

## **Achieving Kilimanjaro ambition to overcome depression mountain**

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**On 5 July 2012, I stood on the roof of Africa – 5,895 metres above sea level – having fulfilled a lifelong ambition to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.**



Ready for departure: Rod outside Heathrow Airport.

After seven days on the mountain with four wonderful companions I had never previously met, I took those final few steps through the snow to Uhuru Peak and success.

This was an achievement off my bucket list. Although the original plan was to have tried by the time I was 50 years old, I achieved it aged 57. However, more notably, it was also the final step in a fight against depression that had been affecting me more and more over the previous few years. The success has changed me as a person, both in my outlook on life and into becoming a far more positive person, wanting to succeed.

## **Dark places**

Depression and mental illness is an ever-increasing problem in our profession, as highlighted by some columns in this journal. One can feel very isolated and helpless, and probably one of the hardest things is admitting to yourself you are “ill” before you can do anything about it or seek help.

After working through the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in 2001 and questioning why I did this job with the unnecessary killing, a marriage breakdown, other failed relationships and other things going wrong in my life, I reached a stage where I was becoming more and more insular, not sleeping, going into dark places in my mind and starting to hate myself.

It was only after going to my GP for insomnia that depression was mentioned by him and, even then, I wouldn't admit to it, as if some sort of stigma was associated with mental illness. He eventually persuaded me I had depression and should take medication. Counselling followed when the tablets weren't working, but I couldn't approach this with a positive outlook.

The hardest part was when my children felt uncomfortable with me. All this time, I continued working, keeping everything to myself, becoming more withdrawn. Even when I admitted to it at work, I received no help, but probably the biggest kick in the teeth was being sent to occupational health meetings to see if I was fit enough to work.

However, after a holiday in Egypt and reading one of those inspirational little ditties, I saw the light and realised the only person who could help me was myself. Close friends pushed me into reviving my Kilimanjaro ambition. As fast as I found excuses, they found reasons why I should do the climb.

So, in February 2012, I took the plunge and, after a medical, booked the trip for late June on the Lemosho route, which provides the longest time to acclimatise to the altitude. It was also suggested I should try to raise money for a local hospice. I was going to do it, or at least try.

I had to start walking, so evenings and weekends were spent on the local Shropshire hills, before a week in Exmoor to complete the 45-mile Coleridge Way in two days to see if I could walk for that long. Finally, a friend who had done "Kili" took me up the Watkin Path on Mount Snowdon and said it was as hard as anything on Kili. I was ready to go.

## **No turning back**

Checking in at Heathrow Airport was the point of no return. Still unsure of myself, once on the plane I could only look forward to the climb and wonder who my companions would be.

A stop at Addis Ababa in Ethiopia was followed by the short flight to Kilimanjaro Airport, over the Rift Valley, I had dreamed of so many times since I was a child.

I met my companions and tour leaders, Chunga and William. There were five of us, but the operator nearly cancelled the trip a few days before as only three were signed up. One companion was the chief rugby correspondent of a leading newspaper. Eight days of talking rugby – I had fallen on my feet.

An afternoon relaxing in a hotel was followed with a briefing by our leaders and checking kit, before

settling down for our start the next day.

## Memorable first view



Rod's lasting memory of Mount Kilimanjaro.

The image of Kilimanjaro through the clouds, staring down on us, is still clear in my mind.

After a Jeep trip to Londorossi Gate, we met our porters and were driven along a rutted track, with 45° gradients at times and a few colobus monkeys on the way, and reached our starting point on the edge of the rainforest for lunch.

We had to learn to walk “pole, pole; slow, slow” to adjust to the shortage of oxygen that would only get worse the higher we climbed.

A gentle three-and-a-half-hour walk through the forest saw us reach the first camp. Our first experience of camp life was wonderfully cooked food by our team, early nightfall with a dramatic dip in temperature and huddling in our sleeping bags soon after 8pm trying to keep warm and get some sleep. Others had the luxury of sharing a tent, but I was alone.

However, disaster struck when my camera dropped out of my pocket and down a drop-down toilet. The porters valiantly rescued it for me, but I wasn't going to use it again.

Up early the following morning, the sun shining through the tree canopy, we were in good heart as we made our way through more forest and on to the Shira Plateau towards our next camp – and a chance to swim in a mountain stream. We also had a proper introduction to our marvellous porters. The routine was the same every day through to Camp Muir – acclimatisation walks after reaching camp, gaining altitude and descending, to reduce our chances of altitude sickness.

Lava camp was next, nearing the snow line, and offered one of the best sunsets I have seen over Mount Meru. One companion was suffering from altitude sickness and wasn't going to miss out on our chicken and chips supper, but we were told in our briefing a porter would take people down if Chunga thought he or she was not fit to continue.

Next day, we went through beautiful Barranco, streams, and giant Lobelia and groundsel. Although we had to ascend the infamous Barranco Wall, a 1,000ft climb up a steep face, we had lost altitude when we reached camp on a rocky outcrop at Karanga. It was a memorable day, thanks to the scenery.

We were briefed about the summit climb the next night before settling down for a rest, with an easy walk the following day to Barafu Hut to prepare for what we had come for. Predicted temperatures were -10°C near the summit.

## **Summit trek**

Stocked up with carbohydrates, at midnight we set off for the summit in a procession of head torches up the mountain, with the end in sight somewhere in the dark. It is probably the hardest thing I have ever done. We reached Stella Point as the sun started to rise, and enjoyed a welcome cup of tea. We lost one companion, but were relieved when he caught up. One last push and we reached the summit after a six-and-a-half-hour slog. The sunrise reflecting off the ice fields was beautiful, but I was too exhausted to enjoy it.

After 15 minutes at the top, we headed down. It started to get hot – we still had seven layers on from the ascent, so it was a relief to get back to camp less than two hours later to strip off. Lunch, then down to another camp. After walking for nearly 14 hours we could relax, but were saddened to hear on the bush telegraph somebody died on the mountain from altitude sickness.

The following day, having completed our descent and saying goodbye to our porters, we sat in the garden of the Ice Club in Moshi enjoying a beer. It was here, looking to the summit, the elation of what I had done came to me. A tear in my eye boarding the plane the next day as I gave one last look at the mountain, I realised I had done it.

I am unrecognisable from the person who started the climb. I believe in myself, to the extent I wrote a book on the climb – Kilimanjaro: My Goal, My Story – to share my experience of the climb and how it has affected me as a person. I am confident and positive, with depression a thing of the past.



Rod celebrates reaching the roof of Africa.



Rod above the clouds at Karanga camp.



A bottle of Kilimanjaro Premium Lager to celebrate.

## Inspiration

I hope my experiences give people some help in overcoming similar illness. People go through worse illnesses, but, with mental illness, you are often alone and wanting help; however, some must come from yourself. Our practice is pursuing a policy of well-being, so we can recognise and help anyone going through such traumas. It is a step in the right direction.

As for me, four years on, with that confidence, I plan to climb Mount Kenya in 2017 and see the wildlife of the Serengeti, while raising money for a local hospice and for the Send a Cow project in Africa. [Sponsorship is greatly appreciated.](#)