A Look into the Future, Lhotse's South Face

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WHEN I GOT HOME after last year's climb of Kumbhakarna's north face, the mountaineering press was highly complimentary, calling the ascent a remarkable achievement. It kept reminding me of what I felt (or at times didn't feel) while on the face. Prior to departure, most felt it couldn't be done. For many reasons, Kumbhakarna was a highly important step. I proved to everyone, but mainly to myself and the few others who share my views as to the progress of Himalayan climbing, that even the highest mountains of the world can be approached in the same style of climbing as practiced in the Alps. I also learned that the limits of risk and impossibility are very different for different people.

In 1985, I reached the top of Yalung Kang (8505 meters) and found out what the magic limit of 8000 meters means. The memory of my first Himalayan experience has a bitter taste. During the descent, my friend lost his life. I had to bivouac with no equipment at 8300 meters and was lucky to live. This valuable lesson convinced me that the human body can survive even under very severe conditions. I realized my own limits at a moment when I could no longer tell whether I was on this or the other side. Since then, I know precisely how much my body can take. In 1986, it was the turn of Broad Peak and the south face of K2, where I experienced how it feels to be alone on the face of an 8000er. I did also a series of extreme solo climbs in the Alps, both on ice and on rock. I am convinced that to achieve the most in the Himalaya, the climber needs to have excellent skills in all phases of climbing. After I added the north face of Kumbhakarna to all the other climbs, I felt I had accumulated everything needed for a high and difficult face ending much above 8000 meters. Thus, the idea for the south face of Lhotse was born.

It took time to decide on Kumbhakarna but not on Lhotse. In the back of my mind I knew well all who had tried and how many times they had failed. I prepared myself carefully with analysis of previous attempts, trying to find what I could learn from others' mistakes. At the end, my old belief returned—I trust myself more than anyone else. Achieving the first ascent of the face never mattered to me at all. Even after I applied for permission in Kathmandu, there

Sketch by Dee Molenaar

were three more attempts on the south face. What was important for me was to do it my way—solo and in alpine-style. I just didn't feel that it would be right with the current level of alpinism that the face should be climbed by a large expedition with the traditional siege tactics and with the use of supplementary oxygen.

To me, the true problem of the south face was its middle part, which had been tried in 1981 by the Yugoslav expedition led by Aleš Kunaver. He first dreamed of the face twenty years ago and studied it for a decade. Two months prior to the 1981 expedition, he sent a small team under the face to monitor everything that happened on it. What was produced was a photograph showing every single snow or rock avalanche. From this photo, it was hard to figure why later no one (except for the French team of Michel Fauquet and Vincent Fine in the fall of 1985) tried this line. According to the reconnaissance team, this was the safest route. The attempt of the two Frenchmen, who reached 7400 meters alpine-style, was sufficient proof that a solo alpine-style ascent was possible. Useful information came from the climbers who were on the 1981 expedition. And lastly, I spent two months in 1987 on the southeast ridge of Lhotse Shar. From there, the face can be examined as closely as the palm of your hand. Thus, I left for the south face of Lhotse fully prepared.

Prior to my departure, there had been attempts by thirteen expeditions or individuals. Since 1973, Lhotse's south face had become more attractive day by day, no doubt the best known climbing problem in the Himalaya. The events of the last two or three years only added to its popularity.

Two others accompanied me: Dr. Janko Kokalj, who had already been with me on Kumbhakarna, and the cameraman Tomaž Ravnihar. Small team, small problems! But this time we did not envisage fully what was awaiting us in Kathmandu. We lost a week to political and military unrest. Finally, on April 9, we landed on the grassy airport at Lukla and from there things began to move. We had Base Camp set up by April 15 at 4900 meters about a half-hour above Chukung, the last village. Usually, most expeditions locate their Base Camp much higher, but at that location there is no water and a lot less comfort; it is exposed to the afternoon winds. The comfort at my Base Camp outweighed the additional hour-and-a-half's walk to the higher site.

To acclimatize, I chose the southeast ridge of Lhotse Shar. I knew it well from three years before. It isn't too difficult and it is safe. Lhotse is about 800 meters higher than Kumbhakarna and so I figured I needed better acclimatization than last year. I went up on Lhotse Shar four times and reached 7200 meters at the highest. From there, I could observe the planned route on Lhotse. The south face is very complex. How fast and how safely you can climb depends on snow conditions. Technical difficulty really begins above 8000 meters. To this you must add the weather. The morning sun warms the face and starts rockfall. From the distance, it all looks beautiful and nice, but when you're under it, your heart sinks. In the afternoon, the weather practically always turns sour with fog, wind and snowfall. The consequence is avalanches. The most dangerous part is the

lower half of the face, both from avalanches and falling rock and ice. It would clearly be crazy to try to climb this section during the daytime and in the sun.

On April 22, I felt ready to begin. Sleeping bag, bivouac sack, two ice axes, crampons, helmet, harness, ice and rock pitons, extra gloves, socks and goggles, camera, walkie-talkie, 100 meters of 6mm rope, specially made clothes, food and drink including cheese, dextrose, chocolate, cheese strudel, cookies and special whole-wheat biscuits and three liters of coffee. I decided to set out in the afternoon and climb the most dangerous part during the night. Jani accompanied me to the foot of the face and then kept "following" until he lost sight of me in the darkness of the night.

I had started at five P.M. much further to the left than where the Yugoslavs had begun in 1981. For that reason, I reached the middle, rather than the beginning, of the snow ridge which they had called the "Telescope." The conditions were reasonably good on the precipitous part at the beginning of the face. The traverse over to the snowfield which extends upwards to nearly 8000 meters where it meets the triangular rock face was more difficult. I chose a diagonal ramp towards the left and another one to the right to reach the snowfield. There were a number of vertical pitches but luckily they were short. I climbed only about halfway up the steep snowfield to a large buttress on the left side of the giant rock face. From talks with members of the 1981 Yugoslav expedition, it seemed that it would be easier to try to reach the couloir at the left side of this buttress.

Somewhere in the middle of the traverse, at about 7500 meters, I bivouacked for the first time. I had been climbing for about 15 hours and needed rest. The sun was already lighting the wall and rockfall could be expected. In spite of being so high, it was unbelievably warm and the spot was completely safe; I even managed to sleep for a while. I continued in the early afternoon. The beginning of the couloir was canyon-like with steep walls on both sides. At the start it rose gently, but imagine what would happen here during an avalanche! You want to climb faster than your body will let you. Then came a steep rocky step, followed by a nasty traverse with a few steep spots. Finally, only a long snowfield separated me from the foot of the rock buttress. Potential avalanche danger made me choose the route very carefully. Late in the evening, I got to the buttress at about 8200 meters. This second bivouac spot reminded me of the one on Yalung Kang, though it was more commodious, but because of the extreme cold, I couldn't even dream about sleeping. You can't describe such a night with mere words. Cold! Loneliness! The next day would decide the climb and be the most difficult. The rock buttress above 8200 meters would be the crux.

This part had been constantly in my mind. I was sure I could make it, but this section was a mystery. Would it prove impossible and force retreat? Photographs seemed to indicate lines on the left side of the buttress, but previous experience showed that things can look very different from close up. To find out what the truth is, you have to climb the whole of the 3000-meter face first.

The morning of April 24 was just what was needed, clear and peaceful. Leaving all unnecessary equipment at the bivouac, I soon had to make the

decision. A snowy ramp led to a vertical step, mostly rock but covered here and there by snow and dubious ice. This would have been fine at 5000 meters, but above 8000 meters it needed superhuman strength. It took a good three hours to gain some 60 meters, some with artificial aid. Remembering Yalung Kang, I fixed a part of my rope at the top of the step in preparation for the descent.

Although the top was still far off, I was ready to give the last atom of strength to complete the ascent. I was too close to the summit to fail. Despite less difficult climbing technically, the altitude and occasional deep snow were taking their toll. First a snowy step and then a long traverse. As usual, clouds and snowfall began, but the main obstacle was a strong wind. When the gray skies broke, I could look across the South Col to Everest or see Cho Oyu farther off to the west. To the south was an unbroken sea of clouds. I had to dip a bit into a saddle and then up to the very top. It was 2:20 P.M. I called Camp on the walkie-talkie. "Jani, I cannot go any higher." "Why not?" "I'm on top!"

What were my feelings with the task accomplished? None! Maybe relief at not having to climb higher. Body and soul were stretched too taut to feel. Was the work done? Far from it! I was only halfway through. I knew that any minutes lost could never be recovered.

I started the descent immediately, wanting to be as low as possible by sundown. I took the same route down as far as 7800 meters but it was impossible to cross to the great couloir. Avalanches would make it suicidal. There was only one alternative: a rappel over a rock step where the 1981 expedition had experienced the greatest technical difficulties. Their ropes were gone, of course, swept away by avalanches. But nearly all the pitons were still in place, and they were ever so useful to me. The step was reasonably safe from big avalanches, but the new snow was continuously sloughing off. The rappelling was far from pleasant especially after night caught me. What a relief it was when I felt under me the ledge at the foot of the step.

I kept on down the steep sector to the large snowfields in the lower part, but there I had to stop. I couldn't see a thing. A wild dance of snowflakes; avalanche thunder to the right. My third bivouac was at about 7300 meters. I hoped for a clearing in the weather. I checked with Jani. Base Camp weather was poor too, but a weather forecast was favorable. They say I'm cool-headed but in that third bivouac my nerves nearly cracked. In that desperate situation, I must admit I felt that the whole of Lhotse seemed to be trembling from avalanches. Around midnight, the face slowly calmed down. I spotted the first stars. I had a choice: to wait for dawn and maybe a day with a new round of avalanches or to start the descent right away. I set out. In the bottom part, the climbing is not so difficult and you can descend fast. But I was haunted by the fear of being swept away by a sudden white "river." Yet, on April 25, between seven and eight o'clock, I was finally safe. Now it was truly over.

What were my feelings then? After such a strain, I was incapable of thinking. The concentration and tension of the past four days were over. Have you ever wanted something terribly and after enormous effort gotten it? That is roughly how I felt. I know that Lhotse has captured part of my soul, the part that yearns

for uncertainty and true adventure. It is a road where decisions have to be made and carried out constantly, a road so similar to life, but where everything is happening on the very edge of life, an edge so sharp that it is often difficult to sense whether you are on the right side. For better or for worse, from mountain tops you can see so much further, and the true limit is infinity. A man throws a rock—his desire—into the unknown, into the mist, and then he follows it.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Nepal

NEW ROUTE: Lhotse, 8501 meters, 27,891 feet, South Face, April 22 to 25, 1990; summit reached on April 24, 1990 after 46 hours (Tomo Česen solo).

A few skeptics have cast doubt on this solo climb. I have known Tomo Česen for a half dozen years and have the greatest respect for his climbing ability and his *integrity*. We spent a pleasant evening together in Ljubljana in January and discussed this problem of doubt at length. Who was with Hermann Buhl when he stood alone on the top of Nanga Parbat? Who saw Reinhold Messner on the summit of Everest when he made his solo climb? I am in good company with such notables as Pierre Beghin and others in believing implicitly in his word.

H. ADAMS CARTER