

Chapter 11

The Free French Connection

Since our inability to speak French limited normal verbal communication, I do not believe the lump in my throat was too noticeable when we left the Beffera home, although I am sure we were all four holding back a few tears. A feeling of closeness develops when people share a common danger for some period of time, especially when they are aware constantly of the fine line between life and death even as they pray and hope for the best.

It was mid-afternoon when a car operating on coke gas appeared, and Ken and I were invited to take our first ride in what was called a “gazogene.” As we bade farewell to the Befferas, our new guide drove off with us in the back seat. The road was level, and we were pleased with how well the gazogene was running. Apparently it had a fresh charge of coke which was being burned in a 55 gallon metal drum mounted on the rear bumper. Some kilometers later and on a very mountainous road, we became aware of the limitations of this source of energy. We had driven steadily but not fast. Now, while trying to go up a long and constant incline, the car stalled. We did not see any houses or people to be concerned about, but this was a new experience for us. The driver took it all in stride as he got out of the car and walked around to the rear. There he inserted a crowbar-like piece of metal into an opening in the steel drum and stirred the coke so that it would burn better. In a few minutes the coke was again releasing enough gas to power the car, and we drove on.

It was 30 kilometers or more from the Beffera house to our next stop, where we spent the night at the home of Henri Pontier. His son, Rene who spoke English, escorted

us from the gazogene to the house. The area seemed more remote and less populated than any other place we had been. That was fine with us because we felt that fewer people meant less risk.

The next day, a young man, perhaps it was again Rene, took us into the mountains on foot. In this remote area there were only logging roads, and we saw men using oxen to do farming and logging. The oxen were slow but dependable. They could get along on hay and pasture with very little grain. While they did not require petrol like the tractors I was used to seeing on farms, they were even slower than the horses and mules we had used on the farm years before. After our experience with tractors and flying, this one was like stepping into reverse time capsule.

There in the mountains, our hide-out was an old mill which was not being operated. There we joined about six young men who belonged to the Free French or Marquis. For the first time in all our travel we saw our helpers bearing arms. These men appeared able to defend themselves in a limited skirmish or to conduct a small hit and run attack if advisable. Coming together with these people was an introduction to a different aspect of what takes place in occupied territory during a war. (A marquis is a scrubwooded upland, but it came to mean a new form of resistance: armed camps in the woods, ready for combat. As the Marquis grew, it needed arms, training, leadership, and food. Individuals of the Marquis are commonly referred to as Maquisards.)

The old mill had a fireplace in one end of the room on the first floor. The room contained a picnic-style table and some chairs. Several doors or openings could provide for a quick exit or entrance to the rooms and this feature made the mill a good hide-out. The mill was built into the side of the hill, and the mow on the second floor could be entered at ground level from the outside or by a ladder from the inside. We slept in the mow on some hay.

Some of the men seemed to go and come as if they were spending part of their time at work or in homes nearby. Certain members of the group were present all of the time. It seemed they were from another place in France and here they could hide from the Germans and be active members of the French Resistance.

Ken and I were permitted to walk in the woods, but we did not stray very far from the old mill. We did not want to make the mistake of walking into a place of danger, and our group did not seem to want us to see everything in the area. One day while we were walking in the woods scouting around to see what the area was like, we had a real scare. It was very quiet in the woods, and we did not expect to have the silence broken. A sudden noise almost under our feet sent our hearts racing. Our momentary scare was over when we saw it was only a mountain grouse, but the noise it made leaving its nest – unbelievable. The reality of being behind enemy lines had a tendency to keep us on edge, even in a remote area where the only people we saw were friends. On another occasion we walked into a heavy thicket and came upon a carefully hidden truck so well camouflaged that it could only be seen from a few feet away and certainly not from the air. When Ken made a comment about our find, one member of the group made it clear that they knew it was there. They had not intended to share that information with us and preferred that we not snoop too much.

There was plenty of food at the mill, but not much cooking was done. Each person shirked for himself, and people spent a lot of time sitting around the table talking. That was where the men also sat to clean and care for their guns. During one of those times, Ken and I were sitting with our backs to the fireplace talking to a young man who was cleaning his gun on the other side of the table. Suddenly a shot rang out and a bullet whizzed over our heads. The man had failed to make certain the gun was

empty before starting to clean it and had accidentally discharged a bullet left in the chamber. He got up as if unconcerned about the incident, discharged the empty shell casing from his gun, and walked around the table to the fireplace. He spotted the bullet which had just missed us lodged in the wooden mantel over the fireplace, took a pencil from his pocket and drew a circle around the bullet as if he had just hit the bulls-eye of a target, returned to his seat, and proceeded to finish cleaning his gun. He made no apology and no comment. It was as if nothing had happened, and it made us wonder how safe we really were. From then on, we were more aware at all times about what our friends were doing.

It was a loose-knit group that did not appear to be well-trained and well-disciplined unit. We quickly learned that the group had a primary mission in the scheme of things, however. They were not far from a grass-covered mountain top which had been cleared of trees. The grassy area was still surrounded by trees, and the terrain made it possible to hide near the top of the mountain. They showed us this area and some covered dugouts around the clearing. All of this was set up as a drop zone for Allied fliers to use at night. There were several such place throughout France.

In preparing for us to participate in one of their missions, they took us through the complete process. They had a radio in the old mill, and it was always turned on at noon so they could listen to the British broadcasting station. At noon a coded message would indicate if a drop was planned for that night. At 6:00 p.m. they would listen again for a coded message to see whether or not the mission was still on. One day, the message at noon indicated a drop was planned for that night, and so during the afternoon, we went through a practice run in preparation for the mission. We went to the mountain top, and the men dispersed around it. Certain men would be using flashlights to pinpoint the drop area when they heard the plane arriving at the

predetermined time. All supplies dropped would have to be removed from the clearing and hidden in the fewest minutes possible. If personnel were dropped, the same urgency existed. Timing was critical because German aircraft might be expected to try and follow the British or American plane. The Germans would try to shoot the airplane down or drop flares to see the drop area and the activity on the ground. A quick response on the ground was the best way to avoid having the drop zone spotted and to protect the items that were dropped.

After we went through our practice run on the mountain top, we returned to the old mill to await the 6:00 p.m. news, hopeful of a confirmation that the mission was still on. We were all disappointed when the coded confirmation was not given. The weather was good for making a drop, so the men in our group concluded that a drop to another location had been given priority. Only a limited number of missions of that kind could be flown because too many of them drew extra attention. Too many drops to one location could even create supply dispersal problems on the ground. While we were with the group, there was one more noon message that indicated a drop was planned, but it did not get evening confirmation. As a result, we never participated in receiving a drop, but the practice run did give us some feel for what went on and a better understanding of their objectives when we later became a part of their dispersal system.

Only a limited amount of English was spoken at that mountain hide-out, but the exchange of nonverbal expressions was sufficient to produce some understanding of the men and their thoughts. None of these young men had first-hand knowledge about the United States. However, the success the Americans had enjoyed at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and the media's references to baseball and other sports in the United States caused them to respect Americans athletic accomplishments.

Other ideas these men had about Americans came from cowboy and Indian movies and gangster movies. When someone mentioned Chicago, there was a pantomime alluding to guns and gangsters. They showed respect for Ken and me because we were fliers and we had participated in missions against a common enemy, Germany. In their dedication to the resistance movement, they experienced a kinship with us.

The last night we were to stay at this camp was a Saturday. That same night the Maquisards planned to conduct a special mission. They considered the Vichy police traitors to the resistance movement because they worked with the Germans and in many ways they were considered more dangerous than the Germans. They were usually local Frenchmen who knew the community, the people in it, and very often people's feelings about the German occupation. They also had a better chance than the Germans did at finding out about local activities. People were more apt to let their guard down or even trade information for a favor with the Vichy police than they were with the Germans.

By essentially working for the Germans, the Vichy policemen had access to many items that were in scarce supply. On this occasion, a small resistance group we were with had received information about the plans for the wedding and the reception. In comparison to the general standards at the time, this was going to be an elaborate wedding. It would be climaxed by a reception with plenty food and wine, much of which had already been obtained and stored for the occasion. The timing had to be right, but the situation presented two opportunities. One was a chance for this group of the Free French to secure a supply of food and wine. The other was a chance to get something away from the Vichy policeman that would be difficult if not impossible to replace on short notice. Since the

opportunities outweighed the risk involved, the group made a decision to go for it.

The truck we had found in the thicket would be used to transport some of the personnel and to return the items to the camp. Ken and I were told about their plans and invited to join them. They were confident and sufficiently armed to win if using the weapons became necessary. In spite of their apparent ability to succeed against almost any odds, Ken and I turned down their invitation and stayed at camp. We figured our inability to communicate in French might endanger the success of their mission as well as ourselves.

Well after dark, the men took the truck and left the camp area. We remained alone and later went to the mow to sleep. We had no idea about how far they were going or how far they were going or how long it would take for them to complete the mission and return. We expected the men to be able to combine the element of surprise, their potential power of arms, and perhaps some inside information or help in a way that the mission could be achieved safely.

We were awakened a little before midnight and invited to the room below to join in celebrating their success. Naturally we responded, and even though we did not know how much loot they had expected to get, we concluded from their behavior and up-beat attitude that they had succeeded in getting as much or more than expected. The food consisted of several smoked hams, a supply of cheese, at least one barrel of table wine, several bottles of cognac, several cases of various wines and a few bushels of apples. The men indicated their biggest problem may have been getting everything on the truck and back to camp. We did not see everything they had captured because they left we got the feeling that their greatest reward had come from watching the behavior of the Vichy policeman, who had had to watch helplessly as they carried off the food and wine he had been collecting and hoarding for weeks. Some

might call it sweet revenge against a regime of collaborators and traitors.

From that incident I did learn at least two things. One was that an individual like the Vichy policeman, who is a traitor to his countrymen for short-term personal or political gain, may find there is a price to pay. That incident may have been one of the less severe penalties. The other lesson was more personal. To appreciate the value of the Maquisards' bounty, we were expected to sample the various wines and cognac they had secured. We tried to respond to their wishes and not insult our hosts. In our efforts to show appreciation for their achievements and their hospitality, we learned the price one pays for mixing drinks or for over-indulgence. The results affected me for more than 24 hours, and it was experience I have never repeated.

Since we never knew the names of the young men in this small group of resistance fighters or where their homes were, I have no way knowing about actual skirmishes they became involved in or how many of them survived the war. But there are many monuments erected throughout France in memory of the Maquisards, their resistance activities, and the lives that were lost.

Soon after the war I heard from Rene Pontier. He is the son of the late Henri Pontier with whom we stayed before going to the Maquis' hiding place. He was the one who escorted us to his father's home. We have maintained some contact over the years, and from him we have learned much.

Rene Pontier was involved in security work with the Maquis and first worked from Aurillac, France. He was contacted about us by Bernard Cournil, who had been contacted by the Chief of the local resistance, Henri Tricot. Rene was contacted because he spoke English. Then as he remembers, "Our radio specialist announced to the Allied Services in Great Britain your names and gave many

precise information about your ‘Odyssey,’ your next evasion, and arrival in Great Britain.”

After that, Rene left the area and moved several times to avoid being captured by the Gestapo, which hunted him and his associates constantly. He reports:

In Montauban, near Toulouse, a friend who was in my room jumped from the window of the second floor and was killed on a bridge in Montauban while I fled by the door. I almost suffered the same adventure before being sent to the department of Hautes Pyrenees near the border of Spain. I stayed there to manage droppings and to search for new drop zones. Information was gathered and noted to determine which drop zones were or were not agreeable to the Services in Great Britain.

Rene’s responsibilities with the drop zones also involved arranged security and accounting for the arms and other items they received by parachute from the Allied Forces in Great Britain. After the hostilities ceased, his work included collecting and accounting for the arms.

At the beginning of the war in 1940, Rene was a student and too young to be mobilized. After the war, he continued his education and became a teacher. When my wife and I had a delightful visit with him and his wife in 1985, he had retired. They were living at St. Cyr-sur-Mer on the Mediterranean Sea east of Marseilles, and their son lived about an hour’s drive away. Rene’s father had died, and their house near Le Rouget was standing but unoccupied.

Although the Department of Cantal, where Ken and I lived with the Befferas and the Maquis, was not on an organized escape route for airmen, it was an important area for the Masquisards. Newspaper clippings supplied to me by Rene have shown the importance of the people who helped us and of the drop zone, “Chenier Field.” Out

Maquis helpers had responsibility for the security and the operation of Chenier Field. That our presence in the area required careful attention and special handling is not surprising.

France's battle against the invading Germans took place in the spring of 1940 and ended in defeat for France. Initially, the amount of occupational control by the German troops varied with the districts in France, the location, and the population density. Some of the areas with rough terrain, a small population, and limited transportation arteries received less attention from the Germans. The availability of places to hide made these areas advantageous for organizing, training, and equipping Masquisards to carry out sabotage and hit-and-run attacks against the Germans. One disadvantage was that, because the resistance groups did form and act in the rural areas, some of the most devastating acts of retaliation were carried out by the Germans against local people.

By November 1942, with the Germans occupying the Department of Cantal, the resistance was established at Aprajon-sur-Cere. It was organized under the movement of the Liberation of Sud (south); Armand Steel from Aurillac maintained the contacts. In time, Liberation Sud united with the other movements of the Resistance.

At the beginning of 1943, Bernard Cournil, who owned a garage at Rouget, rented a building in La Fontabelle in which to hide his men. In March 1943 the first Maquis, made up of approximately 25 men, organized by Bernard Cournil and Marcel Gaillard (alias "Gilardon") settled in La Fontabelle. La Verrie is the name of the spot in Luzette at the bottom of the gorges of Cayla. When the group's hiding place was attacked on 19 June 1943 by units of the Germans' Automobile Guards from Cahors, the men had left the day before. Such was the advantage of small groups that could move quickly, hide, and act when needed.

In August of 1943, Bernard Cournil was contacted by Harold Rovella of the S.A.P. (resistance section about landing and parachuting), to help establish a new field that could be used for drops and possibly airplanes. For five months Cournil and Rovella worked together to prepare the site called Chenier Field.

Chenier Field was under the Toulouse S.A.P. whose leaders, in their order of succession, were as follows: Rateau (“Pape”), Picard (“Sultan”), and Guillermin (“Pacha”). Their delegates of the department present at Chenier Field during February of 1944 were Rovella, Rene Pontier (“Sultan VII”) and Jean Cotter. (Members of a group were identified by the leader who had enlisted them. Hence Rene Pontier (“Sultan VII”) had been recruited by Picard whose code name was “Sultan.” Each leader’s name was that of a noble rank.)

In addition to his other duties, Bernard Cournil was the person responsible for Chenier Field along with agents one and two of the network which had a crew that kept growing until it included 16 men in 1944.

Chenier Field, selected because of its location, developed into one of the most important drop zones in the district. It was classified as “home depot.” It included a radio- telephone for communications and a beacon called “Eureka,” which was capable of signaling planes for a distance of 250 kilometers. In addition to receiving scheduled drops, it was used to receive the drops from planes which could not locate or drop at their primary drop zones. As a result, the men at Chenier Field had to stand watch from 7:00 pm until 4:00 am when drop missions were being flown into the area.

The field received its first parachutes at the end of August 1943. Rovella recorded about 137 parachutes for the month of January 1944. Parachutes lowered personnel as well as supplies to the ground. Since the field was the distribution center for three Resistance regions, R.N. 6

(Auvergne), the R.4 (Toulouse, the law department) and the R.5 (Limousin), and was also the site of unscheduled drops, the number of parachutes it received during those critical months is not known exactly. An estimate puts the material received at Chenier Field at a minimum of 700 containers. The containers were loaded on carts belonging to Meneviols and the Fontabelle farms. From there, distribution was according to the destination.

In addition to the supplies which were dropped at Chenier, around 42 Allied agents parachuted onto the field to carry out various assignments. The number of agents landing there was greatest around the time of the Allied invasion on 6 June 1944.

Bernard Cournil played a role in helping Ken and me evade capture. He may have driven the gazogene in which we rode when we left the Befferas. He received from the British people "The King's Medal of Courage" in the cause of freedom. He was one of the very few Frenchmen to receive it. Bernard Cournil died in 1982.

It is interesting to look back and realize how important our friends, Cournil's Maquis, in that that quiet, remote, and beautiful part of France were to the Resistance movement. Like the men who landed at Omaha Beach, many of them and their friends died for the cause of freedom.



Above: Rene Pontier (“Sultan VII”) accepts his certificate of appreciation at his home in St. Louis Cyr-sur-Mer on the Mediterranean Sea east of Marseilles. Rene had helped with the security clearance on Clayton and Ken before taking them to his father’s home and the Maquis camp.



Above: “Claire” and Jean (“Sultan II”) Arhex, “Scotty,” and Clayton meet for dinner before the Davids leave Paris for home (1985).



Above: "Claire" and Jean Arhex meet Clayton in Paris in 1985. It was the first time they had seen Clayton since escorting him in 1944. They had met Clayton and Ken at the Maquis camp and escorted them to the mountain guide outside Pau, France, for their climb across the Pyrenees Mountains.