Manaslu from the West

AKIRA TAKAHASHI
Translated by ICHIRO YOSHIZAWA

MANASLU (26,760 feet), the first Japanese 8000er, was climbed from the east by the Japanese Alpine Club under the leadership of Yuko Maki in 1956 after previous attempts in 1953 and 1954. The west side was considered impossible without wings by H. W. Tilman, who saw it from afar, and by the Manaslu reconnaissance party of the Japanese Alpine Club in 1952. The northwest face is a 13,000-foot precipitous and dangerous wall of ice and rock which averages 40°. We sent out a two-man reconnaissance party in the autumn of 1970. They were expected to find a way to Base Camp and on to Advanced Base, to collect information about Sama village, east of the mountain, which had been very threatening to foreign mountaineers. They accomplished these tasks in 60 days.

Our team this year was made up of 11 climbers. We purchased 42,650 feet of fixed rope, 200 snow-pickets, wire and duralumin ladders. After our successful climb we had only 1300 feet of rope and none of the pickets left. Ice pitons were useless but we used ice screws. As the rock was slabby, we used 20% rock pitons and 80% expansion bolts.

Our caravan left Pokhara on March 5, accompanied by 300 porters and with 12 tons of supplies. This was 15 days later than we had expected because it took a full month to get our things through India. Therefore we shortened our 80-day plan for activities on the mountain to avoid the monsoon. The distances between camps had to be lengthened and the number of camps cut down. The rise between each camp became 3300 feet. We had hoped to have seven or eight camps on the mountain but cut this down to five.

It took 11 days to reach Base Camp near tree line at 11,500 feet. We walked up Domen Khola, which flows into Dudh Khola a day's march below Bimthang. Originally Base Camp was to have been on the upper plateau at a tiny tarn some two hours higher, but deep snow prevented the porters from carrying that far. Camp was, however, more convenient for us on the conifer-covered moraine, for we had firewood and timbers for crevasse bridges.

A week later, on March 21, Camp I was established on a plateau at 14,750 feet after climbing through a badly crevassed 2600-foot-high icefall. We had hoped to climb the west ridge and so dispatched three reconnaissance parties which could not find a suitable pack route. Three days later, on March 24, one party found a long but good route which runs directly under the north peak. When we saw the west ridge on the way up, we found that the lower half of the ridge was really a vertical ice wall. We decided our route should be on the northwest face in the middle of which a great traversing terrace ran to the middle step of the west ridge. A week after establishing Camp I, we set up Camp II (Advanced Base, 18,000 feet) on a broad, basin-like snowfield, an ideal safe place protected from the avalanches which fell continuously from the upper wall, because we had many step-like crevasses above us. Our climbing activities began from this splendid stronghold.

The northwest wall on which our traverse lies averages 45° and frequent avalanches swept down as ice blocks on the upper slopes broke off. Moreover, new snow always frightened us by the ceaseless surface avalanches. At times we had to plow through waist- or chest-deep snow and consequently relaying of loads was delayed. This year we had extremely bad weather and as much as three feet of snow fell in a day. On this great slope, over 8000 feet of fixed rope protected us from surface slides, but when block avalanches occurred, sections of 650 to 1000 feet of fixed rope were cut to pieces and snow pickets were twisted and knocked out. We were at our wit's end to keep the route in repair. On April 8, eleven days after establishing Camp II, we placed Camp III (21,325 feet) on the middle step of the icy west ridge.

Kasa-iwa (*Kasa* means "umbrella" and *Iwa* "rock" in Japanese), which confronted us on the west ridge at 23,000 feet, was the most difficult climbing on the whole expedition. To break through this disagreeable obstacle, we had to reinforce Camp III and pile up materials there. All members carried loads on the traverse, but when avalanches were frequent, it was impossible to move despite the fine weather. Once in deep snow, even when climbers moved up from Camp II and others down from Camp III, they could not make contact. It took seven to eight hours to climb up from Camp II to III and three to climb down under good conditions, but it was not rare for the climb to take twelve hours.

Meanwhile, the route-preparation parties had been working hard above Camp III on the ice ridge under Kasa-iwa, the foot of which they reached in three days, fixing rope along all the route. After April 11, Kasa-iwa, an 800-foot-high overhanging wall which resembles a half-open Japanese parasol, was attacked successively by two-man route-preparation parties. Even with fixed ropes, it took three to four hours

to cover the distance between Camp III and Kasa-iwa and so they could work only four to five hours a day on the rock face. It took a full 20 days to get through this critical point. As it was not inviting, we did not climb directly to the top of Kasa-iwa but sought a route in the overhanging dihedrals on the left of the crest. After climbing a 65-foot-high vertical ice wall, we could reach the rock wall. Taking off crampons and overboots, we managed with vibram-soled boots to work out a route on these smooth overhanging rock slabs, with *étriers* hanging from expansion bolts. Later we placed a wire ladder on this wall and got four Sherpas above Kasa-iwa. We used up most of our 100 expansion bolts here. Kasa-iwa is UIAA VI in difficulty in places, but generally is V, A2. On the upper part of these dihedrals was an overhanging slab covered with a thin layer of verglas on which new slow was plastered. As it was so dangerous, we made a depot some 50 feet higher on comparatively thicker snow. There was another depot in a bergschrund at the foot of Kasa-iwa.

On May 6, eight days after pushing the route through Kasa-iwa and 28 days after establishing Camp III, we at last succeeded in putting up Camp IV (23,300 feet) on the windy cornice above Kasa-iwa. Even when the other camps were windless, this high eagle's nest was always exposed to strong wind. Lifting loads up Kasa-iwa was done cooperatively by climbers from Camps III and IV. The Camp III party carried them up to the depot at the foot of Kasa-iwa, while the four Sherpas of Camp IV descended to the upper part of the rock. An aerial tramway was rigged to bring the loads up in the air. When the weather was fine, relaying continued but if it was very windy, they were tent-bound. Yet some 2000 pounds were brought up.

Meanwhile, without taking any rest, two-man teams in Camp IV had been continuously searching for a route on the west ridge, but the rocky crest proved to be an impossible series of little overhanging walls. On this rock-ridge route, we should need more days than we had already spent on Kasa-iwa and it would be impossible for the Sherpas. We turned back to a possible route we had thought of in the planning stages: a hanging glacier snuggled into the southwest wall. First we rappelled about 350 feet onto the south side down the 60° hard ice wall to stand on the foot of the hanging glacier. It fell an airy 11,500 feet to the moraines of the Domen Khola. Strong winds blowing up from under kept the ice extremely hard; it took more than 30 swings to cut a single step. Then we climbed along the line of the bergschrund between the west ridge and the hanging glacier, sometimes on the wall or on the ribs of the west ridge, sometimes on the ice wall of the hanging glacier, using ice screws and stirrups. After six days of work, on May 12, we got to the top of the hanging glacier and prepared a cable line

for lifting the loads by fixing ropes to two ice screws. The rock here was UIAA IV, but it was very difficult because of the altitude. To guard against avalanches on the steep hanging glacier, we fixed ropes along the west-ridge side and climbed an ice couloir to emerge on the summit plateau.

On May 16, ten days after establishing Camp IV we put up Camp V at 24,150 feet on the plateau. Here stood nine climbers: three route preparers, two summiters and four Sherpas. They had six oxygen bottles and four days' food for two climbers. Only the two summit climbers could remain. The other seven descended to Camp IV, praying for the climbers' happy chances. The All India Radio forecast was for northwest wind at 60 kph and temperature at –22° C (38 mph, –8° F) at 21,600 feet and west-southwest at 90 kph and –40° C (56 mph, –40°) at 29,500 feet with possible thunder storms.

It was a mile and a half from Camp V to the summit with a rise of 2600 feet. We had wanted to have another high camp but we had no more materials nor remaining strength. It would have to be a round-trip dash, an almost impossible enterprise with little support at a tremendous height. Nonetheless, Kazuharu Kohara and Motoyoshi Tanaka set out from Camp V at five A.M. on May 17 and ascended the great sloping plateau of ice, snow and sastrugi, sinking at times to their knees. At 12:15 P.M., with next to no oxygen left, the two men stood on the top of Manaslu. Just below the summit they found an ice piton, which had been driven in by Toshio Imanishi and Gyalzen Norbu when they had climbed Manaslu fifteen years before. They drew this precious piton out and brought it the long way back to Tokyo with them, as the French party this year fetched the Japanese rising-sun flag from the top of Makalu. This memorial piton was later presented to Mr. Yuko Maki, who led the Japanese Alpine Club Manaslu expedition in 1956.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Nepal

NEW ROUTE: Manaslu, 26,760 feet, from the west, second ascent, May 17, 1971 (Kohara, M. Tanaka).

PERSONNEL: Akira Takahashi, leader; Noboru Endo, deputy leader; Dr. Sokichi Tanaka, doctor; Satoshi Aoki, climbing leader; Yoshikazu Amamiya, Kazuharu Kohara, Takahiro Atarashi, Tetsuya Matsuzaki, Motoyoshi Tanaka, Seiji Shimizu.