

HE WANTED TO DO IT ALL

John Goddard has been everywhere, done everything. But of all the worlds he has conquered, the most challenging has been the world within.

Forty-three years ago, John Goddard drew up a list of everything he wanted to accomplish in his life. He was just 15, a kid in the suburban confines of Los Angeles. But even then he had dreams of faraway lands, and a vision of himself as a great explorer. He titled his paper, "My Life List."

"Explore the Nile, Amazon and Congo rivers," he wrote. "Climb Mount Everest, Mount Kilimanjaro, the Matterhorn. Ride an elephant, camel, ostrich and bronco. Retrace the travels of Marco Polo and Alexander the Great. Appear in a Tarzan movie. Land on and take off from aircraft carrier. Read the works of Shakespeare, Plato and Aristotle. Compose a work of music. Write a book. Visit every country in the world. Marry and have children. Visit the moon."

He numbered each item, and when he finished he had 127 goals. The list was not simply a rainy afternoon's daydreaming: It was a challenge.

Today a trim, youthful-looking 59, Goddard is a veteran of countless safaris and expeditions, a film maker, author and lecturer. He still makes his home in Southern California, living with his wife in a conventional ranch-style house. Inside, though, he sits easily amid the shrunken heads, silver daggers, bright weavings and other exotic artifacts that recall his many adventures. When that long-ago list is mentioned, Goddard has a soft smile for his younger self.

"I wrote the list," he explains, "because at fifteen I was very aware of my limitations. I was just an unformed human who had potential like everyone else, and I really wanted to do something with my life. I was keenly interested in everything - travel, medicine, music, literature, nature. I wanted to do it all, and inspire others. I set up a blueprint of goals so that I would always have something to work for. I was also aware of people around me who had gotten into ruts, had never taken risks, never challenged themselves in any way. I was determined not to go that route."

With his dreams formally on paper, Goddard lost no time in turning them into reality. By age 16 he had explored with his father in Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia and the Everglades in Florida. "That was one of the first things I accomplished on my list," he remembers. "That and learning to skin dive, owning a horse, and driving a tractor." By 20 he had dived in the Caribbean, Aegean and Red seas. He had also become an air force flier and flown 33 combat missions over Europe. By age 21 he had traveled in 21 countries, and shortly after turning 22 he discovered a Mayan temple deep in the jungles of Guatemala. That same year he became the youngest member of the Adventurer's Club of Los Angeles, and he began planning his most ambitious quest: exploring the Nile River.

"I put the Nile at the top of my list," Goddard says, "because to me it is the most important topographical feature on earth. The Nile is a microcosm of all of Africa. It has virtually every bird, animal, reptile and insect species of Africa in its basin; it has the smallest and tallest of all humans (Pygmies and Watusis); it has highly educated, sophisticated individuals in Khartoum and Cairo, and semi-nomadic pastoral people like the Dinka in the Sudan. So it was the supreme challenge to trace the whole length of the river and study the people who lived along its banks."

Goddard was 26 when he arrived at the source of the Nile in the mountains of Burundi with his expedition partners, Frenchmen Andre Davy and Jean La Porte. They seemed an unlikely team: Goddard spoke some rudimentary French. Davy spoke "schoolboy English". La Porte spoke only French. La Porte was the only one with kayaking experience. "All the government officials told us it would be impossible for three men in little 27-kilogram kayaks to go the whole 6670—kilometer length of the river," Goddard recalls. "But their nay saying only made us more determined."

The trio suffered hippopotamus attacks, bouts with malaria, blinding sandstorms, long stretches of dangerous rapids and a chase by rifle-shooting river bandits. But ten months after they set out, the three "Niloteers", as they called themselves, paddled triumphantly from the mouth of the Nile into the blue of the Mediterranean.

“I learned so much about myself on that trip,” says Goddard, “about the exhilaration of succeeding, about living life fully and intensely. It gave me extra impetus to go after my other goals. If we’d thought ahead to all the distances and problems we faced, we probably never would have left the tent. But by taking each day at a time, we eventually reached our goals. And I think that is the way to approach life - in small increments, learning, love and friendship as possible.”

Following the Nile expeditions, Goddard began checking off his other goals in quick succession. He rafted the 2330-kilometer length of the swift and rapids-filled Colorado River in 1954; explored all of the 4350-kilometer Congo River in 1956; lived with headhunters and cannibals in the wilds of South America, Borneo and New Guinea; climbed Mount Ararat and Mount Kilimanjaro; flew jet fighters at twice the speed of sound; wrote a book (*Kayaks Down the Nile*); married and had five children. After starting out as a full-time anthropologist, he launched a career as a film maker and lecturer, financing his expeditions through his talks and films.

To date, Goddard has completed 106 of his 127 goals. He has received the honors due an explorer, including memberships in the Royal Geographical Society of England and the New York Explorers Club. And he has experienced many close calls along the way.

The Congo expedition turned into a harsh lesson. Goddard set out on the river with a good friend, Jack Yowell. Well into the journey, Yowell drowned in a terrible maelstrom of white water, and his death plunged Goddard into an abyss of despair and loneliness. “We had been together day and night for six weeks, and were as close as brothers,” he says. “We’d overcome every danger along the way. Then suddenly he was gone, and I was totally on my own.” Goddard pauses briefly, remembering the pain. “For a time, I didn’t know how I could continue. But Jack and I had promised each other that if something happened to one of us, the other would complete the trip. So I went on alone.”

Over the next four months, he says, “I managed to banish loneliness forever. There was still the wonderful panoply of life in the rain forest and villages, and I realized as I paddled downstream that there is something to sustain happiness under any circumstance. This gave me the strength to continue.”

Goddard himself had had 18 close encounters with death while pursuing his goals. “These experiences have taught me to value life more deeply and savor everything I can,” he says. People often go through life never knowing what it is to express great courage, strength or endurance. But I’ve found that when you think you’re certain to die, you suddenly find an untapped well of power and control you didn’t dream you possessed. When you express that, it’s like elevating your soul to another dimension.”

Nearly everyone, he notes, has goals and dreams, but not everyone acts on them. “My Life List was written when I was very young, and reflects a young man’s interests. So of course there are things on it I’ll never do - like climb Mount Everest or star in a Tarzan film. Goal-setting is like that. Some may be beyond your capabilities, but that doesn’t mean you have to give up the whole dream.”

Goddard doesn’t feel that he is under any compulsion to complete every item on his list. “It is simply a guideline. It does not control my life,” he says. Nevertheless, he manages to check off another item every year, and constantly sets additional goals and challenges for himself. “I try to assess my life, see what areas I could improve emotionally, intellectually, physically.” He believes that such annual evaluations lead to more productivity and to deeper happiness

“It’s helpful to look at your life and ask: ‘If I had one more year to live, what would I do?’ We all have things we want to achieve. Don’t put them off - do them now!”

Each year, from September to May, Goddard gathers up his thoughts and his films (*Andes to the Amazon*, *Turkey Delights*, *The Adventurous Life*) and hits the road. His lecture circuit takes him to town halls, museums, universities and high schools where he shares his adventures. His high-powered tales and old-fashioned “can-do” message brings stacks of mail from young and old thanking him for his inspiring views.

Goddard has no shortage of future projects, including a visit to the Great Wall of China (item No. 49) and an ascent of Mount McKinley (No. 23). “When the opportunity presents itself, I’m ready.” And yes, in his heart of hearts, he firmly believes that the day will arrive when he achieves item No. 125 on his list: “Visit the moon”.

MY LIFE LIST

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