

african dawn

Thomas E. Muller missed his first sun rising over Mt Kilimanjaro. Almost fifty years later he returns to pay homage to the majestic mountain and the continent of his birth.

The knocks at 5.50 am on the wooden bungalow door were gentle but insistent.

"Mrs Muller... Mrs Muller..." That deep, composed voice outside was tinged with a pinch of excitement. "Come take a look; Kilimanjaro is clear today."

It was Mr Lány, the proprietor of the Marangu Hotel, a modest but amiable lodge in the village of Marangu – nestled at 4,500 feet, in the lush rainforest carpeting the lower slopes of Tanganyika's illustrious mountain and Africa's highest peak. He had promised my mother that, on the very first morning when clouds were not shrouding Mt Kilimanjaro, he would awaken her to view the first rays of sunrise bathing its majestic summit.

That was November 1940. I was just an eleven-month babe and slept through this daybreak spectacle. It was important to catch the early part of the day, before the warm, humid air of the valley rose up the sides of the volcano and formed into thick, blanketing cloud. No matter. One day, I would receive a very different wake-up call and see the magnificent mountain from an extraordinary and breathtaking standpoint.

We spent a month with the Lánys, a Czechoslovak couple who ran the Marangu Hotel for holiday-makers from Nairobi, in neighbouring Kenya, and hikers wanting to tackle the 19,340-foot dormant volcano. Lány died in 1941.

Now, fast-forward – by forty-nine years – to December 1989. The time had come to scale that mighty volcano myself. The summit of Kilimanjaro was first reached in October 1889 by German geologist Hans Meyer and his party, so 1989 was the centenary of that first ascent.

A month earlier, I had sailed by cargo ship from the French

port of Marseille, crossed the Mediterranean to Egypt's Port Said, squeezed through the Suez Canal, progressed down the Red Sea, entered the Indian Ocean and disembarked in Kenya's port of Mombasa. From here I flew to Kilimanjaro International Airport in the land now

known as Tanzania.

A shuttle bus ride, via the town of Moshi, over pot-holed roads brought me to the still sleepy village of Marangu.

I unloaded my climbing gear in my Marangu Hotel cottage and hurried to meet the Lánys' daughter, Miss Erica Lány – now frail and white-haired – but still putting in a half-day's work to keep the lodge running. In her youth, she had climbed Kilimanjaro many times and had pioneered the route and ideal timings for successful attempts by her mountaineering clients. I showed her a square-format, black-and-white photograph taken with an ancient camera. As she squinted at it, I asked whether she recognized the towering man with the Freudian face, goatee beard and immense girth, holding me as an infant. It was her father, Mr Lány. But her eyes were weak and she couldn't make out the details.

That evening, I was having dinner in the lodge dining room, when the head waitress approached. "Dr Muller, you have a telephone call from Dr Mandela." I knew exactly whom she meant and took the call. It was my climbing partner and childhood schoolmate Dr Fred Mandel, a research scientist at the Upjohn pharmaceutical company in Kalamazoo, Michigan, calling from Nairobi. Somehow, we had missed meeting up in Nairobi



Almost Fred, Leslie and Protas resting at Gillman's point.



Another time Mr Lány with young Thomas Muller at Marangu Hotel.

The best of the young Chagga men get the plum jobs offered by the mountain safari lodges: expedition porter, camp cook, or mountain guide.

and travelling to Marangu together. "Fred, I'm starting the Kili climb in two days, so you'd better get here quick," I asserted.

Marangu and its surrounds are peopled by the Chagga tribe who work the fertile soil to cultivate their maize, bananas and coffee. The best of the young Chagga men get the plum jobs offered by the mountain safari lodges: expedition porter, camp cook, or mountain guide.

Fred arrived the following day. Joining us for the climb was Leslie Hayman, a 28-year-old Canadian marketing whiz, working for a Toronto company. She had recently undergone open-heart surgery, but I could detect in her a supreme level of fitness. The three of us formed a single climbing party and were assigned our Chagga guide, Protas Omari Kimei, assistant guide, Isadore, and six porters.

Climbing Kilimanjaro is a five-day affair: four days up, through three camps, and one day down. The porters carry the food and water, cooking utensils, kerosene lanterns, standard bedding and – above the tree line – the firewood. And the guide gets his own porter. Early next day, we travelled by pickup truck to the

With Protas leading the way
– lantern in hand – we
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the frozen scree.



Elated Uhuru Peak, summit of Kilimanjaro. (Photo by Leslie Hayman)

Marangu gate of Kilimanjaro National Park. Two hours were squandered in doing the required paperwork at Park Headquarters: registration for the climb and payment of nine sets of Park fees.

We began the four-hour walk to our first overnight camp at Mandara Hut (9,000 ft) by hiking through dense rainforest. I was feeling terrible. The evening before, I had gone into Marangu to observe the local choir rehearsing Christmas carols, stopping afterwards at a ramshackle bar to sample the locally brewed banana beer. Now, my stomach was punishing me.

Next day was the 5-hour trek to Camp Two – Horombo Hut, at 12,000 feet. As we gained altitude through open alpine meadow, I sensed the thinning air. “Pol-e pol-e,” Protas our guide would remind us in Swahili: take it slowly. By late afternoon we reached Horombo Hut, set in a rocky valley and surrounded by cactus-like giant groundsels, up to five metres tall, that bloom once every 50-70 years. If I were a plant, I could easily be a giant groundsel.

Day 3 was a 6-hour climb to Kibo Hut, nestled at 15,450 ft. The alpine moorland gives way to alpine desert and soon one is puffing up the lunar landscape of the saddle between the lower peak of Mawenzi and Kibo peak, the summit. The chilly air at the Kibo Huts was penetrating my bones and, after a dinner consisting of hot tea and dry bread, I turned in for a very short night on my wooden-plank bunk bed.

It is 1:00 a.m. Protas nudges me out of a fitful slumber. “Thomas, we need to get going. Please get ready.” Thus began Day 4, the push for the summit. We staggered half-awake onto the trail on this moonless night and began the agonising, 5-hour ascent to the snows on Kilimanjaro’s peak. With Protas leading the way – lantern in hand – we snaked, single-file through the darkness, making countless switchbacks over the frozen scree. An eternity later, I sensed the faintest of glows in the sky and, looking up, could make out the silhouette of the crater rim. My heart soared and turned into a pounding piston. Energy poured into my legs. I scrambled ahead of everyone and by the time I reached the snow-covered summit, the sun was bathing it in an orange-red fire. We had made it to Gillman’s Point, generally regarded as having reached the summit.

But I was in no mood to call it quits at Gillman’s Point and start the descent. After a brief rest, I announced to Protas that I would be climbing another 200 metres of altitude to reach Uhuru Peak, the true summit of Kilimanjaro. Fred was spent and began his descent of the mountain with Isadore as his guide. Leslie seemed as buoyant as I was, so Protas led the way for another hour’s climb along the crater’s rim.

At 9:45 am on 10 December – three days short of my 50th birthday – we stood at Uhuru Peak under the blazing African sun. Having reached 19,340 feet, we were at jet-stream altitude. As the wind screamed past us with a furious force I pictured the Tanzanian and Canadian flags I had attached to my wooden climbing stock being shredded

to bits and sucked up into the engines of some jet that might pass overhead.

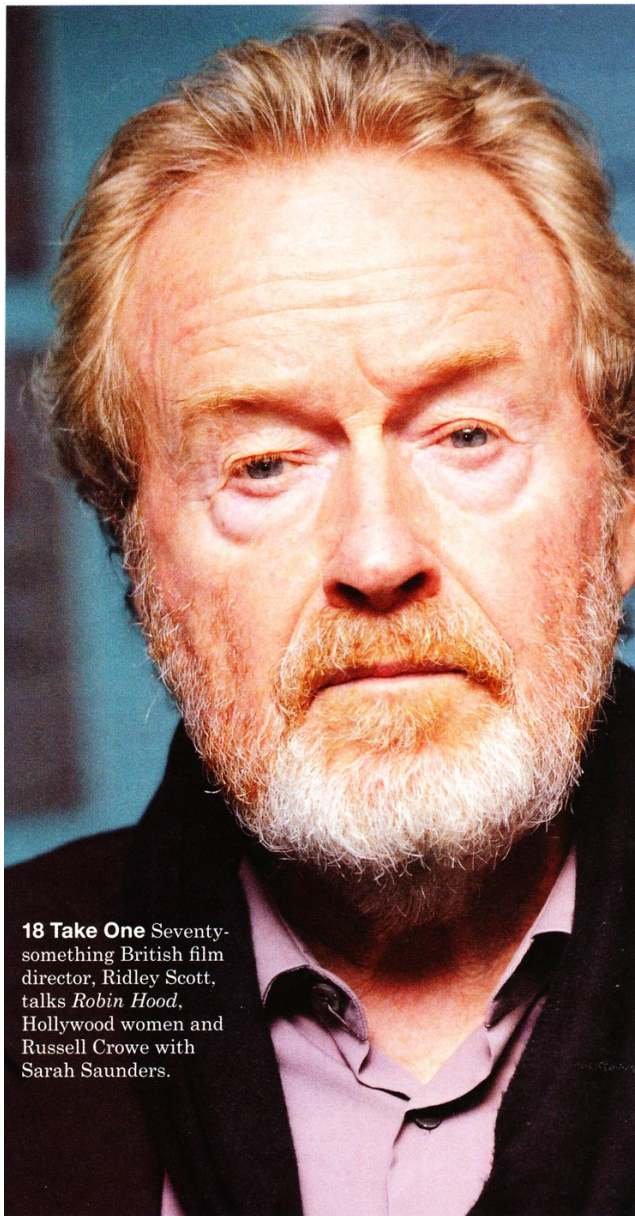
Posing for a photo at 5,895 metres above the Indian Ocean, with the blinding equatorial sun reflecting off the snow, I cherished the clothing that was saving me from ultraviolet incineration. And although I was wearing glacier goggles, my overriding preoccupation was that I could go snow blind.

We turned and made our way back along the crater rim, later descending at an amazing rate through the now-unfrozen, loose scree, like speed-mad downhill skiers, on a mission to get back to Kibo Hut in 60 minutes. A day later, after another overnigher at Horombo Hut, we were back in sub-tropical Marangu. To the delight of my Chagga tribe porters, I gave away every item of warm clothing and climbing gear I had packed.

My long journey home began with a flight from Mombasa to Nairobi on Christmas Eve, which took me past Mt Kilimanjaro. Kibo was visible below, Mawenzi hidden in the clouds. Kibo’s snow-covered cone looked even whiter against the jet-black lava streaking its sides. I cast one last glance back at Kibo, receding in the distance. Kilimanjaro had waited 49 long years for me to revisit. Now, finally, I had paid my respects. ■

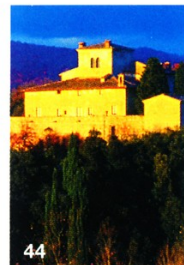
50something

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Cover Film Director Ridley Scott in Los Angeles, March 2010.
Photo: Kevin Lynch ©



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Politics is a funny thing. Last issue we rejected celebrity for celebrity's sake and went with the thinking person's cover: the Prime Minister. That it was his first exclusive interview since *Rolling Stone* certainly helped convince us. As did the revamped magazine's move to engage members much more in the organisation's lobbying processes by introducing campaign pages and a bit more politics.

Engage you we did. And boy, did the accusations fly! Besides being "seduced" by Mr Rudd, my name, according to one reader, is now officially "Dorothy Dixier".

Magazines landed in bins, memberships went out the door. Callers snarled abuse onto answering machines and, such was the friction of pens hitting paper, we could feel the heat before the letters even arrived.

The thing is, I've been here ten years (many of you have been members for 30) and in that time I have seen National Seniors work constructively with both conservative and liberal governments and opposition parties to advance the interests of all older Australians. We're not pushing for Labor nor are we a Coalition outpost.

National Seniors' lobbying agenda is your lobbying agenda – it comes from you and it supports no particular party. 2010 is an election year. Together we'll stand up, together we'll be counted.

Enjoy this one – pollicie free.

Sarah Saunders

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An Accredited Specialist in Insolvency Commercial Litigation, Rod Cunich is a commercial and corporate lawyer of 30 years standing with special interest in insolvency, reconstruction, turnaround management, asset protection, estate planning and business succession planning. Rod works for Slater & Gordon in Sydney.



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David Lord has been a sportscaster for 43 years, most recently with ABC radio. He was the only man at the coal-face of the two biggest international sporting stories of the last 50 years – World Series Cricket in 1977, and attempts to professionalise rugby in 1983.