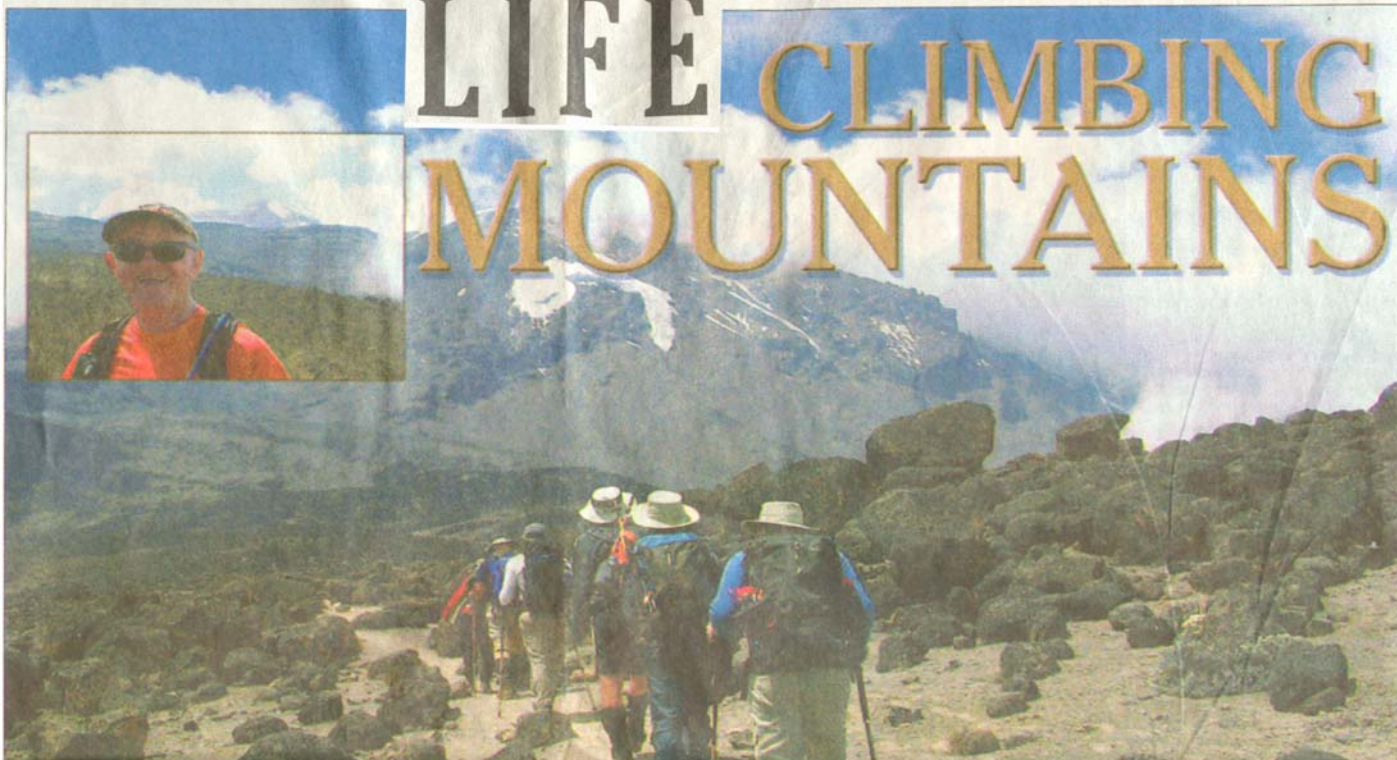


# LIFE CLIMBING MOUNTAINS



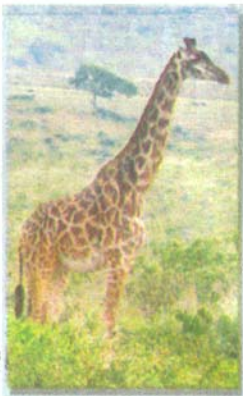
BY JENNIFER BERRY HAWES  
Of The Post and Courier Staff

**T**he 12 meet at the base of Africa's highest peak, Kilimanjaro, a dormant volcano that soars 19,340 feet toward the sky of northeast Tanzania. They quickly bond over a shared ambition to scale "The Roof of Africa."

Actually, Kilimanjaro comprises three volcanoes. Dr. Fletcher Derrick, a Charleston urologist, and the group of Americans on this August day will take on its tallest peak, Uhuru.

Derrick, who's about to turn 70, is the group's senior member. A guide nicknames him Babu, or "grandfather" in Swahili. Derrick counts it an honor, given the life path that brought him here.

The youngest trekker is 17. The others are doctors, an investment banker, teachers, a state trooper, engineers, a speech therapist. Together they will traverse five major ecosystems from the savanna of the Serengeti to the rainforest, an alpine forest, a desert, a lava rock moonscape and an ice cap that covers Kilimanjaro's



wide crater.

Derrick enjoys them all instantly. Like him, they are enthusiastic and love a challenge. But in the exchange of life stories, Derrick leaves off details. He keeps secret the fact that 18 months earlier he lay on an operating table, his chest bone sawed open so surgeons could create four new heart bypasses.

Derrick doesn't want the group hovering, worrying whether the old guy will make it.

### IN NEED OF CHALLENGE

In a sense, the journey up Kilimanjaro began when Derrick's father suffered a heart attack at 52 and then was killed by one at 64. Derrick's father was one of nine boys. All had heart trouble. Seven of the nine died from cardiac-related problems.

Derrick didn't need his medical degree to know that his body would require some preventive maintenance. He began to jog and to eat right in 1970. He didn't plan to fall victim to heart disease, not without a fight.

Not that Derrick is one to sit idly. The Army medic turned urologist and profes-

## Heart bypass didn't keep man from taking on Kilimanjaro



Derrick, kneeling in white in the front row, hiked with a group that included far more people than the 11 other Americans who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Four guides and 34 porters (a few not shown here) assisted them.



Above, Derrick on top of Uhuru peak. The trekkers stop at a preparation shed to fill water containers, put gaiters on their legs and adjust their packs. From left are Derrick, Helge Szwering, John Jacques, James Mondy, William Jacques, Karen Grzesik, Johanna Lawlor, Blanka Ackova and Polly Bixby.

of guys appoint me the emotional and spiritual leader of the group. I'm not sure why this occurred, but it may have had something to do with my age, training and not getting altitude sickness. They asked me to prepare a "pep talk" to be given later when we are approaching the summit. I have mentally prepared a short talk using the word "challenge" as the basis. The idea is to encourage everyone to consider this climb a very special challenge in their lives and to use all their resources to meet it.

Aug. 6

Hike of about four to five hours to Lava Tower Camp at 15,000 feet. All of us are beginning to feel some of the effects of high altitude. Most of us do a little huffing and puffing when we are walking. The guides are always telling us to take our time and to "polepole," which means "slowly" in Swahili. We rest often and all make it to the next level and are in good spirits. The Lava Tower is spectacular jutting up out of the rocks for about 300 feet.

Aug. 7

Three hours of trekking to Arrow Glacier Camp at 16,100 feet. It is get-

ting cold now. Tonight I put on my winter silks and a couple of other layers of clothing and also sleep in those clothes. It is about 20 degrees at dawn. The glacier is spectacular, and the color changes during the day were awesome. From the cool blue of the sunrise to almost bright orange in the afternoon flow just before sunset. Break out the big parka.

I give my "challenge" talk at dinner.

Aug. 8

Six hours hiking. A tough day. Over the rocks and up to 18,750 feet. We are camping in an old crater, out of the wind, but still cold. The Crater Camp was stark, like an arctic moonscape, but beautiful. We were right beside a larger glacier than the day before. Kept on my three to four layers of clothing.

Aug. 9

Awake at 6 a.m., breakfast at 6:30 a.m., start our 600-foot climb to the Uhuru Peak at 7:30 a.m. We arrive on the top, 19,340 feet, about 9 a.m. The climb to the top was steep, and there was about 40 mph wind blowing. The actual top of the mountain is about the size of a couple of football fields. My group gave me the

honor of leading us to the peak. Something to be said again for age. We took pictures, gave high-fives, spent about an hour on top and then started down the eastern side of the mountain.

Going down becomes the hardest part. We are constantly pushing our heels into lava sand to keep from losing our footing. The hiking poles are now worth their weight in gold. My knees begin to complain. We have to move slowly, but we make it down to Mweka Camp at about 11,000 feet. That's some descent in about six to seven hours ...

Aug. 10

Another day of descent ... down, down, down to about 6,000 feet at the Kidea Gate where Martha was waiting for me. We had a wonderful hug. We bid our guides and porters good-bye. Believe it or not, it was a little teary. We had bonded during those nine days and become a little family ...

I would be greatly amiss if I did not say thanks to the good Lord who took good care of all of us as well. We came through without a mishap.

The shower at the Impala Hotel was magnificent. The baby wipes and towelettes are limited in their use.

I may not be the oldest to climb Kilimanjaro, but probably one of the few who has done it after a quadruple bypass.

That night during dinner, Derrick confessed. He finally told his fellow trekkers that he'd undergone quadruple bypass surgery. Mouths dropped. The normally chatty group sat stunned.

Among them was William Jacques, an investment banker who had befriended Derrick during the arduous trek.

"I think that Fletcher is a character of Hemingway-esque proportions," Jacques said, looking back.

"He is not going to let something as trivial as quadruple bypass surgery dictate the way he wants to live life to the fullest."