

The West Face of Gasherbrum IV

To the top of the Shining Wall

BY JAE-HAG JUNG, *Corean Alpine Club*

When Sung-Dae Cho and three other Corean Alpine Club* members climbed Mount McKinley's Cassin Ridge in 1988, it was not only the first Korean ascent of the Cassin, but also the first step of the Corean Alpine Club's decade-long pursuit of big-wall climbing in the high mountains. At that time, Yosemite-style big-wall and free climbing, together with the Yosemite Decimal System, recently had been introduced to Korea, where it had spread rapidly to Korean crags. Many Korean climbers tried to learn and adapt themselves to these new ideas of climbing, which certainly pushed the limits of our climbing.

It was, however, hard to find a similar evolution in mountaineering. Most expeditions still relied on outdated siege tactics, depended on Sherpa support for ascents, and lacked any first-ascent experience. The summit mentality was that an ascent would be made by whatever means necessary; consequently, the real spirit of the challenge was diluted.

Sung-Dae, together with In-Mo Koo (who, after attending a special *École Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme* program in Chamonix in the early 1970s, almost single-handedly introduced French ice technique to Korean climbing) devised the ten-year project of big-wall climbing in the high mountains, which included establishing new routes rather than repeating established ones.

In 1990, four CAC members went to the Pamir International Camp in the Soviet Union. Heavy storms hit the region and huge avalanches buried many climbers on Pik Lenin. Nevertheless, CAC members climbed two 7000-meter peaks within a month. Both were true alpine-style and one-push efforts. All of the CAC members were high-altitude rookies. Hak-Jae Yoo summited Peak Communism solo.

Two years later, Sung-Dae Cho went back to McKinley, aiming for the American Direct route. But the team members became involved in rescue activity in the early stages of the expedition. They carried out two dead Italian climbers, as well as American climber Mugs Stump. The CAC members then moved to Kichatna Spire without having attempted the American Direct. There, Hak-Jae Yoo, Dong-Suk Shin, and Tae-Il Han put up a new line on the east face just right of the first ascent route [See *AAJ* 1993, p. 140]. They also met Mark Bebie there and exchanged information about the Lailak and Karavshin Ak-Su regions in Kyrgyzstan. Two years later, in 1994, they went to the Pamir Alai, where Sang-Man Shin and Dong-Yun Lee climbed the 5,000-foot north face of Rocky Ak-Su in the Lailak Ak-Su valley in four days. Meanwhile, Dong-Suk Shin and Byoung-Ki Choi created a 900-meter variation to a line on the east face of Pik 4810 in the Karavshin Ak-Su.

In 1995, Sung-Dae Cho led the Corean Alpine Club GIV expedition, the crowning event of the 50th anniversary of the Corean Alpine Club. Hak-Jae Yoo and Sang-Man Shin reached 7800 meters via the Northwest Ridge, but severe frostbite forced them to retreat. In 1997, the

* The Corean Alpine Club was founded September 15, 1945, one month after the end of WWII. The original club name was the Chosun Alpine Club. "Chosun," the old name of the kingdom of Korea, was liberated from Japan at the end of the war. Though the new democratic country became Korea, the club retained the old name, and today remains the Corean Alpine Club.

Corean Alpine Club Climbing Technique Committee returned to Pakistan, this time for the final goal of the program: the unclimbed west face of GIV.

The 12 expedition members arrived in Islamabad, Pakistan, on May 11. Sung-Dae Cho led the troop once again. In 1997, Hak-Jae was on the mountain again as well, though this time he certainly had a heavier burden. First of all, we had decided to tackle the West Face via the western rib. Without a doubt, it was our toughest assignment yet. Many were skeptical about our plans. The skepticism easily turned to criticism when people realized that we had only a few experienced climbers on the expedition. Four out of the 12 members were true rookies in high-altitude mountains; in other words, they had never been on a mountain higher than 2000 meters because there is no such mountain in Korea. We didn't have a fancy star climber, but we did have climbers who were eager to climb. Moreover, we had a strong team spirit, and we believed that this would be our greatest strength on such a mountain.

The cumbersome administrative procedure had been easily taken care of with the help of Liaison Officer Nauman. Two years before, Sung-Dae had a terrible experience with a nasty liaison officer who caused constant trouble from the beginning before ruining the whole expedition. Mr. Nauman, on the other hand, was a respectable Pakistan Army officer with great dignity, and also was a good trekker. We shared common interests and paid each other respect. Things went well in Islamabad, except for getting a flight to Skardu. The weather was so unpredictable that nobody knew the flight schedule. We couldn't afford to be tourists in the capital city, so we took two charter buses to Skardu via the Karakoram Highway.

The caravan went on for eight days, camping out at Goropo, Paiyu, Urdukas, Goro, and Concordia. On May 23, we set up base camp at an elevation of 4700 meters on the West Gasherbrum Glacier, with the west face of GIV looming behind us. Among the peaks that enclosed the Concordia terrain, the west face of GIV seemed the most magnificent, just as its nickname, "the shining wall," implies. The central rib of the west face previously had been attempted by at least six other parties; though none reached the top, seven alpinists were sacrificed to this deadly wall. Probably two of the foremost alpinists of their day, Wojciech Kurtyka and Robert Schauer, had successfully climbed the right side of the west face in 1985, yet they couldn't reach the summit either.

The day after we settled down at base camp, we had a ritual ceremony common among Korean climbers. We not only bowed down to the mountain god but also presented great respect to the ten ancestral climbers of the Corean Alpine Club who had been buried together in an avalanche three decades before while preparing for a Himalayan expedition.

We also went to Miroslav Svetičič's empty grave near base camp. Svetičič, a world-class climber with great potential, had attempted a solo climb of the west face at the same time Sung-Dae led his 1995 expedition. Unfortunately, Svetičič disappeared in the clouds and never returned to base camp. Sung-Dae managed to make an empty grave for Svetičič's soul, and one skillful team member engraved his name on a stainless steel plate, then hung it on a cliff near base camp. Svetičič's had been a brave attempt, and it certainly had been inspiring to the 1995 CAC GIV members.

The 1997 expedition started climbing on May 25. We got up at 3 a.m. when the stars were still sparkling in the dark sky. Sooner or later, that became the official morning call for the entire expedition. We had to move when the wall was still frozen; otherwise, it was too easy to become a victim of the falling ice and rock.

Each member packed food and equipment in his backpack and set off for Camp I. We began to ascend a huge slope covered with deep snow. Crevasses had developed at the foot of the

slope. According to local people, there had been a paucity of snow during the last two years.

On May 27, we established Camp I on a vast snow plateau at 5400 meters after detouring around a huge icefall area by traversing a steep snow face. There were countless crevasses on the plateau; we were forced to set up fixed rope all the way to the camp, even though it was a flat area.

On May 30, we started to press the route through to Camp II. This was the real launch of the west face climb where most of the previous teams had struggled and failed. The vertical distance from the snow plateau of Camp I to the summit was about 2500 meters, with only two possible places to camp on the entire central rib of the west face.

By the time we established Camp I, a group of Spanish climbers aiming to climb GIV's Northwest Ridge settled in nearby. Kike de Pablo, Jose Carlos Tamayo, and Jon Lazkano—all of whom were experienced climbers in the Karakoram Himalaya—were among them. We agreed to share fixed ropes up to Camp I, and they reimbursed us. We became good neighbors, sharing food and information. Hak Jae also shared firsthand information from his 1995 experience with them. They were superb climbers, yet the demands of the mountains seemed to be a bit higher than their manpower. Besides, fortune wasn't with them at all. They were the victims of an avalanche that destroyed advanced base camp, and they also lost a tent at Camp I. They retreated shortly after setting up Camp III at 7000 meters, having simply run out of gas.

We had to ascend about 600 meters on a 70 to 80° wall to reach the tiny narrow snow ridge suitable for Camp II. We started climbing at 4 a.m., because after 10 o'clock, when the sun started shining on the wall, falling rock and chunks of snow came down like bullets. A few days later, even with our early starts, Sang-Ho Moon became the first victim hit by falling rock and was disabled for a while.

For several consecutive days, it snowed every afternoon. The leader often swam in deep snow. The climbing conditions were poor and progress was barely noticeable. We finally built Camp II by putting up a small tent on the knife-edge ridge at 6100 meters. It had been ten days since the first step to Camp II. It was the first triumph for us.

Nevertheless, a cornice collapsed the next day while Gung-Yeal Huh was trying to secure the tent with pickets. He plunged with it; Byoung-Ki Choi, who also was working on the tent and who was tied in to Gung Yeal, immediately jumped off the other side of the knife ridge. Both men hung on opposite sides of the ridge, which was about six feet wide and 25 feet long, until other team members could haul them up. The incident remained a secret for a while, because they didn't want to depress the whole expedition. But anyone who came up to Camp II found out about the danger. Tip-toe was common behavior on the CII ridge. Everybody knew that it was not a safe place, but we didn't have a choice. It was the only place to pitch the tent between Camp I and Camp III.

The section between CII to CIII was a nasty mixed route that combined steep rock faces and ridges covered by snow. There also were several overhanging chimneys that frightened us. The biggest obstacle on the route to Camp III was the Black Tower, a 100-meter obstacle that rises from the center of the precipitous ridge. We found old fixed rope and collected a CMI carabiner on the right side of the tower. There also were two expansion bolts at the last anchor point at 6400 meters, but we couldn't find a trace of further progress by previous attempts.

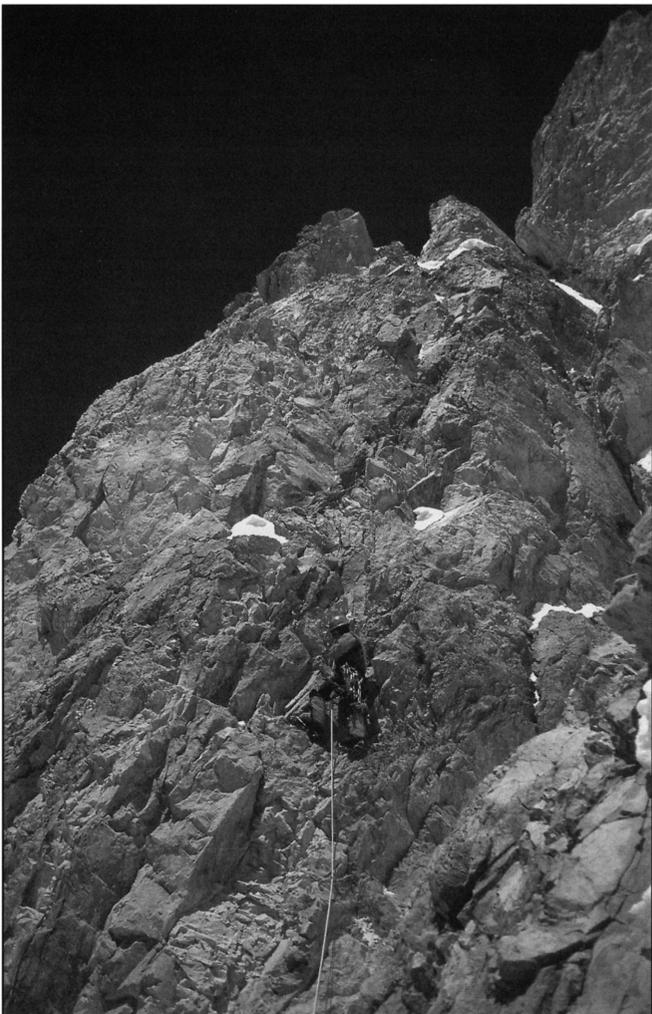
It took 32 days to break through to Camp III. During that period, a week-long snow storm hit the Karakoram. Camps were almost destroyed, and fixed rope was buried deep. It was a totally new mountain; we had to start again from scratch. In the meantime, two members were injured from 25-meter falls, ABC was totally blown out by a tremendous avalanche, and we

had to send a mail runner to Skardu to buy supplementary rations.

As we ran out of rope and pitons, we heard that a Japanese K2 expedition had lost a member in a tragic avalanche and was withdrawing from its attempt. Sung Dae dispatched two members as a condolence. They also asked for left-over equipment, but only received some Japanese food. Meanwhile, two Spanish climbers—the Iñurrategi brothers, who have climbed seven 8000-meter peaks without oxygen or Sherpas—were on Broad Peak challenging themselves on a new route. They gave us some good rope; we also got some more from the Korean Student Federation GI/GII Expedition. The great help from these people kept us on the mountain. When we ran out of pitons while working toward Camp III, we cut snow stakes into pitons with a saw and file; Hak-Jae also placed a spoon as a piton. The climb had become much more serious than we had expected.

On July 12, Hak-Jae Yoo and Byung Ki Choi finally established Camp III at 6800 meters. We pressed on, adding speed to the climbing. We had been in the mountain for two months and the season was nearly over. The clock was ticking. We realized that we had only one chance to push to the summit. Hak-Jae Yoo proceeded about 100 meters up a mixed route on a perpendicular wall that included a 20-meter vertical and partially overhanging pitch to reach 7000 meters. A few days later, Ki-Yong Hwang joined the force to extend the route to 7200 meters. In contrast, Byung-Ki Choi and Kung-Yeal Huh had to retreat to BC because of frost-bite on their toes.

The final summit team was organized by four volunteers, Hak-Jae Yoo, Dong-Kwan Kim, Jung-Ho Bang, and Ki-Yong Hwang. Except for the sub-leader, Hak-Jae, all of them were rookies in the Karakoram Himalaya, and two of them had never been higher than 2000 meters.



Hak-Jae Yoo climbing above Camp III, and left, Jung-Ho Bang climbing toward the Devil's Brow. JAE-HAG JUNG COLLECTION

On the night of July 15, four members set out from CIII, the last formal camp. We planned three days to the summit and one day to get back to CIII, which meant three bivouacs. We sorted out equipment to take: 15 pitons, six ice screws, 100 meters of 5mm rope, personal bivouac gear, and a minimal amount of food and fuel. Each of us carried eight kilos of gear and equipment.

Ki-Yong and Dong-Kwan arrived at 7200 meters at 3 a.m. The wind blowing from the top was getting severe, and the weather looked uncertain. Ki-Yong and Jung-Ho started to lead, placing the last portion of the fixed rope at dawn. Suddenly, the wind was blowing in gusts, sweeping down the snow piled on the upper part of the west face. It was impossible to move; each climber was stopped in his tracks, dodging the lethal storm. Ki-Yong, who was exposed to the storm for three hours, had severe signs of frostbite on his fingers and toes and was forced to retreat.

At noon, the weather cleared out, and the three remaining men set off again. When the last man, Jung-Ho, weighted an ascender, a piton pulled, causing him to fall three to four meters. He hit a rock, breaking his goggles and cutting himself around the eye. Despite the injury, he continued climbing, and by 5 p.m., we had advanced to 7400 meters and prepared a place to bivouac by digging out a tiny snow ledge with endless drops on both sides. We secured ourselves by driving some pitons into the rock and went to sleep wearing our harnesses.

On July 17, Jung-Ho, injured but tireless, took the lead. The rock was very loose, so it was hard to find a place to put pitons. We progressed slowly but steadily. After climbing 300 meters, we were at an elevation of 7500 meters. We were lucky to find a much more satisfactory bivouac site than the previous night's. Another dangerous night passed by.

July 18. The summit day had come. It was a perfect day. The three members got up at 4 a.m. and reduced equipment to the minimum. Dong-Kwan led the team. After climbing 300 meters on the 70° snow-covered wall, we approached a place called "The Devil's Brow." Jung-Ho took over the lead and advanced another 80 meters on the icy surface.





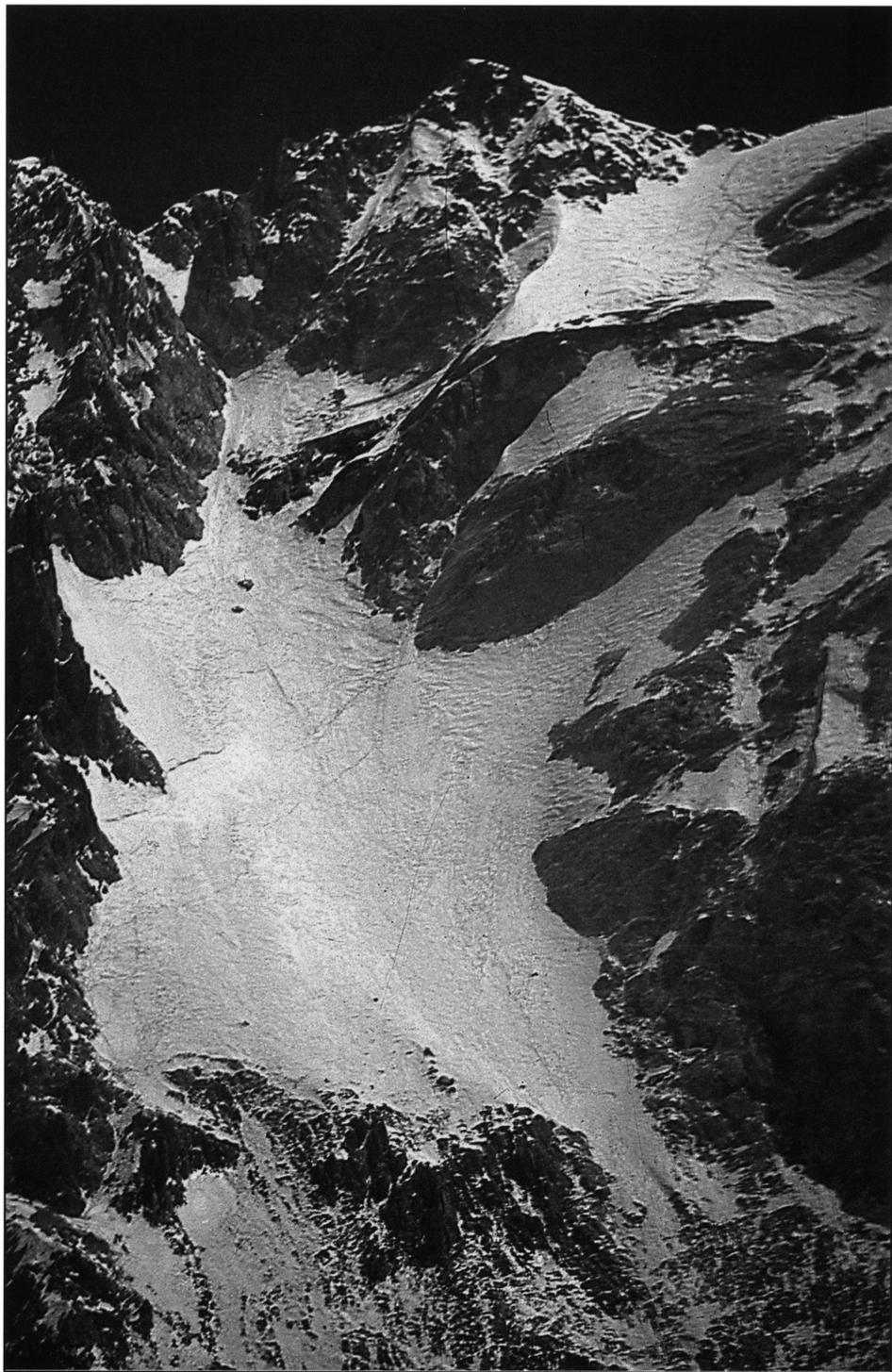
Ha-Jae Yoo at 7900 meters after the summit, with Masherbrum in the background. JAE-HAG JUNG COLLECTION

We established a 30-meter pitch by traversing across the 70° wall in the two o'clock direction. All gathered at one spot for a snack. We were surprised when we looked at each other; everyone appeared nearly exhausted. Nonetheless, no one showed a white flag yet. We could barely proceed up the 60° slope of ice and snow with our beaten bodies. As we went higher, breaking trail became more difficult because the snow surface was not firm. For a moment, Hak-Jae, who was carrying the video camera, went ahead of the others to capture the scene. After advancing 100 meters, we finally reached the summit ridge. The time was 12:26 p.m. To the east, a wall formed a perpendicular drop downward; snow crowned its top along the summit ridge.

We crossed a distance of about 100 meters along the ridge toward a pinnacle in the south that was the tallest on the crest. Hak-Jae climbed to the top of the ridge to observe the east side of the mountain. He could see Camps I and II and noticed that six small pinnacles stuck out on the summit ridge of GIV. All of them appeared to be less than ten meters high. He easily distinguished the third one as the highest because the summit ridge curves around to the east.

When Hak-Jae returned from his reconnaissance, Dong-Kwan took off for the third pinnacle. He nailed two pitons into a crack and traversed in the two o'clock direction. (As we were still on the west face, the rest of the team and the Pakistani employees in Base Camp were able to watch our movement through a telescope.) Dong-Kwan arrived at the third pinnacle after traversing 30 meters along the snow wall right below the ridge. He placed a knife blade and bong-bong and used them to belay the others. At 2:27, they joined him at the belay.

Above us, there was a three-meter-high smooth rock covered by a two-meter snow cor-



The footsteps leading to the summit shoulder, as photographed from base camp. SUNG-DAE CHO

nice. Hak-Jae realized that we could do it if we demolished the cornice before stepping on it, but it seemed too vulnerable to tackle. The danger of its collapse made the last few meters of climbing meaningless. As sub-leader of the team, he decided that was as far as we would go.

We took a few pictures and started descending right away. We rappelled until we came to the gently sloped summit ridge, and hurried down to the Devil's Brow by 3:55 p.m. After a brief break, we continued descending, and everyone returned safely to the bivouac site that we had left early that morning. We were completely exhausted, and Hak-Jae complained of frostbite on his toes. We decided to stay for another night. It was our third consecutive bivouac. At 6 o'clock the next morning, we continued our escape from the deadly mountain.

In the middle of the descent, Hak-Jae found a body at 7000 meters. It was Miroslav Svetičič.

By 11 in the morning, the summit members returned to CIII, where Gung-Yeal and Dong-Chul had been waiting to help in the return to BC. In the process of retreating, the CII cornice collapsed. Gung-Yeal was caught by a thin rope; unfortunately, he lost his backpack that contained ten rolls of film, including the summit pictures. After midnight, all members returned to BC without any summit photos. The next day, we took some pictures with a telescopic lens. The photographs clearly show footsteps going up to the summit ridge. We hope that the next climbers will find our pitons at the top of the mountain.

After the team returned to Korea, Sung-Dae and Hak-Jae were criticized by some fellow climbers for not getting to the very top of the mountain. Some were rather skeptical of the success itself because we didn't have photographic proof with someone holding a flag on the summit. We were deeply disappointed, not only because we couldn't convince them, but also because of the prevalence of disbelief amongst climbers. As the controversy has grown hotter, people seem to neglect the achievement of climbing the face. It is a clear parallel to Schauer and Kurtyka's climb on the same mountain in 1985, considered one of the most impressive climbs, even though they didn't reach the summit.

The summit was not the primary goal for us. We were there to climb the west face, which many people thought nearly impossible. We finally did it after two months' toil; all 12 members devoted themselves to the team and three summiters carried the other members' sacrifice. We could not have had success without perfect teamwork. We could not have made it to the top if there was one person missing. Although six of us were rookies in the Himalaya, every one was of the essence for the team.

If we were mere peak baggers, we could have climbed one of the 8000-meter peaks more easily. The summit priority is one of the things that still dilutes pure alpinism in the Korean climbing community. We wanted to be different, and we have done a different thing. We wonder if that's why we got such a strong reaction to our success.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Karakoram Himalaya, Pakistan

NEW ROUTE: The West Face (VI 5.10 A3, 2500m) of GIV (7925m) via the West Rib, May 23-July 18, 1997 (Hak-Jae Yoo, Tong-Kwan Kim, Jung-Ho Bang)

PERSONNEL: Sung-Dae Cho, leader; Hak-Jae Yoo, sub-leader; Young-Soon Hwang, Sang-Ho Moon, Jung-Ho Bang, Tong-Kwan Kim, Ki-Yong Hwang, Dong-Chul Shin, Byoung-Ki Choi, Chan-Sung Woo, Jae-Hag Jung, Captain Nauman (L.O.), Sullaiman Sardik, cook