



# Fort Carson-MEDDAC News

## Injured Soldier climbs Kilimanjaro to inspire others

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It took 10 days but Staff Sgt. Sandra Ambotaite finally topped the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro on January 15, 2012, and proved a point.

“The only disability you can have is a negative attitude,” said Ambotaite.

The 27-year-old medical regulation specialist joined eight others on “Mission Kilimanjaro.” The mission was spearheaded by Kyle Maynard, a quadruple amputee who wanted to assemble a team of able-bodied and disabled civilians and veterans to climb Africa’s tallest peak with him. The goal was to inspire others into understanding that any obstacle could be overcome.

Ambotaite’s journey to Kilimanjaro meant overcoming her own medical obstacles. Born in Lithuania, Ambotaite came to the United States at 17 years old when her mother got a green card. While working at Coney Island in Brooklyn, she passed an Army recruiting station every day. In 2003, Ambotaite said the recruiter’s persistence paid off and she finally decided the Army would be a good way to improve her English and learn more about American culture.

“I loved it,” she said. “My plan was to do 20 years. I loved the travel and the people and what I did.”

Ambotaite became a U.S. citizen in 2005, just before deploying to Iraq. By her account, she’d found the place she felt she excelled, competing in Soldier of the Year competitions and working to move ahead.

She described her favorite pursuits before June 2009 as “anything scary, fast or competitive. An “adrenaline junkie.”

A motorcycle accident changed it all.

Ambotaite broke her back in the wreck and doctors had to fuse her spine. For a while, she didn’t know if she would ever walk again.

She admitted, “I was in depression mode. I didn’t want to get up. I didn’t want to get off the couch. I’m weak and helpless.”



Eventually, the petite blonde decided she had to try. Through outreach programs she found at the Fort Carson's Warrior Transition Battalion, she made contacts that eventually led her to Mission Kilimanjaro. Ambotaite trained by hiking 14-ers in Colorado and then found herself facing the 19,341 foot peak in Tanzania Africa.

"The first two days I got really sick. I wondered, 'Will I make it?' If I was starting out this way, I wasn't sure I'd be able to continue," she recalled.

Ambotaite pushed on and felt things got better...until the day before they reached the summit.

"Rather than take the easier route around, the team chose the hardest route. It meant moving straight up the mountain and there was no place to rest," she said.

Ambotaite said she only had to look around for inspiration.

"Look at Kyle. He was crawling it. Not once did he complain," she noted. "I had a team. It's not just me. Our team was doing it together. People from all over the world stopped by to see us on our ascent. They knew about us! It was motivating." Finally, they reached the top.

She said, "We carried the ashes of a Soldier who lost his life in Iraq. His mom asked us to spread his ashes up top. It felt special. More special than just turning around and going down again. I had mixed feelings to be there. Some happy. Some relieved. I felt like a part of the history of the mountain."

Ambotaite hoped the trip showed other veterans that obstacles, no matter what they are, can be overcome.

"Still to this day, I can't believe it happened. It's been almost three years since the accident and I went from, 'I can't do this' to what the Army trained us to do. Lead from the front."

Ambotaite is transitioning out of the Army and hopes to work for Homeland Security in Denver. Though she'd hoped to make the military her home, she said, "Everything happens for a reason."

She's now got her eyes on mountain ranges in Russia and Argentina.