

All Japan Mount St. Elias Expedition, 1964

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WE JAPANESE have found with satisfaction that we can enjoy a big climb in Alaska with only four weeks of vacation, less than 500 kilograms of gear and food, \$1300 of expenses for each person, all of which is a marked contrast to the usual big way of a Himalayan expedition. Along with our party from Osaka, there were several Japanese parties in Alaska, the Yukon and the Canadian Rockies this summer. In the near future the mountains of these regions will provide an excellent playground for Japanese mountaineering.

Mount St. Elias had been attempted by at least nine different expeditions by 1946, when the Harvard Mountaineering Club made the second ascent via the long south ridge (the first ascent from the south). (See *A.A.J.*, 1947, 6:3, pp. 257-268.) The first ascent was made as early as 1897 by the Italian Duke of Abruzzi. The Abruzzi party found it necessary to make a long, toilsome trip across the Malaspina Glacier to Newton Glacier for 50 airline miles. Vittorio Sella, who was a member of the party, has left us many classic photographs of the gigantic Alaskan glaciers. Recently Mount St. Elias was attempted via the difficult northwest ridge by the Boyd N. Everett party in 1963, and from the same approach as ours by a California party in 1964. Both parties, unfortunately, were unable to reach the summit. The Everett party was threatened twice by earthquakes. The California party succeeded in the first ascent of Mount Newton and of an unnamed peak next to Newton to the west, which we also climbed.

Our party, under the sponsorship of the Federation of All Japan Mountaineering Unions, Osaka Prefectural Mountaineering Union, and Osaka City, was composed of eight members from the Kansai Toko Kai Alpine Club and one member of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska. On July 1, six members of the party left Haneda Airport at 9:30 P.M. and arrived in Anchorage at 8:30 A.M. the following day. The next day the party was joined by two more members who had left Japan on June 17 by boat. Anchorage, at first sight, appeared a rustic, small town in the wilderness. Dwarf spruce could be seen just beyond the main street, spreading to the rugged Chugach Mountains to the east. The townsfolk

were very kind to these strange climbers, in contrast to the indifference of the six million, busy people of our home town, Osaka. We were happy to include Scott D. Hamilton, Jr. of Anchorage as the ninth member of the party. In spite of his hectic work of city planning after the big earthquake of March 27, he managed to take a four-week vacation. Through him we had contacted the Civil Air Patrol of Alaska, Elmendorf Air Force Base, the Customhouse of Anchorage, and the Mountaineering Club of Alaska. We appreciate their kindness.

On July 3, we drove two trucks, provided by the U. S. Air Force, for 250 miles to the end of the road being built to Cordova. At Chitina, where the road ends, we were supposed to meet Jack Wilson, an experienced bush pilot of Gulkana Air Field, Glenallen. Bad weather had prevented his flying and we had to wait. It was not bad for us to have a few lazy days before beginning the true climbing.

Our air operation began on July 7. From Chitina airstrip a Cessna 185 carried two men and 100 kilograms of equipment each trip to the Tana River airstrip near the end of Tana Glacier which flows to the north from the west end of Bagley Ice Field. The flight took 50 minutes, providing us with a magnificent view of the Wrangell Mountains. The great mass of Mount Bona and the rocky south face of Mount Blackburn were especially impressive. From Tana airstrip — just a flat sand bar with no building — Jack Wilson flew the party in a ski-equipped Super Cub, one by one, to the very base of Mount St. Elias. Through openings in gear piled on one's lap, one could see numerous unnamed peaks glittering in the sunshine. Sometimes one could see the shadow of the plane crawling slowly along the surface of the Bagley Ice Field and Columbus Glacier, which are nearly five miles wide and combined measure nearly 100 miles long.

Base Camp was established at about 7000 feet on a small snow mound near the end of a glacier which descended from the north face of Mount St. Elias. After his fifth flight to Base Camp and twelve hours of flying, our bush pilot declared he was tired and the rest of us had to camp at Tana. During the night it began to rain and we waited one more day. A little bit of courage was needed to sleep there because we saw, all around the campsite, enormous footprints of the notorious bears.

On July 9 Jack started flying early in the morning. As soon as all were at Base Camp, we immediately started for the north face. A direct ascent to Russell Col was out of the question. The only possible route on the north face would be the central ridge which joins the great west ridge near the summit. The first part of the climb is exposed to avalanches from the upper north face; the middle has the possibility of avalanches starting

on the ridge itself; and the last part is barred by a rock wall and a blue-ice belt at the height of 16,000 feet, beyond which is an easy snow slope which leads to the great west ridge and the summit.

Sitting that evening, side by side, in a tunnel-type tent, we discussed the proposed routes. Our final conclusion was that 1.) we should follow the most reasonable route, the one traversing over Mount Newton to Russell Col, and thence to the summit; 2.) after establishing high camps to Russell Col, a small party should try the central ridge of the north face.

July 10: The first day of our plan began with a slight snowfall. It was warm and the visibility was terribly bad. The first reconnaissance team, Nomura and I, soon encountered route-finding problems in the first icefall of a glacier coming down from the north face of Newton. At 2 P.M. we reached an exposed rock on a soft snow slope beyond the icefall, and decided to drop our loads there. The next day we realized we had reached only the end of the northwest ridge of Newton. The rock where we had left our loads was the only rock we trod during the climb.

July 11: At 6:30 A.M. Nomura and Takeda proceeded. Two hours later we followed their trail in the soft snow. When we caught up with them on a small peak at 2 P.M., they were tired out and still trying to fix a 150-foot rope to descend a steep, loose snow wall to a wide snowfield where we established Camp I at 9000 feet. We suffered from the ominous sounds of continuous avalanches on the west face of the peak west of Newton.

July 12: Again Nomura and I proceeded with light rucksacks, followed by five climbers, who carried 50 pounds each. A 100-foot rope was fixed to help them climb up a big ice block. Three hours later our comrades caught up with us at a spot where, much to our surprise, we found a campsite of an unknown party. We concluded it must have been the Californian party, which, we had heard, had tried St. Elias from the southeast side. At 10,000 feet the narrow snow ridge was cut by a crevasse and above its overhanging upper lip of blue ice rose an ice wall of about 500 feet. A fixed rope left hanging by the Californian party was of little use. We chose a route to the left; I crept along a narrow ice band beneath the overhanging ice wall, crossed a snowbridge, and climbed up on a steep snow face traversing to the right to reach the upper part of the Californian fixed rope. It took us six hours to finish hauling all the rucksacks over the overhang to establish Camp II just beyond the wall at 10,500 feet. Our deputy leader Nomura, the photographer Kawamoto, Scott, and the youngest pair, Ben Oda and Takeda, stayed at Camp II, while Yamane and I returned to Camp I for further supplies.

July 13: In the lovely warm weather the five lead climbers wanted to

cross over Newton and head towards Russell Col, but their 50-pound loads told on them at this altitude. When we caught up at six o'clock in the evening, they were almost exhausted. At 8 P.M. we gave up the pleasant idea of crossing Mount Newton and established Camp III at 13,000 feet. Yamane and I returned to Camp I in the twilight. The Base Camp party, our leader K. Asano and the doctor, had carried part of the equipment which would be needed for the coming north-face attack to the bottom of the central ridge.

July 14: The Camp III members pushed on to have a fine view of the Pacific Ocean and of the Malaspina Glacier with its width of 40 miles. They reached the summit of Mount Newton (13,810 feet) in 40 minutes in nice, warm weather, though the snow was soft and sticky. If the ridge descending south towards Russell Col had been a little more delicate, belaying would have been necessary. Then suddenly they stood on the edge of a 400-foot ice cliff and realized why the Californian party had given up their attempt. Beyond the cliff the ridge appeared increasingly difficult, almost impossible with heavy loads. They pitched Camp IV at the top of the cliff at 13,000 feet and called Base Camp by transceiver. Fortunately Yamane and I had not begun work on the north face and could provide them with additional equipment, food and manpower.

July 15: The Base Camp members moved the tent from Camp I to Camp II. At Camp IV Scott, Kawamoto and Takeda started on the first attempt for the summit. They rappelled down the cliff on a long rope which the Californian party had left. On the ice ridge they had to cut steps and were often threatened by hidden crevasses where the ridge widened. They quit at the beginning of a knife-edge at two o'clock with Russell Col still far away.

July 16: Scott, Takeda and Ben Oda descended to Base for a rest. Yamane and I went from Camp II to Camp IV with supplies while Asano and Kawai ascended the top of Newton from Camp II.

July 17: At 2 A.M. Yamane and I left Camp IV, fearful of the weather since it had been windy during the night. Following the trail of the previous party, we reached the knife-edged ridge and continued up and down the finger-like small, steep ice pinnacles. For 1500 feet we belayed each other on ice axes jammed into crevasses at the base of a huge cornice; although we would have preferred ice pitons, we had to save time by any possible means. My nerves were frazzled when we reached Russell Col (12,300 feet) after more than five hours of delicate climbing. From there, where we joined the Abruzzi route, we still had 5700 feet to climb though it was not difficult technically. We kept on. The altitude affected us as we cut steps at 16,500 feet among ice blocks on the north

ridge and on blue ice on the north face. By 6 P.M. at 17,500 feet in the midst of a wide snowfield which rose gently to the summit, I was exhausted and took a 30-minute nap in a bivouac sack.

Finally we skirted a large crevasse at the base of the summit dome and reached the summit of Mount St. Elias from the west. The sun was just setting behind the Wrangell Mountains; a gorgeous red filled our view. To the east all we saw was the long shadow of the summit where we stood. It was 8:20 P.M., 18 hours after our departure from Camp IV. We buried under the snow several photographs of deceased members of our Alpine Club.

At nine we began descending, hoping to bivouac at Russell Col, where we had left our down jackets and a thermos bottle, but the cold affected my tired legs. Reaching the bivouac sack we had left on the way up from the Col, we dug a snow shelf, crawled into the sack and decided to wait for the morning sun. It was the coldest bivouac I had ever had. Yamane, whose nickname was Yeti for his toughness, complained of the cold although he stretched out while I kept shivering and trying to melt snow in a can with two small candles. I could not get a wink of sleep.

July 18: Fortunately the weather stayed fine. As warmth came back, we were encouraged to continue the descent. We reached Russell Col at about noon and Camp IV in the evening, after 38 hours of absence. As the weather was obviously getting worse, it was decided to make no further attempts on St. Elias.

July 19: The Camp IV members moved the tent to the summit of Mount Newton before two of us descended to Base. The youngest pair came up from Camp II. It snowed a little in the afternoon for the first time since July 10.

July 20: The weather was better. We left the Newton Camp at 4:30 A.M. heading for the unnamed peak next to Mount Newton to the west. With pleasant continuous climbing, we stood on the summit at 10 A.M. Its height was approximately 12,800 feet.

After July 20 it snowed every day until the 25th. Then, leaving provisions at high camps and Base Camp, we flew out one by one. By July 28th all members were back in the lovely town of Anchorage.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Frontier between Alaska and Yukon Territory.

ASCENTS:

Mount Newton, 13,810 feet, second ascent, July 15, 1964 (Nomura, Kawamoto, Ben Oda, Takeda, Hamilton); July 16, 1964 (Asano, Kawai, Nishimae, Yamane).

Mount St. Elias, 18,008 feet, third ascent and by a new route over Mount Newton to Russell Col and then following the Abruzzi route, July 17, 1964 (Nishimae, Yamane).

Unnamed Peak, c. 12,800 feet, second ascent, July 20, 1964 (Nomura, Takeda, Nishimae, Yamane).

PERSONNEL: Kiyohiko Asano, *leader*; Tetsuya Nomura, *deputy leader*; Shiro Nishimae, Reizo Kawamoto, Takaaki Yamane, Ben Oda, Minekazu Takeda, Hidero Kawai, M.D., Scott D. Hamilton, Jr.

