

MAKALU

THE STORY BEHIND
THE PANELS

A COMIC BOOK
BY ESTHER BORDET

Pierre Bordet

MÉMOIRES
DE MON MARTEAU



PROLOGUE



In 1954 and 1955, my great-uncle Pierre Bordet, a geologist, joined the French mountaineering expeditions to Makalu, the fifth highest mountain in the world located in Nepal.

While the French alpinists successfully reached the summit of Makalu on May 15th, 1955, my great-uncle was one of the first geologist to map parts of the Himalaya mountain range. His travels to Makalu initiated over 20 years of geological research and mapping expeditions across Nepal and Afghanistan. His journal “Mémoires de mon marteau” ⁽¹⁾, as well as hundreds of photographs, are part of my family legacy, and inspired me to travel to Makalu base camp in April 2019. A year later, I initiated my first graphic novel: “Makalu”. My great-uncle’s notes constitute the basis of the script, and I am using his numerous photographs as visual references for drawing the panels.

Exhibiting my work at Arts Underground in June 2022 is an opportunity to present the progress I have made so far on this project, as I anticipate a few more years of work until completion. This comic book is a complement to the exhibit, a piece of the story you can bring home. I hope it captures your imagination and encourages you to follow the rest of my journey. In the meantime, you can follow the evolution of this project on my social media accounts, or simply by contacting me.

Thank you for picking a copy of this book, and enjoy the read!

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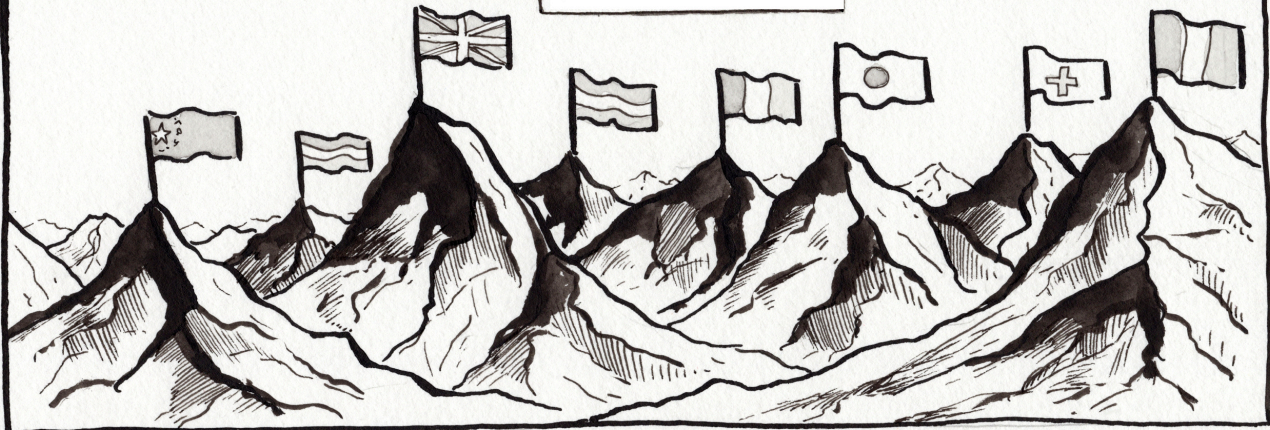
This short comic is a “teaser” version of the graphic novel “Makalu”. It provides visual context to the history of Himalayan exploration, specifically the 1954-55 French expeditions to Makalu, and how and why my great-uncle Pierre Bordet got involved in an adventure that would define the rest of his career as a geologist.

This comic was written and drawn during the summer of 2020. It is published here for the first time.

MAKALU: A STORY OF THE ASCENT OF A HIMALAYAN GIANT

IN THE 50'S AND 60'S, THE HIMALAYAN CONQUEST, IN PARTICULAR THE CLIMB OF ALL SUMMITS HIGHER THAN 8000 METRES, BECOMES AN ADDITIONAL TOOL FOR EUROPEAN COLONIZING COUNTRIES TO ESTABLISH THEIR DOMINATION.

EIGHT OF THESE SUMMITS ARE LOCATED IN NEPAL.



IN 1950, THE FRENCH ALPINISTS HERZOG AND LACHENAL SUMMIT ANNAPURNA, 8091 M.



THEY LOSE SEVERAL TOES DURING THE ASCENT, BARELY AVOIDING A MORE DRAMATIC OUTCOME ...

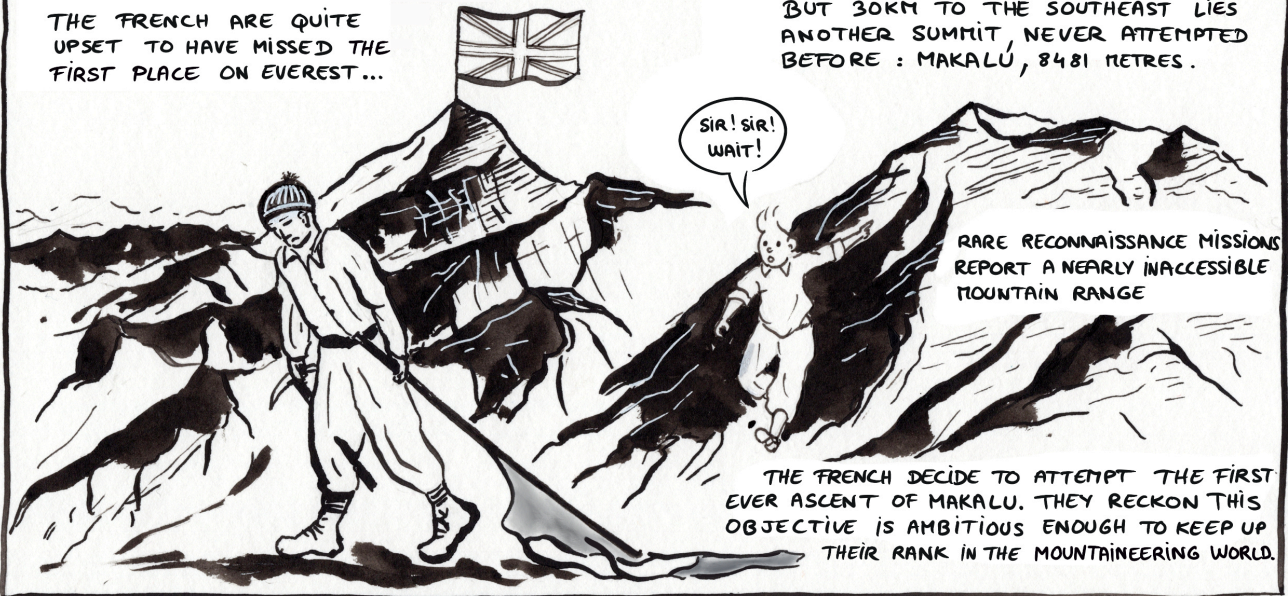


IN 1953, NEW-ZEALANDER EDMUND HILLARY AND SHERPA TENZING NORGAY, REPRESENTING THE BRITISH EMPIRE, REACH THE HIGHEST SUMMIT IN THE WORLD: EVEREST, 8848 METRES.



THE FRENCH ARE QUITE UPSET TO HAVE MISSED THE FIRST PLACE ON EVEREST...

BUT 30KM TO THE SOUTHEAST LIES ANOTHER SUMMIT, NEVER ATTEMPTED BEFORE : MAKALU, 8481 METRES.

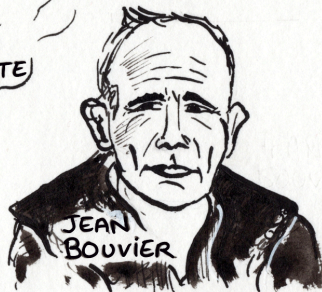
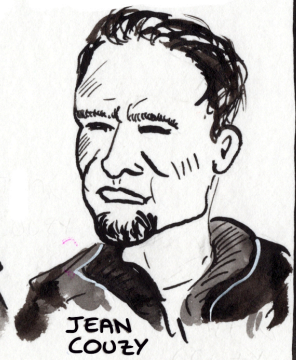


JEAN FRANCO LEADS THE TWO EXPEDITIONS TO MAKALU IN 1954 AND 1955. THE TEAM INCLUDES EIGHT SKILLED ALPINISTS, TWO DOCTORS, AND TWO GEOLOGISTS, ONE OF WHOM IS MY GREAT-UNCLE, PIERRE BORDET.

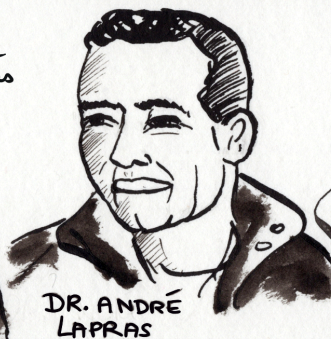
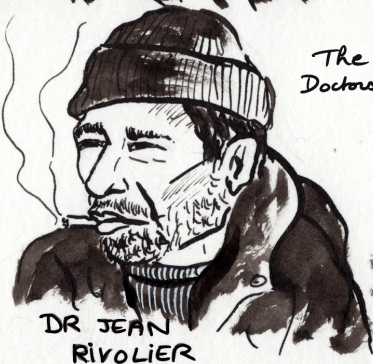
Expedition Lead



The Alpinists



The Doctors



The Geologists.



FROM 1945 ON, PIERRE IS A PROFESSOR AND RESEARCHER AT THE INSTITUTE ALBERT LAPPARENT, NEAR PARIS.



THE INSTITUTE IS OPERATED BY PRIESTS, ALSO SPECIALISTS IN NATURAL SCIENCES



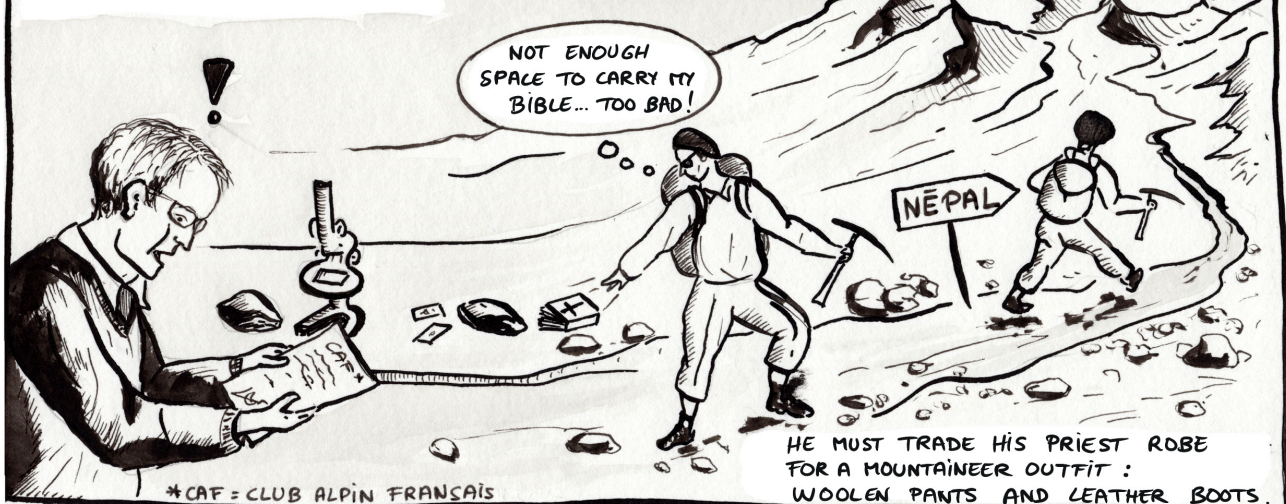
BECAUSE THE KINGDOM OF NEPAL WAS CLOSED TO FOREIGNERS UNTIL THE LATE 40'S, THE MAKALU EXPEDITION WOULD BE A UNIQUE CHANCE TO MAP UNEXPLORED TERRITORIES.



IN 1953, PIERRE SENDS AN APPLICATION TO THE FRENCH ALPINE CLUB, ASKING TO TAKE PART IN THE NEXT HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION. MEANWHILE, HE CONTINUES HIS STUDY OF THE HOGGAR VOLCANOES, IN ALGERIA.



WITH NO MOUNTAINEERING EXPERIENCE, HE IS SURPRISED A FEW MONTHS LATER TO LEARN HE WAS SELECTED TO GO TO MAKALU!

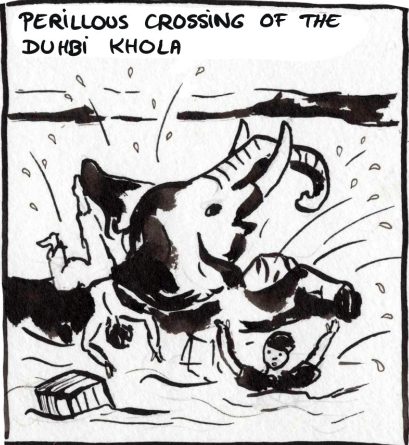
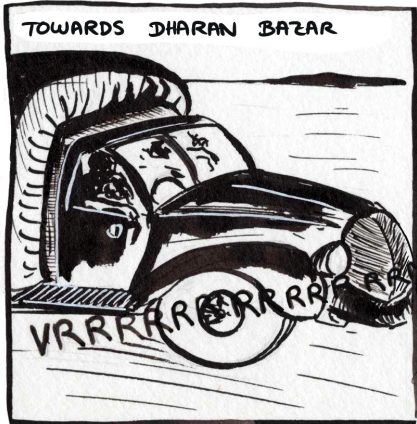
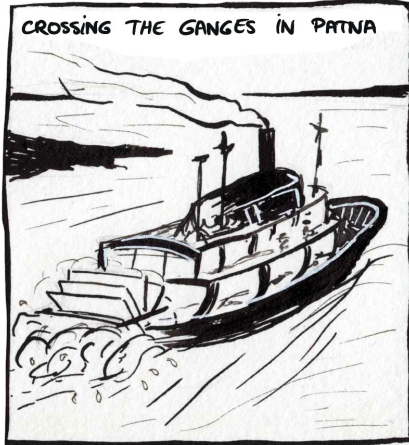
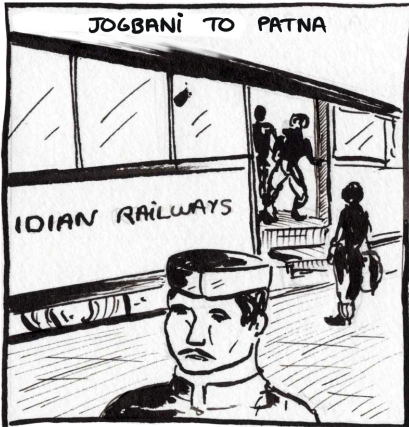
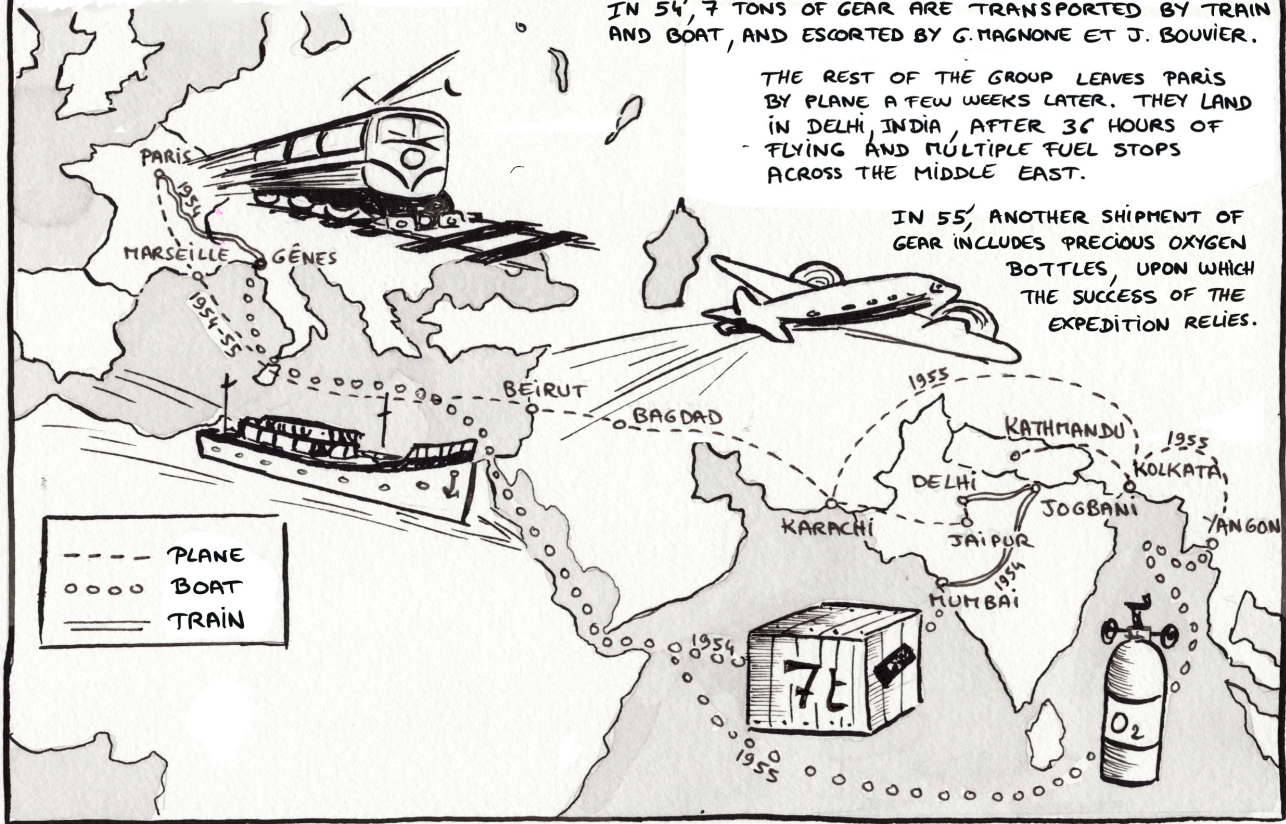


A FIRST RECONNAISSANCE EXPEDITION TAKES PLACE IN THE FALL OF 1954.
 THE TRIP FROM EUROPE TO NEPAL IS AN ADVENTURE IN ITSELF, FAR FROM OUR 21ST CENTURY STANDARDS!

IN '54, 7 TONS OF GEAR ARE TRANSPORTED BY TRAIN AND BOAT, AND ESCORTED BY G. MAGNONE ET J. BOUVIER.

THE REST OF THE GROUP LEAVES PARIS BY PLANE A FEW WEEKS LATER. THEY LAND IN DELHI, INDIA, AFTER 36 HOURS OF FLYING AND MULTIPLE FUEL STOPS ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST.

IN '55, ANOTHER SHIPMENT OF GEAR INCLUDES PRECIOUS OXYGEN BOTTLES, UPON WHICH THE SUCCESS OF THE EXPEDITION RELIES.



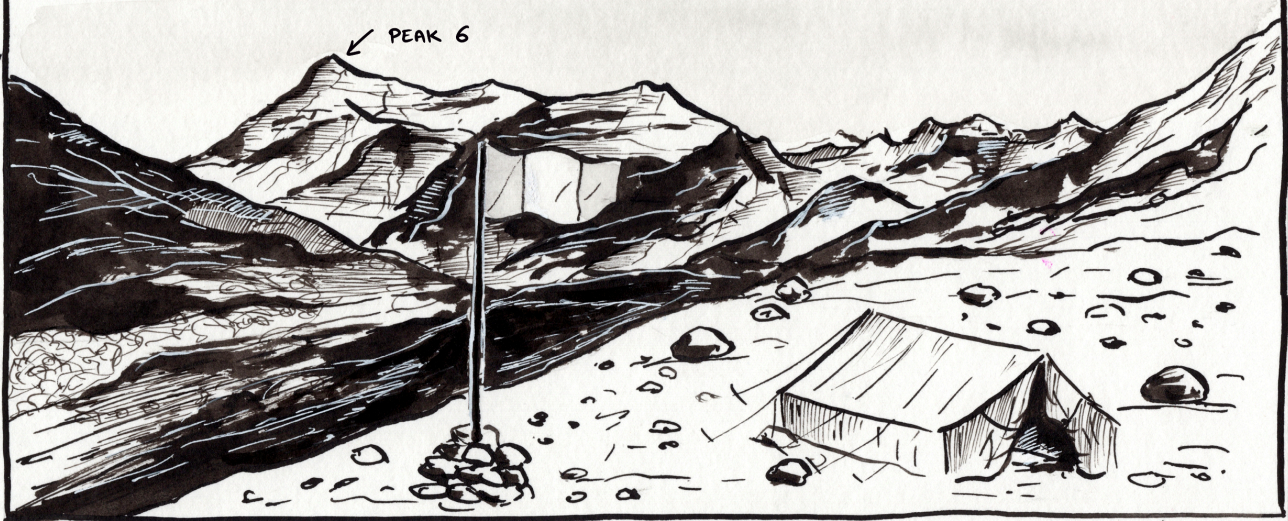
THE FRENCH ALPINISTS HIRE SEVERAL HUNDREDS OF MEN AND WOMEN AS PORTERS. IN THE FALL OF 1954, THE NEVER-ENDING MONSOON COMES WITH RELENTLESS RAINS AND INTENSE HEAT. THE LEECHES ARE MERCILESS.



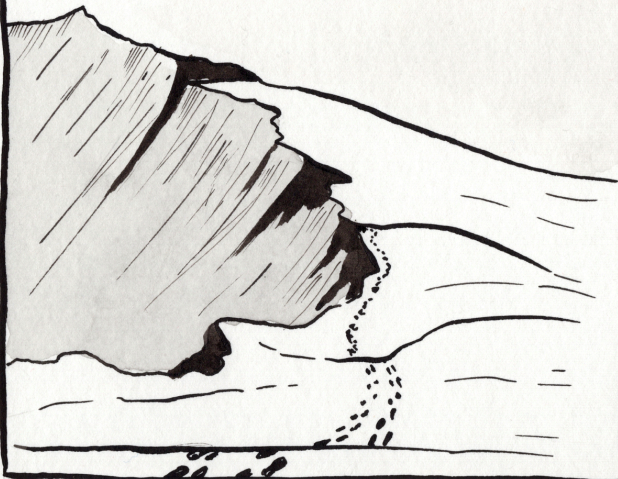
AFTER A 3 WEEK -LONG WALK ACROSS THE RICE FIELDS AND MUDDY TRAILS OF THE ARUN RIVER VALLEY, THE CONVOY REACHES NUM. THE MAKALU SUMMIT IS FINALLY VISIBLE IN THE DISTANCE !



8 DAYS LATER, THE ALPINISTS ESTABLISH A BASE CAMP ON THE TERMINAL MORaine OF THE BARUN GLACIER.



DURING THE FOLLOWING WEEKS THE ALPINISTS EXPLORE ALL THE POSSIBLE ROUTES TOWARDS MAKALU SUMMIT.



MEANWHILE, PIERRE MAPS THE GEOLOGY OF THE BARUN VALLEY AND SURROUNDING PEAKS. HE JOINS GROUPS OF SHERPAS WHO CARRY SUPPLIES BETWEEN REMOTE VILLAGES.



IN MAY 1955, THE FRENCH ALPINISTS ACHIEVE THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL ASCENT OF MAKALU!

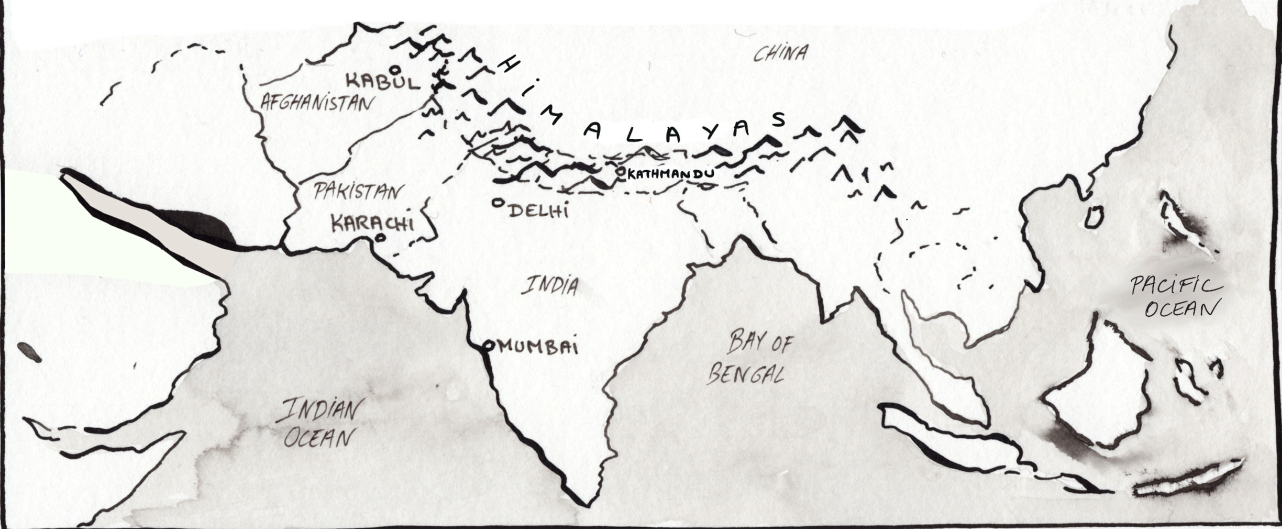


Jean Couzy
on Makalu summit
May 15th, 1955

FOR PIERRE, THE WORK IS ONLY STARTING



HE SPENDS THE NEXT 20 YEARS ROAMING THE HIMALAYAS, FROM NEPAL TO AFGHANISTAN, USING HIS GEOLOGIST HAMMER TO UNVEIL MILLION YEARS OLD SECRETS FROM ROCKS.



HE WALKS HUNDREDS OF KILOMETRES ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS, MAPPING AND SAMPLING ROCKS AS HE GOES. HE GETS SICK, RECOVERS, FALLS DOWN, STANDS UP AND KEEPS WALKING, TAKING HUNDREDS OF PHOTOGRAPHS.



DECADES LATER, I DISCOVER MY GREAT-UNCLE'S PHOTOGRAPHS.
I HAVE ALSO BECOME A GEOLOGIST.
IN APRIL 2019, I DECIDE TO FOLLOW HIS
FOOTSTEPS TO MAKALU BASE CAMP.

THE LAST SURVIVOR OF THE
1955 EXPEDITION, SERGE COUPÉ,
PASSED AWAY IN APRIL 2020.

ATOP THE MORAINE OF THE
BARUN GLACIER, AN OLD RUIN
MARKS THE LOCATION OF THE
ORIGINAL FRENCH BASE CAMP.

NOW IT'S MY TURN TO TELL
THE MEMORIES OF UNCLE PIERRE
AND STORIES OF PEOPLE
ALONG THE MAKALU TRAIL ...



Here we are. Standing at Makalu base camp, looking at this 8485 m* giant.
Now, let's have a closer look at my work on the graphic novel itself.

The following pages comprise original panel drawings, as well as character sketches. I briefly develop a few central themes of the story: the war-like spirit of mountaineering expeditions in the 50's, the complex relationship between my great-uncle and the alpinists, and the colonial-type interactions between the Europeans and the hundreds of porters and Sherpas who assisted them for months.

**Depending on the source, the elevation of Makalu ranges from 8463 m to 8485 m*



In the graphic novel, Makalu base camp is a magnetic and timeless place at 5000 m elevation, towards which all the protagonists gravitate. Interactions between the French alpinists and geologists, trekkers, and hundreds of Sherpas and porters, are driven by a non-linear temporal mesh, weaving between 1954-55 and 2019.

In addition, I created a fictional temporal dimension, in which my character materializes at base camp on the eve of the final ascent of Makalu in 1955. In this fictional time, my character - initially baffled - makes the most of the situation by conversing with Pierre and the alpinists, who are all deceased today. I juxtapose my great-uncle's approach to mountains, adventure, geology, and spirituality, to my own perspective, and explore themes such as blood memory and family legacy, the status of women in science and athletics, colonial-style interactions between the Europeans and their porters, and the human motives behind the exploration of remote mountain ranges.

The story blends several genres, including adventure, documentary, and graphic memoir.



In April 2019, I traveled to Makalu base camp with printed photographs taken by my great-uncle. I recognized many of the landscapes he had captured in the early fifties. At base camp, I found the exact location from which he had taken a photograph of Peak 6.

I am creating the drawings with India ink and walnut ink, each representing a specific time frame. I depict scenes taking place in 1954-55 in sepia, and 2019 in black and white. I use a juxtaposition of the two inks on panels representing the fictional temporal dimension. I am also inserting colour photographs from Pierre Bordet's travels in the narration.

I am working simultaneously on two versions of the script, in French and English, and I plan to have the story published in both languages. This choice reflects the origins of the characters, the multilingual interactions and communication challenges they experience while in Nepal, and will speak to both a francophone (North American and European) and anglophone audience.

(Right page) My character is quite shocked to encounter Pierre Bordet at Makalu base camp... Experiencing hallucinations at high altitude is a very likely scenario. In the story, the physical symptoms of altitude sickness provide me with a perfect narrative tool to blur the lines of time and merge fiction and reality.



THIS IS SURREAL...

WHO ARE YOU?
WHAT YEAR IS IT?

I AM PIERRE
YOUR GREAT-UNCLE!
OVER THERE AT CAMP IS
THE REST OF THE FRENCH
EXPEDITION.
IT IS APRIL 1955,
BUT I'M AFRAID I'VE
LOST TRACK OF
THE DAYS!



I NEED TO SIT
DOWN



MAYBE IT'S THE ALTITUDE? MY BRAIN...
HOPEFULLY I'M NOT HAVING A CEREBRAL
OEDEMA! WHAT AM I GOING TO DO?



THIS IS NONSENSE!
I DON'T KNOW WHO
YOU ARE...
I THINK I'M
LOSING IT!



The French camp at the base of Makalu in 1955. Drawn after a photograph by J. Franco in the illustrated version of his book (Walnut ink on paper)



CAMP DE BASE DU MAKALU, 2019



Guido Magnone



Jean Bouvier



Jean Franco



André Vialatte

Pierre Leroux



Jean Couzy

Lionel Terray



T
MAK
15 M

CAMP DE BASE DU MAKALU, 1954



TOP OF
KALU
MAY 1954



Old Nepalese man



Nepalese woman

The 1954 and 1955 expeditions to Makalu were mandated by the French government ⁽²⁾. They took place in a post-WWII geopolitical context marked by the hegemony of European colonizing countries⁽⁴⁾. In the world of mountaineering, this crave for domination translated into a ruthless race to the fourteen summits over 8000 m (the “eight thousanders”), eight of which are located in Nepal.

Successful expeditions took place back-to-back between 1950 and 1964, a period referred to as the “golden age” of Himalayan climbing. European alpinists came from a privileged and educated social background and were affiliated to select, men-exclusive alpine clubs ⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾. Their motivations in the Himalayas were purely about the athletic achievement, and stained with patriotism.



I have been enjoying reading social science papers focusing on genre studies and colonialism in the context of the history of mountaineering ⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾. It makes me giggle to imagine how alpinists from the 50's would have reacted to this very 21st century research!

My great-uncle did not get along with the alpinists ⁽¹⁾. He was annoyed at their constant bragging about various mountaineering achievements, and their never-ending conversations about fresh food that would never be available at 5000 m. In 1955, during the second expedition, he made his own itinerary, voluntarily detaching himself from the alpinists group (although still benefiting from their logistical support). He conducted his mapping work solo, or accompanying groups of Sherpas who were traveling between villages.

(Right page) Pierre Bordet invites my character to join him for tea, and meet the group of French alpinists. In this fictional scene, I imagine the condescending and misogynistic attitude of the alpinists based on a number of references, including the book by J. Franco ⁽²⁾, and a social science study which reviews the very few autobiographies written by female mountaineers ⁽³⁾.



Himalayan expeditions would never have succeeded without the massive logistical support and knowledge of the terrain from local populations. The Himalayas are a rugged place, where isolated communities struggle to survive. Nepalese and Sherpa people worship their mountains. Therefore, climbing for the sake of it was not a thing until the Europeans showed up with tonnes of gear, ambitious conquest plans, and a massive ego ⁽⁵⁾.

The behavior of the French alpinists towards the Sherpas as described in Jean Franco's book ⁽²⁾ is respectful, but extremely condescending. Several photographs taken by my great-uncle are an uncomfortable testimony of the not-so-distant European colonial history.



A photograph by Pierre Bordet (left) inspired a panel from the graphic novel (right). The photograph shows the alpinists wearing white hats, sitting on chairs, while potential porter candidates stand in line for a physical checkup conducted by Doctor Rivolier.

Since the 50's, thousands of Sherpas and porters have massively supported mountaineering expeditions in exchange of a salary: the promise of a better, easier life in a rough environment. They have opened routes for generations of alpinists, summited peaks with them, and died doing their job⁽⁵⁾. It took decades for porters and Sherpas to get the recognition they deserve in the race to the Himalayan summits. Nowadays, every single expedition initiative, every successful mountain ascent by a Nepalese- or Sherpa-only team, no matter how publicised, is a major win over decades of mountaineering expeditions shaped by a colonial model.

(Right page) Clarifying the definition of the word "Sherpa", which tends to be misused to describe any high- altitude porters, regardless of their cultural origin.

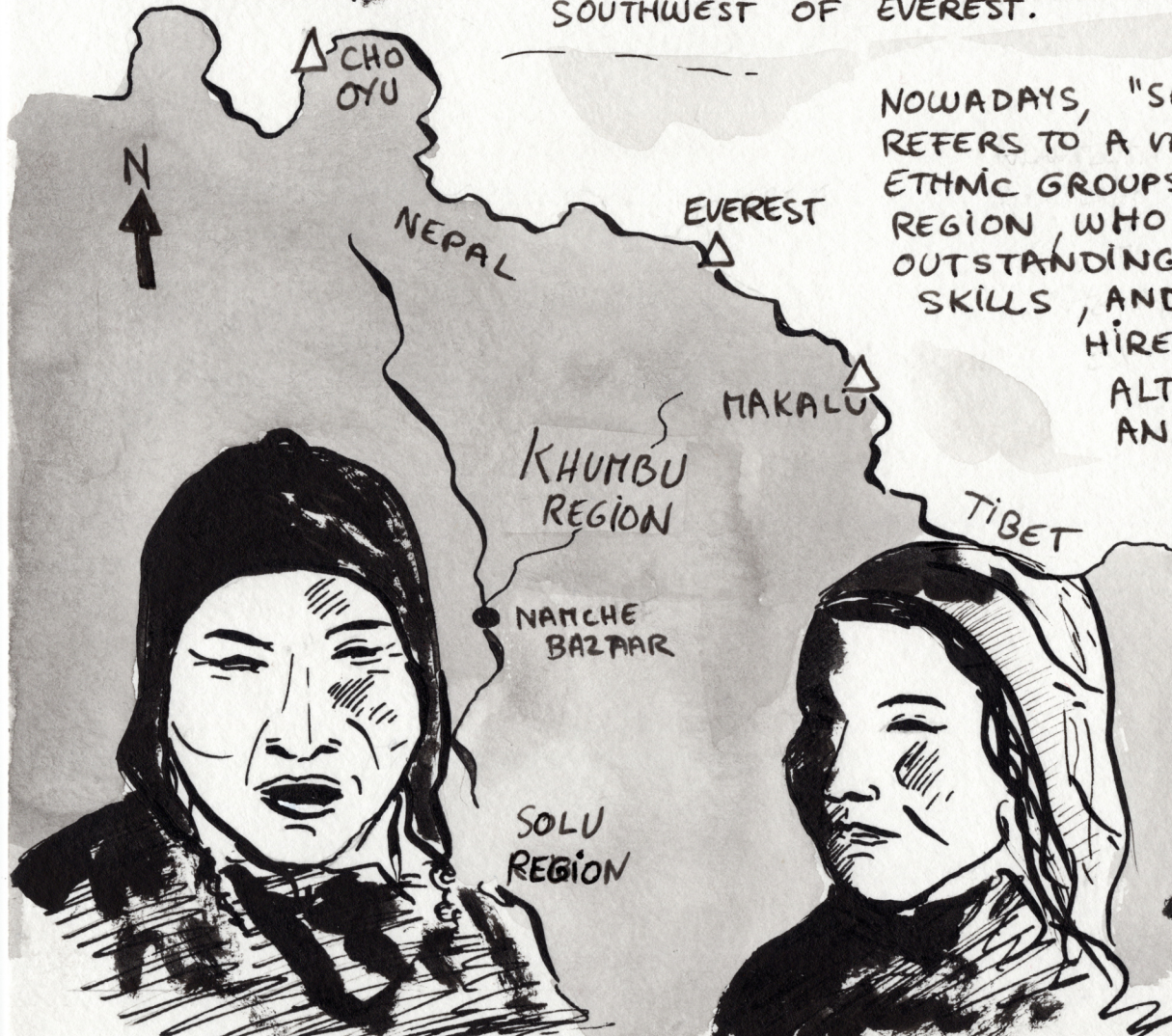
WHO ARE SHERPAS?

THE TERM SHERPA REFERS TO AN ETHNIC GROUP ORIGINALLY FROM TIBET.

SHERPAS HAVE THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, FOOD, CULTURE

FOR OVER THREE CENTURIES, SHERPAS HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED IN THE REGION OF SOLO-KHUMBU, SOUTHWEST OF EVEREST.

NOWADAYS, "SHERPA" ALSO REFERS TO A VARIETY OF ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE REGION, WHO EXHIBIT OUTSTANDING MOUNTAINEERING SKILLS, AND ARE OFTEN HIRED FOR HIGH ALTITUDE GUIDING AND PORTAGES.





EPILOGUE

My name is Esther Bordet. I am an artist, geologist and builder, among other things. I was born in Paris, France in 1983. I moved to Canada in my early twenties to study and work in geology. A few years after moving to the Yukon in 2015, my career took a different turn as I decided to focus on my artistic pursuits, particularly to create my own comics.

I attended my first graphic novel course at Emily Carr University in Vancouver, BC, and later attended a workshop at the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont, USA. I discovered that creating comics is possibly one of the most time-consuming art forms. Each panel is a picture. Each page comprises multiple panels. Each book is made of dozens of pages. However, a comic is more than an assembly of pictures. It is a visual language combining writing and storytelling skills.

I didn't think I had these skills when I decided to draw comics. In fact, all I had been writing for over a decade was scientific reports, articles and graduate theses. I used a highly technical jargon, to be read only by a minuscule and nerdy audience of geoscience academics and industry specialists. This category of writing seemed awfully remote from storytelling.

However, of all the sciences, geology requires a creative brain and a fertile imagination. Hypotheses are grounded in fossilized life, timescales are so large they surpass our cognitive capacities, theories are built over landscapes that are long gone (and maybe never were...). In geology, you build a solid scientific reasoning based on observation and data, but there is inevitably a point when you must surrender to your imagination. Nothing can be proven with 100% certainty because time travel is not an option to confirm your hypotheses. Our imagination is our time machine. This process of infusing imagination into scientific reasoning is sometimes referred to as "geopoetry". The term bears an ironic connotation depending on who uses it. Personally, I think it perfectly addresses the necessary use of art in geoscience.

So, when I took a career shift from geology to comics, I continued doing what I had always done: telling stories. Now, I use the universal language of images.

Since 2021, I have been a full-time illustrator. This new professional endeavour allows me to support my comic artist life, an activity which definitely falls into the category of "massive time suck with very little financial reward." More importantly, I get to practice drawing and consolidate techniques on a daily basis. Finally, this illustration practice also fulfills my scientific brain, having been proudly contracted multiple times for illustrating geopoetry!



An example of geopoetry: Jurassic marine and subaerial fauna from the Whitehorse region
(illustration commissioned by the Yukon Geological Survey, 2021)

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Tin Cabin Publishing is an imprint of Esther Bordet Painting. It is located on the traditional lands of the Ta'an Kwach'an Council and the Kwanlin Dün First Nation, near the city of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada.

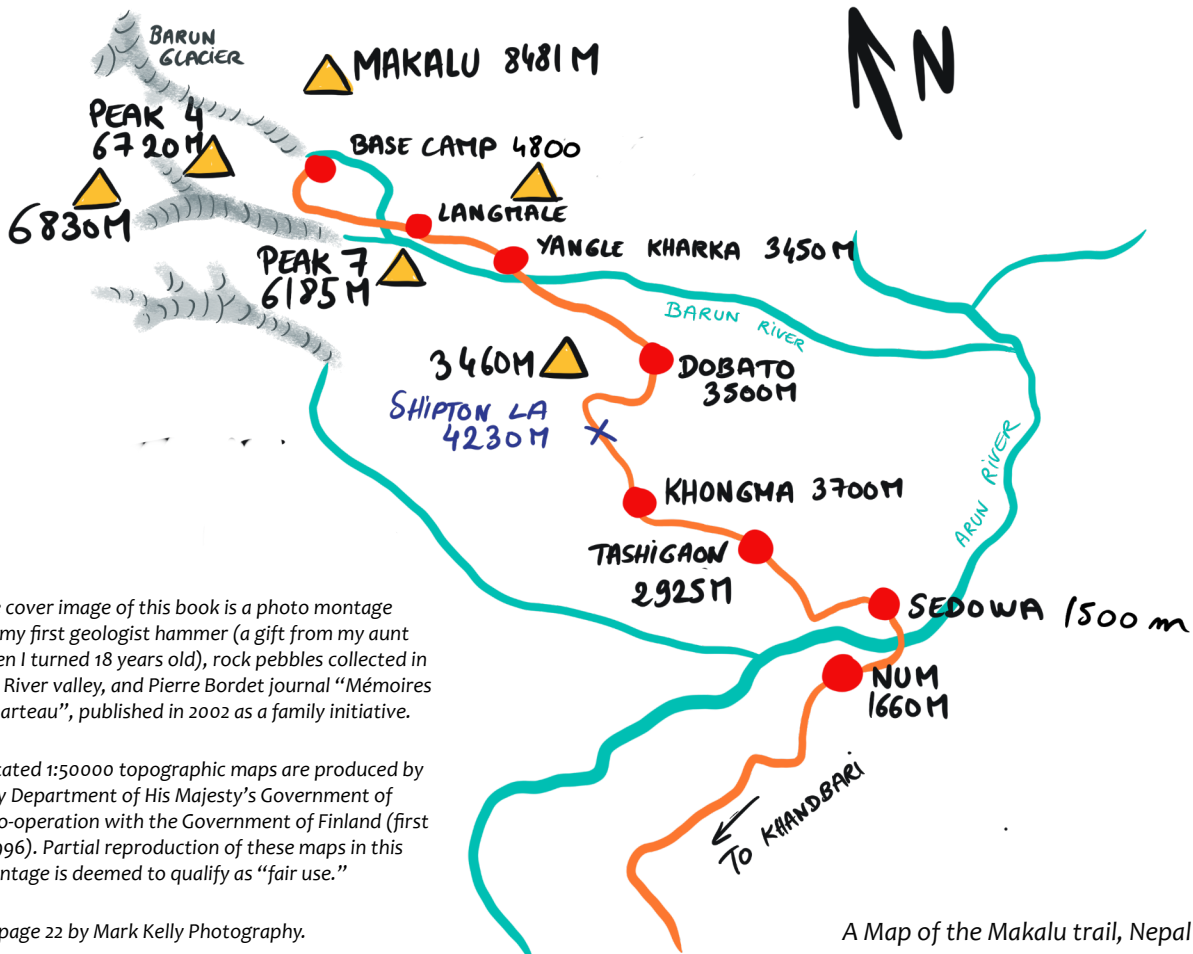


THANK YOU

A huge thank you to Lauren Greenlaw, Amy Kenny and Maxine White for their thorough review, constructive comments and edits on a first version of this book.

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- (1) Pierre Bordet, 2002. Mémoires de mon marteau. 320 p.
- (2) Jean Franco, 1966. Makalu. Le Livre de Poche, 249 p.
- (3) Delphine Moraldo, 2013. Les rapports entre les genres dans l'alpinisme français et anglais. Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine, 13 p.
- (4) Delphine Moraldo, 2015. Les conquérants de l'inutile : Expression et diffusion d'un modèle de masculinité héroïque dans l'alpinisme français d'après-guerre. Genre, Sexualité et Société, v. 13, 21 p.
- (5) Ang Tharkay, 2016. Sherpa: The Memoir of Ang Tharkay. Mountaineers Books, 192 p.



The inside cover image of this book is a photo montage featuring my first geologist hammer (a gift from my aunt Sylvie when I turned 18 years old), rock pebbles collected in the Barun River valley, and Pierre Bordet journal "Mémoires de mon marteau", published in 2002 as a family initiative.

The annotated 1:50000 topographic maps are produced by the Survey Department of His Majesty's Government of Nepal in co-operation with the Government of Finland (first edition, 1996). Partial reproduction of these maps in this photo montage is deemed to qualify as "fair use."

Photo on page 22 by Mark Kelly Photography.

A Map of the Makalu trail, Nepal



Open area and scrub with

Remarking Khabu

Dabate

Tutula Shipton's pass

MAKALU

NATIONAL PARK

Dense mixed forest

Dense mixed forest

Scale 0.5 km

57

58

59

Yaduwa



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