

AFTER THE BATTLE



THE BATTLE OF THE VERCORS

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No. 174 £5

NUMBER 174

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 Editor: Karel Margry
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 Published by
 Battle of Britain International Ltd.,
 The Mews, Hobbs Cross House,
 Hobbs Cross, Old Harlow,
 Essex CM17 0NN, England
 Telephone: 01279 41 8833
 Fax: 01279 41 9386
 E-mail: hq@afterthebattle.com
 Website: www.afterthebattle.com

Printed in Great Britain by
 Warners Group Publications PLC,
 Bourne, Lincolnshire PE10 9PH.
After the Battle is published on the 15th
 of February, May, August and November.

LONDON STOCKIST for the *After the Battle* range:
 Foyles Limited, 107 Charing Cross Road,
 London WC2H 0DT. Telephone: 020 7437 5660.
 Fax: 020 7434 1574. E-mail: orders@foyles.co.uk
 Website: www.foyles.co.uk

United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:
 Warners Group Publications PLC,
 Bourne, Lincolnshire PE10 9PH
Australian Subscriptions and Back Issues:
 Renniks Publications Pty Limited
 Unit 3, 37-39 Green Street, Bankmeadow NSW 2019
 Telephone: 61 2 9695 7055. Fax: 61 2 9695 7355
 E-mail: info@renniks.com. Website: www.renniks.com
Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:
 Vanwell Publishing Ltd.,
 622 Welland Avenue, St. Catharines, Ontario
 Telephone: (905) 937 3100. Fax: (905) 937 1760
 Toll Free: 1-800-661-6136
 E-mail: sales@vanwell.com

New Zealand Distribution:
 Battle Books NZ Limited, P.O. Box 5549 Lambton,
 Wellington 6145, New Zealand
 Telephone: 021 434 303. Fax: 04 298 9958
 E-mail: sales@battlebooks.co.nz - Web: battlebooks.co.nz

United States Distribution and Subscriptions:
 RZM Imports Inc, 184 North Ave., Stamford, CT 06901
 Telephone: 1-203-324-5100. Fax: 1-203-324-5106
 E-mail: info@rzm.com Website: www.rzm.com

Italian Distribution:
 Millistoria s.r.l. Via Sofia, 12-Interporto,
 1-43010 Fontevivo (PR), Italy
 Telephone: ++390521 651910. Fax: ++390521 619204
 E-mail: info@millistoria.it - Web: <http://millistoria.it/>

Dutch Language Edition:
 SI Publicaties/Quo Vadis, Postbus 188,
 6860 AD Oosterbeek
 Telephone: 026-4462834. E-mail: si@sipublicaties.nl

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Front Cover: Remnants of four of the gliders with which the Germans assaulted the Resistance stronghold in the Vercors in July 1944 (*inset*) can still be seen in situ. This skeleton of a DFS 230, immaculately restored in 2015, stands in front of the Resistance Museum at Vassieux. The remains of another are on display nearby and there are sections of two more gliders, one a DFS 230, the other a Go 242, at the National Cemetery outside the village. (USNA/Jean Paul Pallud)

Back Cover: The National Cemetery at Saint Nizier, dedicated in July 1947, contains the graves of 98 fallen fighters of the battle of the Vercors. (Jean Paul Pallud)

Acknowledgements: For help with the Battle of the Vercors story the Editor would like to thank Christian Assel, Philippe Biolley, Pierre-Louis Fillet of the Vercors museum, Anne-Laure Mignerey and Patricia Pennarun. For their assistance with the *Saving Private Ryan* Revisited story, he thanks Tom Sanders, Alan Tomkins and Ronan Urvoaz.

Photo Credit Abbreviations: DL — Georg Schlaug and Klaus Neetzow: *Deutsche Lastensegler 1938-1945 Eine Chronik in Bildern* (1994); INA DMV — *Dans le Maquis du Vercors* (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel); MDRV — Musée Départemental de la Résistance de Vassieux-en-Vercors; MRDI — Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère; MRL — Musée de la Résistance en ligne.



The Vercors is located in south-eastern France, on the western side of the central Alps, south-west of Grenoble. Triangular in shape, the high plateau is surrounded by steep mountain walls along most of its sides — a natural fortress with only a few weak points in the north. It was in this inaccessible region that from late 1942 onwards several camps sprang up for young men hiding for forced labour in Germany. These men soon developed into resistance fighters known as the Maquis. By June 1944 their strength had grown to some 400.

The Vercors plateau lies in the Alpine region of France, south-east of Grenoble. Triangularly shaped, it is some 50 kilometres long from north to south and 20 kilometres wide. Mountain walls stretch along its sides, particularly steep along the eastern face where only a dozen passes permit access to the plateau via steep footpaths.

Most of the plateau is over 1,000 metres high and sparsely populated — about 5,000 people lived there in 1944 — the main economic activity being agriculture and logging in what was one of the largest forests in western Europe. In the northern part, winter tourism was already well developed with ski-lifts operating from 1936, with Villard-de-Lans even then a high-class ski resort with prestigious guests like Zita of Bourbon-Parma, the wife of ex-Emperor Charles of Austria, and the Sultan of Morocco, the future King Mohammed V. In the south, a ski-lift started operating near the Col du Rousset just before the war.

After the defeat of France in June 1940, the Vercors ended up in the so-called Zone Libre (Free Zone), the area administered by the Vichy Government (see *After the Battle* No. 170). The availability of housing in the ski resort resulted in many refugees settling down at Villard-de-Lans, including Jews (both French and foreign) with a strong contingent of Poles. With timber desperately needed to make up for the lack of coal and petrol in Vichy France, hundreds of loggers progressively moved to the plateau, many of them refugees from all over Europe, particularly from Spain and Poland.

In the summer of 1940, Vichy had established a youth organisation called the Chantiers de Jeunesse and the wide expanse of the Vercors was a perfect location for camps for Groupement 11 based at Villard-de-Lans, and there were soon 11 spread across the plateau at Autrans, Méaudre, Saint-Nizier, Corrençon, accommodating around 1,200 young men.



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On June 8, 1944, following BBC messages on June 5 calling for the French Resistance to prepare for action, the Maquis in the Vercors rose in rebellion, mobilising some 4,000 men on the plateau, and planning to move them into action as soon as an Allied landing occurred in Southern France. On July 3 the

insurgents even proclaimed a Free-French Republic of Vercors. To deal with this uprising, on July 21 the Germans launched the largest operation ever conducted against the Resistance in Western Europe, attacking with airborne and mountain troops to destroy these insurgent groups.

THE BATTLE OF THE VERCORS

By Jean-Paul Pallud

After the stunning defeat of France in June 1940, small groups began to meet in every town of France to discuss the situation that the country now faced and what could be done about it. One of these groups with a socialist background revolved around Léon Martin, the ex-mayor of Grenoble and a Deputy in the French parliament from 1936. He was one of the 80 members who had refused to grant full powers to Maréchal Philippe Pétain in the infamous vote of July 10. A doctor and pharmacist, he had a car and a telephone, assets not so common at this time, and his pharmacy at No. 125 Cours Berriat became a convenient meeting point. The group included Eugène Chavant, a café owner and former mayor of Saint-Martin d'Hères, and Aimé Pupin, another café proprietor. In August 1941, the group began to distribute the clandestine socialist newspaper *Le Populaire*.

In April 1942 they made contact with another group of socialist militants from Villard-de-Lans led by Eugène Samuel, a doctor and pharmacist. In the summer, the two groups merged and became part of the Franc-Tireur organisation which was later to become one of the major resistance movements, although at first it organised and recruited members in southern France (see *After the Battle* No. 105). Individuals and personalities from all over the region progressively joined and by the end of the year Franc-Tireur was the best-organised of the resistance movements in the Vercors and Grenoble areas.

In November 1942, the Allies invaded French North Africa, and with France's Mediterranean coast now vulnerable to Allied attack, the Germans and their Italian allies lost no time in occupying the Zone Libre. While German forces took over south-western France and the border with Spain, Italian forces took control of the south-eastern part of the country up to the Rhône river, and the island of Corsica. The Italians stationed the 4a Armata, commanded by Generale Mario Vercellino, in their occupation zone between the Alps and the Rhône. It comprised two corps, plus the 5a Divisione Alpina Pusteria, which was stationed as army reserve in the Grenoble sector.

As the war progressed, the Germans began exerting strong pressure on Vichy to raise large numbers of workers for Germany. At the beginning of 1943 the Germans required 250,000 new workers to be dispatched by mid-March and the Vichy administration saw no option other than to introduce compulsory work service. In February it passed a law that required all males born between 1920 and 1922 to register for the Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO). Thousands of potential conscripts evaded the requisition and the STO caused the departure into hiding of nearly 200,000 evaders, of whom about a quarter became full-time members of the Resistance. A total of 600,000 to 650,000 French workers were sent to Germany between June 1942 and July 1944.

These groups soon became known as 'Maquis', a term originally used simply to

describe the scrub-covered high-ground typical of south-eastern France, but now it soon began to be widely used to refer to the men themselves now hiding in that kind of terrain. Its first appearance in print appears to have been in *Le Petit Dauphinois*, the newspaper of Grenoble and its region, in September 1941. The Free French in London started to use the term in early 1943 and the BBC soon followed suit.

In the Vercors, one of the first Maquis camps was set up at the Ferme d'Ambel, a remote farmhouse in a large clearing in a forested area in the south-west corner of the plateau, and by early 1943 some 80 maquisards had gathered there, Ambel being code-named C1. Additional camps were progressively created: C2 lay south of Corrençon; C3 was first located near Méaudre, then north of Autrans; C4 at Grande-Cournouge, west of Saint-Martin; C5 at Gros-Martel, south-west of Méaudre; C6 began at Laragnole but then moved to the La Chau pass above Vassieux, while C7 had its base at Saint-Ange in the north-east. Most were managed and financed by the Franc-Tireur movement.

Then began the difficult process of amalgamating the small original groups, consisting mainly of urban socialist militants, with the large amorphous groups of the Maquis, comprising men of all social origins, many of them rural.



MRDI

Leftt: The original mastermind behind the Vercors uprising was a man named Pierre Dalloz, an architect and avid mountaineer who lived on the slopes of the Vercors near Grenoble. Back in December 1942, he had conceived a plan whereby armed resistance fighters would congregate on the Vercors plateau to support an Allied landing on the Riviera. In January 1943, he had brought his idea to the attention of Yves Farge (*right*), a staff member of the Franc-Tireur resistance movement, who had the plan submitted to Général De Gaulle and the Allies in London. This picture of Farge was taken in Die, south of the Vercors, on July 14, 1944 — French National Day and six weeks into the uprising. (The town had been taken over by FFI forces for a parade to mark the National Day. Postponed because of Luftwaffe aircraft passing overhead, the parade finally went through at 6 p.m., with Farge addressing the crowd to say that liberation was soon to come. However, the Germans re-took the town within a week and Die was not finally liberated until August 20.)



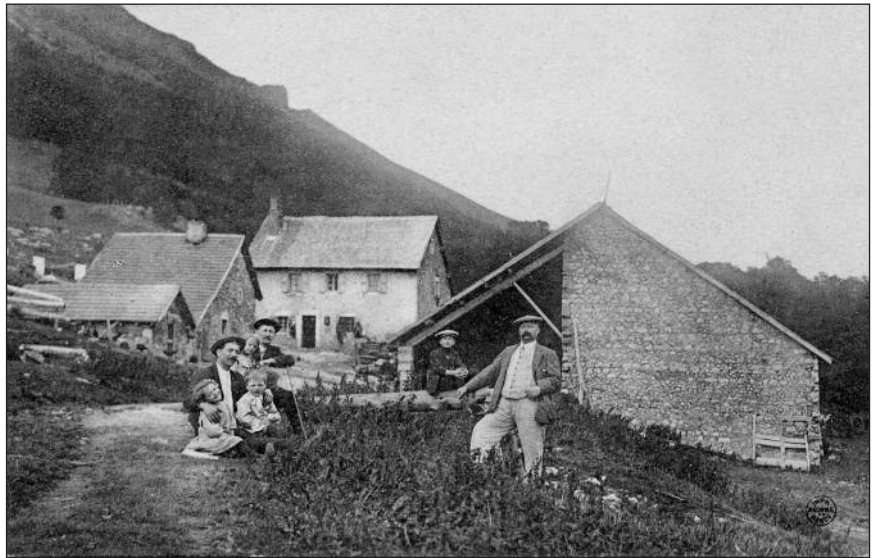
MRDI

PLAN 'MONTAGNARDS'

In the meantime, without knowing what was going on in the mountains, Pierre Dalloz, a 32-year-old architect and mountaineering enthusiast living at Sassenage on the northern slopes of the Vercors near Grenoble, envisaged how the vast Vercors mountain plateau might be transformed into a natural fortress and a haven for resistance fighters. In December 1942 he produced a three-page document titled *Note sur les possibilités d'utilisation militaire du Vercors* (Note on the military capabilities of the Vercors). The basic concept of Dalloz's plan was that armed resistance fighters stationed in concealed camps on the remote plateau could be brought into action after an Allied landing on the Mediterranean coast of France with a view to encircling the German forces there.

In January 1943, Dalloz brought his idea to the attention of Yves Farge (nom de guerre 'Grégoire'), a journalist based at Lyon who was a staff member of Franc-Tireur. Farge submitted it to Jean Moulin ('Max'), the man whom Général de Gaulle had entrusted with the mission of co-ordinating and unifying the various resistance movements in France. Moulin gave it his backing and a meeting followed at Bourgen-Bresse on February 10 between Dalloz, Farge and Général Charles Delestraint ('Vidal'), head of the Armée Secrète, the underground organisation that from September 1942 grouped together the fighting units of the Combat, Libération and Franc-Tireur resistance networks in southern France. Pleased with the plan, Delestraint named it 'Montagnards' and took it with him when he went to London to co-ordinate the secret army's actions with the Inter-Allied command. It was soon approved by de Gaulle and the Allies and on February 25 the BBC sent the agreed code message: 'Les montagnards doivent continuer a gravir les cimes' (The mountaineers must continue to climb the peaks) signifying approval.

Through Yves Farge, contacts were established with the Franc-Tireur group and sometime in March 1943 a 'Comité de Combat' (Fighting Committee) was created to co-ordinate actions within the framework of the 'Montagnards' plan. The participants comprised Dalloz, Pupin, Farge, and army officers like Commandant Marcel Pourchier, ex-director of the high mountain military school, and Lieutenant Alain Le Ray who had just made the first successful escape from Colditz castle (see *After the Battle* No. 63). After the Allied landings in North Africa the previous November, everyone was confident and enthusiastic at the idea that another landing was soon to be carried out in southern France.



The first 'réfractaires' — those refusing to be drafted for compulsory labour in Germany — began assembling in the Vercors in late 1942 at the Ferme d'Ambel, a remote farm in the south-west corner of the plateau. By early 1943 some 80 maquisards had gathered there and, as additional camps were set up, Ambel was given the code-name 'C1'.



The farm and its annexes were burned down by the Milice (the Vichy police force) on April 16, 1944. Rebuilt after the war on a smaller scale, the farmhouse is now used as a refuge for passing hikers.



MDRV

Above: From the autumn of 1943, Eugène Chavant was recognised as the civilian head of the resistance organisation in the Vercors. **Above right:** Lieutenant Alain Le Ray became the region's first military chief. This photo of him was taken in March 1945 when he was a lieutenant-colonel commanding the 7ème Demi-Brigade de Chasseurs Alpins (see *After the Battle* No. 97).



A. LERAY

Moulin funded the Vercors Maquis with large sums of money (over four million francs between February and May) and at the beginning of April Delestraint visited the plateau with Farge to inspect progress.

Meanwhile the Italians were not idle. In March they raided two Maquis camps in the south of the plateau: C7 at Saint-Ange (a camp created and run by the Combat organisation) in the north-eastern corner in April, and C4 at Cornouge in May. They also apprehended several members of the initial groups set up at Grenoble and Villard-de-Lans including Aimé Pupin. Tried by an Italian military court, 17 resistants were imprisoned at Cuneo in Italy. The risk of arrest forced Farge and Dalloz to leave the region, the latter for good (he reached Algiers in the autumn).

It was a hard blow to the 'Montagnards' project and on June 8 the BCRA (Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action, the Free French agency in London charged with the organisation, direction and supply of the Resistance), told Moulin to put it on the back-burner with the intention of reviving it sometime in the future.

The Germans hit the Resistance even harder than the Italians, arresting Delestraint on June 9 and Moulin on the 21st. With these arrests the 'Montagnards' plan lost two of its strongest and most-highly-placed supporters. Even worse, their disappearance broke the link between the Free French high command in London and the Vercors group. Nevertheless those who had escaped arrest went on and began to rebuild the organisation. In late June, a meeting was organised in the Murinais château near Saint-Marcellin, west of Grenoble, and a new Fighting Committee was formed consisting of two military men, Le Ray ('Bastide') and Lieutenant Roland Costa de Beauregard ('Durieu'), and two civilians, Jean Prévost ('Goderville'), a well-known novelist, and Eugène Samuel. The latter was soon replaced by Eugène Chavant ('Clément') and from the autumn he was recognised as the civilian head of the Vercors while Le Ray was the military chief.



MDRV

First set up in a forest dwelling near Méaudre, at the beginning of 1943 camp 'C3' moved to a building located deep inside the forest at Gève, north of Autrans. Life was difficult in this remote setting and parties had to walk a considerable distance to bring water to the camp.



MDRV

Things were even more difficult in winter. This picture was taken at 'C3' in November 1943.



Following the occupation of southern France by the Axis in November 1942, the Italians stationed the 4a Armata in the sector between the Alps and the Rhône river. One of its units, the 5a Divisione Alpina Pusteria, in May 1943 took over the Curial Barracks at Chambéry, 60 kilometres north of Grenoble.

However, when the Italians concluded an armistice with the Allies in September 1943, the Germans lost no time and acted swiftly to take over the Alpine area. A battalion of Reserve-Grenadier-Regiment 7 was then quartered in the same barracks.

Le Ray now began shaping the Vercors Maquis into an effective fighting force, with each of the camps — by now nine in number — becoming an operational group under a military officer or an NCO. Meanwhile, Prévost worked hard to get this militarisation accepted by the civilian element.

More men joined the plateau in the spring of 1943, a time when expectations of an Allied landing in southern France were widespread, but many of them returned to the valleys when it became clear that the landing would not take place before the following spring. By the autumn of 1943 there were only an estimated 380 maquisards left in the Vercors, most of them young men less than 23 years old.

In addition to the maquisards on the plateau, the Fighting Committee decided to organise those members of the Resistance who still resided at home, living and working as usual in the towns around the plateau. These Civilian Companies were to stand by, ready to move to the plateau when required. Four of these companies were created: at Grenoble, Villard-de-Lans, Romans and in the Royans sector. Commanders were named; supplies of Michelin maps purchased; requisition forms drawn up to obtain shoes, cutlery and kitchen tools and other supplies from local shops, and signs prepared ready to be nailed to trees to show the way up to prepared positions on the plateau.

In August, the leaders, including the commanders of the new civilian companies, all assembled in the Derbounouse clearing, high up in the mountains just east of La

Chapelle. There, Le Ray discussed possible plans for the plateau, either as a stronghold to be stoutly defended, or as a bridgehead from where raids could be sent to harass

German communications. However, there was little support for the first idea, the general consensus being much more in favour of the second.



The French Army vacated the barracks in 1975, the city of Chambéry subsequently converting the whole site into a commercial, cultural and administrative centre. The entrance gate was demolished but the memorial to the Savoyards killed during the Franco-German War of 1870-71 still stands in the Place Monge.

THE GERMANS OCCUPY THE ALPS

The armistice between Italy and the Western Allies, signed in secret on September 3, 1943, was made public on September 8. Though Pietro Badoglio, the new Italian prime minister, repeatedly confirmed the unwavering loyalty of Italy to its German ally, the Germans were distrustful and they rapidly moved to disarm the Italian forces in Italy and take over the Italian zones of occupation in the Balkans and southern France.

Charged with taking over the Italian-occupation zone in the northern Alps was the 157. Reserve-Division. Commanded by Generalleutnant Karl Pflaum, the division had transferred from Bavaria to the Jura sector in central eastern France in the autumn of 1942, and was thus in a perfect position to swiftly carry out its mission, Pflaum establishing his headquarters at Grenoble. Comprising three infantry regiments, an artillery regiment and an engineer battalion, its units were distributed as follows:

Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 1, its command post set up at Aix-les-Bains, took over the northern sector, with one battalion each at Annecy, Lanslebourg, Bourg-Saint-Maurice and Briançon.

Reserve-Grenadier-Regiment 7, with headquarters at Grenoble, assumed responsibility for the central sector, with a battalion each at Grenoble, Chambéry and Belley.

Reserve-Grenadier-Regiment 157, its command post located at Gap, occupied the southern sector, with one battalion at Grenoble, another at Digne and a third at Embrun.

Reserve-Artillerie-Regiment 7 stationed one mountain artillery battalion at Grenoble and another at Albertville.

Reserve-Pionier-Bataillon 7, the divisional engineer unit, was at Grenoble with three companies, as were the divisional service and support units.

The 157. Reserve-Division was actually a training division, its mission being to instruct young recruits who, after six months with the division, were sent to a field army. By 1944 many of these recruits were Volksdeutsche, i.e. ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe. An even larger part — up to half of the men in some units — were Polish from the so-called Volksliste III (People's Category III), comprising those whose ancestry was doubtful but whom the Reich considered as 'Germanisable'. The division had a good cadre of officers and NCOs with combat experience from the 1939-40 campaigns and the Eastern Front, many having battle injuries that made them unfit for front-line duty. The division's armament and equipment was also second-rate.

The highest German authority in the former unoccupied zone was the Kommandant Heeresgebiet Südfrankreich (Commander Army Area Southern France), a post held since November 1942 by Generalleutnant Heinrich Niehoff. The command set up so-called Verbindungsstäbe (Liaison Staffs) in each French department, each of them responsible for control of their region. In the northern Alps, grouped under a Hauptverbindungsstab 590 (Main Liaison Staff), established at Lyon under Generalleutnant Otto Kohl, were ten of these liaison staffs, those responsible for the area around the Vercors being Verbindungsstab 735 under Oberst Werner Kirsten at Grenoble, and Verbindungsstab 502 under Oberst Kurt Niezoldi at Chambéry.

To maintain security the Germans stationed an assortment of forces in the region, their mission being to guard bridges, railway lines, depots, etc, and to launch anti-partisan operations against the Maquis. One of them was Landeschützen-Bataillon 685, a guard battalion made up of three companies. It was first stationed in the northern part of the former Italian-occupied zone covering the border with Switzerland but by June 1944 was operating in the Grenoble area.



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Commanding the German forces occupying southern France, including the area previously occupied by the Italians, was Generalleutnant Heinrich Niehoff.

Generalleutnant Karl Pflaum commanded the 157. Reserve-Division, the main unit stationed in the northern Alps region.



ASSOCIATION DES GLIÈRES

One of the main actions of the 157. Reserve-Division before the summer of 1944 was their attack on the Resistance stronghold at Glières in Haute-Savoie in March of that year (see *After the Battle* No. 105).



ATB

Les Glières, then and now, with the Pointe de Puvat in the background.

Another was Ost-Bataillon 406, a unit also comprising three companies, made up of 'Ostruppen' (Eastern troops), i.e. Soviet Red Army soldiers captured on the Eastern Front and coerced into fighting with the German army. Moved to southern France in September 1943, it took over the Maurienne valley east of Grenoble to cover this vital road and rail link with Italy.

Sicherungs-Regiment 200 was created in September 1943 from four previously independent security battalions in France. Commanded by Oberstleutnant Rudolf Ufer and with headquarters in Lyon, by May 1944 the regiment had its I. Bataillon stationed in Aix-en-Provence, the II. Bataillon in Valence, the III. Bataillon in Nîmes and the IV. Bataillon in Lyon. Around this same time, another security unit, Sicherungs-Regiment 194, had its II. Bataillon moved to Digne, in the southern Alps.

SS-Polizei-Regiment 19 was moved to southern France from Slovenia in June 1944. Commanded by SS-Obersturmbannführer Hubert Kölblinger, its II. Bataillon and III. Bataillon took part in anti-partisan actions against the Resistance in central France while the I. Bataillon operated in Haute-Savoie north of the Vercors (see *After the Battle* No. 143).

Running parallel with the military occupation hierarchy was the police hierarchy, with SS-Gruppenführer Carl-Albrecht Oberg at the top in Paris as the Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer (HSSPF, Higher SS and Police Leader). The regional branch at Lyon was under SS-Obersturmbannführer Werner Knab, Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des Sicherheitsdienstes (KdS, Commander of the Security Police and Security Service – Sipo/SD). He was responsible for the departments of Rhône, Ain, Haute-Savoie, Savoie, Isère, Drôme and Loire.

From the end of 1943, it was clear that resistance activities in south-eastern France were becoming far too strong to be dealt with solely by the weak occupation forces, so the Germans were compelled to switch the 157. Reserve-Division, nominally a training formation, to anti-guerrilla operations to contain them. The division then provided the forces for Operation 'Korporal' against the Maquis in the southern part of the Ain department in February; Operation 'Hoch Savoyen' to wipe out the Glières stronghold in the Haute-Savoie in March (see *After the Battle* No. 105), and Operation 'Frühling' in the Jura in April. The division carried out these operations with a strength of only two infantry regiments, Reserve-Grenadier-Regiment 7 having left the division in January 1944 to be integrated in the 276. Infanterie-Division then being re-formed in southern France.



These photos were discovered by Jean-Paul in the album of a German veteran. With no clue as to where they were taken — it could have been Bavaria, France or Italy — or which unit was represented, it was only when 'JP' identified one of the pictures as having been made at Embrun, in the Alps east of the Vercors, that he could identify the unit: Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 217 of the 157. Reserve-Division.



PATRICIA PENNARUN

The men were high above Embrun practising their mountaineering skills. The mountain in the background is the 2565-metre-high Tête de Clotinaille.



Left: Following the Allied landing in the Riviera on August 15 the Allied air forces mounted operations to cut bridges in order to stop the Germans from moving reinforcements to the south. On August 19, B-26s from the US 320th Bomb Group attacked



PATRICIA PENNARUN

the road bridge at La Clapière near Embrun but the bombs all missed the target. The resistance then finished the job by blowing up the span. Right: Its post-war replacement was built some distance downstream from the original one.



MDRV



MDRV

Left: Commanding Region R1 of the Armée Secrète in south-eastern France was Chef d'Escadron Marcel Descour. Above: Capitaine Narcisse Geyer (right) succeeded Alain Le Ray as military commander of the Vercors in December 1943.

ORGANISING THE VERCORS RESISTANCE

De Gaulle's efforts to unify the resistance movements in France succeeded in the spring of 1943 with the formation of the Conseil National de la Résistance (National Committee of the Resistance, CNR) that included representatives of all the main resistance groups and of the principal pre-war political parties. The Armée Secrète was organised on a regional basis and regional commanders were appointed. Overall command for southern France was in the hands of Général Gabriel Cochet, whose HQ was in Algiers in North Africa. Within his zone of responsibility were six different regions, named R1 to R6. Region R1, the Lyon area and the northern Alps, was under Chef d'Escadron Marcel Descour ('Bayard'), and region R1/R2, south-eastern France, was under Colonel Henri Zeller ('Faisceau'). Then, in June 1944, the headquarters and staff of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (French Interior Forces, FFI) were created in London to assume command of the resistance forces in France as a component of the Allied armies under the Supreme Allied Commander.

Meanwhile organisation was continuing in the Vercors, Alain Le Ray working hard to mould the maquisards into some kind of military force. Feeding the men was an issue but enough food was usually obtained thanks to the local farmers, whose attitude was mostly co-operative, although force sometimes had to be employed. A great handicap was the



INA DMV

By June 1944 a hospital had been established on the Vercors specially to cater for the needs of the Resistance. Located at Saint-Martin, its personnel came from various towns around the plateau, one particular team arriving from Romans on the 10th. Some of the medical equipment was air-dropped but most came from requisitioning supplies from other hospitals, like one large 'donation' from the Chantier de Jeunesse hospice near Saint-Jean-en-Royans.



INA DMV



ATB

Left: The hospital received its first patient on June 9 — the first day of the insurrection. Right: The building was torched by the Germans on August 4, as part of their retaliations after

suppressing the rebellion. By the side of the D103, down the track seen on the left, a plaque today recalls that the Maquis hospital was once situated here.

lack of field equipment such as blankets, mess kits, raincoats, boots and uniforms, although the main problem was how to arm the men. At first, a few weapons had come from caches from the disbanded French Army, supplemented by weapons captured from the Italians in the autumn of 1943, but this was hardly sufficient. Through 1942 and most of 1943, aerial supply of weapons and other materiel to the French Resistance was limited by insufficient air transport for only two RAF squadrons of approximately 20 aircraft each could be spared to carry out such missions (see *After the Battle* No. 26). However, in January 1943, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill directed that an additional 48 aircraft (32 Stirlings from RAF Transport Command and 12 USAAF Liberators) be made available for arming the French Resistance and with this new transport capability, the number of supply drops rose steadily throughout the spring. From late 1943, additional squadrons based in North Africa, including American ones, joined in.

The first arms and supplies drop to the Vercors was made on the night of November 13/14, 1943, over the Derbounouse clearing in the eastern part of the plateau. Weapons and equipment were recovered and distributed but a part of the consignment was lost and Descour blamed Le Ray for the mishap. In a stormy meeting at Lyon in December, Le Ray resigned and Descour appointed Lieutenant Narcisse Geyer ('Thivollet'), a cavalry officer, as the new military commander of the Vercors, promoting him to Capitaine.

In January 1944 an Inter-Allied mission parachuted into France by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and operating under the code-name 'Union', toured south-eastern France to inspect the resistance groups in the Drôme, Isère and Savoie departments. Led by Major Henry Thackthwaite, the three-man team visited the Vercors and subsequently reported favourably, informing London that the group there consisted of about 500 men already lightly armed and organised in groups of ten. They were impressed to see men already trained in the use of heavy weapons and ready to use Vickers machine guns, mortars and PIATs although they had none. Major Francis Cammaerts, one of the best and most-experienced SOE agents who ran the large 'Jockey' circuit in south-eastern France, also visited the Vercors that March and confirmed that the resistance soldiers there badly needed anti-tank weapons. (Later that spring, SOE officially appointed Cammaerts as head of all Allied missions in south-eastern France.)

Following these reports, four supply missions took place: two in March (one near Vassieux, one near Saint-Martin-en-Vercors),



INA DMV

The insurgents set up a wireless communications centre in a dairy at La Britière, a remote hamlet two kilometres south of Saint-Agnan, to maintain contact with London and Algiers.



ATB

However, this shot of a radio operator working in a field was quite a challenge to locate as the mountain skyline in the background was the only clue.



MDRV

Left: The wireless team pictured during the early days of the République du Vercors (L-R): Maurice Mercier ('Brutus'), Jean Cendral ('Lombard'), the team's leader Capitaine Robert Bennes ('Bob'), Mario Montefusco ('Argentin') and Patrick Gamot



ATB

('Patrick'); squatting in front: André Lacourt ('Joseph'), Juste Winant ('Olivier') and Pierre Lassalle ('Benjamin'). Right: A plaque on the La Britière building commemorates the work of the wireless operators that worked here from June 6 to July 23, 1944.

In June 1944, the Resistance despatched Félix Forestier (*right*), a professional cameraman, to the Vercors uprising there. He was joined in early July by Georges Coutable and Albert Weil. Using 35mm Bell & Howell Eyemo cameras, the trio filmed many scenes throughout the Vercors battle. When the German attack dispersed the resistance forces, Forestier buried the exposed reels in a cemetery and then hid with a group of maquisards, continuing to shoot more scenes. After the liberation, it was planned to include the recovered reels in a movie telling the story of the Vercors battle but the movie's director, Jean-Paul Le Chanois, found the sequences disappointing — too many shots of parades and training, and of faked attacks. The project finally developed into production of a feature film titled *Au coeur de l'orage* (In the Heart of the Storm) released in 1947. The genuine images then got lost in the archives of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) until they were rediscovered by filmmaker Franck Mazuet in 2013. They were edited into a film titled *Dans le Maquis du Vercors*, released in 2015.



INA DMV

and one each in April (again near Vassieux) and May 1944 (near Méaudre); two more followed in June. On the night of June 13/14 a drop was made on the 'Sous-main' field near Méaudre and the following night another on 'Rayon' in a clearing at Oscence, west of La Chapelle-en-Vercors.

To manage the delivery of air supplies, trained specialists and their equipment were parachuted in to the resistance movements. Known as the Section Atterrissage Parachutage (Parachute Air-dropping Section, SAP), its men selected suitable drop zones and liaised with London and Algiers by

radio. On the day of delivery, the section operated S-Phones (ground-to-air walkie-talkies) to communicate with the aircraft overhead. By the spring of 1944 the Vercors possessed of seven established drop zones, the most important being 'Taille-crayon' just south of Vassieux.



INA DMV

Left: The 1944 footage represents unique images from the Vercors fighting. This still shows one of the cameramen, Georges Coutable, filming young maquisards as they undergo training



ATB

Right: By analysing the mountain skyline, Jean-Paul was able to pinpoint the location to the hamlet of Domarières, just south of Saint-Julien.



INA DMV

Left: The third cameraman, Albert Weil, appears in one of the shots showing a faked infantry attack. *Right:* Two new houses



ATB

have been built on the hillside and new trees have grown up, making it difficult to pin-point the right spot.



ATB

On January 22, a German police force moving up along the Grands-Goulets road brushed aside the maquisards who tried to stop them at its south-eastern end, at Les Barraques. As a reprisal, the Germans set the hamlet on fire, an incident now commemorated by a plaque affixed to the rocks.



ATB

A week later, on the night of January 28/29, the Germans attacked a Maquis camp at Mallevall, a remote village in the north-western corner of the plateau, killing 23 of the resistance fighters as well as nine villagers, and burning down the village.

FIRST GERMAN ATTACKS

The first German raid against the Vercors actually resulted from an ill-advised initiative by local maquisards when three Germans from Valence decided to make a trip as 'tourists' up to the Vercors on January 19, 1944. Their car was ambushed at the Goule-Noire bridge in the Gorges de la Bourne (Bourne river gorge) west of Villard-de-Lans which resulted in a visit the following day by four Feldgendarmes to investigate. Their vehicle was ambushed in turn, one German being killed and another wounded. Together with the fourth man taken prisoner, they were all left in the care of the Gendarmes at La Chapelle-en-Vercors.

On January 22, a stronger Polizei party, now headed by an armoured car and including artillery, forced the entrance to the plateau at the Grands-Goulets gorge and brushed aside the maquisards trying to stop them at Les Barraques. Setting fire to the hamlet in reprisal, they continued five kilometres further south to La Chapelle where they recovered their captured and wounded colleague in good shape at the Gendarmerie. Moving on, they then burned down a sawmill at the Rousset hamlet near the southern end of the plateau.

The lessons to be learned by the Maquis were painful. An initial failure in command and indiscipline had triggered a German raid, and armed resistants proved unable to prevent the enemy from forcing entrance into the stronghold.

The Germans mounted another raid later in January to eliminate a camp at Mallevall, a remote village at the bottom of the mountain on the north-western side of the plateau,

Right: A plaque affixed to the rock face (off to the left) today recalls the battle that took place here. The Route des Ecouges was opened in 1883 after the inhabitants of the village of Rencurel, who had no proper road connecting them with the Isère valley down below, decided to fund the construction of a totally new road that followed the course of the Drevenne rivulet down into the valley. The section seen in the still from the wartime cine film had to be blown out of the rock face. It was so narrow that a bypass tunnel had to be blasted through the mountain in the 1960s, giving a new lane for ascending traffic, while descending vehicles still used the original carriageway. The danger of rock falls necessitated the tunnel to be widened to two-way traffic, after which the 'balcony' road was finally closed to all traffic in 2008. There are plans for it to be re-opened in 2016.



INA DMV

On June 21, the Germans launched a probing attack along the Route des Ecouges in the north-western quarter of the Vercors but the Maquis party controlling this narrow passage held on and the Germans were compelled to fall back after over ten hours of fighting. The Forestier-Coutable-Weil camera team later filmed a group barring the road with a French FM24/29 light machine gun and a Browning .30 medium machine gun.



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At midnight on June 8/9, the Vercors command issued Order No. 1 directing the civilian companies to move up to the plateau. Planned for months, the operation was swiftly executed using buses and lorries to bring up hundreds of men from nearby cities and communities. *Left:* A lorry carrying a



ATB

rifle-armed Maquis fighter passing through Pont-en-Royans, the town that lies at the north-western entrance to the plateau — another still from the 1944 footage. *Right:* A perfect comparison taken at the eastern entrance to the town, near the bridge over the Bourne river.

where an armed group had assembled independently from the Vercors Maquis. Acting on good intelligence, elements of Reserve-Pionier-Bataillon 7 moved silently to encircle the village on the night of January 28/29. Although many of the resistants managed to escape, 23 were killed as well as nine villagers. The village was then burned down and several of the locals were deported, eight of whom subsequently perished.

By now the German command in the West was actually becoming alarmed by the impressive increase in numbers and size of resistance groups all over France and in February 1944 an order was issued for the total destruction of the Maquis forces. Those nestling in the mountainous areas of the Jura and the Alps were among the most worrying for they posed a direct threat to the Rhône valley — the vital artery for the German forces holding the Mediterranean coastline — and to the flank and rear of the Italian front.

The first operation was launched in the Vercors on March 18 when a battle group pushed along the Gorges de la Bourne, forced the passage at the Goule-Noire bridge and then south to the hamlet of La Matrassière where Chef d'Escadron Descour had set up part of his R1 regional headquarters. The raid surprised the resistance men and six of them were killed as well as three civilians. Several farms were also burned down.



INA DMV

A lorry carrying a whole group of maquisards was filmed as it entered a tunnel near the Goule-Noire bridge, 11 kilometres east from Pont-en-Royans along the Gorges de la Bourne. On June 9, the first day of the uprising, Compagnie Abel, made up of FF1 fighters from the Royans sector, took up positions around here.

INA DMV



Left: Another lorry in the same convoy crossing the Goule-Noire bridge itself. On June 10, Chef d'Escadron François Huet, military chief of the Vercors since May, came to this bridge to



ATB

confer with Fernand Crouau, the commander of Compagnie Abel. *Right:* The same view on the D103 today, looking in the direction of Saint-Julien-en-Vercors.

In April 1944, a force of 40 men from the Milice (the Vichy-French collaborationist police) and of the paramilitary Groupes Mobiles de Réserve (GMR), approached the village of Vassieux in the centre of the plateau. However this time the maquisards had been forewarned and had moved their camp away from the village. The Milice remained at Vassieux for a week, making house searches and interrogating the villagers. They also shot three strangers that they had arrested and left confident that the number of maquisards was, as they put in their report, 'exaggerated when compared to the reality'. The operation left a deep uneasiness in the population as to who might have passed information to the hated Vichy police.

The large influx of men to the plateau enabled both the Milice and the German Sipo/SD to infiltrate informers and both agencies certainly ran a sizeable agent network. The maquisards were aware of this and did their best to identify such agents, executing without compunction any men or women suspected of informing on them. Among those liquidated were a hotel waitress at Villard-de-Lans in January and a farmer at Vassieux in May.

MOBILISATION!

Though the Resistance was still an amalgamation of different factions, the creation of the FFI in June resulted in unity in command. Most local resistance leaders were keen to integrate their group into some kind of military organisation and the cadre of former regular officers and NCOs played an increasingly important role in the Maquis. However, it was not without difficulties and from the start many of the young maquisards were opposed to the old-fashioned behaviour of the army officers.

Also, while Le Ray and Chavant had previously found a balance between military and civilian responsibilities, sharing command accordingly, Le Ray's successor Capitaine Geyer simply saw his role as the overall chief of the Vercors. Tension between the civilians and some of the military often ran high, Chavant in particular criticising the inadequacy of Geyer.

In May, the Vercors saw a new adjustment of the military command when Descour, the R1 regional chief (and soon to become the FFI regional chief), appointed a new commander for the whole sector: Chef d'Escadron François Huet ('Hervieux'). Setting up his headquarters at Saint-Martin in early June, Huet divided his command into two sub-sectors, appointing Geyer to command the southern one, south of the Goule-



INA DMV

On July 15, a complete section of Gendarmes from Saint-Marcellin, a town in the Isère valley to the north-west of the Vercors, left to join the Maquis. Led by Lieutenant Charles Morel, over 30 officers and men drove up to the plateau with all their weapons and vehicles. To cover up the move, a fake attack by the Maquis was organised to make it look as if the vehicles and men had been captured. One of the cameramen filmed the arrival of the Gendarmes on the plateau, this still from the footage showing them at Rousset-en-Vercors, a small hamlet a few kilometres north of the Col de Rousset at the southern end of the plateau. The bus is a commandeered civilian vehicle, normally used on the line running between Saint-Marcellin and Grenoble.



ATB

Rousset has seen few changes in over 70 years.



INA DMV

In the early hours of June 23, Geyer sent a small party with three lorries down to La Doua, north-east of Lyon and over 90 kilometres away, to liberate and bring back Senegalese soldiers from the disbanded Vichy army who were interned in a camp there. The operation was a swift success and the party



ATB

returned to the plateau with 53 soldiers and one NCO, all of whom were soon integrated in the reconstituted 11ème Régiment de Cuirassiers. *Left:* Here men of the Senegalese troop march through Les Barraques. *Right:* The south-eastern end of the Grands-Goulets, now closed off by a fence.

INA DMV



Left: The Vercors arsenal began to grow after the start of Allied supply drops in November 1943. Here a consignment of Spring-field rifles is being unloaded at a barn used as an arms storage. Right: Supervising the operation was Capitaine Robert Bennes

Noire bridge, and Costa de Beauregard the northern one.

Yet all this could not make up for the lack of trained men, the large majority of the resistance force having no military experience. The few French and Allied instructors did their best but it was an impossible task to train so many men due to the shortage of time and lack of ammunition.

Meanwhile, in late May, Chavant travelled clandestinely to Algiers to confer with the

French authorities of the Comité Français de Libération Nationale (CFLN), the French Committee of National Liberation which was the precursor of what in June was to become the Provisional Government of the French Republic. He confidently reported on the situation in the Vercors and stressed the need for deliveries of weapons and reinforcements. The official document he obtained confirmed that the directives given for the Vercors in February 1943 by Général

Delestraint were still valid. Dated May 30, the document was signed in the name of Général de Gaulle by Jacques Soustelle, the head of the Direction Générale des Services Spéciaux (DGSS), the Special Services Operation Centre, which was the combination in October 1943 of the BCRA service in Algiers with their local counterparts initially under Général Henri Giraud. However, the document was formulated in vague general terms specifying only that operations were to



INA DMV

(centre), an officer of the BCRA (the Gaullist special operations and intelligence agency) who had parachuted in from Algiers in March 1944, and was now the Vercors' chief radio officer (we already saw him at La Britière on page 10).

INA DMV



Left: Dispatched from Algiers, the American OSS Operational Group 'Justine' parachuted in near Vassieux in the small hours of June 29. It comprised two officers and an NCO — Captain Vernon G. Hoppers, Lieutenant Chester L. Myers and Sergeant Delmar Calvert — and 13 enlisted men: Francis J. Defrane, Robert J. Vanasse, Raymond J. Brochu, Norman J. Harp, Laurence W. Labreck, James W. Murray, Nathan



ATB

L. Richman, Howard O. Flake, Paul E. Laflamme, Stuart M. Levine, Gaston J. Paquette and Joel J. Picard, yet only a few of the men could speak fluent French. Here they are training the maquisards in infantry tactics. Right: Although nothing remains to be seen of the ruined house today, it is clearly visible on aerial photos taken in 1946 enabling Jean-Paul to take a precise comparison.

INA DMV



Cameramen Félix Forestier, Georges Coutable and Albert Weil were present to record the activities of the OSS team on celluloid.



ATB

be carried out along the departmental and regional FFI chain of command, in liaison with the military missions sent out from London and with Algiers, but without giving any operational details or promising any large-scale support. However, after the war, Chavant was adamant that his main interlocutor in Algiers, Lieutenant-Colonel Jean Constans, had orally promised him to send 4,000 paratroopers to bolster up the Vercors force.

As far as Chavant was concerned, the essential part was that the 'Montagnards' plan as devised in 1943 had been confirmed. He got back to the Vercors on June 7, just in time for a decisive moment.

In the early hours of June 6, as Allied paratroopers were dropping in Normandy and the invasion armada was approaching the assault beaches, the BBC broadcast special coded-messages to the French Resistance ordering the implementation of pre-arranged sabotage plans. These included schemes for cutting railways (Plan Vert), interfering with road traffic (Plan Tortue), dislocating telecommunications (Plan Violet), attacking German ammunition dumps (Plan Jaune), oil fuel stocks (Plan Rouge) and command posts (Plan Noir).

Descour and Huet waited for clearer orders and for the return of Chavant. Then, on the evening of June 8, at a conference held at Huet's headquarters at Saint-Martin with Descour and Chavant attending, a decision was taken to implement the 'Montagnards' plan. Huet, realising his force was far from ready to carry out the ambitious scheme, was willing to wait for an Allied landing in southern France but Descour, his conviction strengthened by the directive and oral promises that Chavant had brought back from Algiers, insisted they should go ahead, following the call for mobilisation as broadcast by the BBC. And so, at midnight on June 8/9, Huet issued his Order No. 1, directing the civilian companies to move up to the Vercors.

Meticulously planned for months, the operation was swiftly executed, buses and lorries bringing up hundreds of men from Grenoble, Sassenage, Villard-de-Lans, Romans, Saint-Jean-en-Royans, and other communities to the plateau. By mid-June some 3,500 men were camped in the Vercors, far more than anticipated, and there were only weapons for little over half of them. However there was now no way back as to make them return would condemn them to be hunted down by the Germans and the Vichy police. This realisation somewhat dampened the initial enthusiasm and Descour sent urgent messages to the FFI command in London, requiring drops of men, armament, fuel and tobacco within 48 hours.

The Germans lost no time in reacting to the general uprising by the Resistance and



INA DMV

Captain Hoppers and one of his men demonstrate how to operate the bazooka. Many of the maquisards were at first mystified at this unusual 'stove pipe' weapon.



INA DMV

The Americans then turned to the Browning .30 machine gun.



INA DMV

Left: After relaxing for a time at Saint-Julien, drinking water at the fountain and chatting with young ladies, Captain Hoppers and Lieutenant Myers led their men back to their quarters near



ATB

Saint-Martin. This still taken from the cine film shows all the 15 men in the party. Right: The southern entrance of Saint-Julien, then and now.



INA DMV

On June 25, a parade was held in front of the First World War memorial at Saint-Martin.



ATB

Left: The memorial stood in front of the village school, which remains, albeit considerably changed. Right: The poster that officially proclaimed the creation of the République du Vercors

République Française

LIBERTE EGALITE FRATERNITE

POPULATION DU VERCORS :

Le 3 Juillet 1944, LA REPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE a été officiellement restaurée dans le Vercors.

A dater de ce jour les décrets de VICHY sont abolis et toutes les lois Républicaines remises en vigueur.

LE COMITÉ DE LIBÉRATION NATIONALE DU VERCORS
Investi dans ses fonctions par Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, détiend des pouvoirs très étendus.

Charge de l'application de ces décisions, il desire administrer le pays avec le plus grand esprit de JUSTICE, mais aussi avec FERMÉTÉ. Le Comité compte sur le concours dévoué et sur le bon sens de toute cette population du Vercors, qui pendant toute la période de résistance clandestine a manifesté un courage et un attachement à la France au-dessus de tout éloge.

Notre région est en état de siège. Le Comité de Libération Nationale demande donc à la population de faire l'impossible comme il le fera lui-même pour mettre à la disposition du Commandement Militaire qui a la charge écrasante de nous protéger contre un ennemi toujours aussi barbare, tous les moyens dont il dispose.

Habitants du Vercors, c'est chez vous que la grande REPUBLIQUE vient de renaitre. Vous pouvez en être fiers. Nous sommes certains que vous saurez la défendre. Nous voudrions que le 14 JUILLET 1944 soit pour le Vercors une occasion de plus de manifester sa foi Républicaine et son profond attachement à la grande Patrie.

VIVE LA REPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE !
VIVE LA FRANCE !
VIVE LE GÉNÉRAL DE GAULLE !

Pour le Comité de Libération Nationale,
LE PRÉSIDENT : CLÉMENT

MRDI

on July 3. Headed by the traditional republican slogan 'Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood' it was signed by Clément (i.e. Eugène Chavant, the civilian head of the Vercors resistance).

they quickly launched an operation against the Vercors stronghold. On June 13, a company of Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 179 moved against the weak spot near the village of Saint-Nizier, the gateway to Vercors in the north-eastern corner of the plateau. Three FFI companies defended the sector with unexpected determination and after several hours of fighting the Germans pulled back to Grenoble, having lost one man killed and eight wounded. French losses were eight

killed and as many wounded. This was probably only a probing attack, the Germans did not consider it feasible to clear the plateau with such a weak force.

Two days later, on June 15, the Germans renewed the attack at Saint-Nizier, this time with a battle group of around 1,000 men, including elements of the Milice. The battle lasted for several hours and in the end the FFI were forced to withdraw having lost 24 men. The Germans had six men killed and 15

wounded. Although the access to the plateau was now open, the Germans did not pursue the advance, content for the time being with burning down Saint-Nizier.

That evening, judging the sector far too difficult to defend, Huet and the Vercors command directed a withdrawal to an easier defensible line higher up. This meant abandoning Lans-en-Vercors and Villard-de-Lans with the FFI manning new positions above these towns.



INA DMV

Left: Taking the salute at the parade was Capitaine Geyer, Huet's predecessor as military chief of the Vercors and, after Huet's appointment, commander of the Vercors' southern sector. He applauded Huet's decision to recreate old army units, the 11ème



ATB

Régiment de Cuirassiers being his old regiment. Geyer, seen here on his horse with sabre drawn, was a controversial figure, his elitist bearing falling ill with the rebellious nature of the maquisards. Right: The southern entrance to saint-Martin, looking westwards.



MDRV

Left: Huet addresses the troops, his speech being along the line of the order of the day that he was to despatch on July 13: 'In the past two years, the flags, the standards, the pennants of our regiments and our battalions have been asleep. Now, with a



ATB

magnificent drive, France has risen against the invader. The old French army that has shone in the course of centuries will reclaim its place in the nation.' **Right:** Across the road in front of the school the old garages still remain by the side of the road.

REPUBLIQUE DU VERCORS

On July 3, the Vercors resistance officially proclaimed the creation of the République du Vercors. Its first formal appearance was on a poster that was pasted on walls and notice boards to salute the visit of Yves Farge, now Commissaire de la République for the R1 area, who arrived to visit the plateau command at Saint-Martin. Headed by the traditional republican slogan 'Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood' — so erasing the motto 'Work, Family, Nation' of Vichy — it was signed by the 'Président' of the republic, Clément (i.e. Eugène Chavant). A newspaper was soon published, the *Vercors Libre*, which saw four issues distributed in July.

Authority in the re-established republic was shared between a civilian command, Chavant being a de-facto prefect, and a military one, with Huet commander-in-chief of the plateau (under Descour, the R1 regional commander) with Geyer and Costa de Beauregard as his sub-sector commanders. At first, both authorities shared offices in the Hôtel du Vercors in the centre of Saint-Martin but Huet soon set up his own command post in the Villa Bellon located along the main road at the northern entrance of the village. Descour had his command post in a forest house in the Ranc-des-Pourrets below the hamlet of Brunets, south-east of Saint-Agnan. Four entrance/exit points to the plateau were set up and manned by the FFI: at the Goule-Noire bridge in the north-east corner of the plateau to control the road to



INA DMY

The troops being reviewed by Huet probably belonged to the company of Lieutenant Abel Chabal, now part of the reconstituted 6ème Bataillon de Chasseurs Alpins. They are armed with Model 1903 Springfield rifles recently air-dropped by the Allies. These were the early First World War model with the 'ladder'-type rear sight and finger grooves in the stock, then widely used by American rear echelon and service troops.



INA DMY

Chabal then laid a wreath at the memorial. He would be mortally wounded a month later, leading the defence at Valchevière.



ATB

Moved after the war, the memorial now stands between its original location and the centre of Saint-Martin.



MDRV

A flag-raising ceremony was then held in the centre of Saint-Martin, in front of the church.

Grenoble and the northern Vercors; at Balme-de-Rencurel on the Pont-en-Royans road to the west; at Les Barraques to cover the road leading north-west to Pont-en-Royans through the Grands-Goulets gorge, and at Rousset on the Die road at the southern end of the plateau.

The military established a 2ème Bureau (intelligence) under André Vincent-Beaume ('Capitaine Vincent') to gather information on enemy activities and keep files on suspected traitors. A prison stockade was set up, first in a factory building at La Chapelle, later moved to Oscence. It soon held some 100 persons, including eight German POWs, a few Miliciens, the remainder being suspected of pro-German or Vichy sympathies. A military tribunal, held in the La Chapelle schoolhouse, sentenced three Miliciens to death and they were shot at Vassieux on June 28. For the other suspects, the court only filed the case for further consideration after the liberation.

Several squads of Gendarmes had joined the Vercors garrison, the local one from La Chapelle being increased by officers from various towns in the Drôme and Isère departments giving a total strength of 60. They assumed their normal task of keeping law and order under Huet's command.



ATB

Finding the apartment from which the scene was filmed closed, Jean-Paul was very pleased when Christian Assel, the local potter, kindly agreed to let him into his flat in order to match up the image from a window just a few metres over to the left.



INA DMV

After the parade, the officers and men enjoyed an outdoor lunch at the Hôtel Breyton where in the early phase of the rebellion both the civilian and military commands shared offices.



ATB

At the northern entrance of Saint-Martin, a plaque on the renamed Hôtel du Vercors now recalls that it was here that the Republic was restored on July 3, 1944.



Left: Supplies were brought up to the Maquis from communities surrounding the plateau. Here M. Chartier, the grocer at Romans, brings up provisions along the Grands-Goulets road

Huet organised his own headquarters along strict military lines and made a decisive step to integrate the Maquis force into the traditional framework of the French Army. On July 13, he re-created several Army units that had officially been disbanded after the defeat of 1940: the 6^{ème}, 12^{ème} and 14^{ème} Bataillons de Chasseurs Alpains (BCA) and the 11^{ème} Régiment de Cuirassiers. The various Maquis camps then became companies and squadrons of these reconstituted units. This was not merely a symbolic act to signify that the République du Vercors had a proper army but also an attempt to instil badly-needed training and discipline into the motley Maquis force.

Though some of the young volunteers welcomed the idea of becoming real soldiers in the fight against the German occupiers, this decision to militarise the Maquis, and the fact that the military commanders, particularly Geyer, clung to old-fashioned army pomp, led to tensions within the force.

In considering how best to organise the defence of the Vercors with the small force available, Huet and his staff had to make important decisions. Knowing that access to the plateau via the 12 mountain passes on the eastern side would be very difficult as only footpaths led up to them, they reasoned that the Germans would not exploit their firepower on this quarter. Also, as these passes were far from any infrastructure and from the villages on the plateau, Huet decided to



Right: The spectacular balcony road was closed to all vehicles and pedestrians in 2005 though there are plans to re-open its south-eastern section to hikers.



On July 10, OSS Operational Group 'Justine' joined with a party of resistance fighters to ambush a German convoy at the Col de la Croix-Haute, on the main N4 road some distance south-east of the Vercors. On their way back, the party passed the Col du Rousset, which may explain the sign mounted on their Berliet truck.



Left: As the lead German vehicle came around the bend, a bazooka round brought it to a halt, and the Americans and maquisards then swept the convoy with a barrage of fire and hail of Gammon grenades. The operation was a complete success, the first victory for the Maquis since the Germans had dislodged them from Saint-Nizier on June 13. Here, three of the participants pose for the photographer at the pass after the action (L-R): Lieutenant Myers, Joseph La Picirella and Captain Hoppers. (After the war, La Picirella became one of the first



historians of the Vercors battle. He was also the creator of the first Battle of the Vercors Museum at Vassieux.) **Right:** Elated at the success of their ambush, the resistance fighters form up near their vehicles. (A plaque by the side of the N75 just north of the Croix-Haute pass today commemorates Louis Picard, one of the men who was killed here. The OSS team has received due recognition too. For example, in May 2005 a ceremony was held in Vassieux at which Delmar Calvert, one of the members of OG 'Justine', was awarded the Légion d'Honneur.)



Left: These stills of maquisards undertaking weapon training nicely serve to illustrate the ambush. However, this one was



taken along the Route des Ecouges where the attack of June 21 was repulsed (see page 12). Right: This is the same spot today.

deploy only one company in this sector. Compagnie André, around 150 strong, sent 10 to 12 men armed with rifles, light machine guns and a few light mortars to each pass.

Another problem was communications. Lacking radios, the Vercors force had to rely on runners which made co-ordination very difficult and quick reaction almost impossible. For long-distance wireless communication, the Vercors had the radio sets operated by Capitaine Robert Benes ('Bob') who had parachuted into France on the night of March 14/15. On June 7, a communications centre was set up in a small dairy building at La Britière, south of Saint-Agnan, manned by Benes and his assistant operators with three runners. Eventually the dairy would have seven radio operators.

During the following weeks several parties of Allied military were dropped onto the plateau to reinforce the Vercors FFI. The first, on the night of June 28/29, was a 16-man American OSS Operational Group (code-named 'Justine') which landed near Vassieux. Led by Captain Vernon G. Hoppers, its mission was to instruct and train the resistance fighters in the use of the weaponry, particularly machine guns and bazookas. However, their arrival, coming just three weeks before the main German attack, gave little time to improve things.

The same night an Inter-Allied SOE Mission named 'Eucalyptus' parachuted in blind without a reception committee to receive them. Landing near Vassieux, it comprised two officers, Major Desmond Longe and his second-in-command, Captain John Houseman, and two radio operators, American 1st Lieutenant André Pecquet and a French Lieutenant, Jean-Yves Croix. The two British officers, both from the Norfolk Regiment, were an unfortunate choice for neither of them really spoke French and all their communication in meetings with the FFI had to be done via translators. The team set up quarters at Saint-Martin, close by the Resistance headquarters and started acting as liaison between the Vercors command and the Special Forces HQ in London.

On the night of July 6/7, a third Allied team arrived from Algiers. Mission 'Paquebot' was led by Capitaine Jean Tournissa, his five-strong team (including a female radio operator, Krystina Skarbeck) being tasked with establishing an airstrip just south of Vassieux (code-named 'Taille-crayon') suitable for Dakotas to land to bring in supplies and men. With the help of Capitaine Pierre Haezebrouck ('Hardy'), Tournissa immediately mobilised a force of nearly 400 men — maquisards, civilian volunteers and young farmers — and began clearing a strip 1,050 metres long and 140 metres wide.



Members of Team 'Justine' demonstrate the UD M42 sub-machine gun. It had two magazines welded face-to-face to allow a quick re-load.



The Grands-Goulets road is today closed to all traffic, including pedestrians, but Jean Paul ingeniously turned his Nelson's Eye to the 'Accès Interdit' signs and climbed the tall barrier gate to reach this spot.

MASSIVE AIR DROPS

Shortly after the Normandy invasion, Special Forces Headquarters (SFHQ) — a joint SOE/OSS set-up — advised Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) that the French Resistance could play a major role in the battle in France. Detailing how the French resistance fighters had already made cuts on every important railway line and blocked many highways, SFHQ pointed out that virtual control of all southern France by resistance fighters seemed possible, so threatening German communications and forcing them to divert their effort from Normandy. The resistance groups lacked only armaments and supplies.

A conservative estimate placed the number of armed resistance fighters in France at 15,000 and the number awaiting arms at 31,800, while potential recruits might raise the latter to more than 100,000. These figures were split over eight areas of France ('principal centres of activity') and the supply requirements of each were set out in the report. For the Vercors area, the number of armed resisters was estimated at 2,000, with another 4,800 waiting to be armed. To supply the latter would require 48 sorties delivering a total of 60 tons, the requirements thereafter being 85 tons per month. The few Special Operations squadrons were unable to deliver these huge additional quantities but SFHQ calculated that by diverting B-17 heavy bombers to supply operations, an additional 34,000 resistance fighters could be maintained by carrying out 340 sorties a month.



INA DMV

At dawn on July 14 the Vercors insurgents prepared to receive a large air-drop on 'Taille-crayon', a drop zone just south of Vassieux, as part of Operation 'Cadillac' — a mass supply drop of weapons and supplies by the US Eighth Air Force. A Maquis company was deployed around the zone as protection and vehicles stood parked in the nearby village ready to carry off the supply containers. At 9.45 a.m., as the first wave of aircraft was seen approaching, signal fires were lit.



USNA

Seventy-two B-17 bombers of the US 3rd Air Division came in from the south, wave after wave, each aircraft dropping 12 containers. The tail code of this particular Fortress — a letter 'A' in a square — identifies it as belonging to the 94th

Bomb Group of the 4th Combat Wing, the square being the identification for the 3rd Air Division. The aircraft itself might possibly be 43-37830 *Lady Jane* of the 410th Bomb Squadron.



USNA



GOOGLE EARTH

Above left: As one photographer with the 94th Bomb Group, flying on the right wing, took this shot looking east, a colleague in an aircraft on the left wing pictured the opposite view (*below*) looking west. The markings on the

nearest aircraft, GL-W, identify it as belonging to the 410th Bomb Squadron. Its closer identity is uncertain but it could be 43-37773 *The Uninvited*. **Right:** These are the two areas which appear in the wartime photographs.

These arguments convinced SHAEF that the effort should be made and the US Eighth Air Force was directed accordingly. On June 15 it assigned 75 B-17s to flying supply missions to the Resistance, increasing the figure to 180 aircraft three days later. The 3rd Air Division then assigned five bombardment wings of 36 aircraft each to the first operation. It was calculated that each wing could arm 1,000 to 1,200 men with rifles, machine guns, bazookas, ammunition, grenades and side arms. While SFHQ hurried to transport the pre-loaded containers to the 3rd Air Division's airfields, the bomber crews received hasty training in methods and procedures for what were termed 'Carpetbagger' operations.

Originally scheduled for June 22, the first operation, code-named 'Zebra', was postponed for three days by unfavourable weather. Then, with fighter escort provided at set rendezvous points, five wings took off on the 25th to carry out supply drops in five target areas: the Cantal region, west of the Rhône; the Ain region; the Jura; the Haute-Vienne, and the Vercors. Two aircraft aborted, one was lost to flak, and a fourth was shot down by a German fighter, but the remaining 176 B-17s all made successful drops, delivering 2,077 containers to four of the five target areas. (With no reception committee at Cantal, the aircraft scheduled for that drop joined another wing.)

The formation supplying the Vercors was the 4th Combat Wing, comprising the 94th and 447th Bomb Groups, with 36 aircraft. The 447th Group reported: 'Briefing was at 0200 hours and the target was the plateau of Vercors, west of Grenoble. Instead of bombs, the payload for this mission was canisters containing small arms, ammunition and other supplies to support the Maquis. Also on board were several OSS agents [members of Operational Group 'Justine'] that were to bail out with the canisters and instruct the partisans in the use of the equip-

ment. The drop zone was a clearing in a wooded area and there was no opposition. Results were rated as good and landing started at 1235 hours with no losses.' The drop took place on the 'Rayon' field at Oscece, west of La Chapelle, and 432 containers were recovered.

The 3rd Air Division's second mass drop, Operation 'Cadillac', took place on July 14, French National Day, and involved nine wings delivering supplies to seven locations. The 324 B-17s began taking off from 4 a.m., joining a fighter escort of 524 P-51s and P-47s. The only enemy opposition came from



USNA

In order to reduce speed for the supply drop, the bombers had lowered their undercarriages. The one nearest to the camera is 42-97079 *Dozy Doats* of the 548th Bomb Squadron, 385th Bomb Group (code-letter G) of the 93rd Bomb Wing. (It would be lost in October 1944 on a raid to Berlin, five of the crew being killed and four taken prisoner.)

INA DMV



Left: Between 9.45 and 10.30 a.m., the two wings of B-17s released 864 containers and, thanks to the low altitude of the drop, all of them landed well concentrated on the ‘Taille-

crayon’ field. **Right:** In May 2005, to salute the award of the Légion d’Honneur to OSS veteran Delmar Calvert, a C-47 flew low over Vassieux and dropped a stick of paratroopers.

15 Messerschmitt Bf 109s that attacked the formation south-west of Paris. Together, the bombers and fighters claimed nine of the Germans shot down. Two of the nine wings – the 4th and 93rd Combat Wings – were directed to the Vercors where between 9.45 and 10.30 a.m. the 72 B-17s dropped 864 containers on the ‘Taille-crayon’ field, just south of Vassieux.

The remaining seven wings dropped 2,920 containers on six targets in the Saône, Cantal, Lot, Corrèze and Haute-Vienne areas. Practically all of the 3,780 containers, representing nearly 500 tons of supplies, were recovered safely. Two of the B-17s made emergency landings in the Normandy beach-head but the remainder all returned safely to England.

Most of the men on the Vercors plateau could now be armed with modern weapons, mostly Sten and Thompson sub-machine guns, a number of Bren guns and PIATs, and some bazookas. The Allies considered heavy weapons, like field guns or mortars, useless in guerrilla warfare and did not supply any in spite of repeated requests by the Vercors command in June and July.



ATB

Left: Another still from the same sequence as the parachutes are about to hit ground. **Right:** Some distance south of

INA DMV



Left: The maquisards lost no time in collecting and sorting the containers but the well-organised operation was soon put in disarray when German fighter-bombers arrived overhead and started bombing and strafing the area. These containers



INA DMV

appear to be the large ‘C’ type that was used to drop weapons like Bren guns (right), rifles, Stens, bazookas and rockets. The ‘H’ containers carried Sten guns, pistols, grenades, high explosives, ammunition and field dressings.



ATB

Left: The maquisards lost no time in collecting and sorting the containers but the well-organised operation was soon put in disarray when German fighter-bombers arrived overhead and started bombing and strafing the area. These containers



INA DMV

GERMAN AIR OPERATIONS

As the offensive to destroy the resistance groups was gathering strength in the spring of 1944, the Luftwaffe was directed to lend a hand. A special unit dedicated to anti-partisan operations was hastily created in mid-April from the III. and IV. Gruppen of Fliegerziel-Geschwader 2 (a unit whose proper role was towing targets for the training of anti-aircraft units). Subordinated to Luftflotte 3 and commanded by Major Hermann-Josef von dem Bongart, the makeshift unit known as Geschwader Bongart was based at Bourges in the beginning of June. Its main aircraft was the Italian Reggiane Re 2002 fighter-bomber of which it had 35 on strength in June, 22 of them operational. The unit also operated a great variety of other bomber and fighter-bomber aircraft, including Ju 88s, He 111s, Bf 110s, Go 145s, He 46s, and FW 58s.

Attached units like the III. Gruppe of Schlacht-Geschwader 4 and elements of Zerstörer-Geschwader 1, flew FW 190 fighter-bombers, while the II. Gruppe of Kampf-Geschwader 26, which also assisted occasionally, flew Ju 88s. The latter units were certainly trained in bombing and strafing, but one wonders how the pilots of Geschwader Bongart, whose talent lay in target-towing, could ever be efficient at such a difficult task.

Air operations against the Vercors opened on June 24 when 14 aircraft of III./SG4 attacked a 'partisan village' east of Valence. Four more missions were flown and by the time the group was ordered to transfer to the Eastern Front on July 1, the FW 190s had flown 59 sorties against the Resistance.

OPERATION 'BETTINA'

In early July the Germans decided to clear up the situation in the Vercors and in a document dated July 8 Generalleutnant Niehoff, the commander of Heeresgebiet Südfrankreich, detailed the reasons for it: 'The concentration of strong enemy forces in the Vercors area, being increasingly armed with heavy weapons, and probably reinforced with Canadian paratroopers, and with an enemy airborne force being awaited on the Vercors plateau, all these give reason to assume that, in case of a landing, aggressive actions are being contemplated from this area to occupy Valence and the Rhône valley, and maybe also capture Grenoble'.

Thus it can be seen that the Germans clearly saw the strategic logic of the 'Montagnards' plan and prepared measures to counter it. (The mention of 'Canadian' paratroopers reflects local rumours that were rife all around the plateau at this time.)

The operation to wipe out the 'terrorist bands' in the Vercors was code-named 'Bettina' and the 157. Reserve-Division was ordered to assemble the necessary forces. The division obtained ample intelligence from the SD office at Grenoble, headed by SS-Hauptsturmführer Ernst Floreck, which enabled it to prepare a map detailing over 60 strong points, camps, supply dumps, armed road-blocks, mined roads and tunnels, and pinpointing command posts including the one at Saint-Martin, and some of the fields used to receive supplies.

By July 20 the preparations for 'Bettina' had been completed. The main assault would be carried out by four Kampfgruppen, one of which would attack from the air, the other three overland. Composition of the attack force and unit missions were as follows:

Two companies of airborne troops from the II. Gruppe of Kampf-Geschwader 200 (the special operations wing of the Luftwaffe) under Oberleutnant Friedrich Schäfer

Right: Pilots of Luftlande-Geschwader 1 assembling at Lyon airfield in the early hours of July 21. This is another snapshot from Itter's photo album.

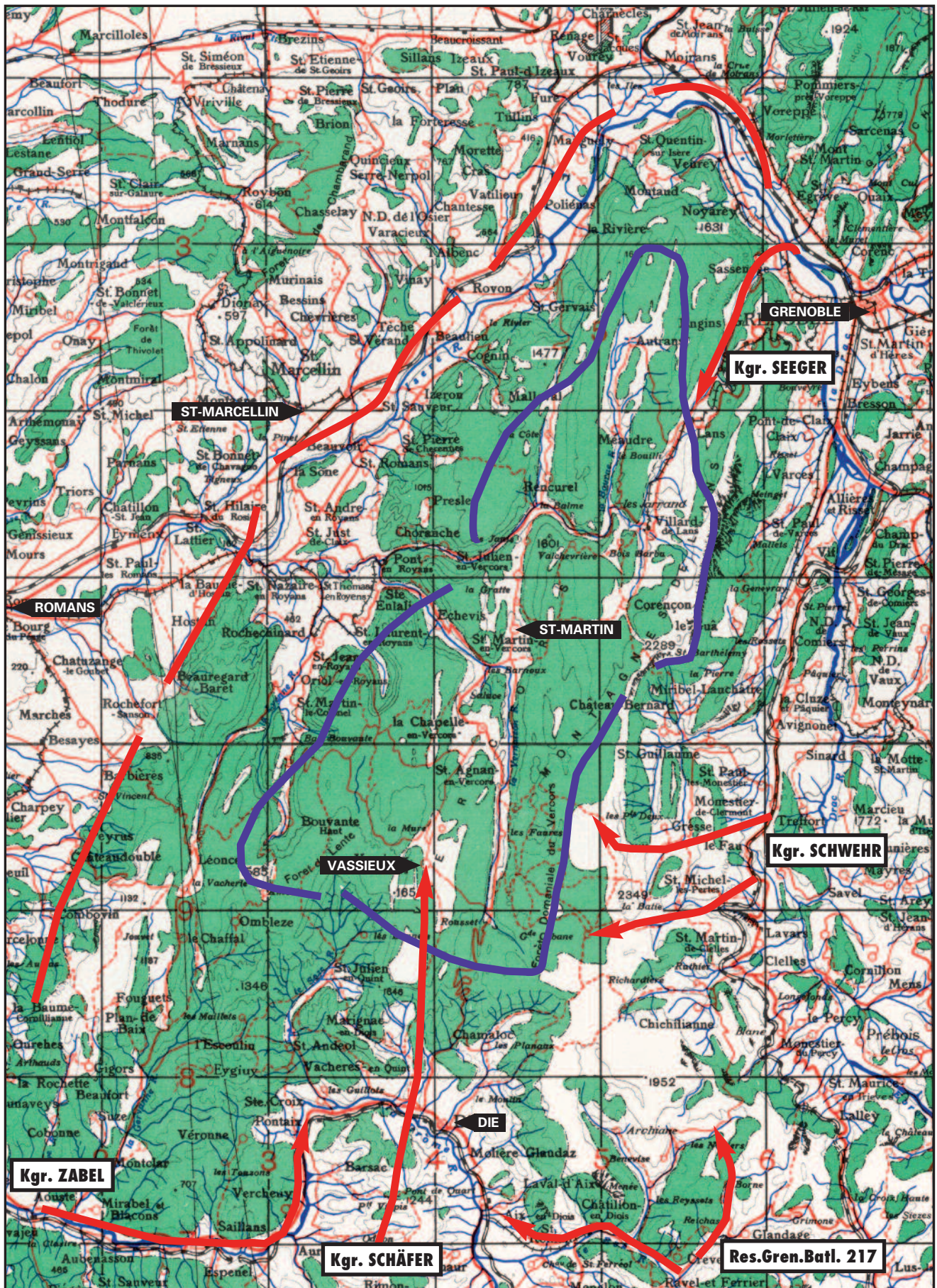


The main Luftwaffe force assigned attack the Vercors stronghold was the makeshift Geschwader Bongart. Its primary aircraft was the Italian Reggiane Re 2002 fighter-bomber of which it had 35 on strength in June, albeit that only 22 of them were operational. Luftwaffe operations against the Vercors began on June 24 but it was not until July 21 that a full-scale airborne assault was launched to eliminate the resistance fortress there.



Left: The officer commanding the airborne force was Oberleutnant Friedrich Schäfer. Right: Gliders came mainly from Luftlande-Geschwader 1. Here one of the glider pilots, Unteroffizier Wilhelm Itter, poses by his DFS 230 glider in July 1944.





Operation 'Bettina', the German plan for eliminating the Vercors bastion, stipulated an attack by four Kampfgruppen. While Kampfgruppe Schäfer was to land in gliders right in the heart of the plateau, Kampfgruppe Seeger was to attack overland from the

north, Kampfgruppe Schwehr from the east, and Kampfgruppe Zabel from the south. In the south-east, Reserve-Grenadier-Battalion 217 was to help seal off the plateau and a variety of forces were deployed to cordon off the western side of the massif.



The DFS 230 glider was equipped with a parachute brake that allowed it to make its landing approach in a steep dive at an angle of 80 degrees and come to a stop directly on top of its target. On the morning of July 21, 21 gliders landed on the plateau, 12 of them coming down close to Vassieux. A second lift two days later brought in another 17. The nine DFS 230 gliders seen in this aerial photograph appear to be still intact, and as the pilots set fire to their aircraft before they left Vassieux on July 26, this indicates that it was taken before that date.

were to land in gliders near Vassieux, right in the heart of the Vercors plateau. The village and the neighbouring hamlets were thought to be heavily garrisoned and the Resistance headquarters was thought to be located there. After taking Vassieux, the airborne Kampfgruppe was to push north to La Chapelle, there to block the southward road to Die, and then advance further north to Saint-Martin and Saint-Julien.

To deliver the airborne force, between July 18 and 20 two squadrons of the I. Gruppe of Luftlande-Geschwader 1 were transferred with tugs and gliders from Strasbourg-Enzheim to Lyon-Bron airfield, 100 kilometres north-west of the Vercors. However, the number of tow-planes available limited the initial assault force to 22 gliders and the airborne attack was therefore planned in two stages over two successive days.

Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 1 of the 157. Reserve-Division was to attack the plateau from the north-east and east, using its four battalions of mountain troops and with four mountain artillery batteries (25 guns) in support. One battle group, under Oberst Alfred Seeger, the commander of Reserve-Artillerie-Regiment 7, and consisting of Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon 99 and Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon 100, with two and a half of the artillery batteries and a company of engineers in support, was to attack from the north-east at the weakest point of the Vercors' natural defences.

The regiment's other battle group under Oberst Franz Schwehr, the regimental commander, comprising Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon I./98 and Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon II./98, with the rest of the artillery in support, was to attack over the passes along the eastern mountain range, an unexpected move in very difficult mountain terrain. Oberst Schwehr selected four passes at the south-eastern end of the range, assigning each of his battalions to capture two of these. The regimental command post was first to be set up at Monestier de Clermont, down the eastern side of the plateau, and then follow Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon I./98.

The fourth main attack force, which was to come in from the south, did not belong to the 157. Reserve-Division. Known as Kampfgruppe Zabel, its main component was the II. Bataillon of Panzergrenadier-Regiment

10 of the 9. Panzer-Division. This division had been refitting in the Avignon area since May, having been withdrawn from the Eastern Front, and was in bad shape after months of heavy fighting. In mid-June, the II. Bataillon, then commanded by Major Heinz Unger, was detached from the division as a quick-reaction force to suppress resistance attacks that had sprung up in the Rhône valley, and it had since been involved in a major action near Valréas and Privas.

In addition to the II. Abteilung, Kampfgruppe Zabel comprised elements of Marsch-Bataillon Müller from the 352. Infanterie-Division and a company from an Ost-Bataillon. Total strength of the force was about 800 men. Starting on July 19, now under Major Zabel, the force pushed south towards the Drôme river valley in preparation of Operation 'Bettina', reaching Crest

on the 20th. Its mission was push east through the Drôme valley, take control of the Die sector and thus seal off the Vercors from the south in conjunction with Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 217, which would be moving towards them from the Gap sector in the south-east.

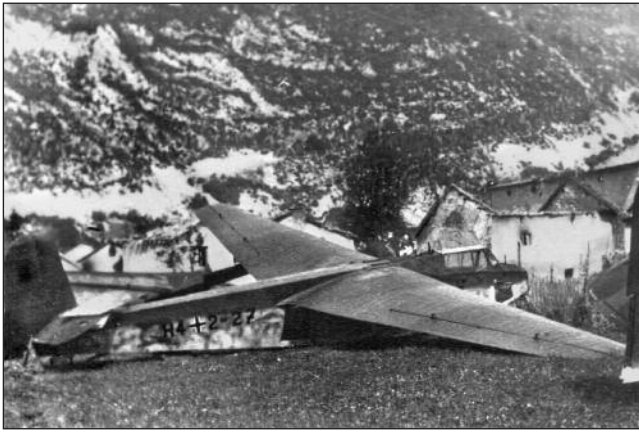
In addition to the four main combat groups that were to assault the plateau, a variety of forces were deployed to cordon off the western side of it. These comprised two battalions from Reserve-Grenadier-Regiment 157 (Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 179 and Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 199); one engineer company from Reserve-Pionier-Bataillon 7 (both from the 157. Reserve-Division); a battalion each from Sicherungs-Regiment 200 and SS-Polizei-Regiment 19; 200 men from the Feldgendarmarie with scratch local units; and three Ost-Bataillone. The Osttruppen — referred to as 'Mongols' by the French — would behave atrociously towards the civilian population, looting and raping, while they also proved prone to desert and join the Maquis.

Sipo/SD personnel was assigned to the various battle groups, their tasks being to interrogate prisoners, gather intelligence and carry out reprisals. There would at times be noticeable friction between the military and the security police, the former often being unwilling to concede to the latter and proving on occasion to act moderately towards the population in accordance with a directive issued by General Niehoff, the Heeresgebiet Südfrankreich commander, on July 22. Headed 'Fighting the terrorist bands; precautions to be taken to spare the civilian population', the directive started by stressing that all officers 'were to constantly ensure that this order was respected. The Ost-Bataillon needed to be controlled with particular attention.' It went on to say that 'During the fighting against terrorist bands, one must obviously act with force and decision against an opponent who, mostly, fights with ambushes and despises the laws of war. Softness is not appropriate. But is also clear that in this struggle the German soldier must keep his legendary discipline and must honour his reputation as a correct and chivalrous fighter. Even if the partisan war makes it difficult to distinguish friend from foe, the German soldier always considers that his first duty is to save the innocent and protect their property from the consequences of war.'



Totally destroyed (see pages 34 and 37), Vassieux was completely rebuilt after the war.

GOOGLE EARTH



DL

The small airborne battle group swiftly set up defence positions in the village but soon found itself surrounded by resistance forces. This snapshot from a glider pilot's photo album shows two DFS 230s with their fabric still intact, the H4 code identifying them as belonging to Luftlande-Geschwader 1.



ATB

The same view today, looking west from the southern end of Vassieux. The village, totally destroyed in the battle, was rebuilt from scratch and today offers nothing to match with photos from 1944, the only link with the past being the mountain in the background.

The 157. Reserve-Division distributed the order with a short postscript signed by General Pflaum on July 29: 'The troops of the division have so far always acted according to these principles. They will continue to do so! Unit commanders will intervene vigorously against those who would act differently.'

This makes remarkable reading in the light of what happened in the Vercors. Were the orders issued after the event as a result of what occurred on the plateau on July 21, the first day of the German attack? Were Niehoff and Pflaum naive or were they merely trying to establish their positions for the historical record? At least the warning to closely control the Ost-Bataillone proved to be tragically relevant.

By July 21, everything was ready. With about 8,000 to 10,000 men involved, 'Bettina' was to be the largest operation conducted by the Germans against the Resistance in Western Europe.

When the order to destroy the Vercors stronghold was issued on July 8, Luftflotte 3 pressed Geschwader Bongart 'to do something quickly about the enemy airfield at Vassieux'. Sorties were flown on the 8th, 9th and 10th, the latter a record day with Geschwader Bongart flying 45 sorties, followed by 35 sorties on the 11th, including attacks on La Chapelle, and 28 on the 13th, with more attacks on La Chapelle and Vassieux.

On July 14 — the day of the Eighth Air Force's massive daylight drop at Vassieux — the Luftwaffe reacted immediately, strafing the drop zone forcing the FFI who were busy collecting the containers to take cover, and bombing the village. At 3.30 p.m. the church



USNA

On August 28, just after the liberation of the area, US Army photographer Tech/5 Robert F. Stubenrauch of the 163rd Signal Photo Company visited the Vercors to record the devastation. At Vassieux, he took a series of pictures showing the ruined village and wrecks of the German gliders. Note the foxhole dug by the encircled Fallschirmjäger close to one of the craft.



DL

Left: As part of the second lift on July 23, two Gotha Go 242 heavy gliders landed south of Vassieux, with a third landing on the 24th, bringing in heavy weapons and supplies for the



ATB

beleaguered Germans. The Go 242 was capable of carrying 20 fully-laden soldiers or a cargo of 3.5 tonnes. Right: Vassieux, looking in a southerly direction today.



USNA

was hit and destroyed. Later that afternoon, the aircraft turned to attacking La Chapelle, with high explosive and, later, with incendiaries. The town was soon ablaze with the aircraft machine-gunning people endeavouring to save their belongings. In all, the Luftwaffe flew 27 anti-partisan sorties that day, 19 of them by Geschwader Bongart. With German aircraft harassing every vehicle and person in sight, the FFI had to wait for darkness to finish the collection of the containers and distribution of their loads.

For the next six days, until July 20, Geschwader Bongart continued its daily sorties, reporting attacks on resistance headquarters, billets and ammunition dumps.

AIRBORNE ASSAULT

The 'Bettina' attack began on July 21 when the two squadrons of I./LLG1 took off from Bron at 7.30 a.m. with 22 Dornier Do 17s towing as many DFS 230 gliders. Each glider carried ten men, including the pilot. One squadron was tasked to land near three small hamlets north of Vassieux, and the other just to the south. Flying at about 8,000 feet, the force took about an hour and a half to reach the Vercors, only one glider being forced to make an emergency landing before reaching the target. Released at 3,000 feet above the plateau, the glider pilots steered their craft for the steep descent to their objectives. It was 9.30 a.m.

In a first wave, seven gliders landed next to the hamlets north of Vassieux, two at Le Château, three at Les Jossauds and two at La Mure. The airborne troops took the maquisards completely by surprise, killing 30, plus 20 civilians. They then turned the farmhouses into fortified defences.

At 10 a.m. a second wave of 14 gliders arrived carrying 140 men, including Oberleutnant Schäfer, the force commander, and SS-Obersturmbannführer Knab, the Sipo/SD commander from Lyon, with a small team from the SD. Surprise was now lost and the FFI, elements of the 11ème Régiment de Cuirassiers, welcomed the gliders with heavy machine-gun fire. Two gliders crashed, killing the pilots and most of the passengers, but 12 landed close to Vassieux, some practically next to the houses.

The airborne troops assaulted the village but their losses were heavy: 22 dead and 23 wounded, i.e. about a quarter of the force. Among the casualties was Knab, wounded in the leg. This left a force of only 150 men, including those in the hamlets to the north, but too few in number to move northwards as planned. Instead the small battle group

During his visit of August 28, Tech/5 Stubenrauch pictured what looks like the same Gotha Go 242.



ATB

The same view today, looking northwards from Vassieux.

quickly organised defence positions in the village where they were soon surrounded.

The FFI re-organised and late in the morning Capitaine Haezebrouck led a first counter-attack from the south-east. Coming under heavy machine-gun fire from the Germans entrenched in the village, the attempt failed, Haezebrouck being killed. Huet then ordered that the village must be recaptured and despatched all available reserves to achieve this. Late in the afternoon Geyer launched a better-organised attack with 400 men, including the 15 Americans from OSS Group 'Justine'. Supported by light mortars and Bren-gun fire, the attack pressed on from the south and south-east and the leaders were about to gain a foothold in the village when Lieutenant Hoppers, the OSS commander, ordered a withdrawal. (Resistants later reproached the American officer for having lost his nerve just when the attack was about to succeed.)

Throughout the day, aircraft from Geschwader Bongart supported the airborne force, first providing cover for the incoming gliders and then supporting the trapped airborne troops with bombing and strafing. In all, the unit flew 44 sorties, while a handful of aircraft from Jagdfliegerführer Süd dropped a total of 7.5 tons of bombs.

GROUND ASSAULT

Meanwhile, the ground assault was underway. In the north, Kampfgruppe Seeger moved south from Grenoble, occupying Lans-en-Vercors and Villard-de-Lans without meeting much opposition and pushing on to the village of Corrençon. It took considerable time to take the latter village where the French defenders — the 4ème Compagnie of the 6ème BCA — made a prolonged stand, holding out for over six hours. An advance beyond the village was difficult as there was no metalled road, only forest trails. Meanwhile, on the Kampfgruppe's right flank, a second column consisting mainly of Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon 100 advanced up the mountain from Lans-en-Vercors and, infiltrating through the woods held by the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA, soon forced the Col de la Croix Perrin. By evening they had reached the villages of Autrans and Méaudre in the northern corner of the French defence perimeter.

The main road leading from Villard-de-Lans to the heart of the plateau passed through the Gorges de la Bourne, a narrow and deep ravine, along which the road was mostly blasted out of the rock and interspersed with a series of tunnels and a few bridges, all of which the maquisards had

destroyed. A swift advance along here was out of the question so instead Kampfgruppe Seeger had to use a cart-track winding up along the wooded slopes south of the gorge.

In the south-east, Kampfgruppe Schwehr attacked towards the passes in the mountain barrier. These narrow passes were perfect defence positions but with only the lone Compagnie André guarding all of them, each one was defended by 20 men at best. Climbing the foothills in the morning, the men of Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon II./98 deployed for combat below the Pas de la Selle and Pas des Bachassons and, after a short but intensive fight, forced both of them. However, the mountain troops did not pursue the retreating defenders but set up bivouac on the passes for the night. A little further to the north, Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon II./98 failed to take the Pas de la Ville and Pas de la Berrièves, and these were still held by the Maquis as night fell. The Kampfgruppe's losses for the day were five killed and 20 wounded.

In the south, Kampfgruppe Zabel pushed up the Drôme valley, their advance delayed by a series of ambushes laid on by the local FFI commander, Lieutenant de Vaisseau Paul Pons. Small firefights raged all afternoon, first at the railway tunnel near Saillans and then at the river bridge at Espenel. Finally the Germans broke through and by evening their spearhead had reached Sainte-Croix, halfway to Die. The Kampfgruppe's losses totalled three men killed and six wounded, while the French had lost 14 men killed and a number of wounded. Six civilians had been killed or were shot by the Germans in reprisal and Espenel was partly put to the torch. From the east, elements of Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 217 advanced as planned over the Col de Grimone and, after some sporadic fighting, pushed on to Châtilon-en-Diois.

Meanwhile, elements of Sicherungs-Regiment 200, part of the forces cordoning off the plateau along its western side, moved forward in the Royans sector.

A DECISIVE STAFF MEETING

On the evening of July 21, Huet held a staff conference in his headquarters at Saint-Martin. Almost all the key military and civilian leaders of the Vercors attended, among them Chavant and Colonel Zeller, the FFI regional commander for south-eastern



This snapshot of Generalleutnant Pflaum is said to have been taken at his command post at Seyssinet, west of Grenoble, during the initial phase of the Vercors battle.

France, and SOE agents Cammaerts and Longe. Huet made it clear that the German attack was strong and he believed that within a day or two it would be impossible to contain it. He said he saw only one option: to disperse. The large forests covering the plateau, in particular the Forêt de Lente in the west, offered many remote hide-outs which would allow the maquisards to hide until the Germans withdrew.

Some of those present, including Chavant and Zeller, proposed instead concentrating all the remaining forces in the centre of the plateau and then breaking out en masse to the south but Huet finally convinced them of the impossibility of organising a fighting withdrawal of that kind with such an inexperienced force.

That night, Chavant radioed an urgent message to Algiers, which has since become famous because it did not mince words and well summed up the sentiment of the Vercors FFI in their desperate situation:

'Morale of the population excellent but will turn rapidly against you, if you do not take immediate measures and we agree with them in saying that those in London and Algiers have understood nothing about the situation we are in. These men are considered criminals and cowards. Indeed, criminals and cowards.'

JULY 22

On July 22, the German airborne force, trapped at Vassieux and badly lacking supplies and ammunition, could do little more than hold on to its positions. Due to adverse weather, the second glider lift had to be cancelled, although Geschwader Bongart succeeded in dropping a few supply containers to the besieged force. On the French side, Huet pushed for another attack to take place but the Luftwaffe harassed its preparation and the attack was deferred several times until it was finally postponed to the following day. In the south, German aircraft attacked



Lieutenant Abel Chabal, mortally wounded at Valchevrière on July 23 in repulsing attacks by Kampfgruppe Seeger.



Top-level conference at the Vercors command post in the Villa Bellon at Saint-Martin. Chef d'Escadron Marcel Descour, the regional FFI commander, (seated, wearing a beret) is briefed by Huet who is pointing to the map.



P. BIOLLEY

the serpentine road leading up to the Col du Rousset so as to cut support to the resistants from the south and reported that three bomb hits had cut the road.

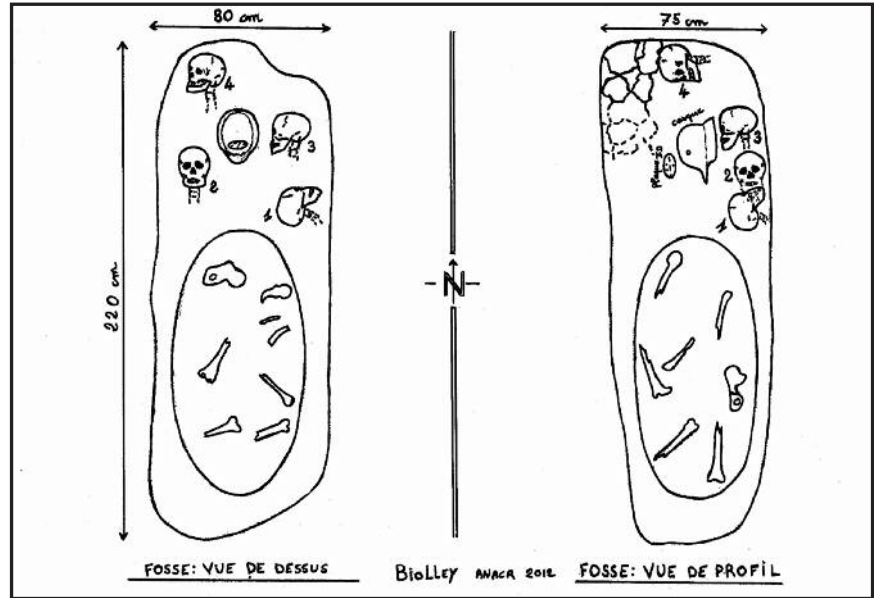
In the north, Kampfgruppe Seeger sent reconnaissance patrols into the forests around Corrençon. Another patrol, moving up the secondary road on the south side of the Gorges de la Bourne, came up against an FFI position at the Belvédère, a narrow defile just before Valchevrière, a hamlet which had been abandoned some years previously. The force comprising 92 men, mainly from the 6ème BCA, were under an experienced soldier, Lieutenant Abel Chabal. He had blocked the road with trees and mines and deployed one platoon up front to overlook the minefield. A second platoon was emplaced alongside the road and a third on the heights to the south. (The fourth platoon was being held in Valchevrière as a reserve.)

As the Germans approached, Chabal's men warded them off with relative ease. Failing to appreciate that the enemy move was just a probing effort, the sector commander, Jean Prévost, sent an enthusiastic but misleading message to Huet: 'Success at Valchevrière. Chabal repulses the enemy and inflicts severe casualties'.

In the east, Kampfgruppe Schwehr was still battling to open the passes and consolidate. Pushing north from the Pas de la Selle, the 7. Kompanie of Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillon II./98 attacked the French positions at the Pas de la Ville from the flank, forcing them to withdraw. Meanwhile, two platoons of the battalion's 8. Kompanie pushed southwards along the mountain ridge to clear the French defenders at the Pas de l'Aiguille.

In the south, Kampfgruppe Zabel reached Die, joining up with Reserve-Grenadier-Bataillon 217 approaching from the east. Withdrawing northwards up the Col du Rousset to the Vercors, the FFI had to leave their wounded comrades behind at the local hospital but the Germans soon found them and executed them on the spot.

The encirclement of the Vercors plateau was now so complete that any thoughts of an organised retreat by the FFI to the south had become impossible. Though German progress might appear to have been slow, with their airborne force still contained at Vassieux, and with only small gains at the eastern passes and in the north, Huet and his staff knew that the assault would be renewed on the morrow. Runners were sent out to distribute a dispersal order to all units on the plateau, with the proviso that it was only to be executed on receipt of a second order.



P. BIOLLEY

Left: During the second glider lift on July 23, one of the DFS 230 gliders crashed at Montjoux, a village some 30 kilometres south of the Vercors. In May 2012, Philippe Biolley, a member of the ANACR26 historical association in the Drôme department, discovered the field grave of four of the men killed in the crash on the hillside above the village. *Right:* These are the sketch plans he drew of the location.



P. BIOLLEY

Fifty-three years earlier, in April 1959, a survey team from the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (German War Graves Commission, VDK) had come to Montjoux looking for field graves of German soldiers killed during the war. This was at the time when the VDK was working to concentrate the graves of fallen Germans into new military cemeteries. The team reported having found seven bodies: one in the village cemetery (Hans Wolf, a German POW who had died in a nearby camp in March 1945) and six others buried in a common grave in a field some three kilometres south-east of the village. Three of the six had been interred in one coffin and, although no identity discs were found, the VDK identified one of them as Unteroffizier August Birzer, the pilot of one of two gliders that had been reported missing on July 23. The other five remains were described as being 'Russian Hiwis' (auxiliary Wehrmacht soldiers) killed 'in a glider crash in July 1944'. Hoping to get more information, the team attempted to find out who was responsible for burying the bodies in 1944, but without success. The five were subsequently buried in the German cemetery at Dagneux, just north of Lyon, in Grave 122-123. Philippe Biolley first heard of the German glider crash in the 1990s but it was only in April 2012 that he decided to go to Montjoux and search the crash site to see if he could find any remains of the glider. No one still living in the village could tell him where it had crashed but Louisette Pellegrin, a local woman who was ten years old at the time, was able to show him the location of the grave excavated by the VDK in 1959. Philippe then began to inspect the wooded hillside overlooking the site, looking for remains of the glider. Moving his search higher up the steep slope, in May 2012 he found the first small bits of wreckage including a pair of binoculars, pieces of leather, uniform buttons and cartridges. *Above:* When he found a pair of boots in June (we are looking at the underside of the two soles), he realised that it was possible that human remains might still be buried there.



P. BIOLLEY

DL

Having received permission from the VDK to search the site on their behalf, Philippe resumed his dig in November that year and soon uncovered four human skulls, which confirmed what he had believed from the outset: as a DFS 230 carried ten men including the pilot, with six bodies having already been found in 1959, this left four men unaccounted for. Digging further, he uncovered a crushed helmet (*above*) and an identification disk (*right*) carrying the number '1733' and marked FREIW. UKR. STAM. RGT. 3, which showed the bearer had been an Osttruppen soldier belonging to the Freiwilligen (Ukrainer) Stamm-Regiment 3. The human remains were duly handed over to the VDK which buried the four men in the Dagneux cemetery in July 2013. Among the other items recovered were fragments of a Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger uniform, a gravity knife of the type issued to Luftwaffe crew, and a fork marked 'BIRZER', all appearing to indicate that Birzer (the only Luftwaffe man aboard) was in fact among the four men buried on the hillside. However, the VDK decided not to challenge the status quo and officially August Birzer (*above right*) remains buried in 1959 in Grave 122-123.



P. BIOLLEY



P. BIOLLEY



P. BIOLLEY

Other items found by Philippe at the crash site included a Wehrmacht belt buckle (*left*) and fragments from a Luftwaffe camouflaged smock (*right*), presumably worn by Unteroffizier

Birzer. Also found were two MP40 magazines, a hand-grenade, and pieces of a Mauser 98k rifle and an MP40 sub-machine gun.

JULY 23

Postponed several times, the third French counter-attack was launched before sunrise on July 23 under the command of Capitaine Maurice Bourgeois. It was poorly co-ordinated for to carry out a night attack with inexperienced troops was just asking too much. The Germans illuminated the night with flares and their machine guns inflicted heavy losses on the attackers. Huet now directed fresh elements from the 14ème BCA to reinforce the troops at Vassieux and a fourth counter-attack was planned.

Good weather having returned, the second glider lift was able to depart in the morning, 20 DFS 230s from I./LLG1 and two Gotha Go 242 gliders from I./LLG2 taking off from the Valence-Chabeuil airfield, just 30 kilometres due west of the Vercors, towed by the same Do 17s that had participated in the first lift. Over 200 men were aboard the gliders: 50 Fallschirmjäger from Kampfgruppe Schäfer, 50 Osttruppen, a platoon of mortars and some 20 French collaborators with specialist knowledge of the Resistance. At the same time the two Go 242s brought in supplies and heavy infantry weapons.

Three of the DFS 230 gliders failed to reach the plateau, one breaking its tow-rope over Marignac-en-Diois, just south of the Vercors, which forced it to land prematurely, and two straying over 25 kilometres south of the planned route. When they turned around to head back north, they encountered strong headwind which caused one to break its tow-cable and land near the Col d'Ancise and the other to lose a wing causing it to crash near Montjoux, near Dieulefit, killing all aboard.

Starting at 7.30 a.m., the remaining 19 gliders landed near the positions held by the besieged airborne force at Vassieux, considerably improving the German position. The reinforcements removed any chance of the French eliminating the enemy force before the battle was decided on the other three fronts, and caused the FFI to cancel the renewal of their counter-attack.

Right: Fourteen of the wounded were immediately shot and 11 others killed later, eight of them by the side of the road. Among the patients was Sous-Lieutenant Francis Billon (from the BCRA, who had broken his leg on landing when parachuting in on the night of July 6/7). In spite of being in uniform, Billon was not considered a prisoner of war and was shot out of hand at Rousset on July 28. The cave at La Luire is today one of the most-revered 'lieux de mémoire' in the Vercors.



MDRV

On July 27, four days after the Maquis had been ordered to disperse, a German patrol discovered their hospital, which had been evacuated from Saint-Martin to a cave at La Luire, halfway between La Chapelle and the Col du Rousset, on July 22.



ATB



INA DMV

Left: Remarkably, among the images shot by Félix Forestier and his team at the Saint-Martin hospital was this one showing doctor Ladislav Fischer and nurse Odette Malossane. Both were captured at the La Luire cave. Fischer was shot at Grenoble on



INA DMV

August 10 and Malossane was deported to Ravensbrück where she died in March 1945. **Right:** Another sequence shows the chaplain, Yves Moreau de Montcheuil, conducting a Mass. Captured at La Luire, he was also shot at Grenoble on August 10.

In the north, Kampfgruppe Seeger attacked in force in the early hours of July 23. As a platoon cautiously advanced along the road towards the Belvédère and Valchevrière, pinning down the French under Lieutenant Chabal with mortar fire, other parties moved forward over the wooded slopes, soon reaching the heights overlooking the French positions. Chabal immediately ordered a counter-attack but the outnumbered French soon crumbled. Chabal sent a last message: 'I am almost completely encircled. We prepare for a Sidi-Brahim. Long live France!' before being mortally wounded with his men killed or trying to escape. (The reference to Sidi-Brahim was to a battle in Algeria in 1845 where French chasseurs had fought against a much-larger number of Arabs and were killed almost to the last man.)

Having forced the road-block, Kampfgruppe Seeger set fire to the deserted houses of Valchevrière and pressed on, soon joining up with other elements that had crossed over the mountain ridge from Corrençon. In the evening, they were at Saint-Martin. A decisive breakthrough had been achieved and the road to the centre of the plateau now lay wide open.

In the east, Kampfgruppe Schwehr cleared the situation at the four passes, finally taking the Pas de la Berrières on the right flank. On the left flank the French defenders, entrenched in a cave near the Pas de l'Aiguille, resisted for the whole day before taking advantage of the foggy night to infiltrate through the German lines and escape down to the valley. Thus the battle for the passes was over. It had cost the Germans just 42 casualties, ten of whom had been killed, while the FFI had suffered between 40 and 50 men killed.

In the south, Kampfgruppe Zabel started up along the long serpentine road leading up to the Col du Rousset. From there it was only ten kilometres to the trapped airborne force at Vassieux. They had little trouble overcoming the damage to the road caused by Geschwader Bongart's bombs, but about 150 metres below the top of the col the road passed through a long tunnel where the FFI had hidden supplies from the massive air-drop of July 14. The resistants evacuated what they could before blowing up the tunnel just as the German column reached it. With the easiest way to Vassieux now cut, Kampfgruppe Zabel had to turn back, its only option now being to send parties up mountainous and wooded terrain more to the west to another gateway, the Col de Vassieux.

During the day, Geschwader Bongart flew 63 sorties and Jagdfliegerführer Süd six, both to protect the second glider lift and to support the ground troops.

DISPERSION

In the evening of July 23, with the Germans breaking through in the north and capturing the last passes in the east, Huet decided that the time had come to disperse. Eager to show the Germans that his forces were not 'a bunch of terrorists' but part of a regular army, he ordered the French detainees and the handful of German prisoners to be released. A last message was sent to London and Algiers, reporting that 'defences were broken through at 4 p.m. after 56 hours of battle'. Praising the courage of the men, the message ended by expressing how sad they were 'to have been abandoned alone at the time of fighting'. As Huet left his headquarters in Saint-Martin, German shells were already hitting the surroundings. Moving westwards along the road via Les Barraques with some of his staff, he soon reached the Forêt de Lente. (The accusation that the Vercors was abandoned by de Gaulle and the Allies, or even betrayed by him, continued to be argued over in France well after the war, and the controversy still appears occasionally in print today.)



That same day, August 10, a search team led by Jean Veyer reached the plateau with the intention of burying the victims. As they approached Vassieux, they came across the decaying bodies of cows and horses . . . and men and women. Bodies were lying in the streets . . . in burned-out houses, and in cellars. That day they recovered 65 dead.



ATB

This is the main junction in Vassieux, looking north; one can hardly imagine the horrific scene that once lay here.



MDRV

Fifty-three of the victims were buried in a provisional cemetery at the northern entrance of Vassieux and a further 27 just to the north at the hamlet of La Mure.

JULY 24-25

From July 21 the Vercors command sent numerous messages to London and Algiers requesting air support and particularly for an attack to be made on Valence airfield from where the German aircraft were operating, but it was not before the 24th that it finally materialised. B-24s of the 485th Bomb Group, US Fifteenth Air Force, bombed the airfield and Geschwader Bongart reported the loss of 24 aircraft destroyed or badly damaged, fuel and ammunition stocks hit, and communications put out of action. The airfield was attacked again on the 26th destroying five Ju 88s and one Do 17. Nevertheless, Geschwader Bongart flew 20 sorties on the 24th, 16 of them harassing the withdrawing FFI while four were to supply their own trapped airborne force. A third Gotha glider of I/LLG1 landed near Vassieux that day, bringing in a 20mm light Flak gun. It was quickly set up on the slopes to the west of the village from where it could dominate the whole sector. Several Fieseler Fi-156 Storch aircraft landed on the plain between Vassieux and La Mure to evacuate wounded, amongst them SS-Obersturmbannführer Knab.

The various German combat groups advanced cautiously on the 24th and it was not until the morning of the 25th that Kampfgruppe Zabel, moving in from the south, finally reached the airborne troops in Vassieux. In the afternoon, pushing north, they linked up with Kampfgruppe Seeger at La Chapelle, while in the east Kampfgruppe Schwehr advanced down from the passes into the valley between Saint-Agnan and Rousset. Later in the day two Junkers Ju 52 transport aircraft landed on the 'Taille-crayon' airstrip at Vassieux and evacuated more wounded, plus the glider pilots and three of their dead colleagues killed in the landings.

On the 25th Kampfgruppe Schäfer, the airborne force, marched out leaving Vassieux and the neighbouring hamlets in ruins. They left behind 72 dead civilians, some killed during the air attacks, but most of them murdered. As they moved north, the Germans set fire to the farms along the way and on arrival at La Chapelle shot 16 hostages and burned down the village.

Advised by Luftflotte 3 that mopping-up operations were now underway, Geschwader Bongart flew 32 sorties in support this day and 18 on the 26th, the final day of air activity in this sector. That same day, Kampfgruppe Schäfer marched down to Grenoble, while in the south Kampfgruppe Zabel pulled back to the Drôme valley, fighting a last skirmish with an FFI group near Gisors on the 27th.

MOPPING-UP AND REPRISALS

Having visited the plateau on July 26 in company with Pflaum, General Niehoff issued an order for the systematic cleaning-out of the Vercors so that no Maquis could re-form there in the future. An order signed by Oberst Schwehr, the commander of Reserve-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 1, on July 27 detailed how the Vercors should be methodically cleared. First Resistance groups were to be tracked down and annihilated and their camps destroyed. Captured weapons and ammunition were to be gathered in and taken away. All men aged 17 to 30 should be arrested, even if they had not supported the Resistance, and assembled into labour squads with Heeresgebiet Südfrankreich to decide on their employment later on.

As for buildings used by the FFI, all schools, town halls, sheds, etc, were to be burned down. Housing should be spared however if it appeared that the inhabitants had been forced to accommodate maquisards. Livestock was to be taken away, leaving only the minimum necessary to sustain the



SEGRAY/ECPAD/DÉFENSE TERRE 288-6692

Shocking photos of two men strung up and left to die at La Mure were taken by Henri Chazot, a member of the search team. The atrocities committed by men of Kampfgruppe Schäfer exceeded by far those of any other German units in the Vercors, yet Schäfer himself denied any responsibility and was instead awarded the Ritterkreuz.

locals, i.e. two cows and two or three calves for a family, or proportionally more in case of a large family. Smaller livestock and poultry was to be left untouched.

While the security forces cordoning off the plateau were busy clearing the fringe areas right down to the foot of the mountain cliffs, the plateau itself was divided into two sectors, the northern one allocated to Kampfgruppe Seeger and the southern one to Kampfgruppe Schwehr. Throughout the ten-day clean-up operation, the Germans denied all access to the plateau by anyone from the French police or administration or the Red Cross, in spite of strong protests by the Vichy prefect.

Members of the FFI caught in the operation were mostly shot on the spot. On the 27th, a patrol of Kampfgruppe Schwehr discovered an FFI hospital that had been set up in a cave at La Luire, a limestone cavern 18 metres wide and twice as deep. The walking wounded had already taken to the woods leaving behind the serious cases, about 30, among them American Lieutenant Chester L. Myers of Operational Group 'Justine' who was recovering from an appendix operation, and four wounded German prisoners. Three

doctors, seven nurses and a chaplain were caring for them. As the patrol of some 15 men approached cautiously, fearing it was a resistance fighters hide-out, the German POWs shouted a warning not to shoot, 'It's a hospital here!'

The wounded that were unable to walk were carried to the side of the road. A villager from Saint-Agnan was summoned to bring up his cow-drawn cart to transport them but, becoming impatient waiting for him, the Germans decided to shoot these 14 on the spot. The 11 others were marched south towards the Col du Rousset but the next day, near the Pont des Oules, they came across another party of Germans whose commander (perhaps from the Sipo/SD) ordered them executed.

Meanwhile, the others that had been at the cave were taken down to Grenoble. Four women — two of them injured in the bombing at Vassieux — and a young man were set free but the nurses, the doctors, the chaplain, and Lieutenant Myers were taken to the Caserne de Bonne for questioning. The eldest doctor, Fernand Ganimède, escaped in the confusion of the evacuation of German



ATB

It happened here, on the left-hand side of the road at the entrance to the hamlet. A small memorial, just visible on the right, lists the names of the victims.



With the Allies having landed in the Riviera, the resistance fighters came out of hiding and quickly re-organised. Capitaine Geyer's 11^{ème} Régiment de Cuirassiers entered Romans in the Isère valley on August 22 and, with other resistance units joining in, the small German garrison soon surrendered.

services but Ladislas Fischer and Marcel Ullman and the chaplain, Yves Moreau de Montcheuil, were all shot on August 10. The seven nurses were deported to Germany, where Odette Malossane died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in March 1945. Myers was sent to a regular POW camp.

Most of the Vercors resistance fighters were able to escape the mopping-up operation, either by hiding in the thick forests of the plateau or escaping down to the valley. Huet, Geyer and OSS Group 'Justine' were among those who stayed hidden on the plateau for a time, while SOE officers Longe and Houseman managed to get away and reach Switzerland where they were interned for a few months.

Among those who failed to break through the encirclement was Jean Prévost, a company commander at Saint-Nizier in June and later a sector commander, shot with five others at the Charvet Bridge just above Sassenage on August 1.

All across the plateau, houses used by the FFI were burned down but there were odd German officers who applied the proviso that some people may have helped the Maquis under force and decided to spare their property. Though Huet had had his headquarters in Saint-Martin, the village largely escaped destruction thanks to the



On the 23rd, elements of Task Force Butler of the US Seventh Army passed through Romans (see *After the Battle* No. 110) but four days later the Germans re-captured the town only to finally withdraw northwards on August 30. The town hall remains unchanged after seven decades.



Romans, August 22 about 10 a.m., fighting for the railway station.



In 1948 the graves in the temporary cemetery at Vassieux were opened and the dead moved to a new Nécropole Nationale some distance to the north, which today contains 171 burials. The previous year another national cemetery had been inaugurated at Saint-Nizier containing 98 of the dead. Today, all over the Vercors, dozens of memorials, large and small, commemorate the largest battle fought during the war between the Germans and the Maquis.



USNA

At Vassieux 97 per cent of the houses were destroyed. Reconstruction was conducted along modern lines, far removed from the traditional style of buildings in the Vercors.



ATB

Today the area offers a remarkable contrast between those villages that were destroyed like Vassieux and La Chapelle, and those that escaped devastation like Saint-Martin and Saint-Julien.

decision by an officer from Kampfgruppe Seeger. Over 500 houses were destroyed in total and 700 head of cattle rounded up and taken down to the valley.

Post-war studies by American geographer Peter H. Nash show that 97 per cent of the houses were destroyed at Vassieux and 95 per cent at La Chapelle. The hamlet of Lente was 88 per cent destroyed, the village of Mallevial nearly 76 per cent, as was the town of Saint-Nizier. These figures include the destruction caused by both the fighting and the bombing.

After a final sweep of the Vercors on August 3, 4 and 5, picking up the various detachments that had been left to guard important points, the Gebirgsjäger left the plateau, and the last German troops departed about August 15.

By then it was clear that, though it may have been a tactical success, Operation 'Bettina' had achieved little. With the Allies having landed in the Riviera (see *After the Battle* No. 110), the resistance fighters from the Vercors came out of hiding and quickly re-organised, soon taking a major part in the liberation of the Drôme and Isère departments. Many individuals that had fought in the Vercors soon enrolled in the French 1ère Armée and would keep on fighting as regular soldiers until the end of the war.



La Chapelle first suffered from bombing and strafing by Geschwader Bongart, which already destroyed a quarter of the buildings, and was then finally put to the torch by German troops on July 25.

CASUALTIES AND WAR CRIMES

Precise casualty figures for the battle of the Vercors are difficult to establish. Early post-war studies put the number at 639 FFI and 201 civilians killed but later research indicates a lower figure. Joseph La Piscirella, the creator of the first Vercors Museum, believes that 332 resistance fighters and 131 civilians were killed in the immediate plateau area but to these figures must be added some 100 FFI killed or executed away from the Vercors. The Milice also executed 19 at Beauvoir-en-Royans on July 26, and the Germans 37 at Saint-Nazaire-en-Royans between July 26 and August 11. Twenty more were shot at Grenoble on August 14, and another 15 at Gua, near Prélentfrey, on the 27th. This would increase the French casualty figure to around 570. Of the 440 resistants, some 200 were killed in actual combat, the rest were killed or executed after the fighting.

On the German side, the official report listed 65 killed, 18 missing and 133 wounded.

The size of the massacres of civilians shocked the population and the French authorities, and Vassieux was one of the four cases of war crimes submitted by France to the Nuremberg International Tribunal, together with Oradour-sur-Glane, Tulle and Ascq (see *After the Battle* Nos. 1 and 49).



ATB

Its post-war reconstruction provided the town with a large square. Located at the southern end, tucked away in the far right corner in this view, is a yard where on the night of July 25/26 the Germans shot 16 young men as a reprisal measure. Part of the Ferme Albert in 1944, it is today known as the Cour des Fusillés and preserved as a memorial. In addition to the many war memorials in the region, there are today two museums documenting the battle of 1944: the Musée départemental de la Résistance du Vercors in the centre of Vassieux and the Mémorial de la Résistance perched high up on the western cliff above the village. The former opened in 1973, the latter was inaugurated in 1994.