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THE ROOF OF AFRICA—  
Kilimanjaro Expedition

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# The Roof of Africa

## Kilimanjaro Expedition



Eric, John, Riley, Todd with  
the summit of Kilimanjaro directly  
over and behind Eric's head



"The Group"



BY JUDGE JOEL F. DUBINA

*Joel on the climb to Shira I Camp on west side of Shira Plateau at 11,500 ft.*

After summiting Mount Rainier in August 2002 and writing a Unity Club paper on that adventure, I immediately began looking around for another mountain to climb. I talked at length with my friend, John Steiner, who climbed Mount Rainier the year after I did. I also consulted with Mike Dunnahoo, my friend in Atlanta, who has climbed Mount Everest twice, as well as most of the other major mountains in the world. I narrowed my list down to three: Mount McKinley, which is slightly more than 20,000 ft. and is the highest mountain in North America; Aconcagua at 22,000 ft., the highest mountain in South America; and Kilimanjaro at 19,844 ft., which is the highest mountain on the continent of Africa. All of

these mountains are included in the world's seven summits. I have been to Alaska nine times and South America once, but never to Africa. I decided on Kilimanjaro.

John and I also began researching guides. I had read a book entitled *Detectives on Everest* and John Steiner had read a book entitled *Ghosts of Everest*. Both books were coauthored by Eric Simonson, founding partner of International Mountain Guides of Tacoma, Washington, and who was the leader of the 1999 Mallory and Irving research expedition that found legendary British climber George Mallory's body at 28,000 ft. on the north slopes of Everest. Mallory and Andrew Irving disappeared into the myths of history on June 8, 1924, when they were last seen

climbing high toward the then-unconquered Everest summit. There has always been speculation whether Mallory and Irving summited Mount Everest some 29 years before Sir Edmund Hillary. The mystery has not been solved yet. Eric himself has summited Everest twice and is known as the most experienced Himalayan expedition organizer in the United States and possibly the world. At any rate, John and I had a conference call with Eric about personally guiding us up Kilimanjaro.

Eric agreed to guide John and me but went one step further. He told us that if we could put together a group of ten people we would not be lumped in with another group. In other words, we could have our own private expedition. I invited my two sons-in-law, John Laughlin from Memphis, Tennessee, and Riley Roby, from here in Montgomery, and my son Mitchell. They reluctantly accepted, especially after discussing it with the rest of the family. John Steiner put together the rest of the group, including two women climbers, Becky Risteen from Montgomery and Johanna Heywood from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Everyone else was from Alabama, including Todd Broome, who is a medical doctor from Huntsville.

Kilimanjaro is one of the world's seven summits; consequently, people from all over the world who aspire to climb the world's seven summits go there. The mountain itself is the tallest freestanding mountain in the world. That is because it is not part of any range but simply stands alone on the Kenya-Tanzania border. It rises more than 5,800 meters (19,045 ft.) into a clear blue equatorial sky. The top of the mountain is covered in glaciers. Some are 150 to 250 ft. high. Sadly, the glaciers are melting and, if they continue to melt at the present rate, scientists predict by the year 2050 they will be gone. The base of Mount Kilimanjaro, which begins in a tropical rain forest, is home to the Chagga and Maasai people, two of Africa's most colorful and fascinating communities—the one an industrious agricultural Bantu group, and the other an Nilotic tribe of fierce and noble warriors.

Training, of course, is the most important preparation one can do before climbing one of the world's major mountains. In addition to my five and one-half mile power walk that I do every morning, about three months before our scheduled departure, John Steiner, J. B. Perrine, Riley, Mitchell, and I would meet at the Federal Courthouse every other day at 5:00 p.m. We would put on our backpacks in my chambers, take the elevator to the basement, and climb six flights of stairs. We would then ride the elevator down and repeat the process until we were able to do the six flights forty times in about an hour and a half. As

best we figured, this would be equivalent to a vertical ascent of about 300 ft. Climbing real stairs, in my view, is the most important part of one's training because it builds the main leg muscles used in climbing and it simulates more than anything else, minus the altitude, what climbing a mountain is really like.

Mike Dunnahoo told me that to get to Camp III on Mount Everest, you literally go straight up the Lhotse face. I asked him to describe what it was like and he said it was like climbing the steepest set of stairs you have ever climbed. Other people trained differently. Sam Adams, for example, put his backpack on every day and walked from his office in downtown Montgomery out to East Chase Mall and back going up and down the various ramps where there are overpasses. Sam told me that on two occasions he was stopped by the police. I guess it was because he looked like a hobo with his backpack and such. Once we started climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, it took me about 24 hours to discern who was in shape and who was not.

Finally, although it is not a technical climb like Mount Rainier where one must deal with avalanches and crevasses, one makes a mistake if he or she underestimates this mountain. People die on it every year, mostly from altitude sickness. Some four months after our climb, three people died below the Arrow glacier at about 15,000 ft. when a chunk of the glacier broke off, started a rockslide, and buried them alive. One of my pictures has me standing about 80 ft. below where they were camped. Although challenging and rewarding, mountaineering can be a dangerous business. And now we begin the journey.



*Londorosi Gate on the west side of the mountain — about 2 miles to the Kenya border*



*Me with the Maasai — the most feared warriors in Africa*



*On our way to Camp I*

## Monday and Tuesday 9/12/05 and 9/13/05:

Yesterday, my son-in-law Riley rented a large van to take his father Jim Roby, my son Mitchell, my son-in-law John (Sam Adams rode with John Steiner and J.B. Perrine in a separate vehicle) and me, to the Atlanta Airport. K M Airlines was impressive. We had an uneventful flight to Amsterdam where we met up with our guide, Eric Simonson. We had about an hour layover before we flew to Kilimanjaro International Airport. Altogether, we have been flying for 20 hours. All of the group's luggage made it. I can't believe we are in Tanzania, Africa. It was about a 10-minute ride to the Keys Hotel, which is really nice! Tomorrow we pack, and Thursday we actually begin our climb.

## Wednesday, 9/14:

A day to relax and pack. Packing is so important. I am thankful Mike Dunnahoo taught me how to pack when we went to Mount Rainier. Our bag going up cannot weigh more than 30 lbs. The first time mine was weighed, it came in at 40! Mine was not the heaviest. Mitchell did great; his was under the first time. So much for two pairs of boots—the Lowas will have to stay behind. Also, Beth will be distressed, but food weighs a lot and much of it will need to stay behind as well. She sent several pounds of oatmeal cookies.

My backpack weighs about 10 lbs. Eric would like to see it at 20, but I told him I could handle the weight and I figure as we go higher it will weigh less because of eating food, etc. Even at 10 lbs., it is 10 lbs. less than what I carried up Mount Rainier.

For lunch today we had cheeseburgers with an egg on top. Absolutely delicious. Also, Mitchell and I got to sit next to Eric. What a fascinating guy! He told us, among other things, about finding George Mallory's body on the north face of Everest at 28,000 ft. The artifacts taken off Mallory's body are on loan to a museum in London. As is typical, once lawyers get involved the rights to those things remain a mess.

We have been drinking water all day. It is important to stay well hydrated.

Tomorrow morning we drive to the base of the Great Mountain where we will check in with the rangers and then begin our climb.

## Thursday, 9/15:

An interesting day! Rode in three jeeps from the Keys Hotel to the Lemosho gate on the west side of the Great Mountain. It took almost four hours. The abject poverty in this country is beyond belief. You must see it to believe it. My heart breaks, especially for the children. So cute, yet their life expectancy is in the early forties. Many of them are orphans because their parents have died of AIDS.

In addition to the 12 climbers, we have 39 porters. The porters cook for us and carry our heavy bags up the mountain. They are like machines, balancing much weight on top of their heads. We hiked three hours this afternoon ascending from 7,500 ft. to 9,500 ft., where we made Camp I. Everyone did relatively well. I am worried about Becky; she seemed to have some problems and has a bad cough. Mitchell had a bout with diarrhea, but I think he is okay now.

Tomorrow we climb above the tropical rain forest and get out on the Shira Plateau to 12,500 ft. Eric is my tent mate. I slept fitfully at first; maybe better tonight.

## Friday, 9/16:

Today, we left Camp I for Camp II at about 8:15 a.m. Breakfast was excellent: porridge (oatmeal) and an omelet. It was a long dusty hike. I am not sure of the mileage, but we went from 9,500 ft. to 12,500 ft. in about 6 1/2 hours.

Although Mitchell and I could see the mountain from our hotel room, we are now at the base of the Great Mountain looking up at the glaciers on the Western Breech. It is breathtaking to say the least!

J. B. led us in a Bible study (we have all been doing a lot of praying), and we all agreed to recommend to Eric to change the route if it means we all have a better shot at the summit. We came as a team and need to do all we can to help each other. Whatever route we take, tomorrow should be an easy day as we continue to acclimatize. Then on to high camp at 15,000 ft.—higher than I have ever



*High Camp 15,000 ft.*

been. From there, *hopefully* to the summit whatever route Eric chooses to take.

## Saturday, 9/17:

Moved to Camp III today. Took a great acclimatization hike on the side to 13,100 ft. This was the highest elevation several people in the group have ever been, including Mitchell. Everyone did okay, but we lost Becky. Mitchell scared me a little, because he got an intense headache. Instead of taking a Diamox, a drug for pulmonary edema, Eric told him to pressure breathe more. Decadron, which we also had, is for cerebral edema. Eric says headaches are caused by a lack of oxygen, not a lack of Diamox! (I will never forget this statement!) Tomorrow I think an emergency vehicle is coming to get Becky.

We are now at the base of the "Great White Mountain." It is fascinating to look up at the incredible glaciers. It is true that when you climb this mountain you go through between four or five climatic zones. Tonight Eric decides which route we go: Western Breech or Machame. Either way, we are going up to 15,000 ft. Machame takes six hours; Western Breech takes two. The difference is in the vertical ascent. I will be interested to hear what our leader says.

## Sunday, 9/18:

Moved to Camp IV today without Becky. We lost her at 12,500 ft. They picked her up in an emergency vehicle this morning as we left Camp III. This is the last place on the mountain accessible by any vehicle. There was much hugging and crying. Who knows? I could be next.

Last night we had a frank discussion with Eric about which route to take. Some of us, including me, wanted to do the Western Breech, but I did say we needed to take the route which would give us *all* the best chance to reach the summit. Eric decided on the Machame route. It too is very hard, but probably not as steep as the Western Breech.

Today we hiked more than 10 miles and went as high as 15,000-plus ft. It was the highest any of us, other than Eric of course, has ever been. We all did well with a great climbing cadence. I am so proud of Mitchell. Other than some minor headaches, he has done well. Climb high; sleep low. Tomorrow we go back up to 15,000 ft. At midnight, we leave for the summit!

## Monday, 9/19:

The hardest day yet! We are at high camp after hiking more than 10 miles and are above 15,000 ft.—until yesterday, the highest



*John with the summit behind him*

any of us has ever been. We eat at 6:00 p.m. and then leave at midnight for the summit. We still have an elevation gain to go of over 4,000 ft. Eric thinks we all have a chance to make it. I still have not taken any Diamox, Decadron or other drug, except Advil. I hope I don't need any tomorrow. All of us are dealing with some altitude issues: headaches, blurred vision, etc. At any rate, this final climb is what it is all about. God willing, we will all make the summit.

## Tuesday, 9/20:

Eric sets the alarm for 10:30 p.m. As usual I can't sleep before heading to the summit. We ate at 6:00 p.m. and Eric, and I are in our sleeping bags by 7:00 p.m. I rest and look at the tent ceiling trying to psych myself up for the climb. Much of this sport is mental as much as it is physical.

We left at midnight and climbed all night. When we left high camp, it was very cold, but little wind. It is going to get much colder. The last group Eric took up, it was 15 degrees below zero on the summit. This climb was the hardest thing I have ever done. We go from 15,000 ft. to 19,340-plus ft. At 17,500 ft., John Steiner starts showing signs of cerebral edema—the most dangerous! He sees boulders moving and hears orchestra music. After a while, Eric sends John down with a guide. At 18,000 ft., it hits Mitchell and he starts hallucinating. He goes down as well. Also, at 18,000 ft. we saw the most majestic sunrise I have ever witnessed. It was even more beautiful than what I experienced on the summit of Mount Rainier. At approximately 7:30 a.m., the rest of us, somehow, arrive on the summit. We came up on the crater side at a place called Gilman's point, and then hiked to Uhuru Peak—the highest point on the continent of Africa. The glaciers we hiked past are enormous—over 200



*Me with "my men" on the Shira Plateau*

ft. high in some places. We are far above the clouds. It is breathtaking. What you can see from the highest freestanding mountain in the world is phenomenal. I see why my father-in-law, who went to Africa in the late 1970s on a safari, could see the mountain on a clear day from as far away as Zimbabwe. When we got to the top, most of us had a terrible cough, all caused by the altitude. It was very cold, right at zero degrees. My water bottles had ice in them. I am disappointed Mitchell and John Steiner didn't reach the summit, but I am particularly proud of Mitchell for getting so high. After taking many pictures, we descended going down the same way we came up. That way we could see what we came through. After eating lunch, we left Camp V. We then descended to Camp VI which is at 11,500 ft. (We can breathe again!)

Tomorrow we hike to the Mweka gate, approximately five miles, and then back to the Keys Hotel where we will get our first shower in six days. We all smell wonderful! We will then meet Becky and head for our safari.



*J.B., Johanna and Riley on the summit with 150 to 200 ft. high glaciers behind them*

## Wednesday, 9/21:

Eric and Mitchell roomed together last night because they are both feeling bad and Eric did not want me to get sick. I roomed with John Laughlin. I am so glad Mitchell roomed with Eric. He told Mitchell and me how proud he was that Mitchell went down. Mitchell was so close to the summit that when we got on the crater rim Enreki, our lead African guide, could see Mitchell's headlamp and thought for a minute that he was continuing to ascend. Eric told Mitchell that he did the right thing. I agree! No mountain is worth the risk of dying from pulmonary or cerebral edema.

While the summit is the goal that is not why one climbs mountains. It is to be together with people you enjoy and to enjoy the beauty of God's nature! Mitchell showed great maturity, and he is young enough that he will live to climb many more mountains. Eric, who is truly one of the world's strongest climbers, told me that he failed on his first two attempts on Everest. Mike Dunnahoo, who had a dream since he was 10 years old of reaching the summit of Everest, failed twice—the last time 300 ft. from the summit. One of our guides told Mitchell he did the right thing, and he is alive to tell everyone about how high he got.

The camp last night was big. As usual, the food was good. These porters make some of the best soup I have ever eaten. I slept 12-plus hours. I was so exhausted. Mitchell told me Eric got up three times last night to check on Dr. Broome. Eric thinks he may have pulmonary edema. We almost put him in the emergency Gamet



*Riley, Jim, me and John at the summit 19,340 ft.*

bag. This is like a depressurization chamber, similar to what one is put in when one rises too fast from scuba diving. His coughing woke me up several times during the night. He easily could have died.

We got up about 6:30 this morning and once again had a great breakfast. We then descended from 11,000 ft. to the Mweka gate.

Disaster struck on the way down. John Steiner fell and broke his leg. Thank God that Dr. Broome was next to John when he fell. Dr. Broome fixed a rough brace, and then two porters carried John down. I think he is going back to the U. S. tonight but I am not sure. They took



*John with his broken leg*

him to a local hospital for x-rays. It is true that most climbers who get hurt or killed are on the descent. That is because they are tired and begin to make mistakes.

Tomorrow, we head for the animal safari on the Serengeti and then home. I hate that John will miss this part of the trip. I talked to him briefly tonight, and he has a great attitude. He does not, however, want a local doctor to set his leg.

The hike down today was very hard. We went from 11,000 ft. down to about 5,000-plus feet. As we got lower, it was good to hit some humidity and to breathe more oxygen.

When we got back to the Keys Hotel, I let Mitchell take the first shower. Mitchell said I looked younger. My grey hair had disappeared. It was the dust. I almost hated to take a shower. The grey came back!

## Thursday, 9/22:

Left Moshi today. John Steiner, Eric Simonson and Ivan Wright fly back to the states tonight. The rest of our group went to Arusha where we ate lunch at a fabulous hotel and shopped a bit before we caught a flight to the Serengeti.

This afternoon we saw four of the big five—lions, cape buffalo, leopard and elephant. One cape buffalo charged our truck. We also saw antelope, hippos, crocodiles, wildebeest, dik-diks and all species of birds. This place is unbelievable! I have never seen so much game. Had dinner outside where a cape buffalo came within 20 steps of our table. It was a bit disconcerting. There are armed escorts everywhere to protect hotel guests from the wild animals.

This hotel is unbelievable; it is in the middle of nowhere. When we got to our room Mitchell killed a huge spider. There was a can of bug spray in the room. That is a bad sign! I will probably sleep with one eye open all night. I am so sore from the climb I can barely walk.

## Friday, 9/23:

Up early this morning at 4:00 a.m. to head out at 5:00 on the hot air balloon ride. I think it may have been the highlight of the trip. The balloon is the third largest hot air balloon in the world. It held 12 passengers plus the pilot. The pilot was a really interesting guy from Great Britain. Once we were up, we went across the Serengeti, which is the size of the country of Belgium, where we saw much game. In fact, we saw three of the big five, including two huge male lions. I could not believe how quiet the balloon was. Of course, it is steered by hot gas and the use of ropes. The landing was a trip as was the takeoff. We were literally on our backs like astronauts. After we landed, right in the middle of about 10,000 tommys, which is a species of antelope, we drank champagne and made toasts.

After breakfast, we left for Ngorongoro. We saw many animals and as we got closer to Ngorongoro, we began to see many Maasi. They are the most fearsome of all African natives. They literally kill all game, including lions, with spears. After a long dusty ride, we arrived at the Ngorongoro Serera Lodge where we will spend the next two nights. From there back to Arusha and then Sunday night, back to the USA.

## Saturday, 9/24:

We went down in the Ngorongoro crater today. It looks like the Great Salt Lake in Utah. The animals were incredible. A female and male lion walked between our trucks. Some sort of territorial thing. We also saw a black rhino today. There are only 13 left in this part of Tanzania. Almost extinct I think. I have never seen so many zebras and wildebeest—thousands of them. We saw warthogs, jackals, two cheetahs, lions and the most despicable, the hyenas (fisi). The natives hate them because they think they are evil spirits. I remember from Robert Ruark's books how evil the natives think they are. Actually, they are just wild dogs who act as scavengers.

Tonight was our last night in Africa. The local Maasi put on a great show. They are the most fearsome natives in this part of the world. They dress colorfully, wearing red and purple capes; they are frightful looking people.

Got word John Steiner is okay. Apparently his surgery was successful. I am saddened his trip ended the way it did.

## Sunday, 9/25:

I slept great last night; the first good night's sleep since I got to Africa. I think the exhaustion finally settled in. I killed a second spider at 3:00 a.m. this morning. I am surprised I was able to go back to sleep. I fear nothing in this world but spiders. I hate spiders! God should have made nothing with more than four legs.

We left for Kili International Airport but stopped at a hotel 10 minutes away to cleanup and eat. We first fly to Dar Es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania on the Indian Ocean, then to Amsterdam (almost 12 hours), and then nine more to Atlanta.

## Sunday (cont'd) and Monday 9/26:

This is a trip I will never forget. This experience with my three men will remain forever etched in my conscience.

While I never say never about anything in life, I think I have climbed my last major mountain. I am getting close to 60 and I have learned one has to be realistic about these things. I only wish I had started climbing 20 years ago when both body and mind were in better shape.

People constantly ask me why did I climb Mount Rainier and Mount Kilimanjaro? I give you the same answer I did three years ago when I quoted John Muir: "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." ■

*Judge Dubina thanks his wife, Beth, for all her support.*



**Judge Joel F. Dubina**

**Judge Joel F. Dubina** is a judge on the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals. He graduated from the University of Alabama in 1969 and received his J.D. degree from the Cumberland School of Law in 1973. After practicing law for nine years, he was appointed a United States Magistrate in 1983, a United States District Judge in 1986 by President Ronald Reagan and to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit in 1990.