

Five Treasuries of Great Snow

MAREK BRNIAK, *Poland**

THE three-mile-long ridge of Kanchenjunga—third highest of the Himalayan giants—at no point drops below 8300 meters (27,231 feet). This splendid, wild mountain group, with its 13,000-foot-high bulwarks of rock and ice, not only thrilled mountaineers but contained our planet's highest virgin summits.

The name of Kanchenjunga is an agglomeration of four Tibetan words which mean "five treasures of great snow": *kang*=snow; *chen*=great; *dodz*=treasury; *nga*=five. This can well refer to the five glaciers of the massif, but Tenzing Norkay has explained that the name originated from five traditional Tibetan treasures which contained salt, gold and turquoise, holy books of health, abundance and medicine, and arms. The mountain culminates in three separate peaks, situated over a kilometer apart. Some experts however also count Kangbachen (25,925 feet) and the peak on the end of the east ridge among the mountain's summits; thus the name of five treasures might refer to the five peaks.

Yalung Kang or Kanchenjunga West (27,668 feet) is situated on the west ridge, separated from the main peak (28,208 feet) by the flat west col. Kanchenjunga South (27,855 feet), where the south and east ridges meet, is the third of the main summits. Between the main peak and Kanchenjunga South there rises a less prominent summit, Kanchenjunga Middle (27,875 feet).

Being close to the Indian Ocean, Kanchenjunga forms the very first obstacle for winds blowing from the south and thus is strongly influenced by the monsoons. A day without rain or snowfall seems to be unusual in this area. One of the most snow-covered parts of the Himalaya, it has an unparalleled wealth of glaciers.

For almost half a century Kanchenjunga turned back all expeditions. Not until 1955 did Charles Evans' British party make the first ascent.

* The article was written in English by the distinguished Polish mountain journalist in close cooperation with his good friend, Andrzej Zygmunt Heinrich and other members of the expedition. Comments by one of the Alaskan members, James A. Brady, follow at the end of the article.

PLATE 17

Photo by Zbigniew Staszyszyn

**Routes on KANCHENJUNGA
MIDDLE and SOUTH.**



Out of respect for local beliefs, the summit team stopped two meters below the top. In 1973 a Japanese expedition climbed the western peak, which has since been called Yalung Kang. In 1974 a Polish Mountain Club (Polski Klub Górski) party, led by Piotr Młotecki, made the first ascent of Kangbachen, leaving still two virgin peaks in the group. These were the dual goals of the next Polish expedition, organized by the same club and led by the same man.

The expedition which left Poland at the end of February numbered twenty-five and included two Americans, Carl Tobin and James Brady from Alaska. On March 14 they started their approach march from Dharan Bazar with 300 porters. Because of the unfavorable weather and very heavy snowfalls, the planned twenty days stretched out to 44. In the wake of bad weather, on March 30 more than half of their porters fled from the village of Amjikhola. It normally takes a bare six days to get from that village to the site of Base Camp on the Yalung Glacier, but the expedition wasted many days, ferrying loads. To encourage the remaining porters, the climbers, carrying heavy sacks, broke trail. To speed matters, some of the members moved up to the foot of the mountain for a reconnaissance while the rest of the climbers helped with the transportation. Finally on April 10, two tents were erected on the spot originally chosen for Base Camp.

They were now able to have a good look at the gigantic southwest walls of the massif. The Great Shelf, a hanging glacier about 5000 feet long and some 1300 feet wide, stretches across the face about halfway up. Its southeastern end rests on a rib which descends from the summit of Kanchenjunga South while its left (northwestern) end vanishes into the walls of Yalung Kang. From the left side of the Great Shelf, a glacier flows down for 6500 feet and turns at the foot of a huge hump called Kempe's Rib, where it forms a large plateau. The only logical way onto the Great Shelf is up the glacier; elsewhere it is guarded by a 5000-foot wall of rock slabs.

The rib mentioned above had been the original goal of the expedition. Descending 10,000 feet from the summit of Kanchenjunga South, the bottom 3000 feet suddenly drop down a triangular rock headwall to the surface of the glacier. The reconnaissance party found the planned route technically very difficult and extremely dangerous from frequent sérac avalanches coming down from the Talung Cwm. Instead they decided to follow the British route of 1955 to the Great Ice Shelf, hoping to get onto the rib there or to attempt the summit headwall. The new plan required moving Base Camp to the site of the Base Camp of the Japanese Yalung Kang expedition.

On April 16, after fixing 2500 feet of rope, Eugeniusz Chrobak, Andrzej Zygmunt Heinrich, Lakpa Gyaul Sherpa, Kasimierz Olech, Józef Olszewski and Wojciech Wróż, the advance party, erected tents

on the snowy crest of Kempe's Rib at 20,350 feet. The rest of the expedition, with the help of the remaining forty porters, ferried loads to Base Camp, completing the job on April 28.

Enjoying the best acclimatization, the advance party soon became the expedition's main force. From Camp I the route went some 1650 feet up Kempe's Rib to a 400-foot rappel down an almost vertical snow couloir onto the plateau of the glacier. Then, avoiding the crevasses of the plateau, it led across a flat, easy snowfield to the bottom of the icefall. On April 24 the tents of Camp II at 21,650 feet were set up under the protection of a great sérac wall a third of the way up the icefall. The upper section of this part of the route climbed a steep, avalanche-threatened channel formed by sérac walls.

Above, the way traversed along the bottom of séracs protecting Camp II and went over an ice band several meters high onto the vast slopes which stretch to the foot of the top sérac barrier hanging from the Great Shelf. The route went around the hanging séracs and traversed to the very right edge of the glacier, where the exposure over the airy rock face was enormous. Then weaving among jagged séracs, it climbed a difficult ice-and-snow section to reach flat snow at the top of the icefall. There, on the edge of the Shelf, Camp III (23,500 feet) was established on April 27. Some 5000 feet of rope were fixed between the plateau and Camp III.

After the tents of Camp III had been pitched and ropes fixed between Camps II and III, the climbers descended to Base Camp for a short rest. On May 2 Chrobak, Wróż and Sherpa Lakpa started up the mountain again. They took three days to make it back to Camp III. On the morning of May 5 they left for the site of Camp IV and that afternoon dumped their loads at the foot of the summit headwall just above the bergschrund of the Great Shelf. That night they slept in Camp III with oxygen for the first time. The next day they returned to their loads and carried them further up to a neck of a snow couloir in the bottom of the headwall. On May 7 they rested at Camp III where they were joined by a support party bringing supplies of food and more oxygen cylinders. The next day Chrobak, Heinrich, Janas, Olech, Olszewski, Serafin and Uchmanski went to the site of Camp IV, where they put up a tent at 24,775 feet for Chrobak, Heinrich and Sherpa Lakpa. After a night on oxygen, under gusty wind the trio fixed rope without use of oxygen to 26,250, following the route originally planned up the rib. Above their heads towered a steep step which promised very difficult rock climbing. Leaving three oxygen cylinders behind, they descended to Camp IV where Serafin and Wróż were waiting for them. As Lakpa did not feel well, he descended, leaving the four climbers cramped in the tiny tent. The following morning Chrobak and Wróż were eager to push fast to the top, but the summit bid had been planned

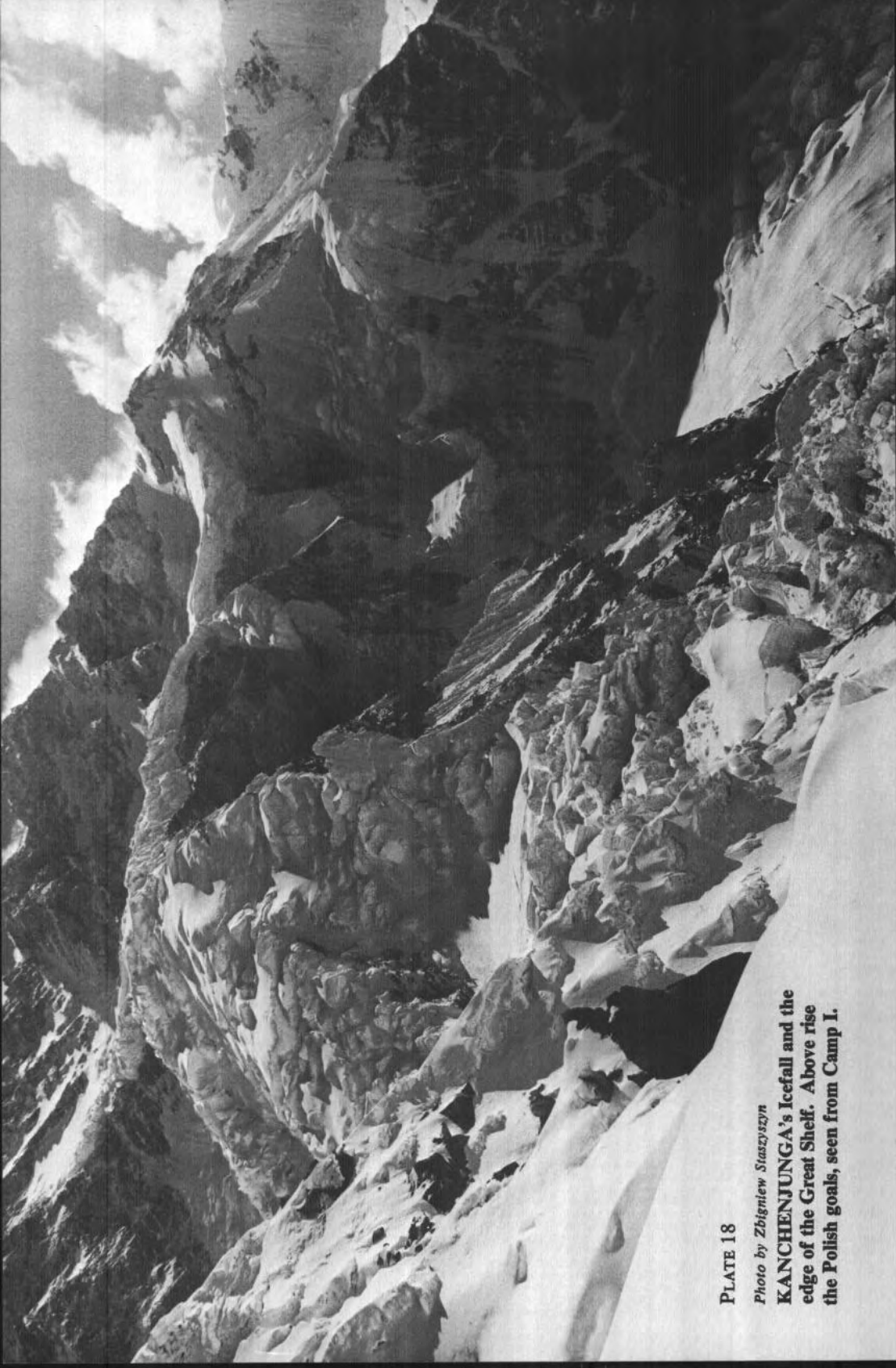


PLATE 18

Photo by Zbigniew Staszczyn

KANCHENJUNGA's Icefall and the edge of the Great Shelf. Above rise the Polish goals, seen from Camp I.

for between May 15 and 20 with a full moon and Heinrich persuaded them to go down to Base Camp for a rest.

While they discussed plans in the comfort of Base Camp, Brański, Olszewski and Sherpa Sonan made it twice to Camp IV, leaving it fully stocked. As the rock step was proving difficult and time-consuming, they fixed more rope.

On May 14 Chrobak and Wróż, with Sherpa Lakpa accompanying them, left Base Camp for the first summit bid. At Camp III they were joined by Sherpa Mingma and in the evening of May 17 all four arrived at Camp IV. The following morning they fixed ropes to 26,575 feet on the summit headwall, where they left four oxygen cylinders, and returned to their high camp for the night. May 19 saw them leaving camp at six A.M. for their final push. Climbing with oxygen, they tackled many difficult sections of rock between snow ledges. At 2:15 P.M. they set foot on the untouched summit of Kanchenjunga South. Though the weather on the way up was fine, on the descent they struggled with a blizzard and a thunder storm and were fortunate to find safety in the tiny tent of Camp IV at six P.M., just twelve hours after they had started.

While the successful summit party was tackling the top section, Heinrich and Olech reached Camp III with another summit assault in mind. In the camp they met the support party as well as members of a Spanish expedition which had failed to climb Kanchenjunga Middle on May 18*. From what the Spaniards explained, it was obvious that their summit party had lost its way and got to the top of a rocky pinnacle situated below the main ridge of Kanchenjunga. The Spanish expedition had arrived late in the mountains and had followed the Polish line to the Great Shelf, establishing their tents in the immediate vicinity of the Polish high camps.

The Spanish failure suggested a change in the tactics of the Polish expedition. They abandoned their second assault on Kanchenjunga South and turned their attention to the last virgin summit of the massif. On May 20 Heinrich and Olech, reinforced by Brański, did not advance but waited in Camp III for the very strong wind to cease. They gave a warm welcome to the two descending summiters. The next day at two P.M. the three-man assault team, supported by Janas and Malatyński, reached the bottom of a great snow couloir which descended from a col in the main ridge. There, at a height of 24,600 feet, they discovered three oxygen cylinders in a Spanish tent collapsed under the weight of snow. While some repitched the tent, others continued about 500 feet up the couloir to leave three oxygen cylinders.

* The Spanish party had permission for Yalung Kang. Their unauthorized change of objective got them into trouble with the Nepalese government. See the account in *Climbs and Expeditions*.

PLATE 19

Photo by Zbigniew Staszyszyn

**Fixed ropes on Kempe's Rib on
KANCHENJUNGA.**



The summit was still more than 3000 feet above the new Camp IV, and so the summit trio, Brański, Heinrich and Olech, decided to leave very early. Preparations for departure began at one A.M. of May 22 and at 3:30 they scrambled out of the tent. After admiring a wonderful sea of clouds 350 feet below them, they started to climb the steep slopes of the couloir. At eleven o'clock they were in the neck of the couloir 1400 feet above their camp. Here they turned to the right and followed a snow ramp in the direction of a buttress falling from the middle peak of Kanchenjunga. Climbing unroped they tackled several rock steps. They roped up at the foot of the last step, which proved to be the highest and most difficult. It led them onto a flat snow-covered part of the main ridge not far from a conical white summit a few feet higher. Olech was the first of the trio to set foot on it, thus placing a crowning touch to his mountaineering achievements—Kanchenjunga Middle being the tenth peak over 7000 meter to his credit; he had also made the first ascent of Kangbachen. Just before three o'clock they once more glanced at the mountains to the north wrapped in rising mist, surveyed the corniced summit of Kanchenjunga South and the light yellow rocks of the main peak against a navy-blue sky and started to descend. In about three hours they were back in Camp IV and by the evening of the next day were back in the warm comfort of Base Camp.

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The following are excerpts from Jim Brady's letter to the Editor: "The expedition went off quite smoothly. Wróż and Chrobak are two outstanding Polish mountaineers, who did much of the technical leading, located campsites and placed fixed rope. Their competence and determination were the primary reason for the success of the expedition. . . . I was able to carry loads to both the Polish Camp IV and the second (Spanish) Camp IV in support of summit attempts. Carl (Tobin) became sick from the altitude and was forced to turn back short of Polish Camp IV. . . . It was amazing that two young, long-haired Alaskan climbing bums would join 23 Poles of high academic and professional achievement for an expedition in Nepal. That we were accepted by them says much for their adaptability. Any conflicts are easy to forget. The mountain environment, the comradeship and lasting friendships dominate my memories."

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Eastern Himalaya.

FIRST ASCENTS: Kanchenjunga South, 27,855 feet, May 19, 1978 (Chrobak, Wróż); Kanchenjunga Middle, 27,875 feet (Brański, Heinrich, Olech).

PERSONNEL: Piotr Młotecki, *leader*, Eugeniusz Chrobak, Wojciech Wróż, Andrzej Zygmunt Heinrich, Kasimierz Olech, Józef Olszewski, Jerzy Wesołowski, Marek Janas, Wiesław Kłaput, Przemysław Nowacki, Zbigniew Pawłowski, Janusz Kurczab, Andrzej Pietraszek, Marek Rogalski, Jan Serafin, Grzegorz Siekierski, Bernard Uchmanski, Marek Malatyński, Wojciech Brański, Marek Najas, Andrzej Sobolewski, Zbigniew Straszyszyn, Symon Wdowiak, *Poles*; James A. Brady, Carl Tobin, *Americans*.

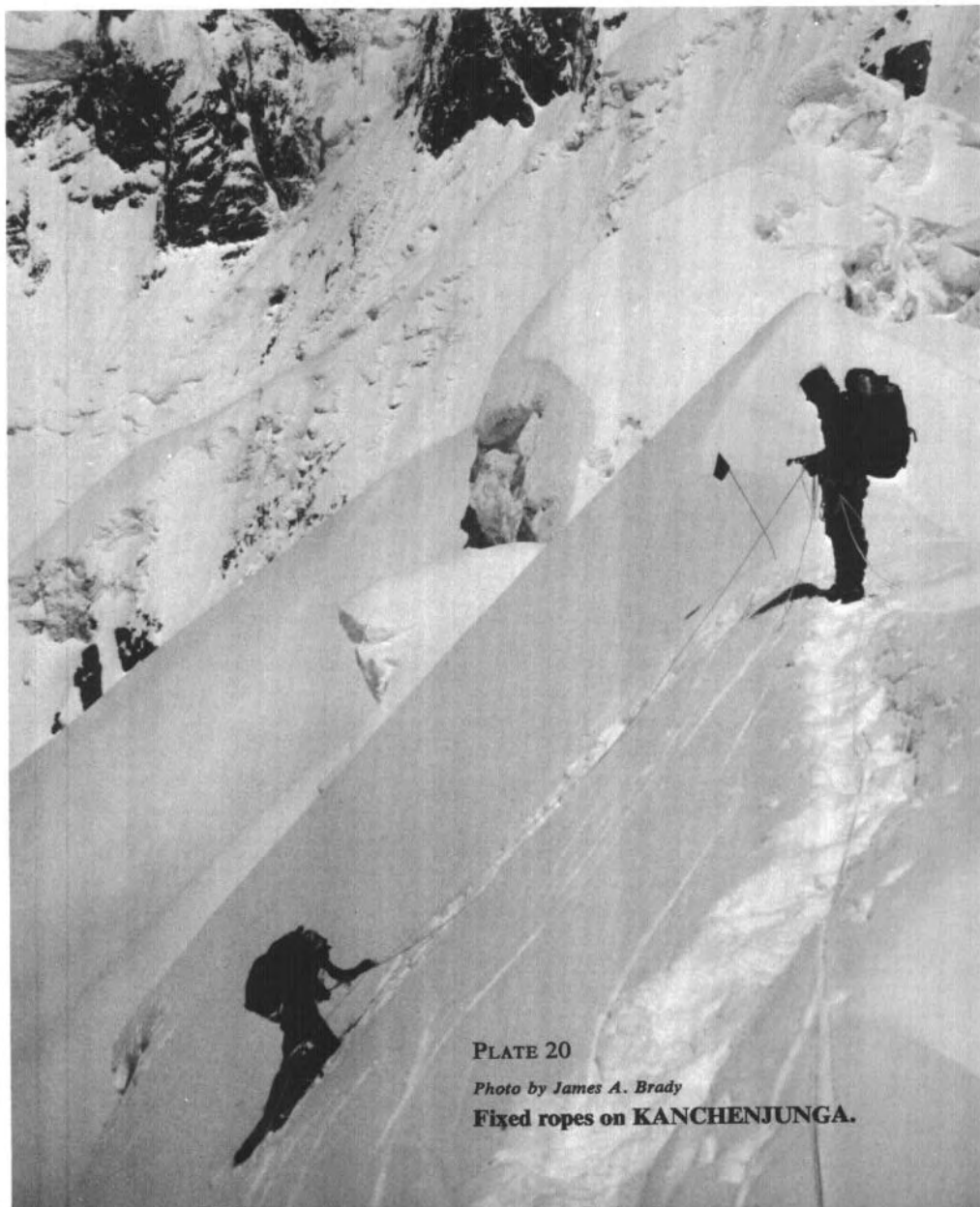


PLATE 20

Photo by James A. Brady

Fixed ropes on KANCHENJUNGA.