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SERGEI EFIMOV

## Baruntse West Face

Translated from the Russian by Rick Allen and Richard Sills

(Plates 18, 19)

It was Alexander Mikhailov who first showed me a photo of Baruntse – or rather a photocopy from a German journal. The beautiful West Face, with a vertical height of about 1000 metres rising to the main peak, was framed by the gigantic cornices of the South-East and North Ridges. Until now, no attempt had been made to climb the face, despite the great popularity of this peak amongst world alpinists. Starting in 1954, when the first ascent of the mountain was made by a New Zealand team, a number of expeditions had reached the summit; but they had all ascended by ridge routes and none had attempted the West Face.

Suddenly the links in a chain of ideas came together in my mind, leading up to the possibility of an ascent of Makalu by the West Face. A first ascent of the West Face of Baruntse would offer our young, high-altitude climbers some excellent preparatory experience of Himalayan conditions at altitudes up to 7000m. Moreover Baruntse is situated alongside Makalu, providing a wonderful opportunity to study the future route and become psychologically accustomed to it. Above all, an expedition to Baruntse would prepare us for an attempt on a technically difficult route on an 8000m peak such as Annapurna, in order to test the ability of our alpinists to climb at altitude and to work out some tactical schemes for team interaction. Only then would we attempt the West Face of Makalu.

This was the origin of the three-year 'Himalaya' programme; the expedition to Baruntse in September and October 1995 was the first stage of the programme. Many alpinists from the Sverdlovsk region had previous experience of ascents in the Himalaya, having taken part in international expeditions organised by the 'Himalayas' mountaineering centre which had been set up in Ekaterinburg. The centre had already organised and led several serious expeditions to 8000m peaks, including the first ascent of the East Ridge of Cho Oyu (8201m), the first ascent of the North Face of Dhaulagiri (8167m)\* and an ascent of Everest (8848m) from the Tibetan side. But the expedition to Baruntse was the first Himalayan expedition conducted solely by alpinists of the Sverdlovsk region.

On 9 September 1995 expedition members gathered in Kathmandu. The familiar procedures for obtaining permission for the ascent, purchasing provisions and packing equipment took several days. On 14 September a

\* See *AJ99*, 43-47, 1994

helicopter transported the whole party and all our gear to the mountain village of Lukla. That day there was considerable cloud cover and the pilot had to circle for a long time, waiting for a break in the clouds so that he could see the landing site. The landing seemed to me quite tense, although the pilot was relaxed. 'We go round and round like that every day!' said one of the pilots cheerfully as he climbed out of the plane. Russian helicopters have been working in Nepal for several years, transporting people and freight.

The post-monsoon weather was in no hurry to improve, but we had no time to wait. The following day a group of eight climbers set off for base camp, accompanied by the sirdar, the cook, his assistant and a small group of porters. The three remaining members of the expedition were responsible for transferring all the rest of the luggage by helicopter to base camp. The journey on foot from Lukla to the foot of Baruntse took us eight days. We crossed the Mera La (5100m), one of the three passes on our route, in deep snow and mist, zigzagging between ice debris. On 22 September, when our group reached the base camp site on the moraine of the Hunku Glacier at a height of 5400m, the helicopter had not yet arrived. Dense cloud in the gorges had made flying impossible. Only on the next day, 23 September, was it possible for the helicopter to land near our base camp.

When all the tents had been pitched and the kitchen and mess tents set up, we started reconnoitring the region and sorting provisions and equipment. In order to gain acclimatisation and to mark the descent route with wands, all ten climbers ascended the South-East Ridge twice to an altitude of 6200m. According to our plan, two groups of climbers were supposed to reach a height of 6500m, but thick cloud and the absence of visibility made upward movement difficult. On the wide ridge orientation was lost and we were compelled to descend. It took three more days to find a way through the many-tiered icefall under the West Face and transfer equipment to the base of the route at 5900m. Then it was time to embark on the face.

The composition of the assault team was as follows:

Valeri Pershin, climbing leader, has climbed Everest from the Tibetan side and has made first ascents of routes on Cho Oyu and Dhaulagiri. He has also attempted Nanga Parbat as a member of Doug Scott's expedition in 1992.

Evgeni Vinogradski, seven times Champion of the USSR, traversed the four peaks of Kangchenjunga in 1989, climbed the East Ridge of Cho Oyu in 1991, and twice climbed Everest (in 1992 and 1995).

Salavat Habibulin, alpinist, Master of Sport and more than once Champion of Russia, has reached 8000m on Cho Oyu.

Nikolai Zhilin and Yuri Ermachek, Masters of Sport and repeated Champions of Russia at the highest standard, had made many ascents up to 7500m in the Pamirs and Tien Shan and were visiting the Himalaya for the first time.

On 3 October Valeri Pershin, Evgeni Vinogradski and Sergei Efimov went onto the face for an exploratory climb and to take video pictures. Pershin climbed and fixed four rope lengths (150m). Next day Salavat Habibulin, Yuri Ermachek and Nikolai Zhilin climbed another three rope lengths and reached the site for the first high camp. From the diary of Salavat Habibulin:

*Tomorrow we climb as a rope of three: Kolya, Yura and I. We suffer the usual pre-departure nervousness. Will it go? We worry about whether there'll be a reasonable place for a bivouac and how much stonefall danger. Above all, we worry about the extended sections on snow. Will they be firm or old friable snow? And what if a snowfall starts? That will mean avalanches. Well, never mind, we'll soon find out. Today Valera and Zhoka are working, progressing another four rope lengths.*

The central buttress of the West Face was chosen for the ascent, the projecting part of which gave some hope of protection from rock and ice which fell unceasingly on the face between 11am and 8pm. This kilometre-high face did not appear as impregnable and dangerous in the photo as it proved to be in reality. Fragile icy armour covered perpendicular rocky zones, and the snow walls with their vertical runnels looked very steep. This beautiful fluting effect is very characteristic of Himalayan peaks; but the prospect of ascending such vertical 'beauty' makes you apprehensive. From Salavat Habibulin's diary:

*Today we tried to ascend. We fixed ropes. In places the rocks are covered with ice and we often had to find ways round overhangs. As expected, we saw no suitable bivouac site. Perhaps tomorrow, when we run out several more rope lengths, something will show up. We can but hope.*

On 5 October the five members of the assault team embarked on the face, taking with them a tent, fuel, provisions for seven days and the necessary equipment for the route. At the same time, the remaining expedition members, Sergei Efimov, Alexander Mikhailov, Boris Sedusov, Andrei Kuznetsov and Alexander Veryovkin crossed the West Col to the South Ridge once more. They climbed to 6800m, fixed rope at difficult points and set up wands so that, even in thick mist, it would be possible to find the route of descent from the summit. According to plan, the assault team would descend by the South-East Ridge. In camp, there remained only three Sherpas and the doctor, Sergei Bichkovski, who observed the team slowly progressing up the West Face. From Salavat Habibulin's diary:

*Today's section was not bad. Steep slabs at 70 degrees. It's like a glassy rock plastered with ice. I traversed under an overhang on skyhooks for 10m up to an ice-filled vertical crack. Progress was only possible by this icy groove just five or six centimetres wide. The slabs were completely smooth. Inserting ice*

*Right*

18. Sergei Efimov, leader of the 1995 Baruntse Expedition, during Doug Scott's Expedition to Nanga Parbat in 1992.  
(Sean Smith) (p93)

*Below*

19. Mixed climbing on the West Face of Baruntse between Camps 2 and 3.  
(Evgeni Vinogradski) (p93)



*screws and hanging in étriers, I progressed another five metres. Beyond lay a smooth rock chimney. No cracks for hooks or holds. I had to climb wearing crampons. Climbing those seven metres was not comfortable! I was reminded of climbing a similar chimney on Asan Usan in the Pamirs, but then I was wearing PAs. The pitch provided an exceptionally interesting variety of terrain and technicality. Ice again, then rough rock, then more snow again. It feels as if we are close to the ridge. I hope we'll emerge onto it tomorrow.*

The ascent of almost 1.5km on the wall took seven days – days of constant physical and psychological tension. Snow merged into rock pitches, often plastered with ice. Placing protection on such mixed routes is more complicated than on pure rock or ice routes. Ascending friable snow, firm steps and reliable protection are impossible. Moreover, on steep snow of more than 30° there is the danger of triggering an avalanche. On the West Face of Baruntse the steepness of the snow pitches attained 45°-50°. Steep, fluted slopes collapsed under your feet and would not consolidate. Every step demanded great physical and nervous outlay. No one could say how trustworthy the snow was, nor when an avalanche would be released. In order to arrange protection, the leader literally had to dig into the snow to a depth of about a metre in order to reach ice or rock where it was possible to place an ice screw or piton. Ice-covered rock pitches were ascended in crampons. Much time was lost cleaning cracks for hooks and wedges. Day after day the tense, incessant work continued. There were no good bivouac sites. Every day, 2½ to 3 hours were spent organising tent sites. From Salavat Habibulin's diary:

*We have to accept that we won't find any compacted snow. All snow slopes are this old porous snow. It's the first time I've encountered such snow. On Cho Oyu in 1991 the snow was as hard as asphalt. . And on our own mountains, on Pk Communism, Khan Tengri and Pk Pobeda, there was every kind of snow, but nothing like this! On those peaks, even if the snow is friable, it is still possible to compact it and make steps, but here perhaps half a day is spent digging and moving just one rope length. And in order to organise protection we had to dig down to the rock or drive in an ice axe and sit on it, not feeling particularly secure. It feels as if our ascent is dragging on ... We've finished our daily task of constructing a tent platform. At least there's a good shovel. It's obvious that we won't find any decent sites for the tent before the exit onto the ridge. But it is just possible to construct and put together a platform, and we do it every day. It's become a habit. Even wading instead of walking through this snow is getting easier and quicker.*

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*Opposite page:* The West Face of Baruntse (7168m) showing the route climbed by the Baruntse Expedition in September/October 1995. The drawing, by Ted Hatch, is based on a photograph by Sergei Efimov, expedition leader.



Only on the ninth day did the climbers get down to base camp. Dirty and unshaven, with faces blackened by the sun, they smiled as they slowly took off their heavy boots, pulled off their clothes, exposed their thinner bodies to the sun and shared their impressions, which had not yet had time to fade:

Yuri Ermachek: 'We didn't expect that everything would take so long ... such snow ... I've never seen anything like it!'

Salavat Habibulin: 'On the first day, when we were low down, it was warm ... to be honest it was scary at such an angle, friable snow crumbling away. You couldn't tell if it would go or not go. You couldn't see where to get protection. But by the second or third day all this had become normal. I knew there was something under the snow, either rock or ice. You could arrange protection, and fear disappeared.'

Valeri Pershin: 'We emerged on the summit and there they were – Everest, Lhotse and Makalu – like gigantic outstretched wings!'

The first stage of our programme was finished. Himalayan experience was gained. Pictures of the West Face of Makalu were taken. It was time to prepare for the next stage, the ascent of the South Face of Annapurna.

**Summary:** In September and October 1995, Sergei Efimov led an expedition to Nepal to climb the West Face of Baruntse, 7168m. Five team members, Yuri Ermachek, Salavat Habibulin, Valeri Pershin, Evgeni Vinogradski and Nikolei Zhilin climbed the c1000m West Face in seven days. Other members of the expedition were Andrei Kuznetsov, Alexander Mikhailov, Boris Sedusov and Alexander Veryovkin. They were assisted at base camp by Dr Sergei Bichkovski.

*Note: The Baruntse Expedition formed part of the 'Himalaya' programme, which received the support of the Sverdlovsk Regional Committee for Physical Education, Sport and Tourism and the approval of the Sverdlovsk Regional Government.*