I remember attending a slide show on the history of backcountry skiing in the Sierra given my friend Andy Selters. Slides of the pioneers of backcountry skiing were shown. There were pictures of Orland Bartholomew, Dave McCoy, and Glen Plake. Then Andy mentioned Walter Rosenthal and how he had completed some of the most remarkable first descents in the area: Checkered Demon, Parachute, and the Pinner Couloir on Laurel Mountain. But, he said he could not find any pictures of Walter, since he skied all of these alone. Andy quipped that he would like to see some pictures of Walter skiing these lines. I don't think he realized that Walter was quietly sitting in the back of the audience, collecting entrance fees to the event. The slide show was being given as a fund raiser for the newly founded Eastern Sierra Avalanche Center. Walter had been instrumental in creating the Center and was its President.

“It's an aesthetic thing, I can't explain it to you rationally,” says Walter. This takes me back because Walter is one of, if not the most rational people I know. Walter goes on, extolling the virtues of skiing steep lines solo, “I actually think it can be safer going alone. You don't have any social or group pressures. You'll only jump in and do it if you are completely confident in your abilities.”

“But don't you worry about falling and then not having anyone around?” I ask.

“If you think you might fall, then you shouldn't do it.”

That was Walter, he always had an answer to everything without pause and he never minced words. He was an uncompromising character. On this particular day in April of 2005, I was asking him about skiing the Parachute, one of Walter's first descents on the Eastside off Pyramid Peak in 1983. Walter had been encouraging me to ski it, alone.

The couloir had looked like an elevator shaft from the top of Pyramid, so I had a suspicion that Walter's unpretentious nature was not nearly describing how difficult the descent was. Yet, I deeply trusted his judgment, so a few days later on a day off, I skied it, alone and broke the cardinal rule of backcountry skiing.
The skiing was awful, boot top mank, and the chockstone was melting out to the point where I had to sidestep and jump over the last part. I was terrified. But at the same time, I was confident that everything would be ok. I trusted Walter and knew that he would not have sent me up there if he thought I lacked the judgment or skill to make a safe descent. The absolute concentration required and the mental clarity that you get from skiing steep lines solo is difficult to put into words. As Walter said, its an aesthetic fulfillment

That night I wrote an email to Walter thanking him for encouraging me to ski Parachute alone. He responded,

Yer welcome, I'm not sure why I did it, it just felt right somehow. An emotional hunch. Did you whoop a little when you came out of the narrows and knew you had it? I remember grinning a lot and making some celebratory noises as I came out onto the thin corn in lower half of the chute, which is still pretty steep.

I took a picture of the line from the top of the notch and gave it to Walter. He liked it so much that he made it the background on his desktop at his desk in the patrol room.

It was a vicarious pleasure for him to see me doing some of the things which he had done while he was younger. By the time I met Walter three years ago, he had long since stopped his hair raising first descents. As he told me, “The first 35 years of his life were all about 'me, me, me'.” But now he had family to think of, which is where all of his extra time and money went. He always said that was not a bad thing, in fact he liked the contrast from the self indulgent ski bum to devoted family man. Walter always carried a picture of his daughter Lily in his wallet.

Walter could recall in vivid detail route conditions and features on descents which he had made 30 years ago. Although he was so unassuming, he didn't talk about them much. Merely saying that Walter had a remarkable mind does not do him justice, he was brilliant. In the late 1980's he enrolled with several other patrollers in a University of California at Santa Barbara Bren School of Environmental Science and Management class on the alpine snowpack. From the course on, Walter was hooked. Soon after he earned his Masters in Physical Geography from UCSB and became a
remote sensing expert. But after ten years as a researcher, in 2001, Walter returned to the mountains and started patrolling again. He said he was sick of being behind a desk. This was to be his last year on patrol. He was waiting on National Science Foundation funding to begin for a grant to study sintering mechanism in the snowpack, which would earn him a PhD. Although if you asked Walter, he would say he never cared about the degree, he was more interested in growing snow crystals in a laboratory and pioneering work on grain boundary diffusion. This work would have been revolutionary; it would challenge 30 years of accepted science on the way snow forms bonds.

Walter made an indelible mark at Mammoth. His enthusiasm for snow science was contagious. People from all departments on the mountain would stop in at Main Lodge Patrol, just to have a chance to talk with Walter. This was a source of constant irritation for Walter since he could never get his work finished, but he was always willing to chat. Employees from Patrol, Sports School, Lift Maintenance, and Cat Crew would often receive such lengthy and technical explanations for their questions that they would leave overwhelmed, but awed by his knowledge.

Walter operated on a higher level than most of us. I thought he never slept. In addition to working 50+ hour workweeks on patrol and hand shoveling his 100 foot dirt driveway after every storm, Walter would go home and work on remote sensing programming for the Army Corps of Engineers. In his spare time, he worked on projects like regression tree models for avalanche forecasting. On top of this he always found time to hang out after work for a few beers.

Walter was a cornerstone of the patrol. He had been patrolling at Mammoth since 1981 and he was a testament to the fact that you can use your brain and well as your body in a job that you love.

Walter died a hero's death trying to save the lives of two other Mammoth patrollers, James Juarez and Scott McAndrews. James and Scott fell into a volcanic vent hole when a snowbridge collapsed under their feet while excavating a gill net fence around the vent. After James and Scott fell into the vent, Walter went in after them with two oxygen tanks, but without one for himself. As he was placing the mask on Scott, he succumbed to the fumes inside the vent. Jeff Bridges, another veteran
Mammoth patroller, followed Walter into the vent and was also overcome by the fumes. Although Jeff lost consciousness and stopped breathing, amazingly he was able to survive and has now fully recovered from the accident.

I cannot write about Walter's life without writing something about James and Scott. Each of these men had glowing personal qualities and rich life stories. James was a warm friend, student of history, and a former marine who served in the 1st Gulf War. He had such enthusiasm for life that he could find something in common with anyone. Scott was a friend to many and an educator. Supervisors would often arrive at work an hour and a half early to find Scott shoveling out the entrance to the patrol room on avalanche control mornings. Our patrol is like a family, and the loss of these wonderful people has been a wound which has cut deeply into the entire Mammoth community.

Please remember that ski patrollers around the world risk their lives every day during the season for public safety. We are not highly paid and many of us work long hours, from dawn till dusk. It's not an easy life, and most of us are here, season after season, for the love of the job and for people like Walter, James, and Scott.

If I can grow to be half of the human being that Walter was, I would consider my life well lived.

Walter is survived by his daughter Lily and his wife Lori. Donations can be made to:

The Walter Rosenthal Memorial Fund
Union Bank-Mammoth Branch
Box 2729
Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546
In lieu of flowers, contributions in Scott's memory may be made to the:

Niskayuna Community Foundation, PO BOX 9711, Niskayuna, NY and will be used to “serve young people, including annual scholarships to attend Outward Bound learning experiences."

Contributions for James Juarez can be made to:

The James Juarez Memorial Fund
Union Bank-Mammoth Branch
Box 2729
Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546