

Montagne de Coupe . . . "out of sight of landable areas"



Cheval Blanc (from Coupe) . . . "time to pack up and go home?"

LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS

Photos: Roger Biagi

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WILLIAM MALPAS takes us on a spectacular trip along a continuous ridge of mountains in the southern Alps.

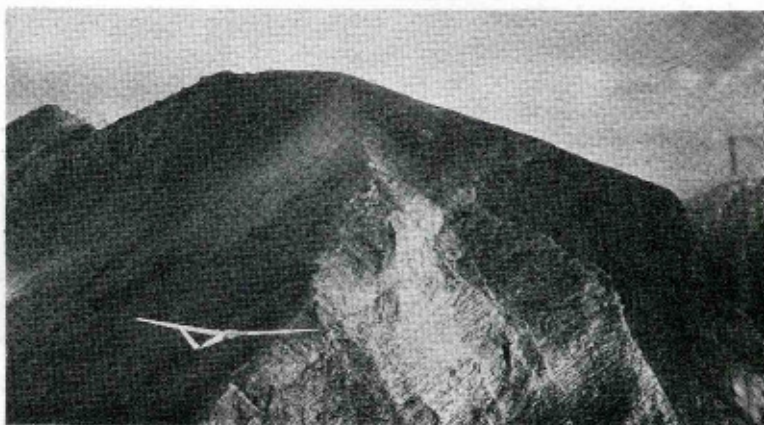
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Do you know that the south-east corner of France contains a soaring paradise known as the southern Alps? Most French pilots know it because they have been to a course at St Auban, one of the two National Gliding Centres. Many return every summer to fly at one of the several airfields in the area. Some German and Belgian pilots have discovered it and come back every year with their own aircraft. The competitors at Vinon know it, but this includes very few British pilots.

This "gliding paradise" is roughly quadrilateral, with all-year-round clubs at Fayence and Vinon marking its two southern corners. Its eastern boundary is the Italian frontier and its northern limits are a climatic "barrier" along the line of the Col de Cabre and the Col de Galibier. Often gliding conditions deteriorate on passing this line, but there is a strong temptation to do so, because there is heady stuff to the north, eg Mont Blanc and various 500km turning points. There is no obvious western boundary, because good flights can be made along the lines of the Luberon and the Ventoux, but this is the direction of the Rhône Valley, not the high mountains. The area marked on the map encloses virtually all the tasks set at the Vinon International Mountain Flying Competition during the ten years of its existence.

Now tighten your seatbelts! I am going to take you for a trip along "*Le Parcours des Combattants*", a continuous ridge of mountains 60km long running roughly north-south in the middle of the area. (In English a "*parcours des combattants*" is a commando course). The Parcours was so named by Roger Biagi whilst an instructor at St Auban and the name has stuck.

It implies that the route is forbidding at first attempt, but it becomes easier with practice. It is one of the principal routes to the north. It is not the only route, and is not direct, so it does not always pay to take it, but if you go



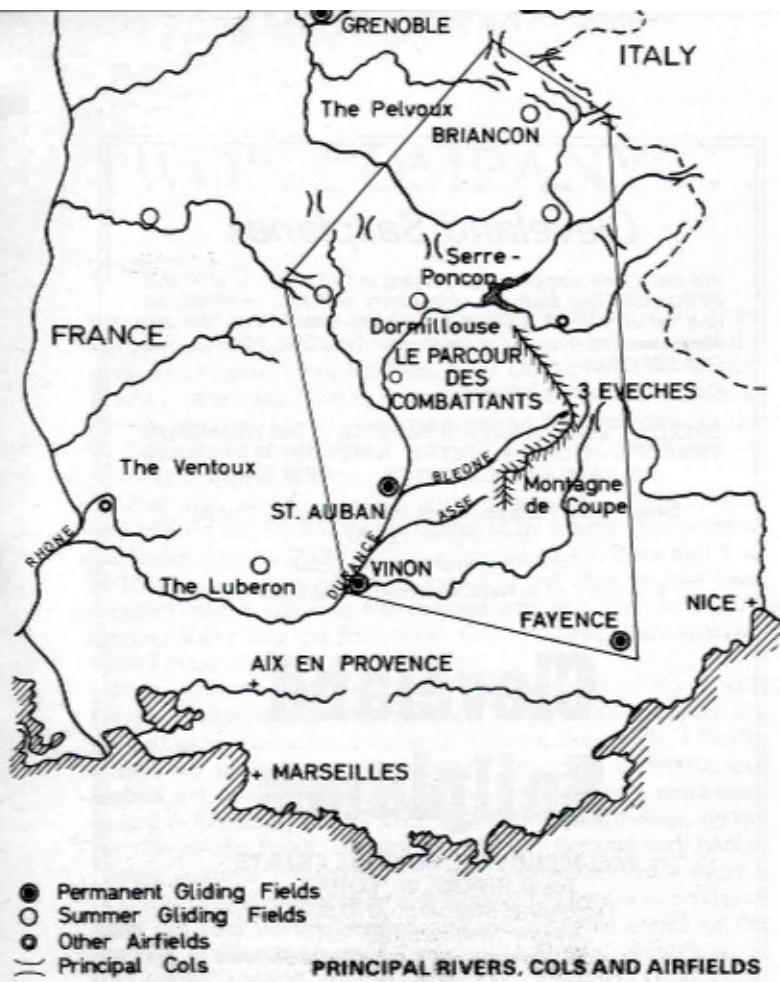
Trois Eveches (2819m) . . . "nearing the high point of the Parcours"

that way on a good day in July or August, you will certainly have company.

Going from south to north, the start is the Montagne de Coupe (1451m rising to 1703m). Here, if you are at the level of the top of the mountain ridge, which you should be, you pass out of sight of landable areas. The prospect is awe-inspiring, and for the first time it can be frightening, but being sensible you have come with an expert, either in a two-seater or in another glider—and you are in radio contact.

There are two important points to note about the Montagne de Coupe. Although you appear to be very low over the mountains of the moon, even if you arrive near the bottom of the vertical face which clearly shows in the photograph, you are actually in gliding distance of respectable fields, which should be clearly marked on your map. This same reflection applies for most of the Parcours. It is hard to believe you are safely in gliding range of a field, and you are so concentrating on following the glider in front or gazing in awe at the surroundings that you don't have time to take out the map and verify the calculation. You should have done that on the ground before leaving.

The second point is that the Montagne de Coupe is a privileged spot in the Alps. It heats up very fast, it is well oriented for the south-westerly gradient winds and also well oriented for valley winds coming from the Durance



Trois Eveches and La Blanche . . . "looking back along the Parcours"

the third photo with the Edelweiss nearing the high point of the Parcours. If you are below the ridge at this point flying close to the vertical walls, you will find the rock formations fantastically distorted by the upheavals of the earth's crust which produced the Alps. You are at the very source of the Bleone and, therefore, at the receiving end of all the warm air surging upwards along the length of its valley. If you haven't tightened your seatbelt, you will wish that you had!

From here the long ridge of Montagne de la Blanche leads you naturally and calmly to the northern end of the Parcours—the Dormillouse (2505m). Calmly, because the country opens out to the left into a broad valley with some reasonable fields, and in the distance the beautiful lake Serre Ponçon, where the Durance has been dammed. Further to the north are the high mountains of the Pelvoux (4000m+).

Our fourth picture shows the Trois Eveches and the Blanche looking back just before arriving at the Fort on the summit of the Dormillouse, which in summer often has many visitors, as there is a good track leading from the valley. The fort is a well-known turning point which is often photographed from below, as in our last photograph.

If you are still at the level of the ridge, you will note that you have climbed from 1451m to 2505m and the chances are you have *NOT STOPPED TO CIRCLE*. On checking my logbook, I find that I have followed the Parcours 20 times, and I cannot remember stopping to circle more than two or three times. I find this very exhilarating. A wonderful change from the search/climb/glide routine of flying over flat country.

It also poses an interesting technical problem in speed

and its tributaries, the Bleone and the Asse. If the Coupe doesn't work anywhere along its entire length of seven kilometres, it is time to pack up and go home—because very few of the other mountains will work either.

Next in line is the magnificent Cheval Blanc (2323m), seen in the second photograph from the northernmost point of the Coupe. Dazzling white even in summer without its mantle of snow, local flying legend has it that an American Flying Fortress flying parallel to the Cheval Blanc in 1947 found itself in the "down" of the wave and landed in the snow. A second was despatched to drop supplies to the crew and did the same thing!

After the Cheval Blanc there follows a long line of ridges climbing gradually to Les Trois Eveches (2819m) and Tete de l'Estrop (2961m), sometimes in cloud but well clear in



Fort on the summit of Dormillouse (2505m) . . . "northern end of the Parcours"



"Well-known turning point often photographed from below"

tasks. Do you fly at maximum speed consistent with staying at ridge height? Or when cloudbase is high enough, do you pick the best lift to circle up above the ridge and fly the corresponding MacCready setting in between? My own solution to this problem is as follows:

First, to arrive at the Montagne de Coupe at minimum safe altitude.

Secondly, to avoid circling.

And thirdly, to fly at a MacCready setting which will bring me to cloudbase at the Dormillouse. In practice, this setting corresponds roughly to a sinusoidal pattern of lift and sink according to the theory developed by E. Kauer and H. G. Junginger for flying along cloud streets, and published in "Aerokurier".

Of course there are other spectacular lines of ridges equally beautiful and just as thrilling to follow. Some are spiced by a high col (or saddle), which must be passed in order to continue the task—often with the uncertainty of being high enough to pass when you get there. Irritating if you cannot, because you must return and go around another way. Very exciting if it works with only a few feet to spare.

The southern Alps are no place for beginners, and even experienced pilots new to this game are well advised to practise mountain flying close to an airfield before setting out cross-country. Radio contact with somebody is highly desirable, and maps must be well prepared and studied before leaving. It is interesting to note that there is already some talk of a French mountain flying rating for glider pilots, in view of the large influx of visitors during the summer and the difficulty of checking their experience.

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