

Flying In The Blanc-Noir World Of The French Alps

by Tamiko E. Warden

Stretching before us blanc-noir are the regal Les Grandes Rousses, valleys opening to pure glaciers, peaks rising to April skies. Serge reaches down to hydraulic system, 20 pumps, in rapid succession. I look outside the narrow window of the Mousquetaire - the wheels have risen up on top of the skis. Ahead is the white world of Glacier de l'Entendard, and we are coming to land on its pure slopes.

We are in the box now, slowing the airspeed, setting the flaps. Left pattern, overfly the glacier, seeking out crevasses. Smooth tracks outline the traces of those before us, sweeping upward with a graceful flourish at the finish.

Gliding to a solid wall of white, the Mousquetaire hugs the snow, jolting slightly. The 100 hp engine purrs as we follow the flourish, off to the left. We cut the engine. "A droit," Serge tells me, for the snow is deep on the left. The door opens to a world of the silence of snow.

Our boots on the snow echo in the cradle of the glacier. The air is crisp and cool, and we look outward to jagged peaks which point the direction of Mont Blanc. It is a moment of clear and total silence. Suddenly, against the clear skies, a cloud rises over the peak. "Vite, vite," says our chef-pilote, crushing his cigarette, and we quickly board. A roar of engine, and we rock the Mousquetaire to slide across the altisurface. The cabin rattles with the bumpy snow as we pick up speed, the skis silent, and we are airborne.

The flying world of the French Alps is a breed unto itself. To receive the certification of the mountains, a pilot must show proficiency with altiports, altisurfaces, landings and take-offs in grass and on snow, understanding of weather and local topography, and an uncanny sense for the mountains themselves. There is no set "course" to take, nor a series of specialized books to read. It is a matter of developing a "sense" of the plane and the mountains, and each pilot is measured by his judgment.

One of the first place I visited in Grenoble, tucked at the base of the Alps, was the aerodrome at Le Versoud. Near the town of Domene, Le Versoud sits at the base of the Belledonne chain with a tarmac and two grass strips. Within one hour, a pilot can land on glaciers, altiports (6,000 plus feet) and rugged altisurfaces with 20 plus degree slopes. An hour and a half by air lies Europe's tallest mountain, Mont Blanc, and the border to Switzerland.

Rounding the Cimes du Sauvage, we move into a snowy valley. Our destination is l'Alpe d'Huez, the prize of the altiports. Beginning at 5930 feet, finishing at 6102 feet, it averages a modest 16.2 percent slope under 1500 feet long, with an approach that drops into a valley for faulty pilots.

"Ben, bien" comes in the gruff voice of Bruno over the radio as we move towards the vertical asphalt. He holds a hand-held radio, and passes judgment on my landings. We take the pattern over the strip, heading out over the wires, across a mountaintop. Head straight for a scree face across the valley, turn right to another mountain, then bear towards Huez. A telephone wire reaches across the bottom of the strip, with a valley that pitches directly down.

of the strip is a bar with a large sundeck, next door to the emergency helicopter rescue team. Bruno bounds out of the part-time tower to see the female "American" pilot.

A few cigarettes later on the part of the chef-pilote, and we roar down the slope into the valley. Climb up to 7500 feet, and just round a peak to the right. The mountain snakes around the valley, high mountain lakes covered in ice. We are well above the trees. Pass a mound of stone, and we veer sharply downward to the left, through a narrow valley with barely room for a wingspan. The breath passes out of my body and my ears buzz with the G-force.

Ten minutes later we are on the ground at Le Versoud, the tower only hesitating slightly to my English radio work. I clock the hours - just 1.1, and know I am hooked. Little did I realize that this was only the beginning of the Alps adventure.

Over the next two months, the altisurfaces, one with a bend and 25-30 percent slope covered with wildflowers, picnics on glaciers at Mont Blanc, and many little strips would beckon. Not to mention Marie's superb meals and wonderful bar just across the hall from the aeroclub, that would do wonders for my French practice.

There is a sense of wonder in the Alps, of a presentation in Nature so superb, it seems divinely made for aviation. Perhaps it is best described by one of the pioneers of French Alps aviation, Herman Geiger, 1957 (Les Alpes et le Massif Central by Robert Barner, 1992)

"Rien ne peut nous donner ce sentiment de paix, comme nous donner un vol dans les Alpes, sous

Cont. on Page 36

Alps ...

Cont. from Page 34

un ciel aussi pur que l'eau d'une source qui coule le long de nos rochers.

Sur cette terre, l'homme est toujours prêt à la lutte. La-haut dans cet espace, il est seul livre à lui-même, tout petit. La terre et le ciel sont à lui."

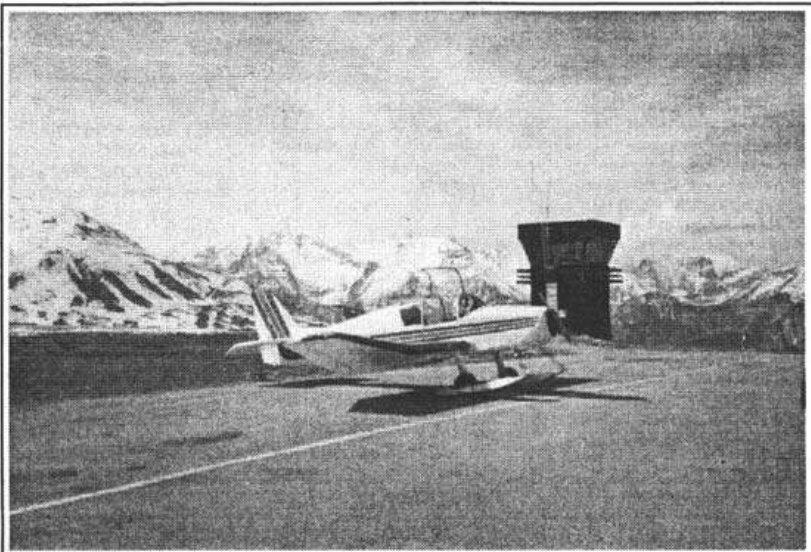
"There can be nothing as the sentiment of peace that we find in flying in the Alps, under a sky as pure as the source of water which has flown long on its rocks.

On earth, man is always ready for struggle. But up high, in space, he is alone, living by himself, so small. The earth and the sky are his."

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

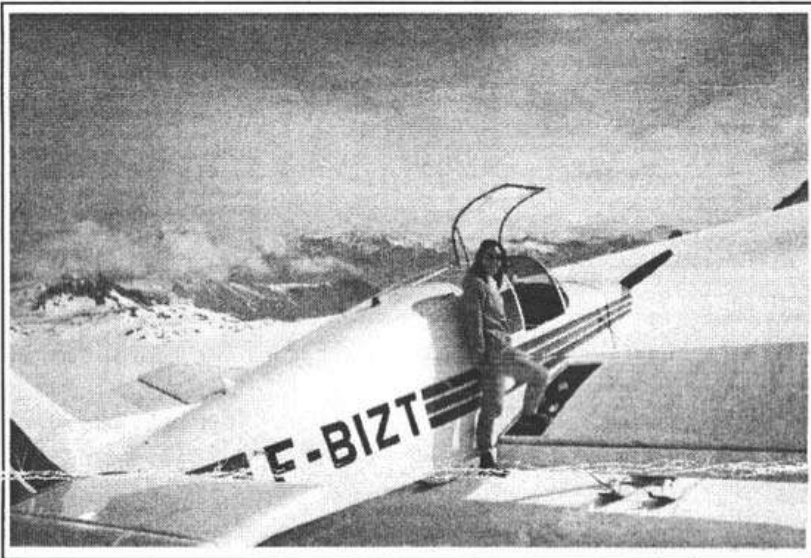
Tamiko Warden is a freelance writer with a recent passion for aviation. She spent five years living outside the U.S. working and studying in Japan and has traveled extensively throughout the world. Some of her favorite locations include South Africa, Namibia, Borneo, Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea and exotic off-the-beat islands.

A previous serious athlete, Warden's varied background includes a stint on the U.S. Women's National Cycling Team, completion of the 1984 Olympic Trials and 1986 Tour de France Feminin, sailing the first U.S. yacht into the Soviet Union, and participation in mountain climbing, kayaking and triathlons in different parts of the world.



Le Mousquetaire awaits on L'Alpe d'Huez, France April 1996.

- photo by Tamiko Warden



Tamiko Warden on the Altisurface Glacier de l'Entendard, France.

She holds a Bachelor of Science in Marketing and a Master of Arts, Pacific Affairs with the University of California, San Diego in California. Her languages include fluency in Japanese and conversational French. An FAA private pilot since 1985, when she departed for a year round-the-world trip, she has flown in France, Namibia, South Africa and Kenya. At this time she resides between Laguna Beach, California and Los Angeles and is in the process of moving to South Africa.