

Obituaries

William N. Miller

November 23, 1924 – March 30, 2016

William N. (Bill) Miller, 91, former 10th Mountain Division ski trooper, CIA psychologist, communist prison camp expert and Oregon Red Cross Emergency Services Director, died at his home in Sisters on March 30, following a short illness.

Miller, who could have been a strong candidate for a “Most Interesting Man in the World” contest, enjoyed a life full of action, incomparable experiences and recognition. Coming from a skiing family that helped found the “First Kingdom of Ski” club in upstate New York back in 1900, he enlisted in the elite 10th Mountain Division during World War II. He was hit twice by enemy fire and earned a Bronze Star for exceptional bravery during the historic battle for Riva Ridge and Monte Belvedere in Italy.

He said he knew of no other attack in World War II that was carried out at night with unloaded weapons. The idea was to rope and crawl as quietly as possible up the mountain and throw grenades at any gun that fired because it had to be a German. Such surprise tactics and bravery drove the enemy off this key position and cleared the way for U.S. forces to free Italy.

After the war, Miller married Nancy Roberts (Miller) of Utica, N.Y., who became his wife, best friend and confidant for 66 years until her

death in 2014. “Nan” was a Sisters community legend, having been a founding member of the Habitat for Humanity Thrift Store and a developer of the SMART children’s reading program. Nan’s many heroic volunteer efforts resulted in the honor of Sisters’ “Citizen of the Year” in 1994.

Miller completed his undergraduate and masters degree studies in psychology with honors at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. in 1952, while working as Director of Winter Sports. After graduation, Miller joined Alcoa Aluminum where he became chief labor relations negotiator for a 3,000-man forge plant in Cleveland, Ohio. But it wasn’t a good fit. Miller realized, as part of company management, he was too sympathetic with the union’s point of view.

A dramatic life-change came when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) called on a recruiting mission. They were looking for a professional psychologist and outdoorsman with a military background who could recruit, assess and train both U.S. and foreign personnel on intelligence-gathering techniques under adverse conditions. Miller was ideally suited, and he stayed with the CIA for more than 20 years. Overseas tours of duty included Saipan, Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

The release of captured U-2 pilot Francis Gary

Powers by the Soviets in 1962 demonstrated that U.S. prisoners then were ill-prepared for the rigors of imprisonment. Shortly thereafter, Miller was assigned to head up a new CIA “Risk of Capture” program. This involved thorough debriefing of hundreds of Americans, some of whom had been held captive in communist and Iranian prisons for up to 21 years. Perhaps most notable was the crew of the spy ship USS Pueblo which was captured by the North Koreans in 1968.

The purpose of the study was to learn in depth the prisoners’ treatment, feelings, behavior and lessons learned. This research became the basis of a program designed to prepare others in potential danger of overseas capture.

As a result of his work, Miller was awarded the Intelligence Medal of Merit for “developing, conducting and sustaining programs to enhance an individual’s capacity to resist hostile exploitation and survive imprisonment in the event of capture.” His efforts contributed to changes in the U.S. Military Code of Conduct as noted in the Congressional Record.

Most gratifying to Miller was his work with the League of (POW) Families, where his research changed opinions of what families could expect and how they should best deal with sons and daughters returning from incarceration.

Miller’s program was



unique. Previous potential POW training relied on yelling, harassing, humiliating, demanding unrealistic resistance and ignored the most important element for detainees: concern for their family. Foremost, they needed to be assured that their families would receive pay, that promotions would continue, savings would be safe and a large life insurance policy would be in place.

His talks to family groups all over the U.S. were turned into a special film and later a national television interview.

After retiring from the CIA in San Diego, Miller got his ham radio license through the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) and became heavily involved in San Diego Mountain Rescue work as both a radio operator and climber.

Moving to Sisters in 1988,

he extended his radio work helping search and rescue teams with communication providing digital data communication links from the amateur ham radios that weren’t available from standard-issue walkie-talkies. He later became Red Cross Disaster Chairman for the state of Oregon and worked closely with the Oregon State Police developing statewide emergency backup communications systems.

But one major recent accomplishment is perhaps a ski-industry record: He attained first-time certification as a PSIA ski instructor working two seasons at Hoodoo Ski Area in Oregon at the prime age of 83. His last bucket-list item was just achieved last summer, when at age 90 he and his dog Ellie

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