

'Roughing' It At Villard Notre Dame

by Tamiko E. Warden

It is a day of perfect blue above, yet the mountains are hidden in a soft white haze. "Parfait," says Serge, the chef-pilote, squinting his eyes up towards the peaks of the Belledonne chain. The aerodrome at Le Versoud is buzzing with planars, and the air is fresh with the coming of spring. It is a day for the mountains.

Just two weeks before, I arrived at the club and begged in atrocious French to fly in the mountains. We stood before a relief map on the wall, where the Alps rose up in peaks of grandeur, someone had placed screws for the main altiports. The screws seemed to rest on a crevice in the fold of the relief. "Here," he points at one screw, watching my face. It reads Villard Notre Dame, and rests in a valley between peaks.

We are in the Rallye 885 this time, with 145 hp, made for the mountains. She is very simple, this plane, but accelerates smoothly over the passes. Serge takes my map, which I am holding tightly, and tosses it into the rear seats. "Regarde," he tells me, "Watch the mountains. There is no time for charts."

The Rallye accelerates up, out of Le Versoud. To the right, and we circle over forests of green. Pass closely to the hillside, where I can see a small frozen lake in a crevice. "Closer," he tells me, and we move so the wings feels as though they will brush the sides of the mountains. My heart is beating faster, and the plane climbs slowly as we round the walls of the small valley. Circle back round, with altitude to cross the pass. Over Chamrousse at 2257 meters, and down the Gorges de la Romanche.

I pasted the Institut Geographique National maps on the wall in my room, and circled all small black airplane symbols in the area Altisurface du Glacier de la Girose on a white surface, nearby peaks up to 3289 meters, Altiport de Meribel-les Allues,



The Rallye waits among the wildflowers on the altisurface at Villard Notre Dame.

photo by Tamiko Warden

Altiport de Megeve, closing in on the Massif du Mont Blanc. Even the names have their own magic, images of tiny strips of grass, dirt and snow hidden high in the Alps. Meribel, Megeve and l'Alpe d'Huez are the three prize altiports, but today we are heading for the most difficult, Altisurface de Villard Notre Dame.

First, the practice runs at l'Alpe d'Huez. Each altiport and altisurface requires its own certification, a competent flight with a certified mountain pilot. Of these, perhaps there are 200. The vertical surface is becoming an old friend, and Bruno's gruff voice a welcome beacon, "Allo, c'est toi?" Another mountain pilot is there in his Jodel with his girlfriend in high

heels and mini-skirt. Bruno is gazing at her skirt and worshipfully holding a strand of white muguets, the recipient of porte bonheur, the flowers of May.

Over the wires again, across the valley over le Bourg d'Oisans, where a small road snakes up the hillside to our destination. We cross over a green hillside, and Serge points down below. No, I think, it's impossible. That's a cow pasture. But there is no time to think, we are in the gorge, and entering into the pattern.

The gorge quickly narrows, leading up to waterfalls and a snowy peak, and we circle to the right. "Ne pas survoler le village," he tells me, and we fly to avoid a small village clinging to the

mountainside. The trees reach up to nearly brush the undercarriage, and we move towards the pasture.

Villard Notre Dame begins with a grade of 25-30 percent - it feels you are landing upward on the back of a sofa. The Rallye takes the grass-covered slope, which slants in a 2/3 convex against a mountain, feeling its way through the holes and the hard dirt beneath the wildflowers. The slope eases to 20 percent, and 300 meters later we are a small area of flat surface at the top.

The door opens up and out, the mountains are clear far off in all directions, and the ground is thick with the smell of coming spring. Serge jumps out, and bounds off towards a group of rocks, which hold a tattered windsock. "Viens," he motions to me, "come here," cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

He searches the rocks, lifting one, then another. "Ah," he exclaims. There is a green bottle, and he pulls the cork and lifts the bottle to his mouth. His face grimaces, and he puts back the cork, and the

bottle under the rock. He puts a finger to his lips to hold the secret and we stand on the rocks, looking out over the mountains.

The air is clear in a way that no place by the city can be, and the peaks reach out in white jagged edges to the blue, blue sky. What was haze in the town is now the clear beauty of the mountains. We can feel the earth rich with the beginning of spring, and the grasses thick around our ankles. Small wildflowers, exquisite, exuberant, share the mountainside.

I breathe deeply. We are talking of Africa, of flying where nature reaches out in savage grandeur. He shakes his head, "There is no place like this on earth," he tells me. We cannot agree, even on this extraordinary mountainside, the place where true pilotage begins and finishes on a grass slope of gentle wildflowers and views far beyond.

It took me nearly three months to see what the chef-pilote told me on that hill. We took off down that 20 percent slope, the Rallye rumbling on the hard dirt, shaking her-

Cont. on Page 30