

THE KILIMAN

THE STORY OF AN AMAZING

Last August, Jim Milina of North Vancouver made history.

Using a specially designed wheelchair, Jim and his mountaineering team (CORD, an acronym for Climbing Over Restriction and Disability) took up the challenge of Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro, the tallest free-standing mountain on earth. No wheelchair user had ever before attempted the northern route they plotted - Rongai Route, considered difficult. After days of arduous climbing, not to mention weeks of training and months of preparation, Jim reached Kilimanjaro's "Saddle", between the peaks of Mawenzi and Kibo.

Jim had climbed higher than any quadriplegic person in the world - 14,500 feet. Throughout his adventure, Jim kept a constant log of the ups and downs - and ups and downs and ups and downs. We bring you a taste of Jim's quest with an excerpt from his story.

CLIMB DAY 1

OUR FIRST CLIMBING DAY started out early. We awoke around 6:30 at our hotel in the town of Marangu, on the southern slope of Kilimanjaro. We did some final packing and last-minute preparations. We dropped off our gear in the courtyard of the hotel and were at breakfast by 7:30.

When we returned to the courtyard after breakfast we were met by a line of Tanzanian men; in front of each man was a large burlap sack. They had stuffed all of our equipment and supplies— including our brand-new Arc'teryx packs - into flour sacks. Each filled sack weighed over 50 pounds. The porters would carry them on their heads! We were introduced to each of the men. I would find out later that the hands I was shaking here at the hotel would be the same hands my life would be in over the next five days. The chair and sacks were loaded onto the roof of a behemoth Mercedes four-wheel-drive. We drove

for 3½ hours around to the northwest side of the mountain to Rongai, a tiny logging town near the Tanzanian border with Kenya. We were dropped at the Rongai Gate, which was little more than a shack or two with a small crowd milling about. My positioning and clothing were checked one last time and the sleeping bag I was in was zipped up to my mid-trunk. The four-point seat belt harness was fastened and tightened, and then the



The team encounters a rough section at about 10,000 feet above sea level.

solar panels were fixed into place. The chair was kicked forward and rolled off the braces. We were off!

The trail set off through a small stand of pine trees but brought us to a dirt road leading up through a clear-cut area of rainforest. The road was very dry, and the inches-deep volcanic dust kicked up into clouds as we passed over it. As we got further up, the smoking earth yielded to fields of dry cornstalks chattering on the barely perceptible breeze.

The road's steady incline, coupled with the soft volcanic dust and the fact that we were already at an altitude over 6,000 feet, made it deceptively difficult. By the time we left the road and entered the forest, we were already using the help

of the additional porters we had hired.

Where the logging ceased, the rainforest took over, enclosing us in a tunnel of vegetation. The trail was firm and dry and interlaced with roots, sticks and small logs. It was similar to the environment we'd trained on in the mountains of North Vancouver. The difference was, we were at an altitude near 7,000 feet.

The altitude was having a dragging effect on all of us. Tanzanian porters had taken over the front two positions on the

chair. At the back, Erik, Glen, Tony and Brian took short turns that worked in rotation. The trail was good, but then incline was steady and we began to wonder what we had gotten ourselves into. Our spirits were buoyed, however, when we heard rustling and saw the long, black and white coats of several Colobus monkeys jumping from treetop to treetop.

By the time we exited the rainforest, the porters had taken over the back of the chair as well. Now it was the Canadians who helped out in the tougher stretches.

We'd left the forest and entered a bush zone with a tight, winding trail of trampled grass and rocky outcroppings. Somewhere around 9,000 feet, we came around a final corner and the path opened into a large, circular, grassy area cut into the surrounding vegetation. We had made to First Camp.

It was called "First Cave", and had probably been a stopping point for hikers for a very long time. The actual cave was merely a large slab of rock. We were happy to be done for the day and celebrated with a cup of tea. We felt confident, having finished the day's hike within our expectations. When we retired to our tents for the night, we felt a giddy excitement about the following day's seven or eight-hour day.

On Day Two we'd be reaching the 10,000-foot mark, the point at which altitude really begins to have effects. There was no data available on how a paralyzed body reacts to altitude. In fact, we were participating in the first-known

JARO QUEST

ADVENTURE • BY JIM MILINA

such study, in conjunction with Simon Fraser University's Kinesiology Department. We would monitor my heart rate, blood pressure and blood oxygen level, as well as listen to my lungs and test pulmonary function. This would also tell us how my body was coping. Inside the tent, my mind churned, overflowing with a sudden and overdue reality. What on earth was I doing at 9,000 feet, halfway up the side of the largest volcano on earth? I was in the thick of it now, and there was no way out.

CLIMB DAY 2

WE BROKE CAMP around 9:30 am and as we left the clearing, the terrain immediately got worse.

The heather that had lined the trail the previous day now grew higher and encroached

on the trail. The trail itself was tough. Where we encountered outcroppings of volcanic rock, the chair had to be muscled up and over them. The trail continued to deteriorate, and over some stretches it disappeared altogether, becoming little more than a field of boulders.

This didn't sound and all like to the trail I'd researched and heard about. I had been told that this trail was similar to the southern Marangu Route, a smooth walking path that would be friendly to me and the chair. Day Two erased any hope of that being true. And the trail, if you could call it that, was only beginning to reveal what it had in store for us.

As we neared 10,000 feet, the heather gave way to lower, exotic-looking shrubs. Some rocky sections had three, four, and even six-foot boulders, all of which required strategy as well as significant exertion on everyone's part. On these sections, Glen, Erik, Tony, and Brian all hunkered in and helped lift or pass the chair up and over whatever obstacle was in our way. For me the ride was brutal. I was constantly shaken, pounded and

jarred as the chair made its way up the trail. Lunch break was around 10 or 11,000 feet at "Second Cave." Whoever named these caves could've used some imagination. Our stop was brief; it was already 3:30 and we were told we were only halfway to our next camp at Kikelewa Caves.

I'm sure we all hoped that the terrain



The team reaches the top of a challenging ridge.

would improve as our direction changed and we went from a fall line ascent to a traverse that aimed directly towards Mawenzi. Mawenzi, the lower of Kili-manjaro's twin peaks, is characterized by its craggy volcanic spires. It was toward Mawenzi that we would climb for the rest of today and tomorrow.

The trail crossed an endless series of ridges. The rocky sections of boulders grew more frequent and the grassy sections disappeared. The single wheel of the chair rounded its way over boulder after boulder, and occasionally was lifted entirely off the ground. The pounding and punishment I experienced worsened along with the terrain.

The fading light, however, was becoming of greater concern. The sun had passed behind Kibo and darkness was falling rapidly. We were out of food and water,

and the porters were in only t-shirts and sweatpants. I was feeling a chill as well, and didn't like it much when one of the porters said we still had a kilometre or two to go.

Luckily, Corrine soon returned from camp with some headlamps, water, chocolate, power bars, and warm clothes. Two additional porters accompanied her and were put to immediate use spelling off two of the regulars. The fresh hands quickened the pace. However, it was still

another hour before more help arrived. A tiny line of lanterns appeared over one of the distant ridges, and as it grew closer we could hear voices in Swahili. The chair and I suddenly became the centre of a surreal swarm of activity. All I could see from underneath my shelter of warm clothing were hands grabbing at the chair and pulling it up, over, or around anything in our path. Our pace had improved now with almost a dozen sets of hands propelling the chair, but it was still two hours before we made it to Camp Two. We were all exhausted.

It was at this moment that we witnessed the awesome power of the CORD Team in action. No one knew what my condition would be, just that it might be a very serious situation. As we rolled into camp, the chair came to a stop, braces were quickly put in place and I was picked up and literally thrown into the tent where team members had been inside getting it warm. They had also been wearing the clothes I would be changing into and lying in my sleeping bag to warm it up for me. Once I was tightly zipped inside the warm, down sleeping bag, I was given hot soup, rice, and some nasty tasting chicken—which I forced myself to eat. Nutrition and energy were a necessary part of our success.

Sleep somewhere around 12,000 feet was elusive once again, but at least I felt less apprehensive about where we were. After all we'd been through, we'd *survived*. And there wasn't much chance that things could get any worse on Day Three.

CLIMB DAY 3

THE MORNING WAS CRISP. The sky was blue and crystal-clear. We started earlier this day. I took off with the porters immediately after wolfing down breakfast; the others would catch up. We had extra porters today. Our pace and timing on Day Three were much better, and the late in the afternoon we ascended the final ridge before we descended into Camp Three. As we went up the final ridge, cold clouds heavy with vapour swept up from below and enveloped us in a thick moist fog that clung to any exposed skin and beaded its way down my Gore-tex.

The crest of the ridge was a boulder field of razor-sharp rocks, and the aluminum of the chair was cold wet and slippery. At some sections the chair and I were passed gently down into awaiting hands because the only way over was *all* the way over. Those were the *smoothest* bits, and so long as I remained calm about the chair being held all but vertical with my upper body suspended in the four-point harness, I knew things would *probably* work out just fine. I tried not to think about the rocks that stared out at me as I hung there waiting for the moment to end. I tried not to think about the possibility of hands slipping on the cold, slick metal, or the harness coming loose, or, worse yet, my body coming into contact with those sharp rugged boulders directly below. This entire trek was becoming an endless series of dangerous experiences. Luckily, after cresting the ridge, it was a quick and only somewhat treacherous descent into Camp Three.

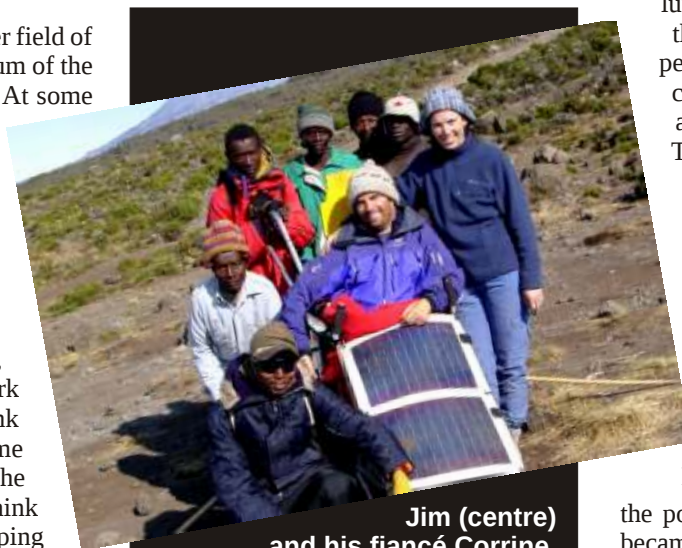
Diane felt my lower leg and found it warm, but I still felt cold. Johnneen checked my temperature and it was a little above normal, just the way I like it, but I still felt cold. Angela, as always, buoyed my spirits, and Scotty got as much as he could on videotape. This team knew how to get things done. It was exactly the way I had imagined it would be all those months earlier when the dream of Kilimanjaro was just that—a *dream*.

Our team had grown with the addition, our new Tanzanian friends, and that made success feel inevitable, especially given all that we had been through already. What more could the mountain throw at us? Apparently, there were still a few restrictions to climb over.

CLIMB DAY 4

WE AWOKE AND FOUND that the tire of the chair had been ruptured the previous day and would have to be changed, which took almost an hour. Adversity, however, was not done with us yet.

We had to make it up another thousand feet of rocky terrain to get onto the Saddle. Once on the Saddle we could descend via the Marangu, or "Tourist" Route. All of us were affected by the altitude. Exertion of any kind was exhausting. Changing the tire was an expense of energy. When it was finally pumped up using a tiny bicycle



**Jim (centre)
and his fiancé Corrine,
and the Tanzanian guides.**

hand pump and I was transferred from the tent into the chair, the tire immediately went flat. *Adversity*.

Another hour of repairs later, and this time the tire held. Within minutes we were off.

The rest of that team went directly up and over the ridge, but I, with the four porters and Glen and Erik, backtracked along yesterday's path and went around the ridge. The trail we followed had less elevation but was also a less direct way of reaching the Saddle. The trail the others followed was steep and precarious, and at this altitude, extremely difficult.

Finally the mountain seemed to ease its determination to turn us back. The rocks and boulders began to diminish. We came around the ridge and traversed back and up onto the high alpine desert between the twin peaks of Mawenzi and Kibo.

The landscaped was eerie and strange, as though we were on the moon. There were few signs of life but a tuft of grass here and there. A cold and steady wind separated the sandy earth below from the eternity of blue sky above. We had made it. We were on the Saddle.

It was a vast, barren expanse. With my mental function hazy from the altitude, and a lack of any frame of reference, the proportions of things were confusing. What seemed nearby was very distant, and what seemed very distant one moment was suddenly nearby only moments later.

Our contingent stopped at the only significant feature on the barren landscape. Four or five boulders in the middle of nowhere provided the only shelter from the incessant wind. We stopped to eat our lunch and wait for the others to come up the trail. Glen, Erik and the other porters sat in the lee of the rocks and I sat nearby but separate, with my back blocking the wind, and ate my lunch watching for the others. When they finally appeared over a barely perceptible rise, they were crystal clear in detail but still a great distance away.

To my right was Mawenzi with its rugged, jagged spires now behind us. To my left was Kibo, the final ascent for the others the next day.

Erik, Johnneen, Glen and Brian—would all reach Uhuru Peak, the highest point on the crater rim. Angela, Scott, and Diane would also make the crater rim at Gilman's Point, also considered the summit.

Before me was the wide expanse and the point where the Saddle fell away and became a pillowy sea of clouds that extended over Kenya as far as the eye could see. This remote northern slope had been our world for the past four days.

Now I sat in a place where no quadriplegic had ever been before. This was my moment. Isolated. Alone. And engrossed inside my mind, body and world... not unlike the way my disabled world feels much of the time.

I sat, content and at peace. I was somewhere between the busy-ness of the world that existed below, and the divinity of the heavens above. A rush of exhilaration and vitality fused into a realization of where I was and all that we had accomplished.

The others soon arrived, and when they did my world returned to a hub of activity. Pictures were taken and a short piece of video was shot. When we'd put the team together, I had thought about 'that moment' and imagining 'that photo' which we would all have to remember what we did. This was *that* picture. We were that team I had imagined we could be. And, we'd successfully accomplished all that I knew we could.

This was *our* moment.

Check out their web site for more photos and details at www.cordclimbs.ca.