

# Japanese women's expedition— Manaslu 1974

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Our project to climb Manaslu by way of the E ridge had started 3 years earlier. We aimed to make the first ascent of an 8000 metre peak by women and at the same time to put all the climbers on the expedition on to the top. We were very happy to receive permission to climb the E ridge of the mountain in January, 1973. At the end of April a reconnaissance party was despatched and the results were very fruitful, but the season was too late and, as they could not reach the problematic rock pinnacle on the E ridge, some questions remained unanswered. In the beginning we asked the Nepalese authorities for permission to climb the E wall, but on hearing that the Koreans had the same idea, we changed the route to the E ridge and so got the final permission. Later the Korean expedition was called off and we received permission to select either the E ridge or the E face route. This meant that we should be able to reach the top before the monsoon using the E face, even if we were unable to traverse the lower rock pinnacles on the E ridge which we had not yet reconnoitred. When the reconnaissance party returned preparations began.

From our studies and discussions which had been going on continuously since the beginning, we decided to make our summit attempt at the end of April and, taking into account the probable slowness of our pace, we thought it desirable therefore to reach our Base Camp during the first week of March. We assembled at Kathmandu on 9 February. On the 14th, we started from Trisul Bazar for the village of Sama at the foot of Manaslu, carrying our 11 tons of loads. Our caravan consisted of about 450 persons including expedition members, Sherpas and porters. The expedition members were as follows: Kyoko Sato, Mrs Tsune Kuroishi, Mrs Naoko Nakaseko, Michiko Sekita, Mrs Masako Uchida, Mieko Mori, Masako Itakura, Mutsumi Nakajima, Teiko Suzuki, Tomoko Ito, Shizu Harada and Naoko Kuribayashi. Captain P. S. Rana was Liaison Officer and Illa Tsering was Sherpa sirdar. At first we were worried whether an all-woman party could bring this long caravan safely all the way to Sama village. But contrary to our expectations, we reached it in 12 days, one day earlier than we had expected.

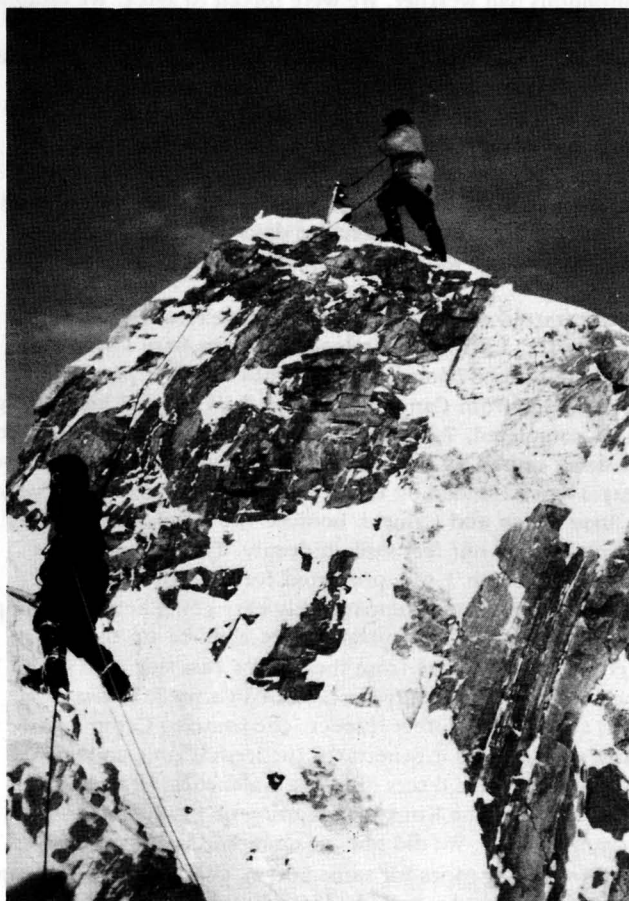
Reaching Base Camp on 3 March, we began to prepare the route to Camp 1 on the 5th. We did not want to be criticised that our routes were made by the Sherpas rather than by us, the climbers. So we did the ploughing and the Sherpas followed the sluggish mem-sahibs placing red flags on bamboo poles for guidance. On the 7th, load lifting to Camp 1 began with the aid of local porters. The climbers also helped in order to acclimatise. We were often frightened by avalanches which passed down close to our route. The weather was unstable during this period, always worsening in the afternoon, but the carrying of loads went well as far as Camp 1.

On 18 March the weather improved and we began to prepare the route to Camp 2. Fixed ropes and pitons, good enough to reuse, had been put in by the reconnaissance party of last year. Up to Camp 2 ran a sharp knife-edge ridge on which we had to fix nearly 2000 m of rope. We began to feel anxious about a possible shortage of ropes and snow bars because we had had to expend them beyond expectation. At this point our Sherpas suggested a decrease in their load weights to under 15 kg per head between Camps 1 and 2 because of the severity of the route and the continuous bad weather. We were forced to agree. We established Camp 2 on 26 March. We tried to traverse a snow wall in front of the rock tower to reach the foot of it, but the snow was a beehive-like mass which made our steps unstable. After 5 days only 120 metres of the route had been prepared; it was the end of March and we still had not reached the rock tower. This was our previously agreed time limit, so we assembled at Base Camp to discuss a change in plans. Thus the decision came at last to change the route to that taken by the Japanese party in 1957. Because of prolonged negotiation over porter fees and then a village festival, precious days were lost doing nothing. The moving of our Base Camp was only completed on 9 April.

The new Base Camp was started on the 5th and the route extended without a hitch to new Camps 1 and 2. Lifting of the loads between Base Camp and Camp 1 was quickly done using 37 local porters, while the Sherpas were engaged in carrying the loads from Camp 1 to Camp 2. When the load-lifting to Camp 1 was almost completed, 7 local porters were used onwards to Camp 2 to make up for the delay caused by the change of route; meanwhile the route from Camp 2 to Camp 3 was extended by the expedition members. It was very hard going between Base Camp and Camp 1 because the snow face softened swamp-like in the afternoon and our feet sank in deeply. The traverse route above a crevasse in front of Camp 1 was protected for the porters with a fixed rope for about 90 metres. It was comparatively easy going between Camps 1 and 2 as the Manaslu glacier had few crevasses. We climbed up to the 'Black Rock' after fixing 200 m of rope from the Larkya Pass side on a steep slope of rock and snow. Here at 5900 m, we established Camp 2. It was exposed to the wind, but safe in every other respect. The route to Camp 3 was an uneasy and unstable one because it penetrated the ice-fall zone and we had to traverse a slope where there were traces of block avalanches. Hereabouts occurred the terrible accident to the Korean expedition of 1972, so we were very nervous about siting Camp 3. We did not use crampons, rather we were troubled by ploughing and fixing ropes for some 500 m. Our route from Camp 3 to Camp 4 was clearly in view and we climbed it directly a little to the left. This slope was exposed to the strong wind from the N Col and it was often crusted. We had here an abrupt change of conditions every day. The Sherpas wished to have fixed ropes from the easy slope onwards and we therefore fixed them for 800 m from 6600 m to Camp 4 and from there to Camp 5, almost as high as the Plateau.

From 29 April we prepared the route to Camp 5 (7650 m) by turns and set it up on 1 May. We used oxygen ( $\frac{1}{2}$  litre/min) when sleeping above Camp 4 and it was left to climbers' choice to use it or not when they were on the move.

The Sherpas hardly used it at all, except when we insisted during the forcing of the route to Camp 5. Lastly we fixed 4 May as the first attacking day from Camp 5 and began to plan it. On 2 May 3 Sherpas began to lift the loads to Camp 5, while the 3 members chosen as the summit party reached Camp 4. On the 3rd 5 Sherpas lifted further loads to Camp 5, where 3 climbers and one Sherpa were installed for the final assault.



33 The summit is reached. Photo: M. Mori

Shortly after 5.30pm on 4 May 3 climbers and one Sherpa stood on the summit of Manaslu one by one. 'Yare, Yare' (Here we are at last) was my first impression. In the cloud sea all around were innumerable Himalayan peaks; on the W and S sides were precipitous cliffs. The ridge which must run on towards P.29 disappeared abruptly into the moving mist. The 3 behind me were watching the top and shooting their cameras alternately. The highest point was almost a point literally, only as big as a small table; there was no space for 4 persons to stand at the same time. With a clearing blue sky above, a comfortable breeze brushing our cheeks, we were all lucky to enjoy a marvellous moment in time.

That morning we rose at 4.30am. A strong wind had blown uninterruptedly since the previous evening. The beating of the wind on our tent promised little sign of weather improvement, much less of reaching the summit of the mountain. The 4 of us were in good condition however, so we decided to start when the wind fell and began to prepare for it. We hesitated for some time because of the strong wind, but we ventured to leave the tent soon after 8am. Outside we found a clear sky and even the wind had dropped, kindly. The first party, Uchida and Sherpa Jambu, and second party, Mori and Nakaseko, left Camp 5 at about 8.30am. In the first 2 hours we were involved in a struggle with hard blue ice. Afterwards it eased somewhat and we went up pleasantly and firmly in our crampons, sometimes we had to plough but we continued without undue haste. We each had on our backs 2 oxygen cylinders, equipment for a possible bivouac, rations and a camera. Shortly after leaving Camp 5 Uchida left one of her cylinders, so that the 2 following could not now leave theirs. After noon a used cylinder was put in a crevasse with a red flag above it as a sign. We lunched here without hurry.

Shortly before 3pm Uchida and Jambu disappeared from our sight; we reached the base of the snow wall on the Marshiandi side. Two pitches higher Uchida leading and Jambu could be seen cutting steps carefully. They must have finished the traverse and were climbing directly up the other side of a mass of rock. In a short time the 2 had climbed the rock wall and took out the flag. I prepared the camera and shouted—'Have you done it? Congratulations'. But Uchida swung her hands horizontally. I wondered if the appearance of a peak might change a great deal from year to year, thinking it to be somewhat different from the pictures of our predecessors. My oxygen mask did not fit,



34 Looking back down the route. This and next photo: N. Nakaseko

making my spectacles mist over, and I had been in extreme discomfort; I put down my rucksack beside Uchida's and went up hastily to them.

Jambu and Uchida spoke to me simultaneously. Jambu, pointing to the white peak which can be seen from the Brigandaki side, said—'that's the one'. Standing by the side of Uchida, I saw the peak from the Marshiandi side. 'Jambu says this is the top, but I think it is the one further up'. In the direction she pointed we saw the very outline familiar to us from many books published in Japan in recent years. We climbed up further with a perpendicular snow wall on our left; suddenly we came upon a gap in front and I realised that we were there. Pictures and equipment details of the earlier Japanese expeditions passed through my head; without doubt, the piton ring put into the rock by our pioneers could be seen just under the summit. What could be the fascination which has gone on drawing us up here, enduring severe wind and snow, for nearly 20 years? Relief welled up in my heart.

'This summit must be reached first by Uchida who has been leading our group all the morning'. I called back to her to change the lead but she refused stubbornly. Many thoughts passed rapidly through my head and I was moved to tears; my voice trembled. Anyway, here we must not have endless discussion; we had to hurry. We put in a piton to the right under the previous one and hung a karabiner on to it. The rock was rotten and we could not trust it, so how well would the reddish-brown ring hold me? How could I express my delight that I had climbed and come as high as this place where my countrymen first trod.

35 *From the summit of Manaslu*



For a little under 4 hours we did not use oxygen (except for Mori), from where our rucksacks were left to the summit and return. We reported the happy news to our leader who was waiting at the Base Camp. Only her word—'Congratulations'—could be heard clearly in return. This was the first communication with her since we had left the highest camp. We were very happy. After 7 o'clock when it was already beginning to get dark, we slowly began to descend. The N Peak gradually came nearer and we saw beautiful lightning. The tent was reached at about 10pm. In the night the wind rose again.

Next morning, the 5th, we went down to Camp 4 against the furious wind. On the way we met Suzuki, a member of the second party. She congratulated us and said—'You had better get down as fast as possible and take a long rest at Base Camp'. These were her last words to us for Manaslu snatched her from us.

On 5 May the second attack party, consisting of Suzuki, Ito and 2 Sherpas left Camp 4 for Camp 5, with 2 other Sherpas as support. The wind was strong until about noon, but then the weather changed rapidly and snow began to fall. By 1pm there was a blizzard. Suzuki, who dared to climb up to Camp 5 in spite of the wind and snow-fall, suddenly disappeared leaving her axe and rope on a flat place short of the Plateau. These lost articles were found on the 6th by the Sherpas who went up to search for her. Their task was made difficult by the strong wind which continued unceasingly. Near Camp 4 her anorak was found. We supposed her to have lost balance when she was changing from anorak to down jacket. With no sign of improvement in the weather, we were afraid of a double accident, so we decided with deep regret to evacuate the upper camps and get down to Base Camp.

On 30 May everyone descended from Base Camp to Sama village through fields now alive with all sorts of flowers. A short funeral ceremony was conducted by the Head Lama of the Gumpa of Sama. We erected a cairn in memory of our lost companion on a hill commanding a beautiful view of Manaslu.