

The Order of Canada for Peter Schaerer

On April 15th, 1999, Peter Schaerer received the Order of Canada for his contribution to avalanche safety.

Peter's contribution to avalanche safety in Canada involves avalanche hazard evaluation and mitigation, avalanche research and avalanche education. Except for 1961-64 when he worked in Switzerland as a highways engineer, Peter has lived and worked in Canada since 1957.

Avalanche Safety for Highways

In 1957-60 while seconded to the Dept. of Public Works from the National Research Council, Peter Schaerer surveyed avalanche zones for the proposed Trans-Canada Highway through Rogers Pass. On the basis of this survey, he advised Public Works on the best location for the highway and for defence structures including the avalanche sheds. This resulted in a safe public highway—now heavily used—through the pass that had previously claimed the lives of over 200 people, including many railway workers. The placement of the avalanche sheds allows the highway to remain open to traffic except during major storms when closures are necessary for avalanche control.

Peter Schaerer was one of the major participants of the 1974/75 Avalanche Task Force which was created to identify and control avalanches which threaten facilities adjacent to highways in British Columbia. The Task Force was established as a result of an avalanche accident that killed seven people on January 22, 1974. The majority of the recommendations in the Task Force's report were implemented resulting in the establishment of a provincial Snow Avalanche Program for the Ministry of Transportation and Highways in British Columbia. Since his involvement with the Task Force, Mr. Schaerer has continually provided avalanche and engineering expertise for Highways projects in areas prone to snow avalanches. He has been a mentor to the avalanche professionals in the Snow Avalanche Programs and still supplies leadership to those developing avalanche hazard analysis and engineering skills for snow avalanche defences.

Avalanche Research

Peter's contribution to avalanche research includes over 90 papers, reports and book chapters! He has studied snow stability tests, avalanche impact forces for defence structures, models for predicting avalanche speeds and runout distances, avalanche accidents, avalanche zoning and snow loads for building design.

Avalanche Education

From the 1970's to the mid 1990's, Peter Schaerer was the senior instructor and co-ordinator of training courses for avalanche professionals. He wrote the original student course manual and training materials as well as leading the initiative to produce the 1981 and 1989 editions of the *Guidelines for Weather, Snowpack and Avalanche Observations* that has resulted in uniformly high standards for avalanche safety programs in Canada. Most avalanche forecasters, technicians and mountain guides have, at some stage of their career, been trained by and inspired by Peter.

As well, Peter Schaerer's knowledge has been passed on to backcountry recreationists since many of those who teach avalanche awareness courses have been trained by Peter.

Organization of Professionals

In 1975 Peter Schaerer was a founding member of the Canadian Avalanche Committee, which formed to address public safety issues and initiate communication amongst avalanche safety organizations and workers.

In 1981 Peter was the founding President of the Canadian Avalanche Association (CAA) which succeeded the Avalanche Committee. The CAA now has over 300 professional members, holds annual technical sessions, administers the training courses for avalanche professionals, conducts a daily exchange of snow stability information between over 45 avalanche safety programs in Canada, and prepares and distributes avalanche information bulletins and avalanche safety videos to the public. (Presently) Peter Schaerer is an ongoing advisor and member of the Education Committee which directs the training schools. In addition, many of the other committees of the Association regularly seek his advice.

Of particular note, perhaps the most enduring contribution of Peter's long involvement in the avalanche safety profession in Canada, was his continual fostering of the collective and co-operative spirit of all persons engaged in the avalanche field. Peter never missed emphasising the importance of promoting and recognising everyone's collective contributions in the avalanche safety community, and in encouraging the high standards of practice that are followed today.

Present Activities

Since his retirement from the National Research Council of Canada in 1991, Peter has remained active in consulting and training. During the winter of 1991-1992, he was the busiest leader and instructor of CAA training courses. He represents Canada at the International Commission of Alpine Rescue and is also an invited speaker at an avalanche conference in Italy to be held in December 1999.

Summary

Canadians, whether driving on an avalanche prone highway, skiing at a mountain ski area, travelling in the mountains with a guide, attending a recreational avalanche course or snowshoeing, skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling or hiking in the mountains in winter, are benefiting directly or indirectly from Peter Schaerer's extensive contributions to avalanche safety.