Four Against Makalu

JOHN ROSKELLEY

THE SOUTH FACE of Makalu pierced a late afternoon azure sky as we dog-legged past the remnants of its southeast ridge and wearily reached French Base Camp at 16,000 feet. The deep, late winter snows that had hampered the four of us, our 60 Sedoa porters and five Sherpa Base Camp staff since Shipton Pass four days before, had disappeared as we approached the world's fifth highest peak at 27,825 feet. It had taken us 18 days to trek the width of Nepal from Dharan, on the Indian border, up the muddy Arun River, along forested ridge crests to Sedoa, then over 14,000-foot Shipton Pass to the Barun valley, which led us to Makalu.

Our Base Camp staff, a superbly efficient group of Mountain Travel Sherpas, led by the sirdar, Ang Nima, organized a temporary base below the south face as the team members and porters arrived.

The team, all from Spokane, Washington, consisting of Chris Kopczynski, Kim Momb, Dr. James States and me, had organized a well-financed, properly equipped, competent expedition in six months and our efforts had already been apparent on the trek to Makalu. Like many of our contemporaries in Europe and Japan, we had chosen to raise ourselves up to the standard of the mountain, not to pull the mountain down to our level with large teams of climbers and Sherpas. We had deliberately kept the team to only four climbers. In addition, we would not use artificial oxygen and no Sherpas above Base Camp.

The West Pillar, our objective, had first been climbed in 1971 by a strong French team of highly trained, tested, handpicked professionals. The 500 porters, eight high-altitude Sherpas and eleven members had placed two men on the summit after two two-man teams had failed on earlier attempts. The technical difficulties were of a level never before attained in Himalayan climbing.

Twenty-five well-clothed porters remained for several days to ferry loads to our Base Camp at 17,000 feet at the foot of the pillar. At the end of March, after three days of carrying up the glacial moraines, the entire expedition of four sahibs and four Sherpas moved to our home for the next 50 days.

The 66-pound porter loads designated for Base had been meticulously packed in Spokane and we spent only a few hours to sort equipment

PLATE 16

Photo by John Roskelley

On the Crest of the West Pillar of MAKALU.

and food that would be needed at our four proposed camps. We hoped to avoid the French Camp IV, a bivouac camp, at 25,000 feet.

Ang Nima's deep-throated prayers and the acrid smell of burning juniper woke us to the first day of climbing. Befitting the support of a big mountain, the foot of the pillar looked solid, broad-based and relatively clean of debris.

Easy scrambling and boulder-hopping made the load-carrying a joy and only a few short slabs, still dressed in winter ice, gave us any trouble. It took us only four hours to set up Camp I at 19,100 feet on the old French site marked by flat platforms, stove pieces, baling wire and partially filled or empty oxygen bottles. Several hundred feet above Camp I, the climbing would begin in earnest.

The four of us were in superb health and morale high. We blended together perfectly. Chris Kopczynski's action-oriented, non-verbal humor characterized his Labrador puppy personality. He was a tough competitor and, like many strong, confident men, always mellow, clear-thinking and likeable. His achievements in climbing had paralleled my own on such ascents as the Eiger North Wall, and east face of Chephren in the Canadian Rockies. He had also climbed Mount McKinley and Pik Lenin in the Russian Pamirs.

Momb had all the physical attributes of the Incredible Hulk, but neither the color or the anger. In fact, Kim's ability to relate to others, take criticism and harmonize with the group were strengths far superior to his obvious physical properties. Kim had only been climbing for four years, but had achieved a level of expertise usually associated only with climbers of ten years' experience. Besides being an excellent free climber and free-style skier, Kim had raced on the national motocross circuit for Yamaha motorcycles.

Dr. States, an expert in young adult and adolescent medicine, added a maturity that several of us had willingly lost upon leaving the United States. Jim's analytical scientific training had left little room for humor, but occasionally Chris's pantomimes would unlock momentarily a rapturous, powerful laugh. Running up 5800-foot Mount Spokane was Jim's way of training his mind and body. Pushing his systems to a new limit, each run tied together emotional and physical extremes brought about by such intensive training. Besides numerous peaks and frozen waterfalls throughout the United States and Canada, Jim had climbed the north ridge of Nanda Devi in India and had made several first ascents in Bolivia.

This was my tenth trip to Asia in seven years and my third time as leader and organizer of a major expedition. I am always totally committed to a project and develop an intensity that many of my teammates do not understand and sometimes cannot tolerate. American expedition teams have notoriously been a mishmash of trekkers, family, friends and a few climbers tossed in to instill a sense of legitimacy. The Makalu team couldn't afford to have anyone deviate from the objective on such a small team. My three teammates I knew to be just as intense, just as

prepared mentally and physically and just as tenacious as I was. Our chances were excellent.

After six days of carrying loads to Camp I, I asked States and Momb to occupy the camp and begin work fixing lines on the lengthy ridge to Camp II at 21,500 feet. The route took on character as it honed to a razor's edge, twisted and buckled, then finally jumped over a broad hump before widening at a plateau, a windy, but comfortable site for Camp II. Jim and Kim tasted the first days of freedom from the expedition, leapfrogging leads along the ridge.

To the north, the granitic gneiss wall dropped abruptly 2000 feet to the west glacier, while on the south the slope was less severe, cascading at angles up to 70°. Since traversing placed little load on the lines, 7mm rope was fixed in all but the most dangerous sections. Despite severe winds and difficult terrain, the two climbers prepared the route for ferrying loads after only three days.

Chris and I moved to Camp I to help stock supplies above. We had been warned the wind ripped from the north over the ridge, but to experience it was devastating to morale. After daybreak, a steady roar with occasional blasts like cannon fire sounded along the ridge. As long as we stayed on the lee or to the south, there was little danger, but the ropes sometimes wove over the crest to avoid drops and placed us in a shock zone that pinned us to the ice. Our breath, already labored from the altitude, was literally sucked from our lungs by the crosswinds. Approximately halfway a sheltered lunch spot gave us respite, but the fixed line floating horizontally from the wind whined a tune of reminder of what was to come.

Camp II was stocked sufficiently by mid-April for Jim and me to move up and begin work on the 7000 feet of Eiger-like climbing above. Leading difficult ice gullies and rock tiers heavily laden is never a pleasure, but at 22,000 feet and above it can take the heart out of anyone. Disregarding the difficulty, Jim and I fixed eleven 150-foot pitches before returning to camp. We had stayed close to the crest of the ridge, avoiding face avalanches and rockfall, but the climbing had been technical and difficult.

Heavy snow and driving winds hampered our efforts to push further the next day, although we managed to stretch the rope across a section that the French had aptly named the "Terrible Traverse." The traverse avoided vertical walls above, but placed us out into the firing line of the south face.

Camp III, at 24,200 feet, fell to Chris and me on April 20 after a 12-hour push up snow-filled chimneys and across ice-encrusted slabs before we regained the blocky ridge crest. Few times would we carry loads over the 2500 feet to Camp III in one push because of the difficult terrain and length of the carry, but a convenient cache before the "Terrible Traverse" enabled those living at Camp III to drop down and retrieve supplies when needed. We didn't reach Camp III again for eight

days because snow storms and wind confined us to lower camps or to carrying loads from Camp I.

I felt a push to occupy Camp III was vital to keep our drive for the summit alive. Supported by Kim and Jim, Chris and I moved to Camp III. I reached the campsite hours before the others and hacked out a platform and fixed the remaining three pitches to camp from the end of our ropes. A natural ice cave formed by the separation of the snowfield and rock provided a protected site for one tent but it took two-and-a-half hours of hacking ice from the roof and sides.

Chris and I descended to the cache the next morning to retrieve ropes, hardware and food. At 24,000 feet, lethargy began to affect our up-to-then steady, strong performance. On May 1, Chris and I set the first five pitches of 18 needed to reach Camp IV. As the route took a sudden vertical surge up a gully system and slabs, we began to find more evidence of the French team's passage—rock anchors and short, discolored, frayed sections of rope. Temperatures down to −20° and gusty winds sapped our willpower, and so we retreated to Camp III for rest and shelter.

The cold could have shattered glass two mornings later as Chris and I crawled out of our down bags at seven A.M. An hour up the ropes and my feet were gone, the pain having given way to a pleasant numbness. Perched on a butt-sized ledge, I removed my boots and began to thaw my feet helped by Chris's warm belly. Soon we were at the end of our lines on a stance too crowded for two. Several aid pins enabled me to surmount a rounded flake and gain a 70° gully. A French cable ladder, frayed and broken in sections, stretched for 80 feet to a ledge system. I used the thing guiltily. The trip to the ledge was terrifying as several anchors popped and the ⅛-inch cable threatened to break.

Once Chris had arrived, I began a steeply ascending traverse, manteling and chimneying through several solid, but blocky gullies. Chris cleaned the few pins and arrived as clouds began to filter in. I front-pointed up several feet of ice, then swung left into a vertical rock gully and corner system.

Another badly damaged cable ladder hung from unseen points. Avoiding the ladder as much as possible, I used the good holds along the chimney's walls, occasionally stepping on a ladder rung to rest. On the top was a notch and the narrowest section of the west ridge I'd seen. I climbed a flaring chimney, manteled an ice-topped boulder and waded up the steep, short snowfield to the old French Camp V, marked by a discolored remnant of tent fabric.

The possibilities above were limited. To my left rose an awkward-looking off-width flake that the French had obviously climbed; to my right was a 95° blank wall, but hung with another 40-foot, vile-looking, deteriorated cable ladder, partially separated, but begging to be used.

While I uncoiled our last 150-foot rope and Chris found a comfortable belay, my freezing sweat and the lateness of the day made me go for the cable ladder. I climbed down from the belay to a three-inch-wide ledge

and traversed to the cable. My eyes were fixed on the break in the cable 20 feet above as I crept slowly toward it. By placing a single front-point on the broken ladder rungs, I was able to use my feet sparingly, depending almost totally on my shoulders and arms. My fingers started to freeze immediately from gripping the bare aluminum, but I finally passed the break in the cable and pushed hard for the lip of the wall. As I reached the end, I was pulled back by my haul line, which was jammed under a flake far below. I descended a few feet, shook the rope violently and it loosened.

My arms and shoulders were blown and I couldn't feel my hands when I surmounted the lip. Painfully, feeling came back, but I was still too exhausted to move for several minutes. I finished the strenuous pitch after jamming, front-pointing and stemming a wide groove for about 90 feet. It didn't look far to Camp IV, but without rope we couldn't continue.

Over the radio the next morning, Kim told us all that he had decided to descend to Base for good. His knee ligaments, continually stretched and torn from wearing converted ski boots, were too painful to continue carrying loads and descending. Jim, who was with Kim at Camp II, also sounded depressed. It was time for the whole team to descend to Base to recuperate from the intense stress of the past several weeks. Moreover, the weather had deteriorated.

Within three days we were ready to go up for the last time. Chris and I, climbing quickly, reached Camp II on May 9 and Camp III the next day. We needed one more day to lead the final four severe pitches to Camp IV, at 25,500 feet. Meanwhile, Jim, a day behind, climbed to Camp III to join us on the summit attempt.

The cramped two-man tent within the crevasse at Camp III became unbearable after a rest day. On May 14 all three of us willingly crawled out of the tent at seven A.M. and slowly began jümaring the 1300 feet of fixed line to Camp IV. Chris and I had already taken some camp gear to IV, but we still had 50-pound loads of food, kerosene, and personal gear.

By 1:30 P.M., I arrived at Camp IV and picked a campsite for our tent. Hacking and shoveling, I finally had a perfect platform and pitched the tent before the others arrived. Cooking and rehydrating was a three-hour process made even more exasperating by a faulty stove pump.

In order to leave the tent at two o'clock the next morning, at 11:30 P.M. we started to dress and cook. We climbed a steep snow gully in the moonless night more to gain altitude than follow a particular route. The pinpoints of light below helped me keep track of Jim and Chris as I left the center avalanche slope for the windpack and rocks of a rib to our side. The rib ended abruptly on the west ridge. Still in semi-darkness, we stopped for a rest and a candy bar where the west wall shot up sharply. The east face of Everest, 12 miles to the west, suddenly flashed a brilliant sunrise orange. Encouraged by the perfect

windless weather, we continued, climbing together despite the steep web of ice gullies crisscrossing the blocky granite.

The West Pillar butted into the southeast ridge at 27,000 feet. It was noon and the days of effort, lack of oxygen and difficult, dangerous climbing called upon every ounce of will we could muster. Occasional deep snow had slowed us as we gained the ridge crest and followed it to an ominous rock buttress that barred further progress.

Chris took the lead as we all dropped off the southeast ridge to Makalu's east side. The lee slope had accumulated weeks of snow from wind and bad weather and in minutes it became obvious that our chances of success there were nil. With a disheartening yell, Chris told us what we already knew. The route was hopeless; we would have to return to the southeast ridge crest.

The only solution was to climb the west wall of the buttress and regain the ridge crest above. Could all of us succeed? That answer was also painfully obvious. Although Jim's will to continue was there, his strength, which had been limited all morning, was not great enough. Regretfully, I ordered him to descend. Chris's strength was there, but he knew one climber could climb faster and have a better chance of getting down without a possibly fatal bivouac. In addition, he could assist Jim on the difficult descent.

Tears filled our eyes as I departed alone. For a few minutes, Jim and Chris watched my slow steady progress, then turned and began their long, dangerous descent. Unroped, I gained the rock wall quickly and began clearing the icy holds of accumulated snow. A steeply ascending traverse of shoe-box width angled sharply toward the summit, but gained little on the rising ridge above. One hundred feet up, I spotted a rappel sling from a past descent party to my right and near the ridge crest. Leaving the security of the ledge system, I manteled and front-pointed my way toward the ridge with nothing sure for my heavily gloved hands. Soon, I was straddling the southeast ridge above the buttress.

Both sides dropped steeply away. I fought hip-deep, bottomless powder to gain inches at a great expense of effort. After 30 feet, the ridge widened toward the west wall and the snow became hard and windpacked, allowing me to gain ground much more quickly. The summit pyramid was now in full view a hundred yards off.

Keeping well to the west side because of immense east-facing cornices, I approached the final pyramid only to find deep, unconsolidated powder. By gaining a rock rib to my west, I was able to move easily to within 20 feet of the top. I quickly cramponed up the remaining distance on hard, summit ice.

Amidst rising clouds, but without wind, I crouched on the summit of Makalu. At my feet were the three great ridges rising from Tibet and Nepal. Three oxygen bottles, a bamboo wand and a package of rye crisp crackers were the only mementos of man that crowded the summit.

I took pictures, then departed, collecting a large chunk of rock from

PLATE 18

Photo by John Roskelley

Climbing on the final day on MAKALU.

the first outcrop as I descended. It was 3:45 P.M. Exhausted, I backed down the route for safety. At the top of the buttress, I knew I couldn't down-climb the west wall, so I pushed off into the cloudy east side, hoping I wouldn't kick off a large avalanche. Within a minute, I had shot through several rock bands and was at Chris's plowed trough at his turn-around point.

Each 10 to 15 minutes, I would collapse intending to bivouac, but after a short, restless sleep, I would come to my senses and realize that if I bivouacked I would freeze to death in my sleep. A natural rock cave, 1000 feet above Camp IV, was my lodestone and I decided that if I could reach that cave before dark, I might survive the night. As the sun disappeared behind dark clouds to the west, I arrived at the cave and immediately dropped asleep just for a few minutes. Out of my stupor, I heard Jim and Chris talking far below.

"Chris!" I yelled.

"John, is that you?" Chris replied.

Suddenly the tension and drama I was envisioning myself in evaporated. I thought, who does he think it is? A touch of humor had removed my building melodramatic stress.

The sun disappeared along with the voices far below. My sweat began to freeze and without the radiant heat of the sun, the air temperature dropped alarmingly. Again, I shuddered at the thought of falling asleep never to awaken. Down I stumbled until it was too dark to see and I had to put on my headlamp. Backing down carefully, I found the wind-blown, snow-covered tracks of that morning and followed those into the depths hoping to surface somewhere near Camp IV. I joined the fresh tracks of Jim and Chris as I entered a narrow section of the gully. Finally I rounded a boulder and collapsed into camp. It was 8:30 P.M.

We forced ourselves to leave Camp IV at four P.M. the next afternoon in a violent storm because the stove had finally quit completely and we desperately needed fluids. In three days' time, we descended the route heavily laden with gear. Our only regret was that we were not able to remove the ropes on the descent.

Makalu had evaded American attempts for years and it was befitting that we had accomplished the task with a small team without artificial oxygen and without support members. No doubt it is the satisfying way to climb the Himalayan giants.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Himalaya, Nepal.

PERSONNEL: John Roskelley, *leader*; Chris Kopczynski, Kim Momb, Dr. James States.

ASCENT: Makalu, 27,825 feet, via the West Pillar, May 15, 1980 (Roskelley).