

Lhotse South Face Winter - Near Ascent

JAC Tokai Section Expedition 2003

Osamu Tanabe

Lhotse South Face



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Two years had passed since JAC Tokai Section tried the first winter ascent of the giant Lohtse South Wall in December 2001, which eventually failed after a retreat at 7600m due to biting winter blizzard.

In order to challenge it again a second expedition was organized in 2003, this time as one of the commemorative events of JAC's centenary. At actual moment of turning back to the Wall, we did not fail to formulate a feasible strategy in setting out with the specific purpose to achieve our object in bitter conditions, based on the past experience.

Our idea was to prepare best men in best physical condition, and to take best climate, all to the utmost degree possible. This was to say practically as the followings: Climbing members to be limited to the potentially-fittest 5 climbers. A perfect acclimatization to be implemented by climbing a 8000m peak immediately before the event. And the summit bid to be made as early as possible in winter.

On October 14th, all the 5 reached the top of Shishapangma Central with 2 sherpas thanks to good weather. Afterward the men took decent time to keep in reserve and regain their fitness either in Kathmandu or in Japan. They set up BC at the foot of the Wall on November 14th. Nepali regulation had been changed to remove 4 seasons' framework already earlier in 2003, therefore it was possible to start operation as early as on November 19th.

We found in front of the Wall, however, that bottom one third of it had changed for the worse compared with the last time as rocks were entirely exposed, albeit snow accumulated on the whole wall was much more than at that time. Nevertheless, the route to be followed had been known to us in detail up to 7600m at least. On November 22nd; we set up C1 on the Rock Cape at 5900m, on 28th; C2 at 7100m having cut off fluted ice, and then on December 3rd; Transit C3' at the site where the Yugoslavian team had placed C4 in the past, which we intended to use as our base to extend route work upwards.

The wall conditions were in good shape, with less frequency of rock falls than in last time. Even such was the case, it was desperately same in its vulnerability exposed to the peril directly of being struck by shrieking stone-bullets out of blue at any time, despite incessant watch to avoid possible risks. Notwithstanding, everything was going on nicely in speed. On December 5th we could pass upwards over the highest point reached last time, and then on 9th set up C3 at 7850m, which height was somewhat lower than primarily counted. Temperature at C3 was recorded minus 35°C. How much we had wished for settling in the high camp where at last we could head for the summit from! All, so far, had gone smoothly according to our plan. Only it remained to push out for summit bids, may be including a few trials. The summit would be surely in our hands.

But it was not to be. The crux of the Wall actually started from there, yet unknown to us. We took the couloir extending at further right as the route to the top, to which a 200m descent over from C3 had to be made. It should directly lead us to the left shoulder close by the top. By doing so, we could avoid the seemingly difficult ridge which supposedly Tomo Checen had taken as his route. That also would enable us to do without tracing the long main ridge to the top across which terrific gale always raged in the winter. On the other hand, the couloir would be always prone to avalanches if in other seasons. As it was, we might find a rather safe way in it, as we had seen nearly no snow fall during the winter season.

As a matter of fact, we found the couloir far from easy. From the beginning, we were forced to make struggle on delicate traverse into it. In the couloir we faced the stiffest pieces of climbs one after another, and the 2 parties, each led by Tanabe and Kitamura, attacked day by day in turn during the following 5 days till 15th, but it was insufficient to reach the top, though we attained as high as 8250m. By then sherpas had been more or less suffered from stone-falls or frost-bite and so not much support from them could be expected any more.

A last bout was taken up by Tanabe party starting from BC on 18th. In that night at C1, however, the weather forecast reported a high probability of snowfall on the day to go on in the couloir, which should imply high risks of avalanches. We had no alternative but to retreat.

Only 250m left. Nevertheless no crucial damage left. True that 8 members among all 20 had some hurt by stone-falls or frost-bite, but a longer climb should have had resulted in serious accidents. Safe return itself is the best result indeed.

My contemplation leads to a possible success only in the following 3 cases: An alpine-style climb by a genius like Tomo Checen, or a thorough rock-ridge climb like old-USSR party took, or a speedy one in pre-winter season. In any case, you need some luck to survive needless to say.

Members:

Leader	Osamu Tanabe (42)
Sub-leader	Masanori Suzuki (42)
Climbing member	Toshiyuki Kitamura (41)
	Shigehisa Yamamoto (35)
	Atsushi Senda (29)
BC manager	Goro Takenaka (43)
Climbing Sherpas	15