

Cold Sweat on Makalu

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FOR HALF AN HOUR our group had been clustered about the radio at our 4900-meter Base Camp at the foot of Makalu. Guy Chaumerueil, leaning over the radio-telephone, was about to explain to Parisian motorists stuck in rush-hour traffic, among others, how our adventure was progressing. Electronic magic!

“Good! You are ready in the studio. I’ll put on the tape.”

Tumlingtar, a miniscule airstrip surrounded by rice paddies drowned under the monsoon. It was there that four members of the French national expedition had been landed by a small Nepalese Twin-Otter plane to start the long approach march. Fifty mostly bare-footed porters. Water and mud everywhere . . . and the famous leeches. On the tenth day, the formidable south face of Makalu is just around the corner.

And Guy could tell it all in two minutes!

This approach march under the monsoon! I had the impression of penetrating an interminable curtain of fog and rain to emerge somehow some day on the other side: at the end of the earth. An expanse of sand strewn with huge boulders, a little bit of grass and before us a 2500-meter-high wall, Makalu’s south face.

After Gérard Vionnet gave up during the approach, we were only three climbers, and although Alain Ghersen and Michel Cadot are very strong technically, tough and enthusiastic, they had never had high-altitude experience. Three climbers to pioneer a direct route on Makalu’s south face is little enough. In 1975, fifteen Yugoslavs—among them the best climbers of that day—were needed to climb the only other route on the face. Six high camps, much fixed rope and a huge degree of obstinacy. No one has succeeded since.

The rock wall which makes up the bottom half of the face is cut from right to left by a very steep ramp that ends near the Yugoslav route at 7300 meters: 1100 meters of gullies, rock walls, ice bombardments, snow funnels and precipitous ridges. It is there that we climb. Everywhere, enormous stalactites detach themselves under the effect of the sun and scatter all over the wall in a fracas of broken glass. This is wide-spread by nine in the morning. By noon, it is a debacle.

On September 21 and 22, we climb a good part of the ramp. Toward 6800 meters, I work my way up a slanting gully bordered by threatening stalactites. The ice is fragile, a veneer over rock. Twelve meters above my last protection,

I find myself on a snow-covered slab with a vague nick for my left hand. I jam the point of my ice axe into a miniscule crack, catch my balance and bang in a piton. Above rises a vertical wall. After a few meters of traction, the angle slackens a little. Another almost vertical gully subject to short bombardments has good ice. I set foot on a snow slope that collects the debris of all kinds that the mountain wants to rid itself of. Alain and Michel follow. We fix some rope. Towards 7000 meters, after they decide to descend, I attack a long, very steep ridge and continue on alone. The ridge ends in a toboggan of ice festooned with stalactites. At 7100 meters, I too descend.

At the end of September, our first summit try is stopped by one of those storms for which only the Himalaya has the secret: 48 hours without the slightest lull.

Everywhere expeditions give up, fall back on their respective Base Camps. The snow cover soon mounts up to a meter. Glacial dampness seizes the region. In turn, each of us grasps a shovel to dig out the sagging tent, to get warm and to pass the time.

On October 2, we make the grand departure. At 5800 meters, we find the tent at Camp I crushed under the weight of the snow. Inside, it is a swimming pool. The sleeping bags, the down clothing, the gloves and socks are learning how to swim. To continue looks bad, but by good luck the sun beats down and at the end of the afternoon, everything has dried.

After some hours of dozing, a midnight departure lacks charm. The bowl of tea and the little crackers sit heavily on the stomach, the packs are too heavy, the night too dark, Makalu too tall.

Near the bergschrund, we lose our way. Above, the south face is only a black mass in an inky night. Except for the North Star, we have no landmarks. We climb too far to the right. We lose hours crossing avalanche gullies, climbing snowy humps. Finally we're back on the route.

Soon the sun emerges from behind the south ridge. An instant later, it is already too hot. The light is blinding. At the end of the morning, at 7100 meters, I decide to halt. Alain and Michel have fallen far behind. I am almost ready to descend to look for them when a head emerges. Only at mid afternoon have they turned up, worn out by the heat and the 1300 meters of difficult climbing.

The bivouac is frightful. With three of us in a badly pitched two-man tent, sleeping is a real achievement. One stirs and the other two groan. At dawn, my two companions decide to quit.

There I am alone. Above, there are 1400 meters to the summit, of which 1000 are very difficult. I have kept a dozen pitons, two deadmen, two 40-meter ropes and minimal bivouac gear. I have practically no food.

At 7300 meters, in order to escape from the ramp, there is only a 25-meter-high rock step covered with unconsolidated snow. I surmount a vague spur or rather a pile of unstable blocks. A good piton! I take off my rucksack and one of my ropes and self-belay myself on the other. It takes me three hours to overcome the last overhanging zone; expanding flakelets, portable handholds, choked cracks rise above an impressive void. The pitons go in only a few

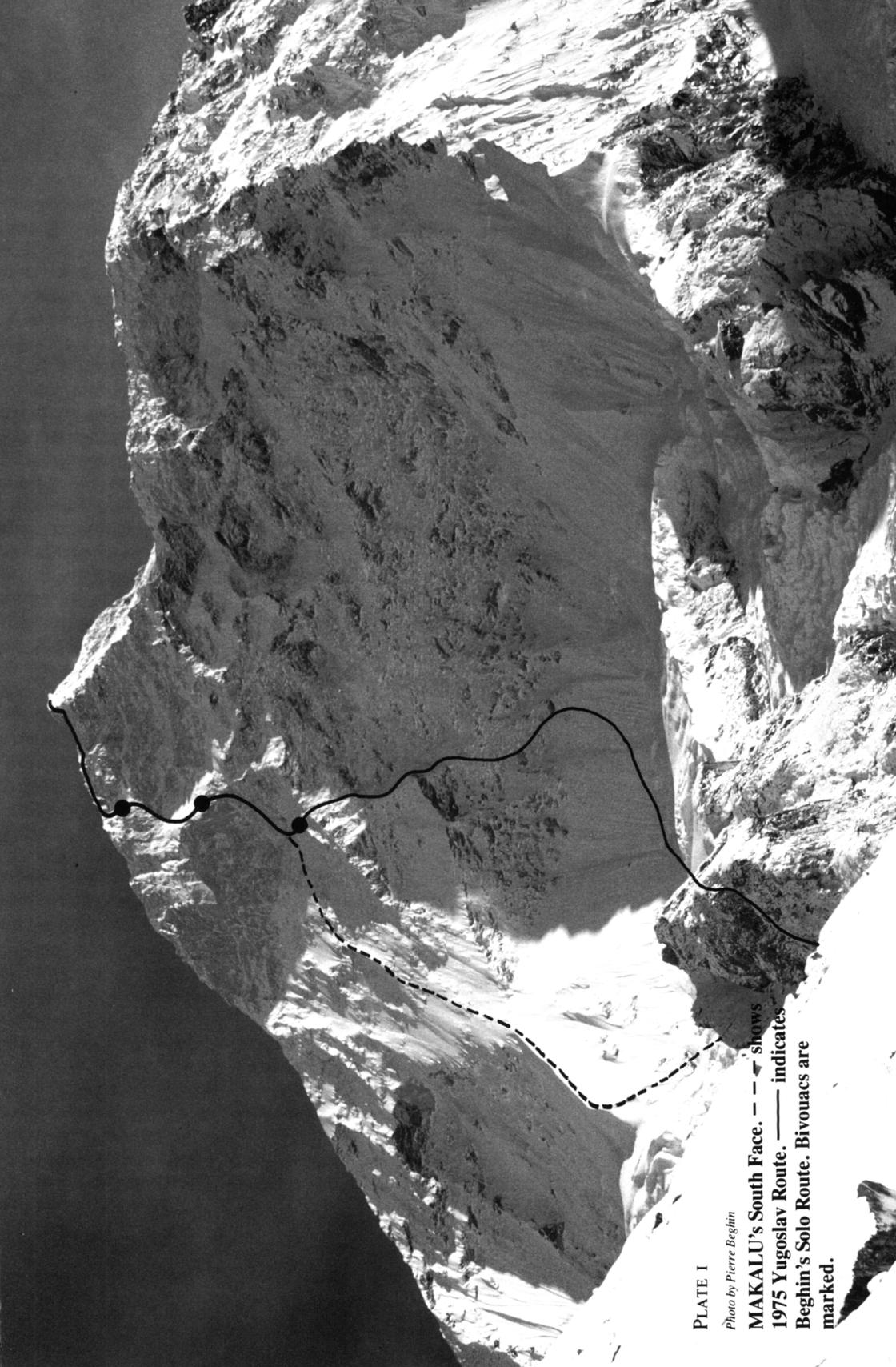


PLATE I

Photo by Pierre Beghin

**MAKALU's South Face. - - - shows
1975 Yugoslav Route. — indicates
Beghin's Solo Route. Bivouacs are
marked.**

centimeters. Then, I can remove them with my fingers. Certainly, this is one of the most exposed passages I have ever climbed in the mountains.

At midday I join the Yugoslav route. I continue up delicate terrain: slabs covered by a thin layer of snow that barely supports my weight. My crampons scratch on the rock beneath. Then follows a long traverse rising to the right. Finally at 7600 meters, some thin bands of ice lead me to the left. I contact Guy on the radio and tell him that I can get out only by climbing up. To descend what I have climbed would make no sense.

By mid afternoon, I decide to halt for an early bivouac. In the night, the wind chases the snow over my tent. The platform is etched away little by little.

The next morning, October 5, I am madly anxious to get going ahead of the sun. Gradually I get my second wind. Snow slopes seem to lead to the west buttress, far to my left. This is an illusion. I know, having studied the face, that they do not meet.

I approach 8000 meters. The slope steepens considerably. Higher is a succession of verglaced walls: an impassable chute dominated by a vertical cliff where the rare cracks dribble ice. Where to go?

Curiously, I scarcely feel the precariousness of my situation. I know I have to do what I have to do. Each difficulty demands so much concentration that, in my mind, the previous one disappears instantly. I find again, here, confusedly, sensations I felt long ago on solo ascents in the Alps.

Suddenly my rope is caught fast. I can't go down to free it. A knife slash and I am free. Little bothered, I keep on unanguished. A horizontal traverse takes me to the west ridge. It is too late to get to the summit before nightfall and the last passages have exhausted me nervously and physically. I bivouac at 8100 meters, higher than I ever have before. It is an icy, fantastic night. Violent electrical storms strike distant Nepalese hills. I look down on them. In a totally unreal silence, lightning flashes off the clouds.

When the next morning I continue up the west ridge, I am greeted by a piercing wind. Swirls of snow rise from the slopes. The sky is cloudy, which accentuates the cold. I fear for my hands and feet.

From false summit to false summit, the ridge never ends. The snow is heaped up on the north slope and dangerous cornices hang far out over the south. All alone, I exhaust myself breaking trail. Once or twice, I straddle the ridge with my left leg in the shade, the right one in the sun.

At nearly 8400 meters, a 20-meter-high vertical rock wall bars the whole ridge. With crampons on my feet and my hands encased in mittens, I climb clumsily up this last obstacle. With each gust I cling to the slope. A hump, then another beyond it still higher. The afternoon has started. At 2:45 P.M. the three ridges converge under me. Nothing is higher.

New space unfolds: the desert mountains of Tibet to the north, Everest and Lhotse closer, far to the east Kangchenjunga. All are surrounded by a myriad of peaks I do not know.

Without a moment's delay, I plunge into the descent of the normal route. Way down, toward Makalu Col, I spy four tiny points: Spanish tents. All goes



PLATE 2

Photo by Alain Ghersein

**Ice Gully at 6700 meters on
MAKALU.**

well. I lose altitude fast. Soon I am on slopes overloaded with snow. Not a track. None of the other expeditions have made the summit. It is sundown. Through the swirling snow, I see the tents of Camp III of the Spaniards nearby.

Suddenly, the whole slope is in motion: a huge windslab avalanche, 300 meters across. I am hurled head first. I try to swim, but efforts are in vain against many tons of snow. Two hundred meters lower, I emerge, unhurt. I have lost one of my ice axes and my walkie-talkie.

Minutes later, I am at the tents. I call out. A tent opens. I plunge in onto the reclining figures in their sleeping bags.

"Pierre! You're coming from the summit?" It's my Catalan friend, Carlos Valles. He is stupified to see me. I'm offered tea. Gradually, I warm up, getting back feeling in my hands and feet. Outside the cold is terrible. Carlos tells me that his thermometer reads -30° C.

On October 7, I continue my descent. At Makalu Col, blinded by drifting snow, I cannot find the Spanish fixed ropes. I start down a long 45° couloir. The vast, easy Chago Glacier lies 1000 meters lower. Halfway down, the snow suddenly changes with crust over loose snow. Before I can really take stock, the whole slope has let go. It is the same scenario as the night before. I glide head first at crazy speed, I am submerged, then flung about. I am hurled over two ice walls. The snow cushions my fall. Interminable seconds! Hideous fear! Four hundred meters lower, the avalanche comes to rest. I am tossed free. With my heart racing, I sit there, totally stupified. I have lost much: my second ice axe, my mittens, the camera, the stove . . . and a lot of adrenalin!

Nervously exhausted, I stagger to Camp I on the normal route. Now I am out of danger. Despite fatigue, I savor the moment. There is no doubt that I have lived through the most difficult and most uncertain of my mountain adventures. I will set out again, but nothing I undertake will really ever be as it was before.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mahalangur Himalaya, Nepal.

NEW ROUTE: Makalu, 8463 meters, 27,766 feet, Direct South Face, Summit reached on October 6, 1989 (Beghin).

CLIMBING PERSONNEL: Pierre Beghin, leader, Michel Cadot, Alain Ghersen.