

LHOTSE SOUTH FACE IN WINTER 2001

Challenge carried over to December 2003

Osamu Tanabe

Dear Mr. Otsuka:

Thanks very, very much for sending me a copy of the first Japanese Alpine News. Its contents are of great interest and the maps and pictures are excellent. Your teams are involved in many exciting ascents. I am particularly interested by the announcement that a Japanese team is planning an attack on the great South Face of Lhotse during the coming winter. Be sure to report to me about the results!!

October 15, 2001

***Very sincerely yours,
Bradford Washburn***

This report is directed first to Mr. Bradford Washburn, born in Boston in 1910, the most famous and distinguished mountaineer in the U.S.A., and then to the many climbers abroad who have been paying the keenest attention to the result of our bold challenge, although it was not successful.

JAC Tokai Section accomplished a remarkable ascent to open a new route from the west ridge to the west face of K2 in 1997. What would be most appropriate for the next target? It didn't take much time for us to come up with an answer. There was no other choice than the first winter ascent of the formidable South Face of Lhotse which remained one of the last problems to be tackled among the Himalayan Giants. To take advantage of good and stable weather, the assault needed to be a speedy climb in the shortest possible period. The party was organized with eight members.

In the fall of 2001 we conducted training for acclimatization to high altitude in the Himalayas. Seven members climbed the normal route of Cho Oyu. Six members reached the summit on October 9 and 11 in succession. Hideji Nazuka, the stoutest member, climbed Dhaulagiri I on October 11 but suffered from serious frostbite that forced him to abandon his participation in the Lhotse climb. Two other members also got sick. Therefore the potential members were reduced to only five climbers.

The expedition party departed from Kathmandu on November 9 and established BC (5200m) at the foot of the awesome, overwhelming South Face of Lhotse on the 14th. The following is an extract from my diary in which I recorded details of the climb up until the time when we were forced to retreat.

On November 19 we commenced to pave the climbing route of the lower part of the wall. On the 23rd we reached a 6400m point where C1 would have been set up, but as the place was apparently exposed to the danger of falling rocks and ice, we decided to pitch

C1 at 5900m. We had sherpas who were engaged to carry gear and supplies to C1 till the 28th.

We expected to push our climbing route to a point at 6400m, first following a Himalayan fluted steep slope to the left and then climbing up an ice-snow wall to the right. Here, however, there was also a serious danger of falling rocks. We changed the route to that taken by the Yugoslavians in 1981. Now winter arrived. On December 1 we set up C1. We negotiated a difficult rock band of about 150m above C1 that led to a snow ridge of distinctive shape. The narrow part between 6400m and 6600m was particularly exposed to the danger of falling rocks. During route preparation work 3 members suffered bruising. To avoid falling rocks we left C1 at 4:00am for route paving. Custom-made down jackets protected us well from the cold. Later on sherpas carried gear and supplies from C1 to C2, starting from C1 at 1:00am.

We followed the Yugoslavian route without deviation and set up C2 at 7100m on the 6th. The Himalayan fluted slope was cut and leveled for the camp.

On the 8th, the designated "A" party of Ohtani, Hanatani, Dawa Tshiri Sherpa and Tshiring Dorje Sherpa extended the route to a point about 30m above the snow col at 7350m where the Yugoslavian party positioned their C4. On the 11th, the "B" party of Tanabe, Miyoshi, Mingma Tshiri Sherpa and Nima Gyalzen Sherpa overcame the critical part, which is analogous to the 'throat' of the South Face, and reached a large snow slope. Three sets of wire-ladders that Yugoslavian party had abandoned still remained on the rock wall en route. The ladders told us how hard they had struggled.

Fine weather had lasted since we had set up BC but on December 15 snow clouds veiled Lhotse South Face for the first time and we had snow fall at BC. Therefore "A" party was ordered to descend from C2 down to BC.

It was on the 18th that "B" party resumed route paving upward. As it was bitterly cold at C2, we had to wait for sunshine before moving out of the tent. Such a situation made progress very slow and we could open the route only up to a point of 7600m on the 18th. Ultimately, as a result, 7600m became the highest point we reached; that is just below the Yellow Band crossing the South Face. The large slope above the 'throat' was incessantly under attack from falling rocks. Tanabe was bruised while descending.

Vehement winter winds, which were what we had feared most, started to blow on December 19. "B" party set out for route paving against strong winds, but we were unable to proceed. While the winds were getting fiercer on the 20th, we ascended to the 'throat', but a terrific gale did not allow us to progress further. Now our members were so exhausted that we knew we no longer had the strength to attempt a further push for the final assault. Without hesitation we decided retreat. We returned to BC on the 22nd.

Our attempt was unsuccessful, but we learned many things on the winter climb. I was convinced that the winter is not a bad season to climb the South Face of Lhotse and that a well-organized team of the strongest climbers would possibly scale it in winter in a swift attack of eighteen days.

We shall return and challenge again in December 2003.

(Editor's note: Osamu Tanabe joined the expeditions of the first winter ascent of Everest Southwest Face in 1991- 1993.)

Members – Leader: Osamu Tanabe (40), Deputy Leader: Masamiki Takine (50),
Members: Kazuo Tobita (55), Manabu Miyoshi (35), Mikio Suzuki (34), Hisao
Ohtani (32), Yasuhiro Hanatani (25)

Brief climbing chronicle of Lhotse South Face

1973 spring – Japanese party from Kanagawa: reached 7300m.

1975 spring – Italian party led by Ricardo Cassin: reached 7500m.

1981 spring – Yugoslavia: reached 8150m.

1984 spring – Czechoslovakia: the first ascent of the South Face of Lhotse Shar (8398m).

1985 autumn – Poland 1st: reached 8200m.

1987 autumn – Poland 2nd: reached 8300m.

1989 spring – International party led by R. Messner: reached 7200m

1989 autumn – Poland 3rd: reached 8300m, Kukuczka died.

1989 winter – Christof Profit: reached 7300m

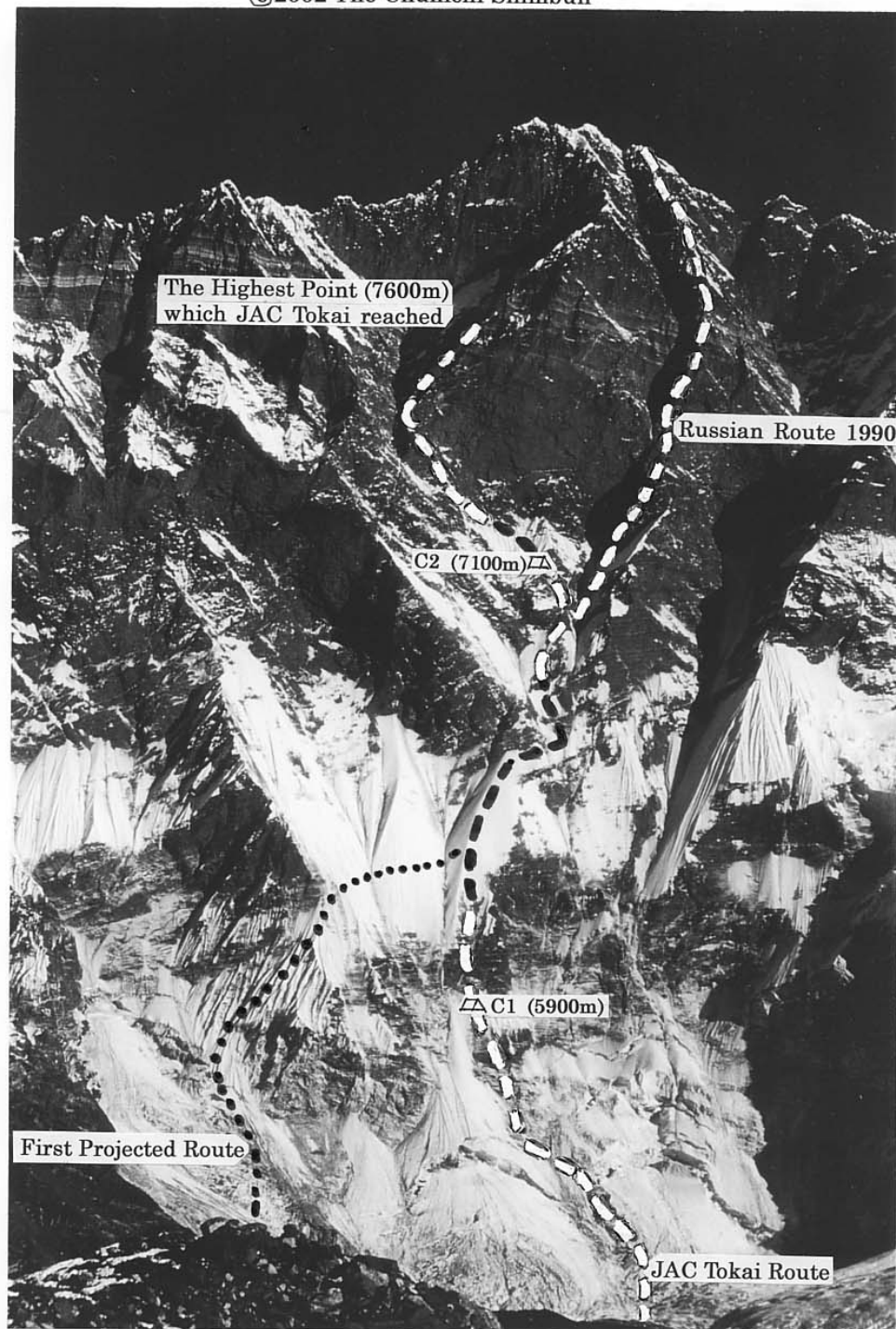
1990 spring – Tomo Cesen: the first ascent by solo climb (controversial).

1990 autumn – Soviet Union: the second ascent by a new route.

2001 winter – Japan JAC Tokai: reached 7600m.

CLIMBING ROUTE ON THE SOUTH FACE OF LHOTSE

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Climbing the South Face of Lhotse at about 7,000 meters. A peak appearing in the background is Makalu. Copyright Chuunichi Shinbun 2002

