Trekking on Tops

A Kangchenjunga Diary

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(Vladimir Balyberdin participated in the Soviet traverse of the summits of Kangchenjunga in 1989. This article is an extract from his expedition diary. It should be read in conjunction with the account in last year's Alpine Journal (AJ95, 24–8, 1990/91). *Translated by Antoni Marianski.)*

. . . In the evening of 21 April, in the Forest Camp in Tseram, Ivanov called a coaches' meeting which began with the sentence: 'In my opinion the traverse should be tackled by two groups of five.' Then we sat for over an hour discussing the situation, the opportunities for the team, and offering alternative ideas mainly so as to increase the number of men making the traverse. However, the discussion was terminated by Ivanov: 'I am closing the discussion by stating my own decision that the team shall consist of 10 men.' None of our arguments had been heeded . . .

Next day, Ivanov started the meeting with the sentence: 'Well, yesterday we decided . . .' I said: 'No, we didn't decide, it was ordered.' Valia said: 'In my opinion we should start by appointing the leaders . . .' More tommy-rot. But finally we got down to naming the team members. The coaches were all asked for their opinion, one after the other. Kazbek took into account the difficulties encountered on the south route and suggested that a group for the traverse should consist of those who had worked on it, plus all the members of his group apart from himself, as he was ill. He suggested that we and the Moscow group should have the opportunity to finish off preparing our branch of the centre route. Realizing that he was not including in the traverse party even his best friend Khrichthaty, I was momentarily dumbstruck. I couldn't understand if he was joking or something, or on the point of making another suggestion. But after a few generalizations Kazbek finished. As I see it, Valeri [Khrichthaty] was sunk in his own thoughts at the time and either didn't see disaster approaching or was sure he had misheard.

Vasili Elagin, who was next to speak, naturally did not agree with the role of spear-carrier that had been allotted to him and said that he and his friends had done their bit and had no less a right to do the traverse than others. I think it was actually Elagin who was the first to propose an administrative mechanism for forming the teams: two men from each of our groups. From there on things went smoothly, the pairs were named with very little discussion, and each pair included the group-leader, those leaders all being present. Faces brightened up

again, everyone was pleased with everyone else – it was idyllic. But then it was Khrichthaty's turn. Valeri, as a man of principle, was unwilling to go along with a mean-minded compromise which embodied no sporting principles. He suggested a completely new approach, similar to the one I had suggested the day before. Our group to go out with a tent and all the necessaries, start the traverse, set up a bivouac in the couloir between the central and main summits, leave an equipped camp there and complete the traverse using the camp on the west route as a base. In that way we would be satisfying four more men, since the other 10 would still be operating the old plan, and, secondly, we would be solving the thorniest problem of the traverse which was the absence of a proper fifth camp on the centre route. At first Ivanov didn't even want to hear any new suggestions, but at Efimov's insistence Valeri was done the favour of being allowed to have his say. Suddenly Elagin supported him. The coaches were politely mute.

This proposal was news to me, so I had to think while speaking. I said that I liked it. 'How do we form the group of ten?' asked Efimov. I answered that I hadn't climbed in the other groups and couldn't take it upon myself to allocate people.

'But what principles should guide us?' Sergei was again being querulous.

'I have always considered that sporting considerations should be paramount, but I am beginning to realize that the majority here are in favour of an administrative solution. Perhaps they are right.'

'Then tell us who should be taken from each group.'

'No, let the group leaders decide.'

I had always been sure that Sheinov and Klinezki were the best climbers in the Moscow group. But here was Elagin asserting that they were more tired during the sortie and were less ready for the traverse. I had no grounds for disputing that assertion.

The discussion ended there. Two hours later Ivanov announced his decision in front of everybody. There were to be 12 candidates for 10 places, plus two group leaders, Bershov and Elagin. Khrichthaty's proposal was forgotten.

As was to be expected, the reactions of the expedition members were various but relatively unemotional. Some were secretly glad, some were depressed or discouraged or offended, others flared up and quickly calmed down again, yet others covertly denounced the unfairness. Sergei Arsentiev refused to speak with a soul all evening, and next morning went up with Sheinov. Gradually the rest followed.

I was in no hurry and was very sorry that there were so few days to rest in. On the second day of my rest my ECG showed a pulse of 84 – most unusual. We evidently had overdone it on that climb. My bad throat hadn't gone away even though I had been sure that being in the forest would cure anything. No medicine helped.

Towards the evening of the 23rd the whole camp was in turmoil discussing an unexpected situation. The Myslovski-Cherni pair had climbed, with oxygen, from Camp 3 to Camp 5 West and was poised to go for the summit the following morning. Originally they had said they would go and have a look

at the climb up the Yalung, but later they said that they would go up along the fixed rope, i.e. towards the main summit.

This caused passions to rage even more fiercely, perhaps, than over the list of men to tackle the traverse. The oxygen-users were crushed. Valeri Khrichthaty, by contrast, flew into a rage and mustered all the sarcasm of which he was capable. The climb up to 8200m, irrespective of the rest of the ascent, had indeed demonstrated what climbing with oxygen meant. Two old men of 52 and 50, with no acclimatization, training or medical supervision, had coolly climbed to over eight thousand and were intending to go even further, confident in their own strength.

But there were also other sides to the situation. Mainly, the safety question. The nearest rescue team was five days away from the climbers. Even in Base Camp, three days away, there was only one interpreter, Vasia Senatorov. At Camp 3 there were, allegedly, three Sherpas who could give back-up. But there was no radio contact with them, so they might as well not have been there. Also, from the point of view of principles and rules and traditions, this action didn't fit any framework.

Next day everybody was on tenterhooks waiting for news from the summit. However, the two men had changed their minds and had come down. The oxygen-users heaved a sigh of relief even though, in principle, nothing had changed, bygones were bygones, and the climbers were coming down to what was called the eight-thousand mark, at 8200m, and spent the night there.

I had still not got better properly, my pulse was still over 70, my throat was sore. But along with the last group I left the Forest Camp on the 24th after lunch. We spent the night in Ramza. Next day, after seven hours of walking plus stops, we got to Base. On the way we chatted with some tourists from the Federal Republic of Germany, and drank tea in the first ice-bound camp.

Next day, 26 April, one group was sent climbing in spite of timid protests from some of its members who had just completed a long journey from down below and had not had a chance to rest. Pastukh's group was given the task of equipping Camp 5 on the centre route. He had Karataev, Khaibullin, Mojaev and Bogomolov.

The same day, at 12 noon, the final list for the traverse was announced: Elagin, Koroteev, Bershov, Turkevich, Vinogradsky, Pogorelov, Lunjakov, Khalitov, Bukreev and Balyberdin. It came to light that there had been a problem of counting out either me or Valeri, and the leaders, Elagin and Bershov, no longer wanted to take Khrichthaty, although they would probably have been pleased to get rid of me too. But that would have gone against the principle of two men from each group. It would be interesting to look at a national football team, recruiting one man from each city. I was shaken. In my opinion Valeri and I should both stay, though I wasn't quite so sure about myself. I started to think feverishly about what I should do.

I could do the traverse in the group, or do it with Khrichthaty, or else I could climb the main summit with him from Base to Base in 24 hours without a stop for the night.

While I was turning this over in my mind, they began to cobble together a group for a quick climb. Its nucleus was Khrichthaty, Suviga, Arsentiev and

Sheinov. Sergei was ready to put on oxygen in order to photograph the climb. Klinezki and Dedii were preparing to help as best they could. They went to the leaders with their suggestion. The negotiations and discussions of the options and the rest of it took 24 hours. Ivanov and Efimov seemed ready to consent, but Myslovski was dead against. It was the usual reason: the risk, which might affect the success of the expedition as a whole. The fact that the lads had calculated everything with hundred-per-cent back-up wasn't taken into account.

In the end the most determined men, Khrichthaty and Suviga, having exhausted all the legal avenues, settled on a final illegal one. They decided to go out at 11pm as planned, even without permission. The rest elected not to go for a direct confrontation and decided to work according to the plan laid down by the coaches.

In the course of this whole struggle Valeri came to me frequently for advice, his latest problem being: 'I'm afraid that they will hold up your group.' I tried to think coolly about this possibility which, on the face of it, seemed absurd.

'Hardly. It would be extraordinarily difficult to justify. Besides, there are Moscow people with us. Would they deprive them of the traverse? At the worst, they'll hold us up for 24 hours. What would be the justification for that?'

'Well, that's a comfort. I'm not afraid of the rest.'

I said that the cameramen were preparing to film their sortie with floodlights. He asked them not to, so as to avoid any unnecessary bother.

27 April

9pm. At supper Valeri has just told me: 'It's all over – I'm staying behind by myself.'

10 May

7.20am. It is very difficult to force oneself to write about the main climb. All that remains is a sense of disappointment, dissatisfaction, mixed with a feeling of unfairness and resentment.

We set off on 28 April. We reached Camp 2 quickly and easily, in spite of having to make tracks after a snowfall. I was loaded down by a cine camera which I had previously taken down for repair, six rolls of film and some food, that is, some 10 kilos. The others had the same without the cine equipment. I was depressed from the very start. I couldn't get used to the idea that Khrichthaty had been sidelined. I myself didn't feel very much like going in the group led by Elagin. It was clear that the combination of oxygen-users and obvious non-users would lead to problems. However, I was still sure that the three of us would survive and do the traverse without oxygen. I kept myself to myself and Vasili, who could see my mood, didn't bother me. And that internal tension was actually resolved during the climb. In Camp 2 I slept very soundly and seemed to be getting fitter. But still there did not seem to have been enough rest days. To this day I cannot imagine why Ivanov was pushing us so hard. Was he trying to synchronize the climb with the May Day holiday? After all, later we simply lived in the Forest Camp in Tseram for a few days, without food what's

more. In fact we were half-starving for almost the whole of the expedition. On the 29th we climbed to Camp 3, again in many places we had to establish the track with our feet and we lost three hours 40 minutes on the crossing. I felt great, I did a lot of climbing ahead of the others and had plenty of time for filming.

Meanwhile Pastukh's group was following the centre route: three men were taking both peaks, the other two were going only for the main summit, having completed Camp 5 on the way. Arsentiev's group had climbed up to Camp 4 West.

There was plenty of space in Camp 3, and so as not to be cheek-by-jowl we took over both tents. I was on duty, which is why in the morning I didn't manage to get the camera ready fast enough and was a bit late leaving. The men from Alma-Ata had forged ahead, followed by Elagin, then Koroteev, who turned his oxygen on right beside the tents. Together with us there came two men from Pastukh's group to take away the empty cylinders from under the bergschrund. I filmed Vasili throwing them down. Meanwhile Koroteev had got separated from me but at the bergschrund I caught up with him and filmed the crossing. While I was reloading the camera he vanished again and I didn't catch up with him until Camp 4. Evidently I arrived an hour or so later than the first pair, as they had already prepared themselves to go ahead. They gave me a drink of hot juice. There was nothing to eat. That upset me . . . In all, the crossing had taken seven hours – quite a heavy day's work. I then had no reason to think that I was badly behind the others – after all I had the extra weight, the cine and stills equipment, and my stops were for filming purposes. Moreover, Lunjakov and Khalitov were not only keeping up with Elagin and Koroteev, who were using oxygen, but were actually ahead of them.

The decisive day, 1 May, was ahead of us. We had to go from Camp 5 South to Camp 5 West, via the south, central and main summits. Even before the traverse I had doubts about the advisability of such an intensive day's work . . . But I didn't make any specific objection. For two reasons: who here was going to take my opinion into account? and in my heart of hearts I was hoping to survive without oxygen. Unfortunately, it later became obvious that I should at that point have chosen between filming or doing the traverse without oxygen. The same choice as in our one-day climb without oxygen from Camp 3, when I had taken the sporting option. This time I was hoping for a little bit more. At Camp 5 Elagin told me to take one cylinder, but within an hour I realized that the weight would make me fall a long way behind, particularly as I was again filming a lot. I ditched the cylinder and went faster. On the famous wall, about which there were many frightening stories, Koroteev and I filmed each other. Afterwards he went up and I stopped to reload the camera. When I set off after him the whole group didn't seem very far away. But gradually the gap widened and I couldn't narrow it. On the summit Elagin turned to me indignantly – why was I holding everybody up and not turning my oxygen on? I didn't have any oxygen, that was why. Indignation again. With reason, actually. He gave me a cylinder from the ones lying on the summit. 'What about the others?' I asked. 'They are all using oxygen.'

That made the psychological turning-point easier for me. My great

fatigue, and my responsibility towards the group, forced me to abandon my long-standing ambition quickly and matter-of-factly. It all turned out as I had predicted, though I had earlier preferred to disregard my own predictions. My lagging behind had let the Alma-Ata men down. Pointing at me made it easier for Elagin to order them to put their masks on. As they told me later, there was no need for that on the south summit. But I think that sooner or later there would have been. After all, oxygen-users needed only to give the valve a turn or two to leave the most acclimatized non-user behind. On the way down from the summit I met Bershov's group. Bukreev was a short distance in front, though I didn't recognize him through his mask. He immediately started to complain that he had been made to use oxygen and that he had completely lost interest in the traverse. I stopped and waited a good while for the others to appear so that I could film the whole group, but nobody came. Tolia and I said goodbye to each other like companions in misfortune, and we separated. A while later the others appeared in a bunch. I did film them, but in my opinion it was a boring clip because they were all indistinguishable in their masks. Meanwhile our group, who had got as far as the rise up to the central summit, were in difficulties. They had to go up along a fairly narrow crest, over a steep layer of snow and then rocks. 'Why didn't you leave a fixed rope?' I asked Turkevich. 'Because we came down the sheer face, but it's impossible to go up it.' Of course, they could have left one, they just didn't think. All the same, Lunjakov managed that section comparatively fast, fixed a rope and the rest of us followed him. I also hurried off, after observing all this peacefully at a distance. When I went up along the guide-rope Koroteev, who was a rope's length or two away, shouted something down to me. I didn't understand a word, but later noticed a message in a hook. I was to take the guide-rope down and bring it with me. I started taking it out. A bit came and then it got stuck. I was forced to go back, undo the knot at the end and pull it through again.

The extra three kilos did not exactly add to my speed, especially as using oxygen had not given me much relief. You evidently do need to actually work with oxygen constantly, otherwise your system takes a long time to re-adapt after prolonged oxygen starvation. At the central summit I took a few snaps and hurried down. The group were already tackling the main summit. I was sure that I would not get there before twilight; however, the gap closed quite rapidly and halfway up I met Arsentiev's group on their way from Camp 4 West to Camp 5 Centre via the main summit. Khrichthaty was climbing without oxygen, which is why Arsentiev was very angry when we met, because he thought it pointless to wear oneself out on journeys to deliver equipment. Suviga, who was using oxygen and carrying all Khrichthaty's things, was unperturbed. 'Turn the supply up,' he said (I had set it at 1.8), 'the summit's right here, and it is only an hour and a half down to Camp – why economize?' Valeri Khrichthaty was walking as if on to a pedestal, or a scaffold: slowly, with concentration, as if every step was a tremendous event, the outcome (as we felt) of a colossal concentration of all his strength – in other words, he was keeping himself going on will-power alone.

Approaching the summit I suddenly discovered that I could make it while it was still light. Elagin reached the summit at 6pm and I reached it at 6.30.

We took photos of each other, on the off-chance they would come out . . . After coming down from the tower on the peak, we found the fixed ropes fastened by previous expeditions and Valiev's group. But after a while the ropes suddenly ended. It was completely dark, the couloir was carpeted by a thick board-like layer of snow. This meant that, with the absence of ropes and the bad visibility, there was a certain avalanche risk. Trying not to lose the tracks of Lunjakov, who had gone first, we crawled cautiously down each protuberance of rock. Finally I saw that Vasili in front of me had stopped alongside Koroteev, and that they were both at a loss. Lunjakov's tracks had got covered over, there was no answer to their shouts. We had to wait for Khalitov, who was a long way behind. But when he reached us, he took a short while to figure out where we were. It was gone eight when we located the tent. Grisha got in and apparently fell asleep at once. We were astounded at the site Valiev had selected for a camp – almost in the middle of a couloir threatened by possible avalanches. Still, we weren't going to reposition the camp in the middle of the night, after 12 hours of uninterrupted toil . . .