

Climber's tribute to mystery donor who saved his life

FOUR peaks, a 14,000ft climb — and all in memory of the unknown friend who saved his life. Irishman Gerry Walker has just completed the gruelling task of climbing four of the highest peaks in Ireland and Britain. And on the summit of each he placed a memorial to the man who a year ago donated his lungs so Gerry could live a normal life again.

For 47-year-old Dubliner Gerry is one-year on from a life-saving double lung transplant that has transformed his health. The only thing he knows about the donor is that his name was Martin and he probably came from Britain. But it is something Gerry will always be grateful for. Which is why Martin was in his thoughts as he conquered Snowdon in Wales, Ben Nevis in Scotland and Scafell Pike in England at the weekend having already climbed to the summit of Carrauntoohil in Kerry.

It's a remarkable feat for someone who could take up to four hours to walk a kilometre even with the aid of an oxygen tank before his operation in July 2008 because of Cystic Fibrosis. He said: "By 2003 I needed oxygen to sleep properly and then I started to need it for short walks.

"A month after the operation I managed to walk a mile near my home without any oxygen. There were tears of happiness in my eyes that I'd been given this chance again — I couldn't believe it."

Ever since Gerry has visited the gym three times a week in preparation for a challenge that finished on the first anniversary of his transplant. "I would have always been very motivated," he said. "Even when I was on oxygen I would have pushed myself to the point of exhaustion just to try to keep my legs moving and stop my muscles from wasting away. "Before I became very ill I was quite active but the deterioration was so serious it took hours to do even small activities."

Gerry says the idea of completing the Four Peaks Challenge came from his love of hill walking — an activity he pursued before he became seriously ill. He also wanted to come to Britain to complete the challenge as a tribute to his donor. "I don't know anything about him other than his name was Martin," he said. "Because the transplant operation was done in the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle he was most likely from Britain. "I just wanted to give something back and raise awareness."

As a tribute to his donor Gerry placed an engraved stone on the summit of each peak which read: 'Remember Martin, an unknown friend who donated his lungs allowing me to climb after a long exile'.

The married man of 20 years also completed the climb on the day of his wedding anniversary.

And to celebrate he went straight back to the hospital in Newcastle for his one-year check-up.