Manaslu—West wall 1971

Akira Takahashi

(Translation: I. Yoshizawa)

Manaslu (8156 m) was the first eight-thousander in the Himalaya climbed by the Japanese Alpine Club—under the leadership of Mr Yuko Maki in 1956, after two previous attempts (1953 and 1954) from the east side. Then Japanese mountaineers climbed Himal Chuli (1960), Peak 29 (Dakura, 1970) and Baudha (1970 and 1971) one by one, and so at last they brought the era of the first ascents of the so-called 'Manaslu Three Giants' to an end. But the west side of Manaslu had been considered 'impossible without wings' by H. W. Tilman who saw it from afar and by the Manaslu reconnaissance party of the Japanese Alpine Club (1952) led by Dr Kinji Imanishi.

This year we had planned to find a route on the West wall and make the second ascent of the peak, descending the East face which was climbed by the Japanese expedition in 1956. The West face, to be exact the North-west wall, is a 4000 m high precipitous and dangerous wall of ice and rock, with an inclination of about 40° on the average. We had no certain knowledge of possible routes or suitable camp sites. Accordingly we sent a two-man party in the autumn of 1970. They were expected to find a way to a Base Camp and then a route to an Advanced Base Camp, to collect possible information about Sama village which is situated at the eastern foot of the mountain and is said to be very hostile, especially to foreign mountaineers. They accomplished these tasks satisfactorily in sixty days.

Our team was made up of eleven selected climbers (mostly members of the J.A.C.) drawn from seven alpine clubs, each of which belongs to the Tokyo Metropolitan Mountaineering Federation. All the expenses were shared by the members and they each contributed $1500 at the beginning. But when the reconnaissance party returned they realised that a lot more material (equipment and provisions) would be needed and the individual share was increased to $2500 each. The total foreign currency spent by us in Nepal was just $10,000. We packed the old and familiar equipment which had been used by us on mountains several times previously, as well as the newest first-class climbing gear. We purchased 13,000 m of rope for fixing, 200 snow-bars and wire, and duralumin ladders as well. After our successful climb there remained only two coils of rope each 200 m, while the snow-bars were used up completely. Ice-pitons were useless and we used only screw-pitons. As the rocks were mostly slabs, we used 20 per cent rock pitons and 80 per cent expansion bolts.

Our caravan left Pokhara on 5 March accompanied by 300 porters and with 12 tons of baggage. This was fifteen days later than we expected because it took a full month to transport our baggage overland through India. The Government of India annulled unilaterally the Commercial Treaty controlling the border between India and Nepal as from 1 January and it became invalid.

10 *Manaslu North-west wall and West ridge from Bimthang.* This and next two photos: A. Takahashi

Moreover, the Finance Ministry of India completely prohibited any transportation of trucks for Nepal as from 17 February.[1] Accordingly, we changed the plan previously decided. We would not be able to use eighty days for our activities on the mountain. We would be into the monsoon if we did not reduce our time scale. The distances between camps must be lengthened and the numbers of camps cut down as much as possible. So the difference in altitude between camps became 1000 m. We had expected to establish seven or eight camps on the mountain but by the change of plan we kept the number down to

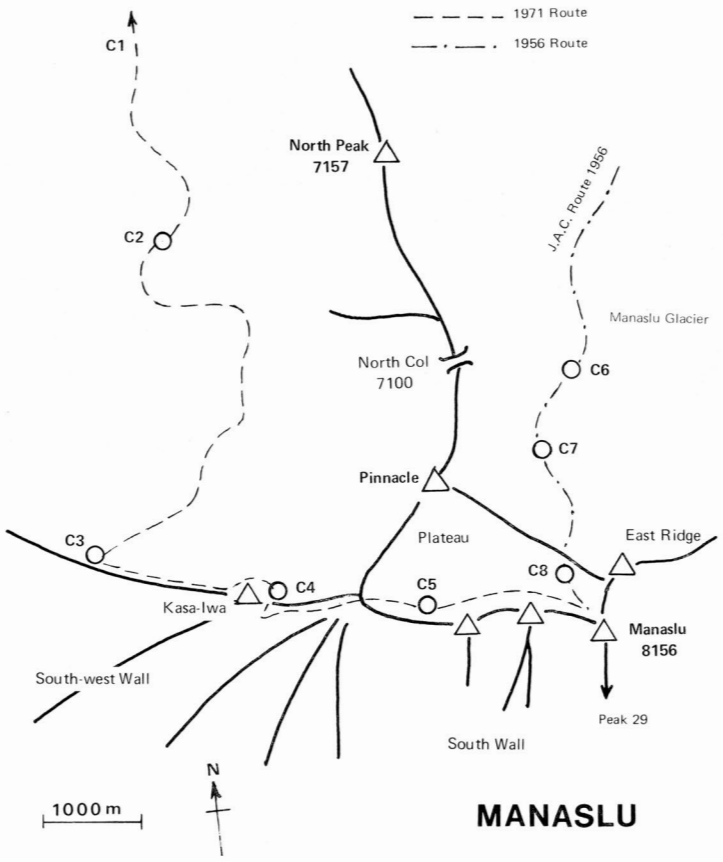
[1] Nepal—India Trade and Transit Treaty was renewed on 13 August 1971

five, so we could climb to the summit ahead of the advancing monsoon. In the end it worked out very well.

It took eleven days for our caravan to reach the Base Camp site previously chosen. We walked up the Domen Khola which flows into the Dudh Khola at a point from which it was a one day trip to Bimthang. Base Camp was established on the upper limit of the forest line at a height of 3500 m.

At the beginning we had intended to set up our Base Camp on the upper plateau some two hours distance from here, but as the snow was so deep and porters could not carry our baggage through the drifts we had to put our Base Camp on the moraine, densely covered here with coniferous trees. It was, however, very convenient for we had plenty of firewood nearby and timber for crevasse bridges.

Camp 1 was established on a plateau (4500 m) after climbing up through an 800 m ice-fall with numberless crevasses. This was finished on 21 March, one week after Base Camp. We had planned to put our Advanced Base Camp on the plateau at the end of the West ridge and so we despatched three route-



making parties for reconnaissance. But at first they could not find a suitable transport route as they pushed on among séracs or ice-fall areas. Three days later, on 24 March, the same day that we heard the radio-news that Base Camps had been erected by the I.H.E. and French expeditions respectively, one of our reconnaissance parties found a long but good and easily negotiable transporting route running directly under the North Peak of Manaslu.

But when we saw the West ridge on the way up, we found that the lower half of the ridge was really an unnegotiable vertical ice-wall and not suitable for bringing up stores on the shoulders of the Sherpas. Then, after some talking, we decided our route should be made on the North-west wall in the middle of which a great traversing terrace ran to the middle step of the West ridge.

One week after establishing Camp 1, we set up Camp 2 (Advanced Base Camp, 5500 m) on a broad basin-like snow-field which was to be called the west-side Sanctuary of Manaslu. Camp 2 site was an ideal safe place protected from avalanches which continuously fell from the upper wall, having many enormous step-like crevasses in between. Moreover from here, on the western skyline we could command a wonderful view of the Himalayan great ranges; from left to right Annapurna Himal, Dhaulagiri peaks, Kang Guru, Himlung Himal, Cheo Himal, and others.

Now, our climbing activities began from this splendid stronghold. The inclination of the North-west wall on which our traversing route lay is 45° on the average and frequent avalanches broke off from the upper slopes. Moreover, once new snow fell, we were always frightened by the ceaseless surface avalanches. At times we must plough through waist- or breast-deep snow and consequently the relaying of equipment was delayed. This year we had generally extremely bad weather and sometimes 1 m of snow fell in a day.

While we and the Sherpas were climbing up and down this great slope on which handrails were fixed over a distance of 2500 m, we were safe from avalanches and even when they swept down on us, the jumars saved us from the final danger. But when block avalanches occurred our fixed ropes were cut to pieces, between 200–300 m at a time, and snow-bars were twisted and knocked off; thus we were at our wits' end to refit and repair.

On 8 April, eleven days after establishing Camp 2 we succeeded in putting up Camp 3 (6500 m) on the middle step of the West ridge of ice. Kasa-iwa (Kasa means 'umbrella' and Iwa means 'rock' in Japanese) which now confronted us on the West ridge at an altitude of about 7000 m, seemed to us the most difficult climbing on the whole expedition. To pass this disagreeable obstacle, we had to strengthen Camp 3 and pile up indispensable materials there. All members were moved out for carrying on this traversing route, but when frequent avalanches continued to fall it was impossible to move despite the fine weather. Contact between camps became very difficult. From Camp 2 to Camp 3 it took seven to eight hours up and three hours down in good conditions, i.e. having no ploughing. Accordingly, it often took twelve hours to make the round trip. Meanwhile, the route-making parties at Camp 3 had

11 *Kasa-iwa and Camp 3*

been working hard in waves on the ice ridge under Kasa-iwa since their arrival there. They reached the foot of Kasa-iwa in three days and completed the fixing of ropes all over the route.

From 11 April, Kasa-iwa, a 250 m high overhanging wall which resembled a half-open Japanese paper umbrella, was attacked continuously by the two-man route-preparing parties. Though the route between Camp 3 and the foot of Kasa-iwa was satisfactorily made with fixed ropes, it took them three or four hours to cover. So they had only four to five hours a day to work on this rock face. Accordingly it was not surprising that they needed twenty days to get past this critical point.

We did not climb directly to the top of Kasa-iwa as it did not look inviting, instead we sought a route in a re-entrant (dièdre) which was overhanging from the left. After 20 m vertical ice-wall, we could reach the next rock wall. Taking off crampons and overshoes, with vibram soles only, we managed to make a route on this smooth rock slab with expansion bolts and étriers. Later we set a wire ladder on this wall and succeeded in sending four selected Sherpas above Kasa-iwa. Most of the 100 expansion bolts which we had in our stock were spent here. The grade of Kasa-iwa wall is VI in places but generally speaking it was V, A2. But the upper part of this dièdre was a slab covered with new snow under which a thin layer of verglas was plastered. As it was very dangerous here, we made a depot on a slope 20 m above with comparatively thick snow on it, driving in some snow-bars around. Now we had two depots, the other one was in a bergschrund at the foot of Kasa-iwa.

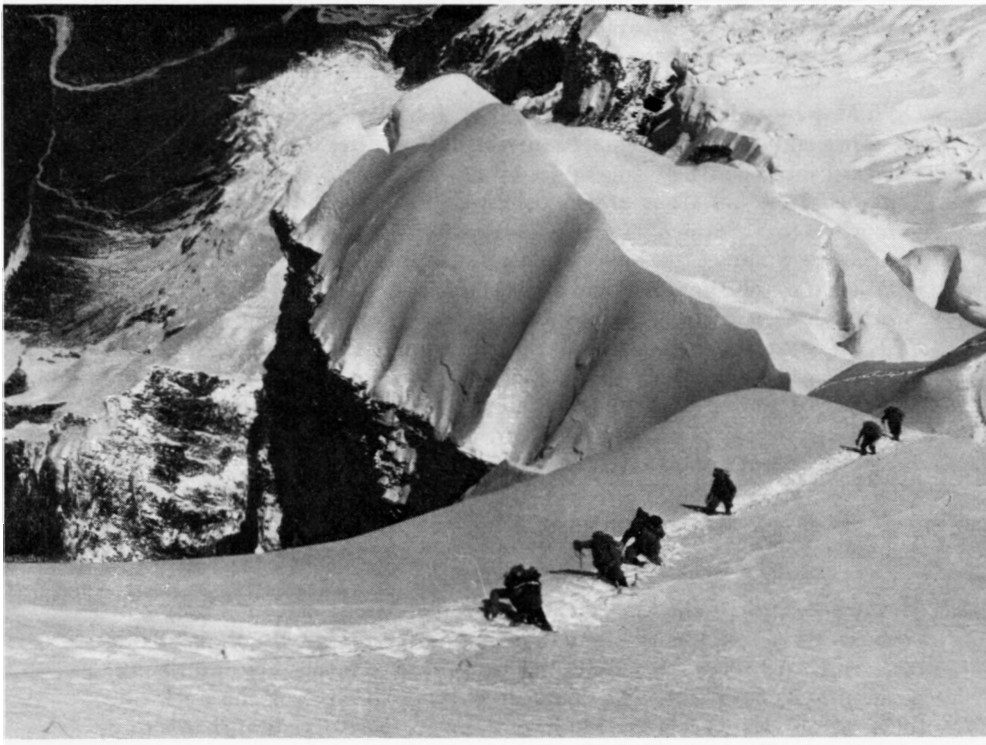
On 6 May by eight o'clock in the evening, eight days after breaking through Kasa-iwa and at the same time twenty-eight days after establishing Camp 3, we at last succeeded in putting up Camp 4 (7100 m) on the snow-cornice upon Kasa-iwa. Here was a kind of window through which wind blows incessantly, so much so that a tremendous snow-cornice formed. And even when the other camps were windless, this high eagle's nest was always exposed to strong wind. The height of this site was a little higher than, or equal to, that of the so-called North Col, we tentatively decided its altitude at 7100 m. Lifting of equipment on Kasa-iwa was done co-operatively by members of Camp 3 and Camp 4. Camp 3 party carried them up to the depot at the foot of Kasa-iwa, while four Sherpas of Camp 4 descended to the upper part of Kasa-iwa and lifted the packages up by cables hanging in the air. Then they were carried to the upper depot. When it was fine, lifting work continued some hours, but if it was very windy they could do nothing except sleep in their tiny tents. Though the work was very severe, they succeeded in bringing up about 1000 kg of necessary materials.

Meanwhile, at the same time, a two-man route-making party in Camp 4 had been searching continuously for a route on the West ridge. But the rock ridge between Camp 4 and the summit plateau proved to be a series of little over-hanging walls with which we could do nothing. If we took this rock ridge route, it was clear that we would have to invest more days in it than already taken for the Kasa-iwa climb. Earlier we had considered a possible route on

the hanging glacier which perched on the flanks of the South-west wall. So we made the final decision to try this glacier.

To begin with, we descended the south side about 100 m down a 60° wall of hard ice to reach the end of the hanging glacier. From here an airy fall of 3500 m to the moraine of the Domen Khola could be seen. The ice here was extremely hard owing to the strong wind blowing up from below. We could not cut even one step without swinging more than thirty times. Then we climbed to the bottom of the bergschrund between the West ridge and the hanging glacier, sometimes on the wall or ribs of the West ridge side and sometimes on the ice-wall of the hanging glacier by using ice-pitons and étriers. Six days later on 12 May, we got through to the top of the hanging glacier and prepared a cable line for lifting up the equipment by fixing ropes to two screw-pitons. We think the grade of the rock here is about IV, but it was very difficult climbing owing to its high altitude. As the hanging glacier was very steep, there might be expected to be extremely high danger of avalanche, so we fixed ropes along the West ridge side and climbed up an ice-couloir which emerged on to the summit plateau.

On 16 May at 4pm ten days after establishing Camp 4 we put up Camp 5 (final camp 7360 m) on the plateau. Here stood nine climbers consisting of



12 *Above Camp 3*

three route-making members, two summiters and four Sherpas, after four days' laborious carrying. They had here six oxygen bottles and four days' food for two members, so only two summiters could remain. The other seven descended to Camp 4 praying for success for the other two.

The forecast of the All-India Radio was: NW wind, velocity 60 km/hour, temperature minus 22°C at 7500 m, and WSW wind, velocity 90 km/hour, temperature minus 40°C, weather thunder showers at 9000 m. It was 2500 m from Camp 5 to the summit and the difference of altitude was 800 m. We wanted one more advanced camp if possible, but we had no more materials nor any strength remaining. We decided to try a return trip at a dash and planned the start time at 3am. But it was an almost impossible enterprise without any support at such a tremendous height. In spite of these unfavourable circumstances, the two climbers left Camp 5 at 5am and tackled the great sloped plateau of ice and *skavra*, sinking at times to their knees. On 17 May at 12.15pm, with hardly any oxygen remaining the two-man summit party stood at last on the top of Manaslu.

Just under the summit they found the ice-piton which was driven in by Toshio Imanishi of the Japanese Alpine Club and Gyalzen Norbu when they climbed Manaslu for the first time fifteen years before. They drew out this precious piton and brought it all the way back to Tokyo with them, just as a French party fetched a Japanese 'rising sun' flag from the top of Makalu this year. This memorial piton was later presented to Mr Yuko Maki who led the third J.A.C. Manaslu Expedition in 1956.

SUMMARY Manaslu West wall Expedition, 1971—Leader: Akira Takahashi. Ascent: 17 May, Manaslu (8156 m) by West wall—K. Kohara and M. Tanaka.