

# YAMANOIS' INCREDIBLE SURVIVAL

## Desperate Descent on the N Face of Gyachung Kang

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In October 2002, Yasushi and Taeko Yamanoi, Japan's premier climbing couple, challenged Gyachung Kang (7952m) via the Slovenian Route. Yasushi reached the summit, only the second ascent, while Taeko stopped ascending at 7600m and waited for Yasushi there. While descending the face they were hit by avalanches and they had a tough struggle to escape from the treacherous Himalayan giant face. Eventually they made a dramatic safe return despite the incredible difficulties they had faced. They were hospitalized, however, in Tokyo for the amputation of fingers and toes due to frostbite.

### *to the summit*

Yasushi and Taeko Yamanoi arrived at Gyachung Kang (7952m) base camp on 16th September. "We initially had two choices at that time," said Yasushi. "There was the Northeast Face, which had never been climbed before, or the North Face. If we chose the North-East Face, I would climb alone, but on the North Face, both Taeko and I would go."

After some reconnoitering, they knew the Northeast Face would be too dangerous to challenge and return alive. They decided, therefore, to climb the North Face together. They were very careful about acclimatizing and spent 20 days for training climbs. They climbed up to 6300 meters, 6700 meters and 6900 meters.

On 5th October, Yasushi and Taeko left the base camp, where Gyaltsen, the cook from Katmandu, stayed alone to look after the camp. At 5:00 am on the following day, they started to climb from the basal part of the North Face at a height of 5900 meters.

Their equipment was: a 50 meters rope (7 millimeter), five titanium pitons, four titanium ice screws, seven carbines, a tent, 600 grams sleeping-bags, one and a half gas cartridges and one kilogram of food. "We made sure that we

each carried no more than five kilograms."

They climbed being unroped through mixed terrain (60°) and reached the 6600m point at 9:00 am. "This was a rather good and ideal pace for climbing such a route," said Yasushi. As the upper part of the face featured overhanging rock, they began to traverse the face, which was in a very delicate condition covered with snow on solid ice or rock. "Avalanches could occur at anytime," thought both Yasushi and Taeko.

They both hoped to climb up to 7200 meters on the first day. "Because if there were just an 800-meter difference, we could reach the top the next day," said Yasushi.

But by around 5:00 pm, they had reached only 7000 meters and had to bivouac there. After a painstaking cutting, they had made a ledge with a depth of 50 centimeter, where they pitched a bivouac tent. Though Yasushi felt some numbness in his right foot, he couldn't check it because of the narrow space. As a result he was left with serious frostbite.

On 7th October, they continued to climb, by going straight up and then traversing to the right without a rope. Again there were very unstable conditions with snow on the slabs and a soft wet snow covered face. In the morning they expected to reach the wide plateau at a height of 7500 meter within five hours, but soon found it impossible. They could reach this plateau only by 6:00 pm. It was a fairly level place (a slope of about 30 degrees), and for the first time on this climb, they could both stand without having to use their hands for support. They pitched their tent here. Yasushi checked his right foot in the tent and saw it had become purplish. Taeko had almost no appetite as usual and could eat only a small portion of ready-made fried noodles, while Yasushi had a good appetite but had a slight cold.

On 8th October it was snowing. Visibility was bad—almost a whiteout. At 7:00 am Yasushi began to climb in the heavy snow. Taeko followed Yasushi but several times felt dizzy. After one hour Taeko called to Yasushi, "I'll go

back to the tent and wait for you there!"

Yasushi, now solo, continued to climb up a 70 degree mixed wall. At last, at 13:30 he reached the summit. It had taken six and a half hours from the plateau.

He stayed only one minute there and began to descend. As he approached the plateau, he suddenly had a feeling of listlessness. He was forced to stop every three to four steps. At the end, he was reduced to crawling on the snow. "It was harder than K2." said Yasushi.

He returned to Taeko's tent at 15:00. He was so tired that he couldn't even take off his shoes by himself without Taeko's assistance.

### ***bivouac on a narrow ledge***

9th October dawned with heavy snow. They descended in visibility of just 10 meters. On this day, Taeko led, because her condition had improved and they both thought this order might be safer since Yasushi couldn't front-point well because of his right foot being frostbitten. They used the rope twice when they came across a

difficult traverse. It took a long time to drive in the piton for making a belay point.

Eventually they reached 7200 meters and bivouacked. This time, the ledge they could make on the North Face was only 10 centimeters deep. "We could somehow place our hips on the 10 centimeters shelf and then we pulled the tent over our heads."

At midnight they heard a roaring sound and suddenly the tent was violently shaken by an avalanche. They tried to stand upright so their bodies could bend to the pressure of the avalanches, which attacked twice, then three times that night. It was as if a runaway train passed over their tiny feeble tent. "Really, this time it might be very difficult to return alive." thought Yasushi.

### ***hanging in midair***

On 10th October, they used the rope right from the beginning. Yasushi went ahead while Taeko kept rope. "I was exhausted with no energy left, but Taeko was still full of vigor. But, while



The N face of Gyachung Kang—Yamanois' climbing line

descending the wall we had to anchor pitons, and in piton technique, I'm better than Taeko." said Yasushi. The problem was that it was very difficult to find a good crack for a piton. Yasushi took one hour to drive one piton into the wall. When at the seventh pitch Taeko was approaching Yasushi's belay point, she was hit by an avalanche. She was washed over Yasushi and ended up with her head hanging down in midair. Yasushi couldn't see Taeko because she was hanging in the shade of a rock. Recovering her position, Taeko noticed that the rope, which had passed over a sharp rock edge, was about to break. She cried out, "Don't pull the rope!" This call Yasushi did not hear. Then she managed to fix herself with an ice-axe and crampons on the right side wall, where she detached the rope from her harness.

Yasushi pulled up the rope and when he saw the end, he understood the situation. "Taeko is alive."

Now they could use only 35 meter from the 50 meter-long rope. This meant that when used double, its length was only 15 meters. Yasushi fixed rope and began descending with a single rope. After confirming Taeko's safety, he climbed up to the belay point. But on the way to this point an avalanche suddenly hit again so that Yasushi was about to get blown off the face. He somehow kept his body safe, but lost his goggles. Moreover, as some of the avalanche snow had hit his eye, his vision became very foggy. Taeko's left-eye vision was also blurred, because when she had fallen down, the right side of her head hit against rock and bled a lot.

For four hours Taeko endured, while Yasushi struggled on the snow-ice wall without vision to reach her. As he had to search the crack for piton by touching with bare hands, his fingers immediately frozen and whitened. At midnight Yasushi eventually rejoined her, but he was exhausted. It was Taeko's role to fix three ice screws and axe to the wall. Using a rope she made a "swing" for their night's "hotel". Yasushi and Taeko sat on this swaying swing in the darkness. Both hoped to drink something. Taeko searched

her rucksack and found a gas-stove and a cup. But when she tried to fire the lighter, unfortunately she dropped it down the vertical depth of the wall. They had no power to search for matches anymore and so they just collected ice and swallowed it.

## *despair at base camp*

Gyaltzen, the cook, noticed Yasushi on the summit on 8th October. But the weather conditions had changed for the worse from the following day with a lot of snow falling at base camp. On 10th October, Gyaltzen tried to go to the basal point by himself, but he couldn't reach it because of the deep snow. On the next day he ran to the Qomolungma base camp and informed one of the Japanese trekkers about the Yamanois' disappearance.

## *hallucinations*

By the sixth day (11th October) on the wall, Yasushi's vision became better. Though they had eaten almost nothing, they continued to descend the wall using the rope. At last Yasushi reached the gentle slope, from where they went down separately. Then at one moment Yasushi realized he had lost Taeko. He shouted, "Taeko, Taeko ". But nobody answered. He thought it might be easier to see her from a distant place, so he descended rapidly. Then hallucinations began.

On the way to the foot of the wall he thought he noticed Gyaltzen, their cook, standing near the rock over the glacier. He looked up at Yasushi and called out, "Tea, tea!" Eventually Yasushi reached the glacier. He looked up the Face and saw Taeko with some people. He also noticed some strangers standing around himself. He asked in English, "What are you doing here?" "We are training." they replied. Two hours later Taeko came back safely to the Glacier. Taeko had also felt that somebody else was always with her all the way down on this day. So, when Yasushi told

her of those people he had seen, she understood that it was a hallucination. They arrived at their advance base before dark and made hot tea with a cooking stove. This was their first drink since the night of 9th October. Finally they got to a place where they could sleep well in sleeping bags. They thought they were safe now. But the situation was still severe.

### *the last trial*

On 12th October, they got up at noon. Taeko's vision had fully returned, while Yasushi's right eye vision was still very blurred. They started for base camp at 13:00. Taeko hadn't eaten solid food during these six days. Though this was usual for her when climbing alpine style in the Himalayas, this time she had already become too exhausted. On this day, the walk to the base camp was the last severe trial for her. Yasushi walked ahead along the Gyachung Kang glacier, which was covered with 30 centimeters of snow. Taeko followed in Yasushi's footsteps but had to stop every few steps to breathe. Their pace was very slow and they began to feel it might be impossible to arrive at base camp before nightfall. Yasushi insisted that all their baggage should be left behind so that they could move more quickly and be in time for the day's goal. Taeko, who thought it was too difficult to reach base camp on that day and that maybe they should spend one more night in the glacier, kept their last pack of solid food, which was dry cooked rice. At 2:00 am they gave up walking and had a rest without using sleeping bags. Throughout the night Yasushi tried to call out several times to Taeko, "Are you still ok? Alive?"

### *return alive*

The next morning (13th October), Yasushi took a picture of Taeko and then hurried ahead for base camp alone. He walked well and at last reached the base camp site. No tent, except the big dining tent, remained. He shouted, "Gyaltzen!" Gyaltzen appeared and burst into tears, because he was so relieved to know of Yasushi's safe return. The liaison officer ran to meet Taeko and carried her on his back to camp three hours later. Because they had thought that both the Yamanois were dead, they had been about to withdraw from base and had already ordered the yak drivers to come up there to carry down all the baggage the next day. Yasushi and Taeko were immediately taken to the hospital in Katmandu and were flown to the hospital in Tokyo on 18th October. Both had to have operations and each lost 10 fingers and toes.

Yasushi and Taeko Yamanoi had previously been in a very serious avalanche accident on Manaslu in 1998. On that occasion, they had started climbing the northwest face with no rope, though at 6000 meters they felt some danger and tied themselves together with a rope. Just five minutes later, an avalanche roared down and flung them both into the air. Yasushi was completely buried. Luckily Taeko was safe and could find Yasushi by pulling on the rope. She dug out a lot of snow and saved Yasushi, who was about to suffocate from the pressure of being covered with heavy snow.

"But the danger this time was 100 times more awful," said Yasushi. However, he thinks they did their best in climbing to the top and returning safely, so he is content with the outcome.

They received the famous Uemura Naomi Adventure Award 2003 in February.

(Coordination in translation by Hiroo Saso)