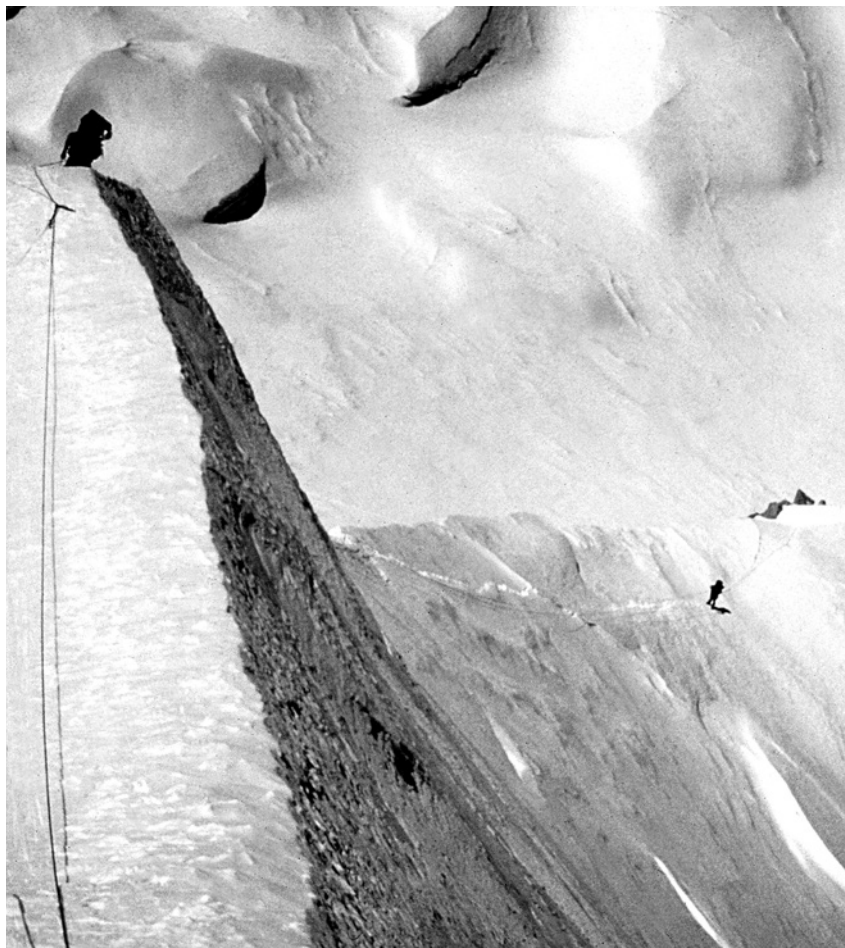


spring of 1984 she joined Albi Sole, Dwayne Congdon, Charlie Sassara and non-climbing member, Doctor Ken Bassett, on an expedition led by Carlos Buhler.

Carlos saw that he was giving Charlie and me the kind of altitude experience that we needed to move on to other Himalayan expeditions. It's very hard to get a break into that circle without having experience. This was definitely for me, something that was much, much bigger than my experience. Makalu's West Pillar Route had a fearsome reputation and was much more technical and more involved than Everest.

The small team spent two months at a cold and windy base camp, taking turns leading, carrying loads and fixing ropes as they worked their way up the only twice-climbed West Pillar. They spent several weeks fixing ropes in technical terrain at high altitude and juggling with heavy loads. After surviving big mountain storms, including one that forced them to spend a night at 7300 metres sitting up with their backs pressed against the wall of the collapsed tent praying it wouldn't blow off the mountain with them in it, Sharon had helped pave the way for the summit team, Carlos and Dwayne.

Then in heavy snow only 200 metres from the summit, at 3 p.m. just moments after seeing a body frozen for eternity, Carlos and Dwayne made the difficult decision to turn around, knowing their descent down the intricate ridge would be difficult in the dark. From Base Camp Sharon, Charlie, Dwayne's partner, Colleen Campbell and Ken kept vigil through the night, praying as they watched the tiny headlamp lights inch their way down the blackened mountain, occasionally picking up the sound of their altitude ravaged voices crackling through the radio, reassuring their friends at Base Camp they were still moving. As Sharon and the others waited for Carlos and Dwayne to rejoin them, she knew and feared she would someday find herself on the other side of the experience.



Carrying loads at 6700 metres on Mount Everest
Photo: Jim Elzinga

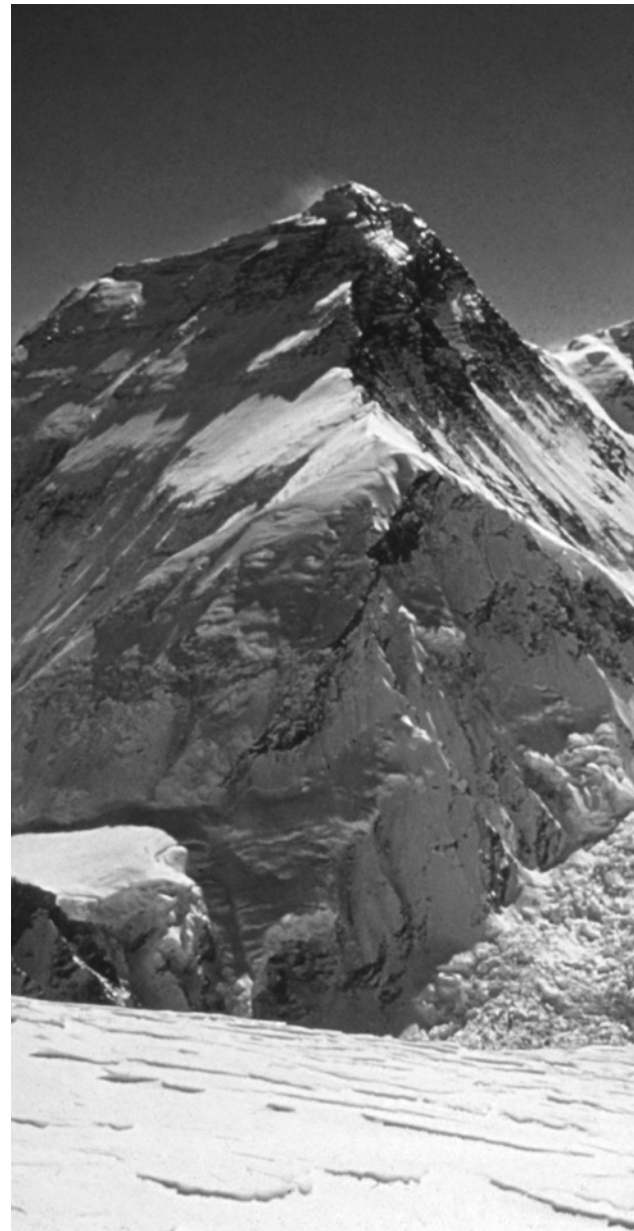
I somehow knew that there would be others at another time watching me, like we were that night watching those pinpricks of lit headlamps descending through the deadly darkness. A looming prescient knowing that fate, the worst that can befall a climber, to be benighted above 8000 metres without shelter, would be mine in the future.

The whole time Sharon was on Makalu, Everest was just 50 kilometres away, and she could see it. Albi and Dwayne, who were already on the Everest Light team started to have conversations with her about Everest. But more than wanting to climb Everest, having figured out the science and the mental challenges of feeling comfortable and strong in hostile places at high altitude, Sharon wanted more of the intensity of the experiences she shared with her climbing partners. In December of that year she travelled to South America with Carlos Buhler and climbed the huge, mixed and hazardous 3000-metre French Route on the South Face of Aconcagua (6960 metres) in Argentina.

We leapfrogged one another's lead slowly picking our way up through the ten thousand-foot multi-tiered face. I learned through Carlos' example that it was near possible to climb anything given dogged determination, strategy and patience.

The following summer Sharon joined Carlos in Peru where, while he guided a client, she soloed the West Face of Toqllaraju (6032 metres). Upon reaching the summit however, she discovered her descent route was dangerously out of shape, leaving her no choice but to carefully down-climb the route she had just come up. The level of engagement and commitment she experienced on that climb was the next step for Sharon. She likened it to meditation, to having nothing in her mind but making the next move perfectly. And she affirmed her passion for climbing, how much she truly loved climbing for the simple sake of climbing. After only a few days' rest, she soloed the North Face of Ranrapallka (6162 metres), descending the regular East Face route. Then together, Sharon and Carlos tackled the unclimbed Anquash Face of Huascarán Sur (6768 metres). Pelted by rocks, Sharon suffered a broken shoulder bone, but she climbed on through a series of steep ice grooves, faces and rockbands. Finally after eight gruelling days they

Mount Everest from the south.
Photo: Lloyd "Kiwi" Gallagher



achieved the summit. Upon her return to Canada she received an invitation to join the Everest Light Team to go to Everest the following spring.

She was ready for Everest

With these climbs I was pushing that line – of what was possible, or my own self-imposed limitations – out. These climbs were defining experiences.



Long before Internet connections, the members of the Everest Light team communicated with their main sponsor, Continental Bank of Canada and the rest of Canada via telegrams.

TELEGRAM

March 26, 1986, 8:54 a.m.

TO: Continental Bank of Canada
Xegarto Basecamp.

A Tibetan road crew of 20 piled on top of three large trucks, roared into Basecamp to open the Rongbuk branch of the Continental Bank. We crossed frozen rivers, moved boulders to open the road to Basecamp.

March 19th and 20th sorted out 150 boxes and barrels.

McNab and Wood established Camp One. Fifteen yaks, three Tibetan yak herders arrive. Team divided into three groups of four. A team – Shank, McNab, Sole, Congdon. B team – Doyle, Blench, Blanchard, Elzinga. C team – Skreslet, Griffith, Wood, Lee. Strategy involves teams leapfrogging one another. One team leads for three days, second team climbs in support for three days, third team rests for three days, then rotate. March 21, Sole leaves with 15 yaks to Camp One. March 22 rest of A team leaves for Camp One. Elzinga, Blench carry to Camp One March 23. Team A establishes route across glacier to Camp Two at base of spur. Wood carries to Camp One March 24. Teams A and B establish Camp Two at base of spur March 25. Teams A and B carry supplies to Camp Two March 26. Team A occupies Camp Two, begins work on spur.

General Notes – All team members healthy. Morale high, weather has been clear with high winds that funnel through Basecamp damaging tents. Wind speed up to 80 mph, temperatures high + 5 C, low -20. Fearing producing fantastic meals.

In March 1986, Sharon and her Everest Light teammates reached the toe of Everest's Rongbuk Glacier and set up Base Camp. With her were expedition leader Jim Elzinga, James Blench, Barry Blanchard, Kevin Doyle, Dwayne Congdon, Chris Shank, Dan Griffith, Dave McNab, Albi Sole and Laurie Skreslet, plus Jane Fearing, their cook and Base Camp manager, and Bob Lee, their doctor. Without Sherpas, the climbers divided into three to four sub-teams rotating through roles, one team fixing rope and preparing the way, as two other teams carried loads from camp to camp, while the fourth team rested until six camps were

established, the highest at 8175 metres. With over half the team's climbers hobbled by altitude related maladies, only four were considered strong enough for a summit bid – Barry Blanchard, Dwayne Congdon, Albi Sole and Sharon. The four were broken into two summit attempt teams. Knowing that an American team was poised to put a woman on the summit, Jim Elzinga presented Sharon with the challenge she couldn't refuse – to go on the first attempt and become the first North American woman to reach the top of Mount Everest. Barry and Albi would follow and make their own summit bid once the top camp was vacated.

Carrying loads at 7900 metres on Mount Everest
Photo: Sharon Wood



TELEGRAM

April 14, 1986, 8:43 p.m.
TO: Continental Bank of Canada

We are nearing half way point of expedition. This is most difficult time in terms of climber's morale. Appreciate as much mail, magazines, newspaper clippings, etc. After a two day storm that forced Wood and Sole off the spur, the route was reopened by Congdon and Blanchard. They spent several hours digging fixed ropes out of the snow only to find upon reaching the site of Camp Three, that wind had blown in eight feet of snow burying the camp. Stranded they spent two hours attempting to find the buried tent and in darkness they were forced to retreat 2,000 feet to Camp Two.

They returned the following day with Skreslet and Blench. Dug the site out. Replaced the damaged tent. This effort forced Congdon, Blanchard down to Basecamp for a rest.

They were replaced by Skreslet and Wood who in an outstanding two day effort managed to fix 3,500 feet of rope to the top of the ice spur at 24,000 feet. Sole, Shank took over and have managed to place Camp Four.

Climbers will spend the next week carrying supplies and rope up the 4000 ft. ice spur so that work can begin on the formidable mile traverse of the West Ridge.

Jim Elzinga



After years of dreaming, planning and collaborating, followed by weeks of demanding physical and mental efforts carried out in the harsh environment of the high Himalayas, together the members of the Everest Light team had reached the final stages of their highest aspirations.

Sharon Wood on Everest at 6700 metres
Photo: Jim Elzinga

TELEGRAM

May 4, 1986, 4:04 p.m.
TO: Continental Bank of Canada

We've had a change in plans. Instead of going up the west ridge direct route we are swinging out onto the north face and will attempt the summit via the Hornbein Couloir. Our reasons for the change are as follows: We are running out of time as we race the approaching monsoon, the weather is starting to deteriorate daily as it approaches.

The length of time needed to fix the direct west ridge to launch summit bid could take anywhere from 15 to 20 days. Our physical and mental resources are starting to deteriorate as a result of the prolonged periods of time we've spent up high, as well as tremendous workloads we've had because we do not have Sherpas.

By going into the Hornbein Couloir we can move much quicker as most of the climbing is on snow and ice. We will have however, four rope lengths of hard rock climbing. Starting at the 27,500 foot mark this will have to be climbed when the summit team makes the first assault. Congdon and Blanchard are currently occupying Camp Five at 25,500 and are starting to fix ropes toward the Hornbein Couloir and eventually Camp Six at 27,200, which is at the base of the Yellow Band as seen in photographs.

As a result of our change we are pushing hard to have someone reach the summit by May 7 so that I can announce our success to the Prime Minister.

I will keep you informed daily as to our progress.

Thanks so much

Jim Elzinga

Makalu Team;
Makalu in the background
Photo: Carlos Buhler



TELEGRAM

May 14 1986, 9:58 a.m.

TO: Continental Bank of Canada

As you know a snowstorm forced us off the mountain. McNab and Sole were to go back up to reopen the route and start fixing rope above Camp Five. Sole got sick and was replaced by Wood who was supposed to be resting for summit attempt.

This change of personnel illustrates the kind of team work that is taking place. Originally Blanchard was to go with Congdon to the summit but Blanchard stepped aside to give Wood the opportunity as the race between us and the Americans to put the first N.A. female on the summit heightened. This came about when we learned that the U.S. woman had set off on a summit attempt. They failed and are currently undecided as to whether they will continue. Blanchard and Wood unselfishness allowed us to continue our forward movement by fixing ropes to Camp Six and demonstrated the spirit of our team as we are determined to succeed in putting someone on the summit.

Further efforts have been demonstrated by other members. Shank who is suffering severely from an intercostal muscle strain between the ribs managed to complete three badly needed carries between Camp Four and Five. Other climbers have been putting up with bouts of nausea and high altitude headaches as they do their carries.

The last load needed to support the summit team was carried by Blanchard to Camp Five today. McNab and Wood managed to fix 2,000 feet rope above Camp Five in a tremendous one and half day effort.

After leaving Camp Five they crossed a snow slope to the start of the Diagonal Ditch, a diamond traverse of rock mixed with ice. The climbing was difficult because they had to climb with 50 pound packs of rope at an elevation near 8,000 meters. McNab describes the rock they had to climb as broken down, sloping, snow-covered black shale.

They had to cross two snow-filled gullies that were loaded with unstable snow. This brought them to the top of the ditch which consisted of broken talus that had released rock fall on them during the day. McNab suffered a severed retinal hemorrhage to the left eye. He and Wood returned to Base-camp for a much needed rest.

They were replaced by Doyle and Sole who perhaps have made the greatest one day effort of the trip. They climbed from Camp Five with 50 pound packs to the end of ropes fixed by Wood and McNab and fixed an additional 2,500 feet up into the Hornbein Couloir. This put us well over the 8,000 meter mark and has set the stage for the summit team.

Snow conditions in the Couloir are excellent and we feel quite positive providing the weather holds. Climbing has gone slower than we expected on the upper mountain but this is largely due to the fact that we have not compromised the safety or the wellbeing of any climber. We have insured that every possible option has remained opened to us to insure a safe ascent and descent for the summit team.

Summit team of Congdon and Wood left Basecamp today May 14. They will be supported by three climbers who will be announced later. Elzinga's strategy is to have all five climbers ascend to Camp Five by the 17th. On the 18th the climbers will ascend to 27,200 feet, the site of Camp Six. The three support climbers will drop their 20 kilo loads, dig a platform in the narrow Hornbein Couloir for the tent at the base of the Yellow Band then return to Camp Four on the 19th. Weather permitting the bid for the summit will be made. Attempt will be on oxygen.

Second summit attempt will be made shortly after first. Probably be Sole and Blanchard. Blanchard considering going without oxygen. This is a question mark as he has spent several prolonged periods up high working extremely hard.

Expedition will leave Base-camp on May 28. Will not arrive Shanghai till June 2. Please stress the team effort in any press release. Personal ambitions etc. have been put aside in order to facilitate Congdon and Wood.

Received telegram only from P.M.

Daily reports will be filed.

JimElzinga

On May 19, Barry and Kevin climbed with Sharon and Dwayne to Camp VI, sharing the brutal weight of the supplies vital to a summit attempt and helping their teammates establish the camp before descending to Camp V. On May 20 at 9 a.m., eight hours later than they'd planned, Sharon and Dwayne set out in gale force winds and began working their way up the Horbien Couloir. Carrying only ten hours' worth of oxygen, they used it sparingly, piggy backing off each other's waning and surging resolve, struggling and moving slowly in the thin air above 8500 metres. Sharon resisted the urge to turn back when they reached the crux, in part due to Dwayne's resolve and in part knowing she couldn't bear to spend the rest of her life wondering if she could have kept going. As soon as she mounted the crux her focus narrowed and intensified emboldening her to climb through. She realized she had allowed doubt and hesitation to drain far too much of her mental and physical energy. Finally, at 9 p.m. Sharon and Dwayne reached the highest point on earth at 8848 metres. They had little time to celebrate

TELEGRAM

May 21, 1986, 7:40 a.m.
TO: Continental Bank of Canada

Continental Bank should stand proud today as Sharon Wood and Dwayne Congdon have planted the bank's flag on the top of Mount Everest at 9 p.m. on May 20. They also flew the Canadian and Chinese flags symbolizing the friendship between our two great nations.

They left Camp Six at 9 a.m. and climbed continuously for 12 hours to reach the summit. They had to battle hurricane winds and severe cold to reach their goal. They spent five minutes on top. Their descent was done in darkness reaching Camp Six at 3:30 a.m.

This is one of the greatest feats in Canadian and Himalayan climbing history. We established a new route in China and Wood becomes the first North American female to climb Everest. Climbers are currently returning to Camp Two.

Thanks ever so much for believing in us.
Jim Elzinga

though, it was sunset and they faced a climber's greatest fear – being benighted above 8000 metres. After only a few minutes on the summit, what seemed to them barely enough time to say, "Let's tag the top and get the hell out of here," they started their long descent.

By 10:30 it was dark and by midnight they were separated – their strongest urge was to sit down and rest, and in doing so, give in. Their greatest challenge was to keep moving and stay alive. At 2 a.m. Sharon crawled into their tent and much later, after the longest ninety minutes of her life, Dwayne arrived.

TELEGRAM

TO: Continental Bank of Canada
Some thoughts from Sharon as she departs for her summit bid.

"Now Dwayne and I are gifted with an opportunity rarely given to individuals – created by the monumental effort of our team members. It is strange – as if I am climbing on each of the climbers shoulders to reach the summit. And in doing so we finally leave the umbilical cord. It is a concept that is both frightening and exciting. I am entering a race with myself filled with hopes and expectations. Thank you Continental Bankers for this experience."

May 16 climbers in Camp Two. Summit bid delayed by bad weather.

Jim Elzinga

Clockwise: Laurie Skreslet with Dwayne Congdon and Sharon Wood at Camp V (7625 metres) after they descended from Everest's summit. Photo: Dan Griffith



You don't look at life the same way again after those experiences. You come out of it transformed. You come back down from a lifeless landscape where you've been living for two months, from extreme hardship, and the first time you see life and feel comfort it's in a new, reborn way. It's a totally new experience. It's like you're seeing it for the first time.

Sharon had met her challenge and she had risen to the occasion. She longed to return to her life of climbing and guiding in her home mountains of western Canada and to planning her future with her soon to be husband Chris Stethem. But reaching the world's highest summit was only the beginning of the challenge. Before even returning to Canadian soil, newspaper reporters clamoured to hear the story.

By the time Sharon reached Shanghai she was inundated with calls and requests for personal appearances. Unfortunately however, they didn't want to hear the whole story. Each reporter had the same single purpose – to hear the story of the two Canadians who had reached the summit and especially the story of the first North American woman to stand there.

Climbing in high winds
on Everest at 6700 metres
Photo: '86 Everest Team collection

TELEGRAM

May 23, 1986, 5:30p.m. TO: Jim Elzinga
Basecamp, Mount Everest

Hi everybody.

You are still hot stuff here. You were frontpage across country. Word has also spread internationally. We are very proud. Full page ad in Globe nationally today. More good wishes:

“Sharon: On behalf of all British Columbians, my wife and I extend our heartiest congratulations to you, the first woman from North America to scale Mount Everest. What an outstanding achievement. Best wishes to you and the members of the team for a safe journey home.”

Robert G. Rogers,
Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia



TELEGRAM

May 28, 1986, 6:19 a.m.

TO: Continental Bank of Canada

Summit Day. Sharon and Dwayne up at 5:00 a.m. to start brewing. By the time they are organized, and have hydrated enough they leave the tent at 9:00 a.m.

Initial climbing is a continuation of the Hornbein Couloir. They climb unroped up hard wind pack snow, 50 degrees in steepness. For 300 meters, this led into a rock headwall where they had moderate to difficult climbing over steep rock and mixed climbing. Sharon led this section and was belayed by Dwayne. They left 100 meters of fixed rope here for their descent.

Climbed unroped over a small snowfield to a steep snow gully that Dwayne led, 60 degrees in steepness. Left another 100 meters of fixed rope for their descent in the gully.

Continued on easy ground to the giant snowfield that traverses the top part of the face. Traversed back over to the West Ridge and ropes up below it. Move together till they hit two pitches of steep rock, 28,500 feet of moderate to difficult climbing. They managed to stay in the lee of the ridge avoiding the high winds, climbing in a traverse over snow patches and rock till they were forced onto the West Ridge Proper, 75 meters below the summit.

Followed snow to top arriving at 9:00 p.m. Spent approximately 20 minutes on summit before starting their descent into the sunset.

Reversed their route and felt confident in returning to Camp Six in darkness, as they had their fix ropes covering all the difficult sections. Reached the first of the rock pitches where they fixed their rope and abandoned it as they rappelled down the two rock pitches into total darkness. Soloed back across the upper snow field by headlamp.

Dwayne's oxygen ran out resulting in him losing contact with Sharon because he had to constantly stop to warm himself. They rappelled their fix ropes as well as down climbed solo, those sections that hadn't been fixed to Camp Six. Sharon arrived at 2:00 a.m. and Dwayne at 3:30a.m.

Dwayne's oxygen running out at 28,000 feet resulted in him being slower as well as causing him some minor frostbite.

During the whole ascent and descent the weather was extremely cold, minus 25C, with 50 mph winds that gusted up to 80 mph.

Once back in their tent at Camp Six they started brewing only to have their propane butane gas cylinder blow up engulfing the tent in flames. Fortunately only minor damage was caused. However they had to spend the night without food or water.

They rested till morning then continued their descent to the base of the Hornbein Couloir where they were met by Skreslet. He had been waiting in support with Griffith at Camp Five had a problem arisen. Laurie had brought hot sugar water and food for the climbers, checked them over and insured that they made a safe descent in their exhausted state.

They rested and rehydrated for several hours at Camp Five before continuing their descent to Camp Two where they arrived totally exhausted but in extremely good spirits.

Their effort and commitment exemplifies the whole team's dedication to this climb. They would never have gotten to the top if the rest of the climbers hadn't made the same kind of commitment. As they did, this is an important message that you can make to your employees from me.

This is our last transmission, look forward to seeing everybody. You have 13 extremely exhausted individuals coming home.

Thanks once again Continental Bankers for being a part of my team and helping us reach the summit. You were in our hearts the whole trip and without your support and words of encouragement it would have never happened.

Jim Elzinga

We're Standing Proud

Sharon's story

But Sharon's story was one of team effort, of a long apprenticeship in the mountains with generous partners and mentors and of the enormous and selfless contributions of the Everest Light team members who helped her every step of the way to that summit, their summit. Sharon was uncomfortable being the focus of the media's attention and she tried to tell them her story, one that focussed on the contributions of individuals and the impact they had on her.

As all thirteen Everest Light team members disembarked from their flight together at Vancouver, B.C.'s international airport, Sharon felt embarrassed and humiliated as the cameras and microphones targeted only two faces – hers and Dwayne's – especially hers. Later however, she would feel grateful that as a Canadian, the amount of attention she received was likely about one-tenth what she would have earned had she been American. Still, it was one-tenth more than she'd even hoped to handle.

An uncomfortable part of being a summitteer, for me, is the public and media's one-eyed view of heroes – our summit was the bottom line result of a series of collective heroic and selfless acts by all the team members. Dwayne and I stood on top because of the sacrifice, effort, integrity and heroic efforts of our eleven other team members.

The west ridge of
Everest at 7300 metres
Photo: '86 Everest Team collection

TELEGRAM

May 27, 1986, 6:17 p.m.

TO: Continental Bank of Canada

May 19 summit climbing team of Dwayne Congdon and Sharon Wood, supported by Kevin Doyle and Barry Blanchard battled hurricane force winds, rock fall and avalanches enroute to the last camp to be established on the mountain.

Climbers left Camp Five at 8:30 a.m. with 70 pound packs and reached the Camp Six site at 8:00 p.m.

After a tremendous effort Congdon and Wood stayed at Camp Six. Blanchard and Doyle returned to Camp Five after a 13 hour day and having carried oxygen and camp gear to set up the summit attempt.

Their effort made it possible for the summit bid to take place.
Jim Elzinga



Sharon began tackling a fear – for her and many others greater than death itself – that of public speaking. To fulfill the obligations of the team’s main sponsor, Continental Bank of Canada, Sharon began telling her story on stage. Before long requests began coming her way until eventually she walked with one foot in her guiding profession and the other in her newfound profession as a public speaker.

Three years later, in 1989, she embarked on her biggest challenge yet, becoming mother to Robin, and then to Daniel in 1992. Sharon realized for her, guiding was not compatible with motherhood, since it meant far too much time away from her young family. At the same time she found her clientele had changed over the years.

When I first began guiding it seemed like people sought instruction and experience as a means to eventually enable them to go into the mountains themselves. Somewhere there was a shift to adventure tourism, clients started showing up with tick lists. I didn’t feel comfortable taking people trophy hunting.



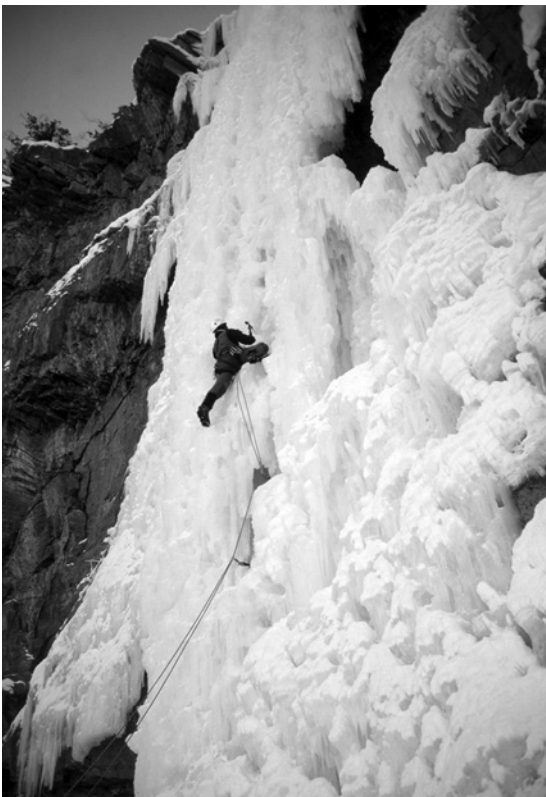
View from the west ridge of Mount Everest
Photo: '86 Everest Team collection

Sharon's interest in alpine climbing also waned. The year following Everest she returned to Peru. Part way up the Paragot Route on the North Face of Huascarán Norte (6654 metres), a technically challenging route, she was once again struck by a falling rock. This was one too many close calls, and it caused her to become more scared than engaged. Her heart wasn't in it anymore.

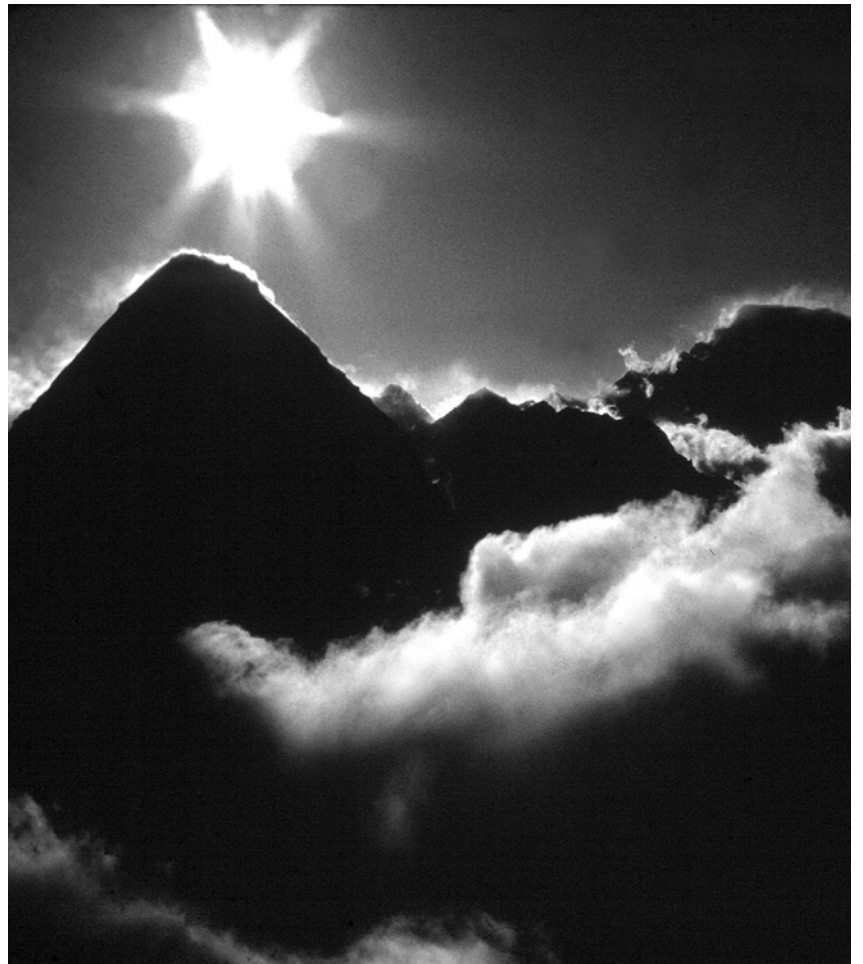
Sharon began to enjoy reaping the benefits of public speaking as she spoke before audiences of six to six thousand,

including young children, doctors, lawyers, bankers, teachers and companies selling everything from pharmaceuticals to lingerie. In telling her story over the years Sharon embarked on an incredible journey of learning to be herself behind the podium rather than reciting the story she thought everyone expected to hear. She found herself reaching a new goal, of moving away from talking about her climb up Mount Everest to what meant most to her in the story of their climb and the challenges in her current life.

Sharon Wood
on Carlsberg Column
Photo: John Popowich



Cordillera Blanca
at sunrise
Photo: Sharon Wood



A mother's journey

As her children neared school age she was surprised by a new passion that welled up, fuelled by a mother's natural tendencies to protect and provide for her children.

Believing a better educational alternative for her children was possible, in the fall of 1993 she and Mary Ellen Wyss organized a gathering of other concerned parents. Together with other dedicated Bow Valley residents, Sharon visited other schools, facilitated information forums, secured leases and established policies and procedures to earn the stamp of approval from Alberta's education ministry allowing Mountain Gate

Community School to operate as a fully accredited independent, non-denominational private school. The purpose of Mountain Gate was to provide an environment that fostered the confidence, individual learning styles and unique strengths of each child. An important aspect of her group's efforts and of a Mountain Gate student's education was the proactive modeling of the parents and teachers working together to create a vibrant learning community. She met the challenge of creating a safe, intimate learning environment that reflected the community values and beliefs of the families that comprised the school.

Robin Wood Stethem
Photo: Colleen Cambell



Education extends beyond the walls and definitions of what we think we know to be 'school.' A child's potential and growth is multi-dimensional and meant to extend beyond preconceived limits – ours and theirs.

Summit of Mount McKinley
Photo: Pat Morrow



Now, nearly two decades after climbing Everest and thirty years after taking her first climbing course, Sharon has re-discovered her roots. After being invited to speak to an international symposium for Outward Bound instructors, she was inspired by their level of passion in imparting and living the Outward Bound philosophy. In fact, she was so inspired that she traveled to Africa to guide a group of Outward Bound patrons and supporters on a guest trip, through which they would participate in a climb of Mount Kilimanjaro

and experience a taste of the Outward Bound approach. Realizing that she need not view guiding as her livelihood, Sharon discovered she had the luxury to pick and choose her guiding work. And in doing so, she discovered she could combine both her chosen fields (after thinking for years that public speaking represented an extreme departure from her guiding career), inspiring others as a public speaker and inspiring others as a guide through climbing and mountain experiences.

I always preferred guiding beginners. There's such a huge gap between what they think is possible and what they can actually accomplish in a single day. The mountains are a powerful vehicle for people to learn about themselves; they humble, expose, embolden and teach. The mountains show people, "We are more than we know". I've come to realize that everything I do seems to revolve around that sentiment.

Awards:

- 1987 – Awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree by the University of Calgary
- 1986 – Appointed to the Honour Roll for Outstanding Achievement by MacLean's magazine
- 1986 – Awarded the inaugural Tenzing Norgay Award as Professional Mountaineer of the Year from the American Alpine Club and New York Explorer's Club
- 1997 – Awarded the The Summit of Excellence Award by the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture
- 1998 – Awarded The Meritorious Service Medal by the Governor General of Canada
- 2004 - Patron of the 15th annual Mountain Guides' Ball

Sharon Wood
Photo: Todd Korol



Home is Where the Mountains Are

The Remarkable Life of Sharon Wood



In mountaineering Sharon Wood found a pursuit equal to her intensity and emotional courage. In coming to terms with the nature of peaks, Sharon discovered others who were not afraid to put their lives on the line in exchange for a glimpse of their deeper selves. She also found she possessed the ability to solve ever more complex and demanding climbing problems. While engaging in the most intense forms of inward and outward exploration, Sharon Wood and her climbing partners shaped an entire generation of Canadian alpinism.

Home is Where the Mountains Are is their story.

For further information regarding The Summit Series of mountaineering biographies, please contact the National Office of the Alpine Club of Canada.

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