Viereck’s impressive legacy includes landmark 1954 Denali expedition

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Among his many accomplishments in life, Fairbanks author and scientist Les Viereck took part in a 1954 climb on Denali that stands as a major chapter in the mountaineering history of Alaska.

Viereck and three others climbed North America’s tallest peak that spring on a journey that began next to the tracks of the Alaska Railroad about 20 miles north of Talkeetna.

Viereck, known in later years for his opposition to the proposal to use nuclear blasts to create a harbor in Northwest Alaska and for his book on the trees and shrubs of Alaska, was joined on that trip by Elton Thayer, Morton Wood and George Argus.

The last two survivors of that difficult journey, Wood and Argus, plan to be in Fairbanks today and attend the celebration of life for Viereck, who died Sunday at 78. Friends and family will gather at the Georgeson Botanical Garden at 3 p.m. today to share stories about his life.

“It would take the 1954 party nearly two weeks just to reach basecamp, and once they started climbing the South Buttress, disintegrating icefalls and swollen rivers behind them meant they would have to complete the first traverse of North America’s highest peak just to get home,” author and climber Douglas MacDonald wrote in an account published in Climbing magazine for the 50th anniversary of the expedition.

At that time, fewer than 10 parties had climbed the mountain, and the four climbers were not “globetrotting alpine superstars,” but friends who wore Army surplus clothing, carried hand-sewn tents and ate food that Thayer’s wife had prepared in her kitchen.

Thayer, 27, was a ranger at Mount McKinley National Park and the leader. He was joined by Argus, 25, who taught at the Army’s Arctic Indoctrination School; Wood, 30, who had served in the Army’s 10th Mountain Division; and Viereck, 24, a soldier who had taken leave from Fort Richardson in Anchorage.

“The four climbers were so compatible during this demanding six-week climb that they seldom
disagreed with one another and then only when they were tired,” Jon Waterman and Bradford Washburn wrote in “High Alaska.”

They walked on snowshoes and sank with each step into the heavy spring snow. It took a week to cover the 40 miles to what is now known as the Don Sheldon Amphitheater, where Wood’s then wife, Fairbanks pilot Ginny Wood, airdropped two loads of supplies.

They had to ascend a steep slope in which they had to cut more than a 1,000 steps into the ice. They reached the summit on May 15, after nearly a month on the mountain.

“But by May 16, both Viereck and Argus were AWOL from the Army — they had gone beyond their 30-day leave. In somewhat of a hurry to get home and staggering under their awkward, heavy loads, they started down the Harper Glacier,” Waterman and Washburn wrote.

“Thirty-three years later, Viereck would reflect that the ensuing accident ‘may have been caused by overconfidence, because Wood had been on this part of the mountain before, and we were on our way down.’”

The four were roped together as they descended a steep slope.

“Thayer slipped, their belays pulled out and the whole team slid toward the Muldrow. They stopped 800 feet later. Thayer was dead, hanging over a serac, his back broken in the fall. Argus had a broken hip,” they wrote.

“I remember once falling free in the air for at least a second or two and then landing on my pack in deep snow,” Wood wrote in the Alpine Journal.

Argus suffered a dislocated hip and torn ligaments and tendons in his legs, Viereck had bruised ribs and Wood was relatively unscathed.

Viereck and Wood searched the slope for their gear and found the basics they needed to make camp. They waited for Argus to improve enough to travel, but even after six days, he was unable to walk.

After moving to a safer camp, at 11,000 feet on the Muldrow Glacier, Viereck and Wood put most of their food near Argus in the tent and set out to get help.

They were about 30 miles from the end of the road at Wonder Lake.

“Before they left, around noon on May 23, Argus asked the two men to send a wire to his mother saying that they had made the summit and that ‘everything was fine,’” MacDonald wrote in his magazine article
“In two days, they arrived at the McKinley River Bar Cabin famished. They quickly found food, stocked the previous summer by a young Denali-struck ranger on his rounds. It was an old Alaskan tradition to keep firewood and food stocked in wilderness cabins in case of an emergency. Young Ranger Elton Thayer could not make it off the mountain, but he had helped his friends, even after death.”

A rescue effort took shape, led by John McCall, a geology professor at UAF. The Army flew a team to 5,500 feet on the Muldrow, from where they began to climb up to save Argus.

“All alone for seven nights, Argus had conserved his food and his single quart of fuel so well that he had supplies for at least four more days,” MacDonald said.

He offered to make tea for the rescue party.

Viereck was going to be disciplined by the Army for staying away too long, but a sympathetic commanding officer at Fort Richardson intervened. The experience was a traumatic event for Viereck that he would never forget.

“These companions had enjoyed a tremendous adventure far from the eye of civilization,” Andy Selters wrote in a history of American mountaineering. “But the loss of their friend Thayer eclipsed their gusto for the first traverse of Denali and one of the greatest expeditions of the decade, and the three survivors never did another major climb.”