

The French expedition to Makalu West ridge 1971

(Translated and summarised by Jeffery Russell from original accounts in *La Montagne*)

1. From the original idea to Camp 2 Robert Paragot

The idea. Each big date in the history of French expeditions to the Himalaya—Annapurna, Makalu, Muztagh Tower, Jannu—marks a step forward in the scale of difficulties overcome. Mountaineering in other countries has followed the same pattern up to the spring of 1970, when a strong British team led by Christian Bonington saw Don Whillans and Dougal Haston reach the summit of Annapurna by its s face.

This exploit marks a turning point in the conquest of the high Himalayan peaks, ushering in the era of climbs of great difficulty and the use of modern techniques over 8000 m.

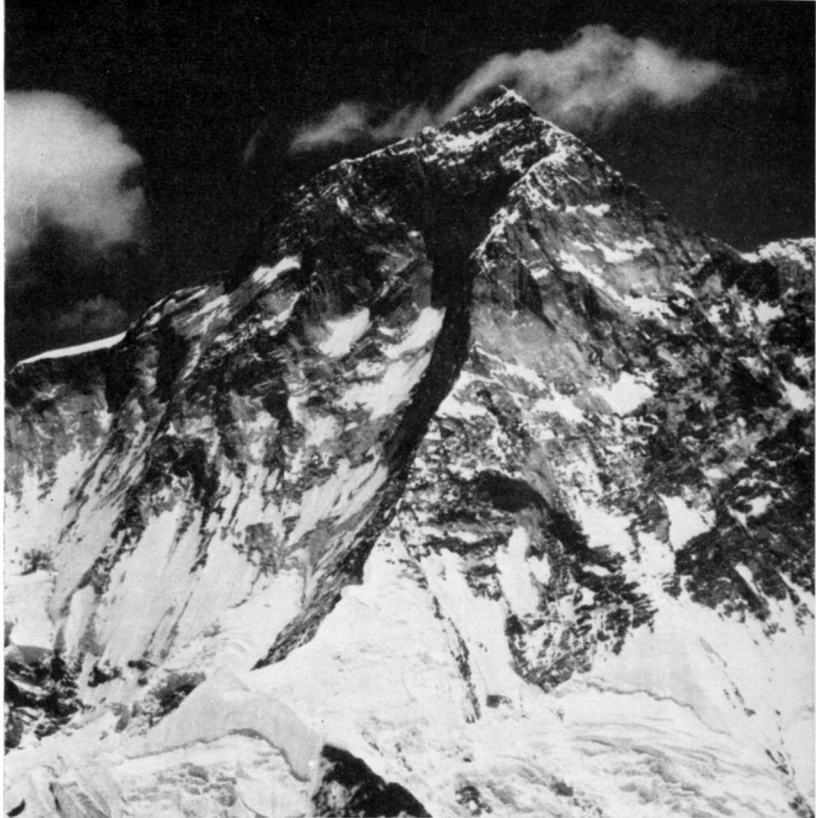
The idea of scaling the w ridge of Makalu was, however, older than that, going back, in my case, to 1959. *En route* for Jannu with Jean Franco's expedition, we had crossed the first great ridge of the Siwaliks, and the fantastic 8000-m giants of the high Himalaya rose up before us like a barrier.

It was then that I first saw Makalu: a magnificent mountain, architecturally perfect, a natural pyramid worthy to house all the gods who reign over the region. Paradoxically, the name 'Makalu' is not connected with a legend as are most names of Himalayan peaks; it is simply called 'the giant who sleeps for six months'.

At the sight of 'the giant' all of us, veterans and newcomers alike, came to a halt. What better goal than its w ridge, what harder problem than its rock step? The finest route on a perfect peak . . . for a long time it remained a dream, until in the autumn of 1969, the Comité de l'Himalaya decided to organise a major expedition, and its choice fell on the w ridge of Makalu.

Preparation. By the end of the 1970 season ten of the best climbers of the day had been selected—taking into account such indispensable qualities as sociability—and approved by the Comité de l'Himalaya. The team thus formed seemed to me well balanced for age. The youngest was 27, five were under 33, and the other five were in their middle or late thirties or early forties. Recent expeditions to the Himalaya have tended to use mature men, capable of prolonged physical effort at high altitude, but with a 300–400-m rock step of extreme difficulty at over 7000 m, it seemed to me better to include a few virtuoso climbers fired with the enthusiasm of youth. One younger man for every seasoned climber seemed to me the ideal combination.

In November 1970 the full team met in Chamonix to discuss every detail of



21 *Makalu—West ridge* This and next two photos: F.F.M. Expedition to Makalu

organisation. The route was obvious from the photographs—straight up!—but there seemed to be no probable camp sites. In the hope of never having to use them, we decided to have artificial platforms made. Orthodox tents appeared unlikely to stand up to the winds which sweep the w ridge, and an order was placed for a new type of tent based on the model used by our British friends on the s face of Annapurna. The final list of equipment comprised some 3000 items; when all was ready, fourteen tons of luggage had to be dispatched.

The approach. On 21 February 1971, an ancient DC 3 landed men and equipment at Tumlingtar, and a horde of some 500 porters surrounded our first camp on the banks of the River Arun. There were so many expeditions to Nepal that we could not engage the porters we wanted, and ours seemed to be lacking in efficiency. We managed to leave on 23 February, when Paris and Payot, who had stayed in Kathmandu to complete the formalities, arrived in an Alouette III, sowing utter panic amongst our army of porters, most of whom had never seen a helicopter before.

At 2500 m we ran into deep snow, and with the Col de Barun at 4200 m to cross, more than half our porters abandoned us for lack of proper equipment. With 175 porters for 462 loads, we spent nearly a month reaching the site of our Base Camp at 4900 m. Luckily the area was free of snow, despite the height, and the rigours of the approach had done much to acclimatise us. A dry stone hut was quickly built, and we settled in for a prolonged stay.

The storm at Camp 2 Our first camp was set up on 25 March, at 5300 m on the 1955 site, after a difficult glacier crossing, and Camp 2, our advance base, was securely installed at 5800 m on flat rocks sheltered from the west wind. The view was extraordinarily impressive, with the plunging walls of a host of summits all around.



22 *Camp 2 looking out to Baruntse*

At last in position to launch the assault on the ridge, the team suffered a serious handicap when Jacob, after undergoing an operation on the throat, had to be evacuated to Kathmandu. But the weather was still fine and there was no time to lose. Jager and Paris pitched a cabin tent above Camp 2, but after a bad first night a fierce wind forced them to dig out a more sheltered site for the third camp nearer the foot of the main ridge. The whole of the Arête des Jumeaux—the snow and ice ridges leading up to the rock buttress—had been equipped with two km of fixed ropes, but the weather was worsening

each day. Despite heavy snowfalls Guillot and Mosca pushed on above Camp 3, and the first, small, overhangs were encountered in the course of an unnerving 120-m traverse over snow-covered slabs. On 14 April we were heading towards a very steep névé when the storm broke. We slid back down the ropes to Camp 3.

The storm continued to hug the mountain on the following days. Our efforts to free the fixed ropes from ever-deepening snow met with only partial and temporary success. Guillot and Mosca made a little more headway, but the wind was too much for them. Paris, Payot and Seigneur held out a few more days in Camp 3 until the Makalu tents began to collapse, when they were forced to descend to Camp 2. The situation was scarcely better there, and rapidly became critical. No provisions arrived from Sedoa, and our stocks of rice for the Sherpas were diminishing.

From Base Camp Guillot informed us that other expeditions were also immobilised in their lower camps; the storm was apparently one of the longest and fiercest seen in the Himalaya for years. Should we retreat without even having set up Camp 4? On the eighth day, in the face of all evidence, we decided to wait a little longer, and on 27 April, after thirteen days of immobility, the storm miraculously subsided. We heard that 21 porters had arrived at Base Camp with rice, fuel and other items, while the Sherpas were remaking the path to Camp 1.

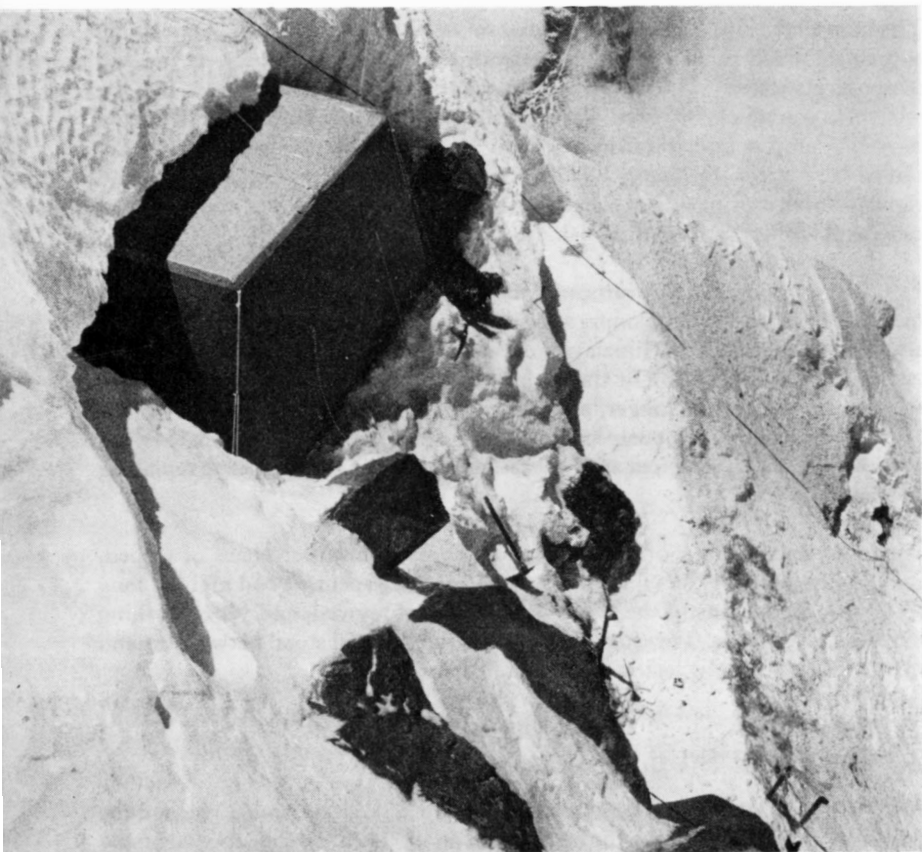
Under a clear sky four of us ascended to Camp 3, an utter chaos of ripped, collapsed tents. But the wind had dropped and we spent a good night at long last. With the passing of the storm our hopes had revived, and yet everything remained to be done. The ridge and its rock buttress still stood between us and that tiny cone of snow lost in the sky at 8481 m.

2. The Rock Step **Bernard Mellet**

After two wearing storm-bound weeks at Camp 2, Seigneur and I reached the thin snow-ridge running up to the buttress on 29 April. In the absence of any ledge, we hewed one out of the slope, a long and arduous task at that altitude. All night the tent flapped in the wind, which was still blowing the following morning when Seigneur led off on rock covered in places with snow and ice. A narrow snow-couloir, unseen until then, enabled us to reach the main mass of the buttress fairly quickly. Despite a full day's work at roughly 7300 m, the height had not troubled us at all, only the cold.

Next day, 1 May, we began the assault on the buttress. Beyond the point reached the day before, we were faced with a veritable barrier of extremely steep slabs culminating in an overhanging 'nose'. What a delight to take off my crampons at last and feel good dry rock under my boots! I almost forgot I was in the Himalaya. . . . After the slabs, and a crack which went well but completely exhausted me, it was time to return to Camp 3 and take a good rest after three days of banging in pitons and fixing ropes at over 7000 m.

The following day brought good news: the famous 'nose' with its massive, overhanging slabs had been climbed by Mosca and Payot, who had thus overcome the first major obstacle on the buttress.



23 Box type shelter at Camp 4

Four days later, having dug out a new ledge for Camp 4, we climbed to the *brèche* reached by Mosca and Payot, and Seigneur disappeared up a small steep *dièdre*. Although only belaying, I felt very tired and only just managed to hold on in the fierce gusts of wind. My hands and feet had gone numb, and I could not put on my anorak with the wind pumping it up like a balloon. Once out of the *dièdre* I was hoping for a calmer passage, but I could see Seigneur buffeted by the gale and motioned him to come down. Utterly exhausted, we had only climbed another 50 m above the 'nose', and the worst was still to come.

Next morning, 6 May, the wind had lost some of its ferocity and we reached our previous highest point in three hours, going well. Seigneur forced a fine artificial pitch and hauled in the rope we were going to fix, leaving me alone with a jumar which I could not even feel, my hands were so cold. My pack was pulling me backwards, and I had to leave go of the wall to unclip the karabiners fastening the rope to the pitons. Seigneur refused to go on until he had restored the circulation in my hands; after much patient rubbing and tapping I was able to continue, and we climbed another rope's length to reach a height of 7550 m before descending to Camp 4 to join Berardini, Jager and Marchal.

After what was for me our hardest day's climbing, three days rest in the relative comfort of Camp 2 was greatly appreciated. There was nothing to do, the cooking was in the capable hands of the Sherpas, and it was very pleasant to be woken by a 'Good morning, Sahib, good morning' from our kitchen boy and his solemn 'Milk, no milk?' as he handed us our bowl of tea.

However, on 13 May we were off again in the intense cold above Camp 4, reascending the fixed ropes on the overhangs with our pack between our legs and two jumars, one for a footrest and the other at the waist. The drop was distinctly unpleasant. While Paragot and two Sherpas stopped below the overhangs to instal a fifth camp, we continued on virgin territory, despite the snow which had begun to fall. Towards 5pm we reached the upper snow slopes, and the rock step was beneath us at last! Unfortunately we had to go down to Camp 4, Paragot and the Sherpas having been unable to set up the fifth camp, which ruled out any attempt to reach the summit the following day. Berardini and Marchal were to take two days to instal Camp 5 at the *brèche*.

3. The Summit **Yannick Seigneur**

It was the fifth time Mellet and myself were *en route* from Camp 2 to the upper camps, and at least the twentieth—the fortieth time counting descents—that we had to cross the endless snow-ridges between Camps 2 and 3. They were fine snow-ridges, no doubt, but after two months they had become something of a bore. Moreover, events had not gone according to plan. At Camp 4 we found Marchal and Berardini, whom bad weather had prevented from attempting the summit after their difficult installation of Camp 5. Mosca and Payot told us they had set up Camp 6 but were unable to try for the summit because their oxygen masks had not worked properly. However, they had carried up loads and fixed 400 m of rope above the camp, for which we were later very grateful.

After a fairly good night at Camp 5 with Jacob, by then recovered, we transported all our equipment—a tent, two sleeping bags, fuel, food, ropes and five bottles of oxygen—via the fixed ropes to Camp 6. That meant loads of 30 kg each at 7700 m without oxygen!

Several exhausting hours later, I was making tea when Guillot arrived at Camp 6 from the upper slopes, tired and in no mood to tackle the summit the following

day. His partner Paris agreed to come with us, though, and at 2.30am on 23 May the three of us set off on the final 700 m, unroped, a rucksack each and a jumar in one hand. We had opened a bottle of oxygen for the occasion; another one was waiting to be picked up 100 m further on, thanks to Mosca and Payot.

From the start Paris experienced difficulty with his oxygen apparatus and fell behind. Our own equipment was functioning very imperfectly and breathing was difficult. At the rate of one litre of oxygen a minute, each bottle would last five or six hours, but the benefit was small. Paris abandoned his defective apparatus and rejoined us without oxygen but lighter by 15 or 18 kg.

Beyond the fixed ropes steep snow-slopes and windblown cornices brought us to the junction of the w and sw ridges—the route taken by the Japanese the previous year. At 8100 m we took a short rest, to melt snow and dump a walkie-talkie and two cameras. With hammer and pitons for the rock cliff below the summit, our rucksacks still weighed 10 or 12 kg.

We set off again at an easier pace, stopping when necessary, and unroped. What did safety mean at that height? Each of us was sure of himself and the others, determined to reach the summit, and above all to return alive to the valley. No victory is worth death, or even mutilation.

We roped up at the foot of the vertical cliff, more than 100 m of red granite. The Japanese had left 12 m of fixed rope, and a few more rope-lengths saw us above the rock. My apparatus had by then completely seized up, and I unfastened it to breathe freely—what a relief, despite the rarefied atmosphere!

At 8300 m, without oxygen, Paris had slowed down considerably. It was already late afternoon, and he decided to wait there, de-icing our oxygen bottles and setting them at four litres a minute. A great surge of energy swept through us, and we almost strode up the final 170 m to the summit.

The day was very clear and we could see the high plateaux of Tibet and the monarchs of the Himalaya—Everest, Lhotse, Lhotse Shar, Jannu, Kangchenjunga. The scene of fine exploits, or of future achievements—the E face of Everest with its three pillars, the S face of Lhotse, or the SW face of Everest, still unconquered despite the Japanese and Haston and Whillans.

It was 5pm and time to go down. Jean-Paul Paris had already installed the first rappel on the rock step when we rejoined him. Night fell at the end of the fixed ropes; my headlamp was broken and I finished the descent with the lamp between my teeth. We were back at Camp 6 at 10pm. A light was shining far below at Camp 2—the Sherpas had lit a gigantic fire to celebrate our victory.

4. A team victory Robert Paragot

As we left Base Camp, knowing that for some of us it was the end of our last

Himalayan expedition, we took one last look at the ridge, reputed to be impossible, and remembered how near we had been to defeat. The ridge appeared as virgin as the day we arrived, and realising it had been equipped with ropes, camps and pitons was like waking out of a dream. . . .

It was the first time that I had set off on an expedition knowing that success was far from certain. But is that not the whole point of such an adventure? If there are no problems, no uncertainty as to the outcome, why go? From the moment we arrived at Base Camp, after a seemingly endless approach march, we had all experienced a marvellous adventure, and success could only add to our already great joy.

If the honour of reaching the summit of Makalu belongs to Bernard Mellet and Yannick Seigneur—incontestably the 'man of the ridge'—the credit for the success of the expedition must go to the whole team and to several of the Sherpas who reached the highest camps. The team spirit was superb, and overcame the elements. Without the courage, tenacity and self-denial of all, such an undertaking would not have been possible.

5. Climbing equipment and oxygen¹ Jean-Paul Paris

All the climbing aids used on Makalu w ridge were classical pieces of equipment of the first quality. We undertook the climb with the intention of respecting the unspoken rules of Western European mountaineering which restrict the use of artificial means to the absolute minimum. As a result, although we possessed a few expansion pitons with which to anchor artificial platforms if necessary, there were no expansion bolts and drills in our ironmongery. On the other hand, we had a remarkable range of orthodox pitons (540 in all), which was a good thing because we used almost every different kind in our possession. The ice-axes, twelve-spike crampons, and harnesses were all quite orthodox. As for ropes, we used seven mm diameter ropes for the sections that were not too steep, and nine-mm ropes for passages of extreme steepness.

Our experience of using oxygen under difficult conditions enabled us to form a definite opinion of existing equipment—it is totally unsuitable for that kind of purpose. Bottles and masks alike gave us only trouble. A fault in the assembly of the oxygen bottle taps could have had tragic consequences, if the team's will to win had been less strong. Two thirds of the bottles leaked and were useless, which brought us near to discouragement. In addition their length is very awkward for the climber on vertical rock: projecting from the rucksack, the taps bang against the rock wall and often open and leak in the process.

As for the mask, it is such a voluminous object that the climber cannot see where to put his foot, which, it will be readily admitted, is more than a hindrance for a mountaineer. The fact is that most expeditions to the Himalaya had used oxygen, and few had thought of dispensing with it for such climbs, the reason

¹ Extracted from the section dealing with 'Clothing, climbing and camping equipment, acclimatisation and provisions'.

being that the movement of heavy loads at high altitude had not posed a problem because the Sherpas could supply the camps, however high they were.

We were also counting on the Sherpas for our climb, but except for two of them, they did not go above Camp 5, and we therefore had to choose between two unsatisfactory solutions: carry oxygen and as little equipment as possible, or carry as little oxygen and equipment as would ensure our safety above Camp 5. Given the numbers of men and the time at our disposal, these two solutions were not equally unsatisfactory, and we had to choose the second.

The problem can also be set in another way: is it not true that the extra energy and vitality gained through the use of oxygen is spent entirely transporting the apparatus which produces the original advantage? In other words, it can be said that the weight of the oxygen bottles is such that the climber can scarcely put anything else in his rucksack, in which case wherein lies the benefit of the operation?

There is of course a physical problem to consider: the body is much more vulnerable to cold without oxygen. But will-power is a big factor, and in the last resort accounts for many difficulties overcome. For future expeditions we would recommend a compromise: the use of oxygen at a low rate at night above 7500 m, with a few bottles in reserve for use when attempting the summit. In our opinion, this is a valid solution, since a new system has recently appeared on the market. Instead of being compressed, oxygen is supplied by chemical reaction, and the apparatus is much lighter, although once the reaction is started it cannot be stopped, and the container must be used up in one go or thrown away. As for the mask, radical research is called for, but the commercial prospects are such that it will be difficult to find a firm willing to undertake the necessary research.

SUMMARY Members: Robert Paragot (Expedition Leader), Lucien Berardini, François Guillot, Robert Jacob, Claude Jager, Jacques Marchal (Doctor), Bernard Mellet, Jean-Claude Mosca, Jean-Paul Paris, Georges Payot, Yannick Seigneur, eighteen Sherpas (five of whom ascended to Camp 4) and—after establishment of Base Camp—seven local porters.

Base Camp	4900 m, 19 March
Camp 1	5300 m, 25 March
Camp 2 (Advance Base)	5800 m,
Camp 3	6500 m,
Storm at Camp 2	14-27 April
Camp 3 (repaired)	6500 m, 27 April
Camp 4	7380 m, 29 April
End of Rock Step	7700 m, 13 May
Camp 5	7650 m, 18 May
Camp 6	7770 m, 20 May
Summit	8481 m, 23 May (Mellet & Seigneur)