

# The West Face of Makalu

*Finding a solution to one of the Himalaya's great problems*

BY SERGEI EFIMOV

TRANSLATED BY SERGEI NEKHAI

On March 15, nine mountaineers from Ekaterinburg, Russia—Salavat Habibulin (the team leader), Alexei Bolotov, Nikolai Zhilin, Yuri Ermachek, Dmitri Pavlenko, Igor Bugachevski, Andrei Klepikov, Sergei Buchkovski (medical doctor) and Sergei Efimov (head of the expedition)—appeared once again in Kathmandu, and the expedition to climb the west face of Makalu began.

A helicopter landed in Lukla on March 28 to pick up the advance group. More than 3,000 pounds of expedition gear would have to be lowered to the 4500-meter base camp, while extra cargo was dropped at the 5300-meter advanced base camp. Given the cloudy skies, it was unclear whether the helicopter would be able to get through to base camp. The caravan with five other members of the expedition carrying the rest of the cargo had left Hille six days before and was expected to arrive in base camp a week later, about April 4.

“Let’s try, Valera,” I said to the pilot, deciding to take the risk rather than change the expedition plans at the outset.

The helicopter flew up into the clouds, finding its way into the valley with difficulty, and finally landed beneath the south face at 4500 meters. It took off again, this time with Salavat and Alexei aboard, and headed toward the west face. Ten minutes later, it was back. Alexei jumped out, cussing. They had not been able to land and had been forced to drop everything while still flying at a high altitude and speed.

We started setting up base camp. The same day, Salavat and Alexei went up to advanced base camp to pick up the scattered gear. It took them more than seven hours to reach ABC. Later on, after acclimatization, the same route would take only three-and-a-half hours to reach.

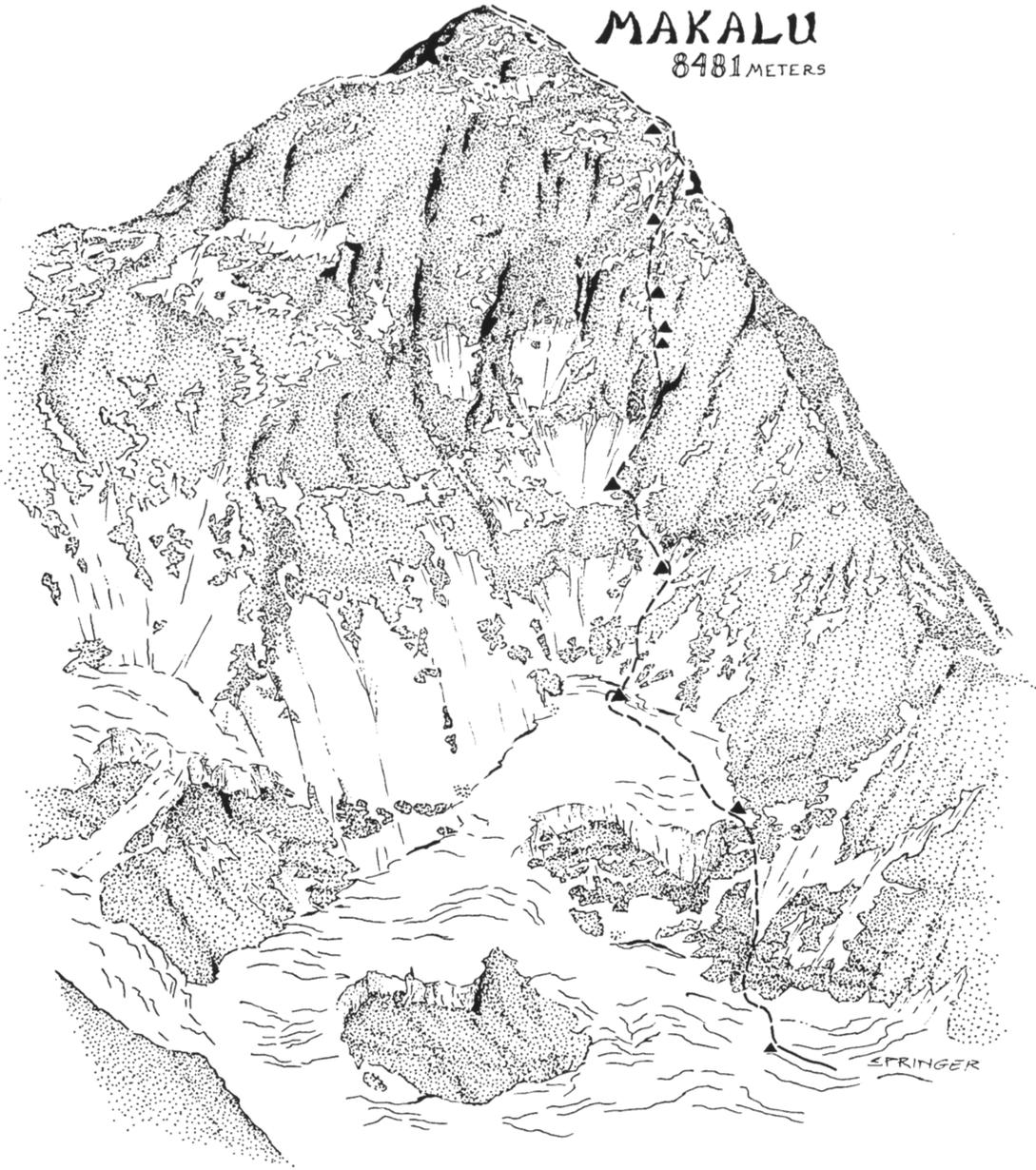
The 1997 Makalu West Face Expedition was the final object of a two-year Himalayan program organized under the sponsorship of the Ekaterinburg local government. The idea of the program, which was designed by the Federation of Alpinism in Ekaterinburg and supported financially by the local government, was to organize several Himalayan expeditions, building up and training a team capable of climbing Makalu’s west face. The first expedition climbed the west face of Baruntse (7220m), a beautiful peak just in front of Makalu’s west face. Photographs of Makalu’s west face were made during the climb; later, they were used to plan the Makalu ascent route.

The route could be divided into four parts. The first part, from 5800 meters to 6100 meters, entailed reaching the top of the steep-to-overhanging glacier by going along the rock wall right of the icefall. The next stage climbed through 35-45° ice fields, reaching a bergschrund at 6500 meters. From there, a mixed section of 50-55° rock and ice leading to 7400 meters would have to be negotiated. Finally, a rock buttress connected the route to the 1971 French West Pillar route at 8000 meters. The 70-75° rock on this last part of the climb would be the most challenging part of the ascent.

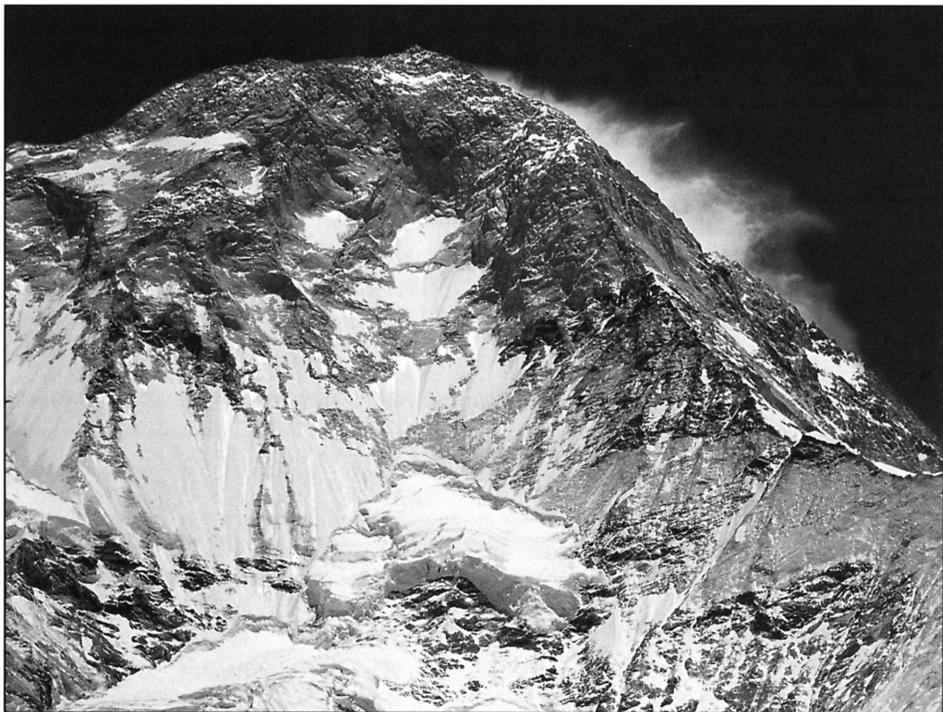
When we arrived, we found the conditions on the wall different from what we had seen in the 1995 photographs. The bergschrund separating the glacier from the wall was much wider.

# MAKALU

8481 METERS



*The 1997 Russian West Face route*



*The west face of Makalu.* SERGEI EFIMOV

We thought, however, that we could see a snow bridge at the upper part of the 'schrund that seemed to reach the wall. From there to the buttress, 55° ice fields brought one into the first rock belt. These smooth ice-polished rock slabs would be hard to free climb, so we chose a route that followed icy gullies across them from 6700 meters to 6800 meters. Higher, there seemed to be a passage to some black rocks at 6900 meters and then to an "S-like" rocky formation that we called "the dollar," where we planned to set up Camp V. From that point, an icy slope rose 100 meters to a 70-75° rock wall. This wall was vertical from 7400 meters to 7600 meters, then continued up to 8000 meters, where it reached the West Pillar. It was the third and greatest obstacle to a connection with the West Pillar route, and had remained untouched for the last 15 years.

On April 9, work on the wall started. While Dmitri and Andrei shuttled loads between Camp I at 5700 meters and Camp II at 6100 meters, Igor, Yuri, and I went up to the bergschrund at 6500 meters and chose a place for Camp III. The 'schrund was filled with snow and nicely protected from avalanches and rocks by a huge overhanging upper side. At this point, however, the weather was still cold and the mountain was silent. Falling snow did not accumulate on the face; rather, it came down in dry spindrift avalanches that did no harm to the mountaineers, who simply pulled up the hoods of their parkas and waited until it was over.

In the beginning, cold weather and insufficient acclimatization hampered early departures; work began each day after 9 a.m. On April 13, Dmitri overcame the first pitch above the bergschrund and fixed a rope. The next day, Igor climbed and fixed two more pitches. Meanwhile, Alexei, Nikolai and Salavat reached 7000 meters on the West Pillar for acclima-

tization. It was also a reconnaissance attempt to see whether it was possible to downclimb the West Pillar from the summit.

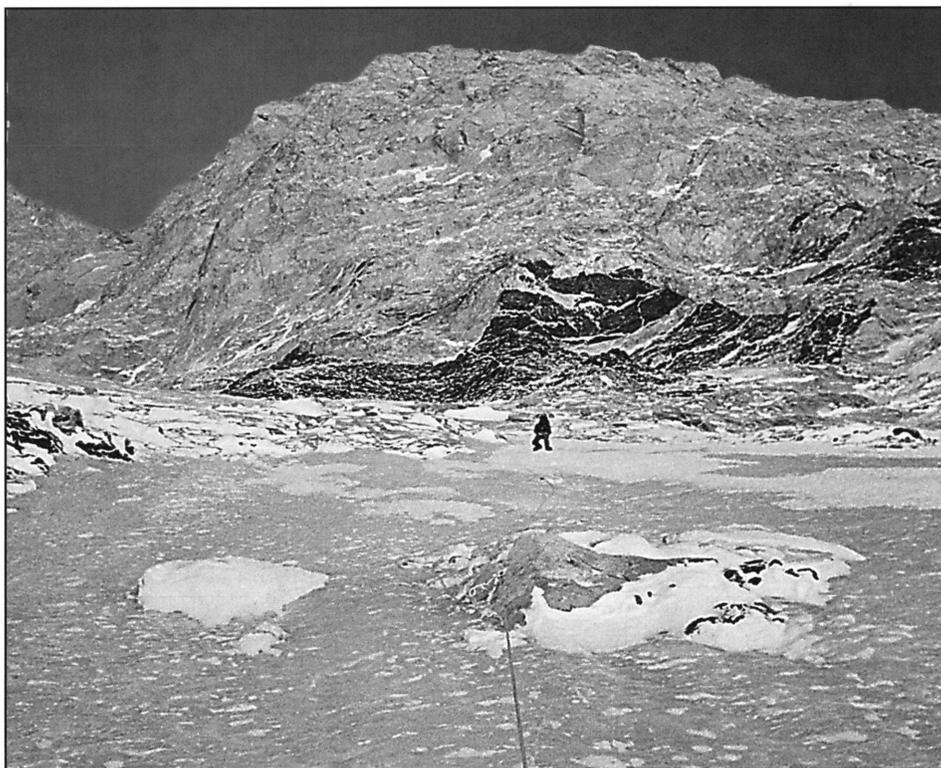
Later, all climbers gathered and rested at the 5300-meter ABC. After a discussion, it was decided to undertake two more pushes on the wall. The first would bring extra gear to Camp III, set up Camp IV at 7000 meters, and fix ropes between the camps. The second would reach the top of the vertical rocks at 7400 meters, then get to a snow pocket at the top of the tower at 7600 meters in order to have a look at the following rock section and assess the chances of success. It was a tough decision to make two more pushes instead of going straight for the summit, but we felt it was necessary.

On April 16, Salavat, Nikolai, Andrei and Dmitri went up from ABC. The next day, Alexei, Igor, Yuri and I followed. A storm camp was organized in the wide 'schrund, where we cached climbing gear, food and fuel, and put up two tents.

Traffic on the wall started. Groups went up, the leaders of which changed each day. The climbers headed toward the enormous rock wall of the west face, which seemed to hang over our heads. The huge scale of the wall was especially obvious as the small figures of the climbers disappeared on the icy slope leading to its base.

Everybody worried about the next two camps. Was there a place to put up a tent above 6500 meters?

Taking bivouac gear, Salavat and three others started from the Camp III 'schrund on April 20. In the evening, they radioed that they had used pieces of platforms found on the rocks (the highest point reached by a 1992 British expedition) to establish the camp. It was not a lot of room for four people, but they managed to spend a night there. (Later, Camp IV would be moved almost 100 meters lower to where Nikolai and Andrei worked an entire day cutting a





*The bergschrund camp (CIII) at 6500 meters. SERGEI EFIMOV*

tent platform out of solid ice.)

On April 23, all the climbers gathered once again at ABC. Ropes had been fixed up to 7100 meters. We had not expected to fix that much rope and were running out, so we decided to remove three ropes below 6100 meters and one rope from the snow slope above Camp IV. I ordered 400 meters of rope from Kathmandu as well. A helicopter was to arrive on May 3; until then, we borrowed ropes from Danish and Swiss mountaineers who had attempted the normal route and who had their base camp next to ours.

On April 26, Salavat, Dmitri, Nikolai and Andrei went up again to the buttress. Salavat rested less than the other men; however, he refused to stay in Base Camp any longer, arguing that he had recovered. Two days later, Alexei, Yuri and Igor followed. They aimed to reach the "dollar" rocks and set up Camp V at 7300 meters, for which there seemed to be a place on a fluted ridge. They then would attempt to climb the buttress at 7400 meters and fix the ropes up to 7500 meters.

On April 28, Salavat and Dmitri reached 7200 meters on steep rocks, finding no place for a tent. Above was overhanging rock. The climbers felt tired and were forced to retreat to Camp IV at 6900 meters, where Nikolai and Andrei were cutting out the tent platform centimeter by centimeter through solid ice. Nikolai worked without glasses. He had set up an anchor for himself and Andrei when they started to make the platform, then called for Andrei to climb. Andrei started, then fell and hung on the rope. Nikolai was jerked by the rope and dropped his glasses, which fell on his boot. He had just bent to get them when Andrei fell again. The glasses were gone. He had to work the rest of the day without them.

The next day, Nikolai decided to go up anyway, hoping to get through the slope before the

sunlight hit. But the climbers had to work until very late in the evening to get to Camp V at 7300 meters. Dmitri, the day's leader, wrote: "The climbing was nasty. I had to use my fingers for balance, but it was cold and I had to wear thin gloves. I placed one ice screw below a very smooth 20-meter wall. On and above the wall, there was no place for a belay. I had to climb ten meters to place another ice screw. It was getting late; I did not have time to think. I had to go fast to beat the darkness. I barely reached the end of the pitch.

"The others came after me. They started to make a place for the tent. I went down to get my backpack. Night was coming. My descent was horrible. My strength had left me, my backpack was heavy, I was alone with nobody to help. The others had not had enough time to set up a good platform. We were forced to spend the night sitting. We made some water, but did not bother to prepare food. Nobody could eat. When I reached the tent, I only wanted to fall down somewhere—or at least to sit a bit."

The next morning, Nikolai experienced sharp pain in his eyes and was forced to go down alone to Base Camp.

"I had to go down to Camp IV as well," wrote Dmitri, "because I felt horrible after the previous evening's climbing. Salavat and Andrei, having spent five hours chopping a place for the tent, also descended. The next group was about to pass us on their way to Camp V while we rested at Camp IV."

The plan for Salavat, Andrei and Dmitri to rest at Camp III at 6500 meters for two days while the other three were working at Camp V was changed the next morning, when Andrei discovered that his toes were frostbitten. Somehow he had not taken his boots off for two days, not even while in his sleeping bag, and he had lost track of his toes. Salavat and Dmitri followed Andrei down to Camp II at 6100 meters, where they were met by the coach, Alexandr Mikhailov and Andrei Belikov. That day, Alexei, Yuri and Andrei reached Camp V and started to move up.

"The day Salavat and I climbed back up was a horrible day," Dmitri continued. "We spent a night at 6500 meters after helping Andrei, waited in the morning snowfall, and then got an extra load at 7000 meters. When we left the 'schrund, it was almost normal weather. I was frying in the sun. I took off my clothes, leaving on only a fleece jacket. Then, just under 7300 meters, on the last fixed rope, everything changed. A snowstorm started suddenly as it sometimes does in winter on Elbrus or on Peak Pobeda. I thought I would freeze to death. I did not know how I would get up. The next day, I could not go higher, so I sat in the tent. I thought that maybe because of this our plans would be delayed. We had to stay there for four days longer than anybody else."

Alexei, Sergei and Yuri spent two days trying to reach the top of the buttress. But their attempt to go to the right failed. This part of the buttress was too hard to climb.

"I tried to reach the top of the buttress the whole day," wrote Alexei, "and then Igor tried as well. A lot of loose rocks. I thought that it was easier on the right, but we moved into polished rocks with no holds at all. Only by aiding on bolts could we do it. I took a three- or four-meter fall, worked the whole day, and finally managed to get six or seven meters up the buttress. But then, we decided to go to the left. We rappelled down, leaving pitons. Igor went left, traversing under the dihedral."

On May 3, Igor and Yuri came down from 7300 meters. That day, Dmitri and Salavat went up. First, Salavat started to continue. He aided 30 meters, going from one piton to the next. It took him almost three hours.

"During the third attempt," Alexei said, "I left with Salavat and his group to complete the part we had decided on earlier. The others were tired from following Andrei down to 6500 meters. Nikolai had burned his eyes and gone down. I was supposed to go down to bring up

an extra tent. Instead, I went up and belayed Salavat as he aided the first 30 meters of the buttress. Then I belayed Dmitri."

Dmitri wrote: "Normally, somebody volunteered to be a leader, but I spent a day in the tent, because of my bad experience climbing in the snowfall. Alexei decided to go up and belay Salavat. Without his help, we would have missed two or three days and might therefore not have made the summit.

"The next day, I led. It was mixed climbing; I either used my ice-fifi or free climbed. My ice tools were no good, as the ice was too thin. Fortunately, the ice-fifi hooked on thin holds and patches of ice. Rocks alternated with ice "loaves," where I placed ice screws. Later, on our next attempt, this ice would be gone. In some places, I used stoppers; elsewhere, especially in the loose rock, pitons. Above, there was a part with some beautiful free climbing and later on, more free climbing in a clean, vertical crack. I stopped one pitch under 7600 meters, due to lack of ropes."

On May 3, the helicopter landed, bringing food, fuel, ropes and two NTV (Russian National Television Company) operators. Andrei Klepikov, whose toes were frostbitten, was flown to Kathmandu. (All his toes were ultimately saved.)

It took the men four days to rest in base camp at 4500 meters. Then, after getting to the advanced base camp and resting another two days, Igor, Nikolai and Yuri went up on May 11. They were followed two days later by Salavat, Alexei and Dmitri. The skies were clear, but a strong north wind blew for several days. Climbers were buffeted on the fixed ropes, barely able to keep balance on the steep ice below 6900 meters. Apparently, the wind had caused rockfall, for the tent at 7300 meters was found with its pole broken and punched through by rocks. Above 7300 meters, one of the fixed ropes on a hard pitch had come untied, forcing the climbers to climb the pitch again.

On May 14, Igor, Yuri and Nikolai reached the top of the buttress at 7600 meters. They had bivouac gear. Because we could see them through binoculars from Base Camp, we did not worry much. The next morning, however, they reported that they had had difficulties putting up a tent the previous night because of the wind. Below them, in Camps IV and V, the tents had been destroyed. In Base Camp, the cold north wind also was trying to destroy the tents, and the prayer flags blew almost horizontally.

Preliminary examination of the west face indicated that the crux would be in getting to the top of the buttress at 7600 meters. As it turned out, however, the climbing above was difficult as well. Only 100 to 150 meters were overcome a day. Couloirs often ended in overhangs, so it was hard to choose the correct line of ascent. The climbers radioed for directions from base camp, but it was difficult to give them from such a long way away. Still, day after day, they reached higher altitudes and set up new bivouacs.

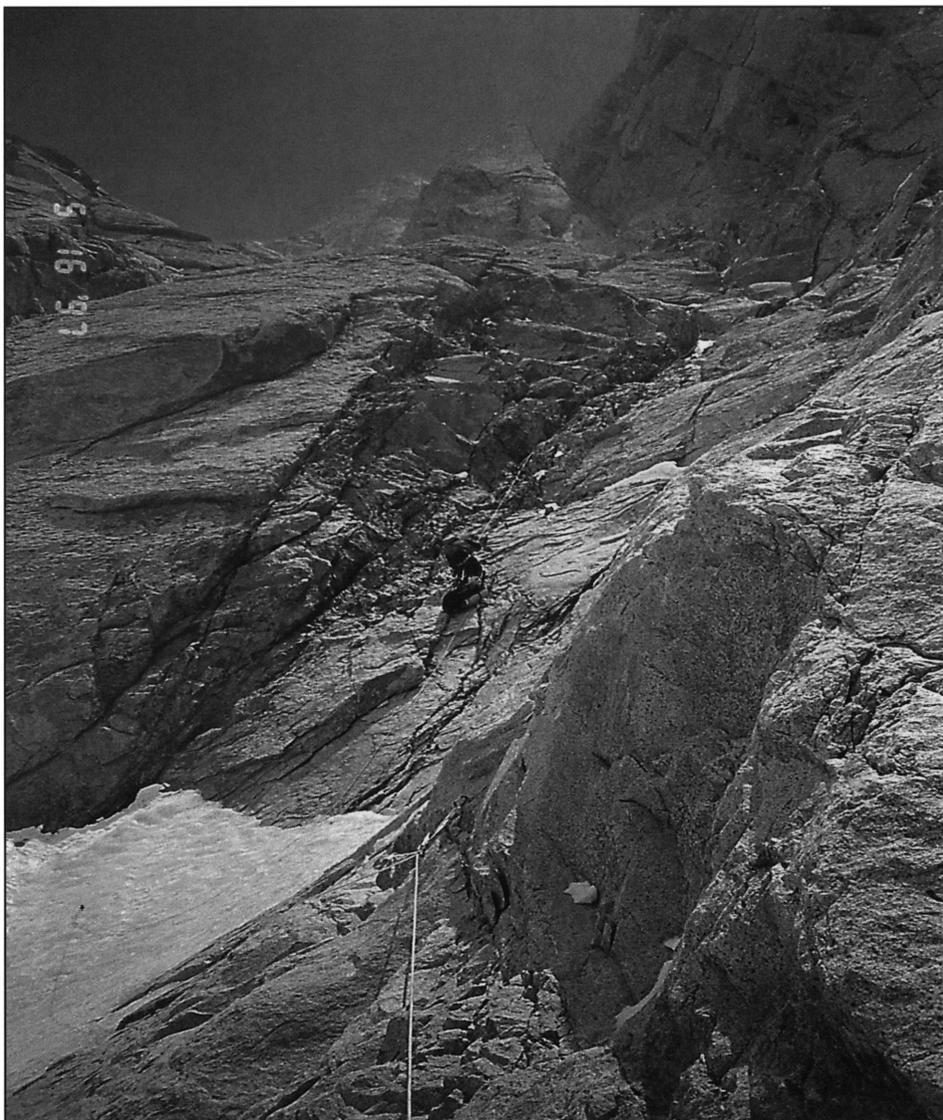
"There were several cool places to climb free above 7500 meters," Dmitri would write of the climbing at that point. "At 7650 meters, there was one hard pitch, then two or three more hard but beautiful pitches later on."

Going in turn, Salavat, Dmitri, Alexei and Igor came up through the buttress. Nikolai and Yuri chopped platforms for the tents. The climbers were tired. Physical and physiological loads were taking a lot of strength. Going up the fixed ropes with heavy backpacks was difficult as well, especially when they were vertical, at which point the climbers had to hang the backpacks from their harnesses to ascend.

On May 19, at 11 a.m., Alexei radioed that he had reached a snow field under the 7900-meter pillar, and that they could begin climbing unroped.

Wrote Nikolai: "It was the most memorable moment when Alexei shouted from above that the buttress was over. I remember that day more than the summit."

On May 20, six climbers went up the West Pillar on Makalu, one of the most beautiful



*In the thick of the buttress at 7500 meters. SALAVAT HABIBULIN*

8000-meter peaks in the Himalaya. The climbers were on their eighth day on the mountain and their fourth day above 7500 meters. Below and behind them were the rock buttress and icy slopes. Ahead, there remained what technically was the easiest part of the route. The west face had been conquered.

At 2 p.m., Salavat radioed to BC that they had stopped at 8150 meters because of the wind and cold and were putting up tents. He spoke hoarsely and slowly. Two hours later, he radioed again, this time from within the tent, in a normal voice. Everything was OK; they were drinking tea and warming up. Suggestions to use some oxygen were turned down. To the question, "What are your plans for tomorrow?" Salavat replied that they

were going to go for the summit early in the morning. Igor confirmed this plan (their two tents were 50 meters apart).

On May 21, everyone woke up at 5 a.m. Radio communication had been arranged for that hour but nobody got on. At 6 a.m., they reported that they were getting ready.

At an altitude of more than 8000 meters, all these preparations lasted for hours. Lack of oxygen affects a person's physical and mental state. Moving and thinking gets slow, and the simplest things, such as dressing up and packing the backpack, require continuous willpower and much longer time. One has to make an effort to think and then to do something. Also, you can not dress up all together in a tight tent—so somebody starts, then the other one follows, and so on.

The climbers started to leave the tents on the ready, indifferent to who was first and who was last. The psychological tension of the wall was gone; they no longer had to belay or be belayed. Ahead was a simple route along the wide ridge, where everyone could move at their own speed, struggling only with their fatigue, indifferent to surroundings, only their subconscious pushing them to the summit.

Salavat got out first, walked to the other tent and came back. He told the departing climbers that he had to drink some tea and warm up his feet. This did not alert his friends because it had happened before on the wall, when Salavat had had to warm up his boots and feet on the gas stove.

At about 8 a.m., five people started to move up the ridge. At 9 a.m., Salavat went on the radio, but the battery was frozen and we could not hear him. I asked that he turn on the radio three times if everything was OK, one time if they needed help. Salavat answered with three signals. I said that we were on all the time and asked not to leave anybody alone on the slope on the way back. After that, nobody got on the radio. At 1:15 p.m., we saw three points moving toward the summit and then, later on, two more.

"This was a special day," wrote Alexei. "I felt as if I had extra strength. When we left the tents and got to the ridge, I became certain that we would summit. I was first, breaking through two to four inches of fresh snow. I used an old fixed rope to get up the steep part, which led to the south ridge at 8350 meters. After that, we followed a gully with deep snow. I asked Nikolai to go ahead and break trail. He had not brought his ice axe. I gave him mine, and he reached hard snow after 10 meters. I tried to go after him, but after the fresh snow, slick rock slabs appeared, and I could not move. Nikolai went ahead and did not notice. I had to wait for the others. They came, fixed a rope and we reached steep firm snow. Soon, I reached the summit."

"The summit was closer than I expected," wrote Dmitri. "Just three hillocks. Smaller than I thought. No view. Valleys in clouds. Only the west side was clear. I felt tired. I asked Yuri to clip me in and belay. Thus we downclimbed to the old fixed rope. The other men had already gone."

At 4 p.m., Igor radioed that five people had reached the summit. To our question of Salavat's whereabouts, he answered that Salavat had remained in the tent.

At 5 p.m., the radio came on. Igor tried to say something but could not. He passed the receiver to Alexei, who said that Salavat had died.

Nikolai said that Salavat got out of the tent an hour and a half after the others. He climbed up two pitches. They found him leaning against a rock as if he were resting. He was not breathing and his pupils did not react to the light. The men carried the body to the first section of level ground and buried him there. It took two and a half hours. They returned to the tents in the darkness.

The next morning, the climbers were able to leave the tents only at about 11 p.m. They took one tent with them and headed down. We monitored them with binoculars, through

which we saw that one pair was far behind the other three people. Later, we learned that Igor had fallen and broken a rib. After that, he could not move very fast. There was one oxygen tank, which was given to Igor. After breathing some oxygen, he went down more quickly.

That day, all five came down to Camp VII at 7650 meters. All night, Igor breathed oxygen and the next morning felt strong enough to go down. Nikolai went first and, at 4 p.m., reached the bergschrund, where he was met by Alexandr Mikhailov and Andrei Belikov, who had come up earlier. Nikolai was certain that everybody would be there, but Yuri and Igor were at Camp VI at 7300 meters and Dmitri and Alexei even higher.

On May 23, the remaining four climbers could not get out of the tent for a long time. That day, information on the groups' movement was forwarded directly to Ekaterinburg on the satellite phone. Relatives and friends called my wife, who passed along information on the condition of the climbers.

My experience told me that the climbers were not aware of their condition, and every extra day they spent at altitude was dangerous. We could see that rappelling was going too slowly. At 4 p.m., Alexei relayed that he could not move Dmitri, who was hanging on the rope, telling everyone to leave him alone. We also learned that Alexei had dropped his sleeping bag from 7650 meters, while Yuri had dropped his backpack with sleeping bag, down parka, gas canisters and food. We realized that a night at 7300 meters might have tragic consequences. Yuri understood it as well, and decided to push through to Camp IV at 6500 meters. He was going to rappel all night if needed, because to stay at 7300 meters without warm clothes was dangerous.

Yuri reached 6500 meters at 10 p.m. Igor, Alexei and Dmitri spent the night at 7300 meters.

On May 24, the remaining three started to move at 8 a.m. Dmitri and Igor were moving very slowly. Alexei was coming last. After descending diagonally through difficult rock sections on the fixed ropes, they reached the ice. Alexei made sure that the others were moving OK, then went ahead.

When Alexei reached the 'schrund, Andrei Belikov started to climb up to bring some hot tea to the men. When rocks started to fall, he decided to stay under the overhanging roofs to wait. Dmitri passed him, and later on reached the 'schrund, but Igor was still on the buttress. Andrei decided to go up to see what happened. When he reached Igor, he saw that he was hanging on the fixed rope, dead. His left temple had been shattered by a rock. He did not have a helmet, though it later was claimed that he started to rappel with one on.

Rocks continued to fall. Andrei rushed to lower the body to the closest station and fix it with rope. The warming of the last few days had triggered massive rockfall on the wall. It was getting dangerous, and we had to leave.

On May 25, the climbers reached 5300 meters, and on May 26 everybody was at 4500 meters in Base Camp. On May 28, the expedition flew to Lukla and from there on to Kathmandu.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Nepal Himalaya

NEW ROUTE: The West Face (3163m) of Makalu (8463m), March 23-May 28, 1997

PERSONNEL: Salavat Habibulin, Alexei Bolotov, Nikolai Zhilin, Yuri Ermachek, Dmitri Pavlenko, Igor Bugachevski, Andrei Klepikov, Sergei Buchkovski, Sergei Efimov