



Left: A view worth climbing for

Below: At Stella point – 5,375m



Aiming high for charity

FOR MY term as High Sheriff of Clwyd I chose to support three charities, one being the Blind Veterans UK centre at Llandudno. To raise funds for them I decided to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Kilimanjaro is an extinct volcano and the highest mountain in Africa standing at 5,896 metres (19,343ft.).

On 5 October last year I arrived at Kilimanjaro airport and travelled to the town of Arusha to meet my climbing companions John and Debbie Grass from Colorado. The next morning we set off for Londorosi Gate in the Kilimanjaro National Park where we registered our climb and met our 18 porters and two guides; it takes that many to carry the tents, food, kitchen sink and even the loo, all essential supplies to sustain 23 people for an eight-day climb. Once registered, we trekked to Shira 1 camp (3,550m) for our first night under canvas, followed by another seven camp stops.

The daytime temperature was around 28°, decreasing as we gained altitude; at night it was -5° and below. The Shira route includes a challenging sheer 200m rockface climb at Karanga Valley but most days we trekked for 7/8 hours at a slow pace over rough and dusty terrain; the guides would tell us to 'Poly-Poly' (Slowly-Slowly).

Around 3,500m elevation the decreasing levels of oxygen cause most people to experience altitude sickness. Reducing altitude as quickly as possible is the only remedy otherwise the consequences can be fatal. About 30 per cent of climbers fail to reach the summit because of altitude sickness; fortunately our group all fared well.

Summit night base camp was at Barafu (4,680m); the night-time temperature was minus 11°. After an early dinner we tried to sleep but couldn't because of the high winds, at one stage I thought my tent was going to take off and I'd kite up the mountain! At 10.30pm using head torches we set off with our guides (the porters remain at the base camp) for Stella Point, an altitude gain of 1,135m taking seven hours. On this section of mountain the terrain is dusty volcanic scree trekked along switchbacks, tough ascending but even tougher descending because of the loose ground and tiredness.

At 6.20am we reached the crater rim at Stella Point at 5,375m, had a breakfast of chocolate and coffee then continued up to the summit at Uhuru Peak (5,896m/19,343 ft) which we reached about 7.30am. By then oxygen was about half that of sea-level

making our movement sluggish, but the panoramic views and the sunlit glaciers were spectacular, enough to make the eight-day climb worthwhile.

The descent back to base camp at Barafu took five hours, a quick meal and then a four-hour trek to Millennium Camp to tent up for the night. By that time we had been on our feet for more than 18 hours so a hasty dinner and straight into our sleeping bags.

The final day started at 6am with the porters holding a traditional tip-giving ceremony (they have a tariff!) then an 11-mile trek to Mweka Gate to sign out and be given our certificates.

The food on the trek was reasonable but limited, mostly pasta, rice and tinned soup, so by the time I got back to Arusha I was famished. Fortunately the hotel served great hamburgers and good beers!

My target for Blind Veterans UK was £8,000 and I was delighted to have raised over £8,500. I would therefore like to thank everyone who donated and helped achieve the target. I know the blind veterans will be very grateful for your generous support.

♣ Jim O'Toole DL

High Sheriff of Clwyd 2016-17