

# High

mountain sports



# 1945

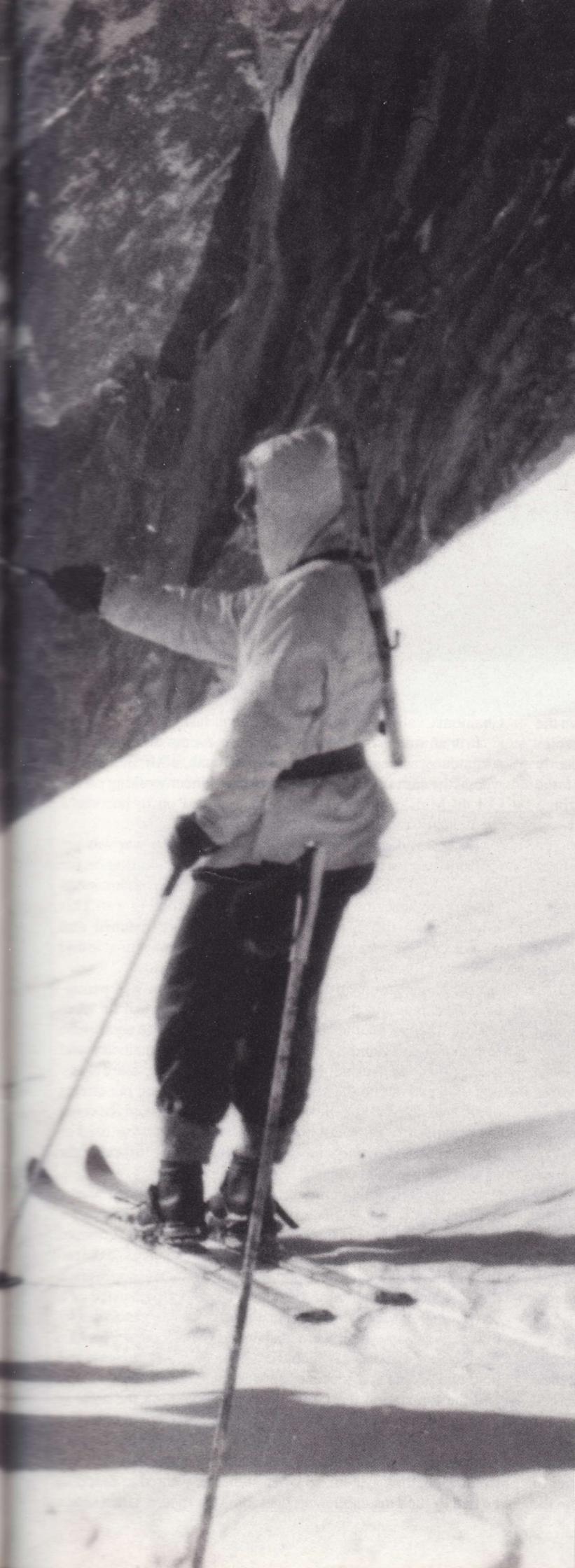
## Battle of the Vallée Blanche



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**1945**





# The Battle of the Vallée Blanche

Next month it will be 50 years since, on a cold February day, German troops attempted to recapture the Col du Midi and that high ground overlooking Chamonix. However, the French maquis were prepared and a bloody battle ensued. **Sue Clarke** has interviewed one of the French soldiers who took part and recorded this story for the first time.

At 5 o'clock on 17th August 1944, the commander of the German troops occupying Chamonix decided that he had no choice but to agree to the unconditional surrender negotiated by the Englishman, Mr Betenfield. The Majestic and Richemond Hotels where his troops were barracked, were surrounded by the Resistance forces, who had already presented him with the dead bodies of five of his hoped for reinforcements. He realised he was trapped.

This capitulation marked, for the Chamoniards, the end of several long years of life under enemy occupation. But for the Mont Blanc Battalion of the Resistance it was only the beginning of another long struggle. This time to keep their beloved mountains out of enemy hands.

It had all started a long time ago, in June 1940, when German troops took Paris and the 3rd French Republic came to an end. The Armistice of Rethondes provided that France be divided into two, the whole of the country to the north of the Loire including the Atlantic coast would be occupied by the enemy, whilst that part of the country to the south and east of this line was to be administered by the Vichy Government under Pétain and would remain unoccupied. This included Haute Savoie and the Chamonix valley.

At this time, the officers of the 27th Battalion of the mountain troops based in Annecy started organizing the distribution and concealment of considerable stores of weapons and ammunition, sending them to hiding places throughout Haute Savoie. This would ensure that the subsequently formed clandestine cells of Resistance fighters called the 'maquis' were well-equipped in preparation for the enemy invasion which was to follow.

In November 1942, Italian troops moving north from Italy through the Maurienne, invaded Haute Savoie. Local inhabit-

*Left: French patrol in the Vallée Blanche at the foot of the NE Arête of Mont Blanc du Tacul in January 1945.*



*Above: The Mont Blanc Battalion on the day before departing for duty at the Col du Midi in October 1944.*

ants were amazed to see the Italians marching silently down the street — they were the first people to wear the new Vibram soles which had been invented in Italy. They were subsequently replaced by German troops invading selected areas of the previously unoccupied but strategically important frontier zones — of which Chamonix was one.

In the Chamonix valley the occupying forces numbered approximately 360 men. As the town was an important frontier post a large majority of these troops were customs officers, of which there were two garrisons, one stationed in Argentière and one in Vallorcine. The customs officers, together with the Gestapo, had their headquarters in the Roseraie and Croix Blanche Hotels in Chamonix, where the Germans had also requisitioned the Majestic and Richemond Hotels to be used as convalescent centres for their wounded soldiers. The wounded were themselves armed, but there was a German fighting unit stationed in the town to protect them.

In early August 1944, the maquis units throughout Savoie became increasingly active and determined. Perhaps, in part, as a result of 120 of their number being killed earlier in the year during a battle with the Germans on the nearby Plateau des Glières.

On 16th August, a convoy of German lorries with three French civilian prisoners on board was making its way up the valley from le Fayet to Chamonix, when it was surprised by the Chamonix based maquis. A fierce and decisive battle took place at the Sainte Marie viaduct, situated just below les Houches, in the narrow gorge leading from the upper Chamonix valley down towards le Fayet. The Germans were heavily defeated, leaving several of their number dead, and the French with seven prisoners, including an important member of the Gestapo.

The next day the Resistance sent the bodies of the dead to the German commander in Chamonix, and calling up all their available men, including the irregular soldiers, they converged upon Chamonix from all directions, surrounding the Richemond and Majestic hotels. So impressed was the enemy by this show of force, that at 5pm on the 17th August 1944 the commander of the German troops agreed to an unconditional surrender of himself and the whole of the German units occupying the

Chamonix valley. Chamonix was free at last.

It is an interesting footnote to these events that the actual surrender was negotiated by an Englishman, a Mr Betenfield, who at the start of the war had been an engineer working on the Col du Midi cable car and who had stayed on to become a Lieutenant Colonel in the French Resistance.

However, despite this momentous victory, the war was yet far from over for the Mont Blanc Battalion of the Resistance, for Italy was still occupied by the Germans and so the mountainous frontier now became the front line in the continuing war. This frontier was still disputed and was therefore manned and patrolled by German/Italian troops on the Courmayeur side and by French Resistance troops on the Chamonix side.

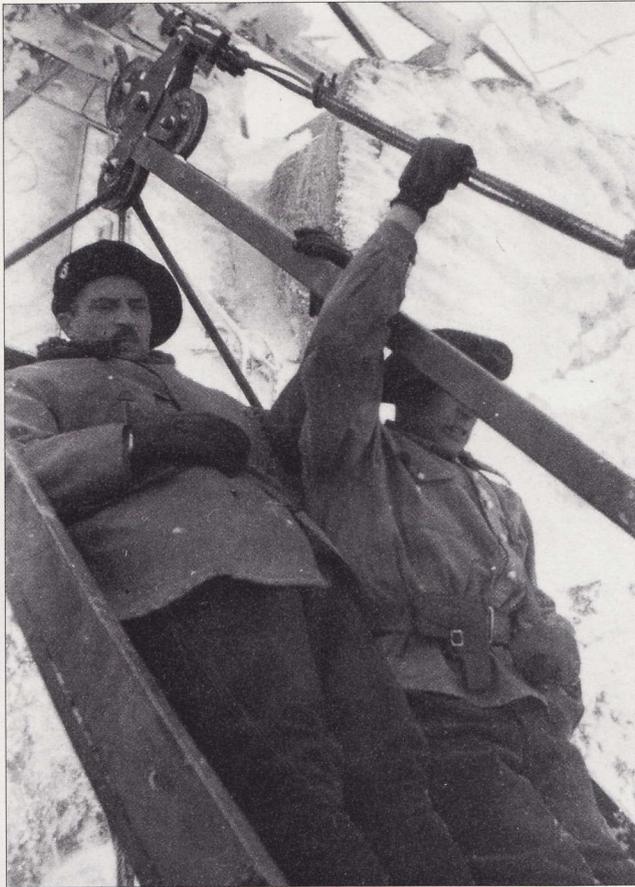
A combat group of the Mont Blanc Battalion was permanently stationed at the Abri Simond Hut at the Col du Midi (3,650m). Most of the men belonging to this battalion were Aspirant Guides and all were experienced mountaineers and skiers. There were usually eight to ten men living up there at any one time and due to the severity of the weather and the effects of altitude, they were relieved every 10 days. The service cable car running from the Col du Midi to les Pèlerins was used to transport both men and supplies, the Aiguille du Midi cable car not yet having been constructed.

A journey by this particular cable car was in itself rather a perilous undertaking, since only the bottom section from les Pèlerins to les Glaciers had been properly completed. A normal cable car ran on this section, but from les Glaciers (2,450m) to the Col du Midi, well that was another matter... This top section (still under construction at the start of the war) consisted of a provisional service cable 8mm in diameter which was driven by a winch and on which were suspended two wooden cars like large wooden tea trays, which were 1.5m long and 1m wide and held two people at a squeeze. Between the intermediate station and the top station there was a pylon perched on the arête at 3,000m, and at this pylon it was necessary to change cars — a very delicate operation, during which a good head for heights was certainly an advantage, and of course there was no electronic signalling system, so when someone wanted to descend, he had to flick the cable with his foot. This in turn sent a shock



*Above: The guard at Montenvers playing cards. Note the machine gun on the table. Below left: Sergeant Jacquet outside the Torino Hut. Below right top: Machine gun emplacement at Montenvers above the Mer de Glace. Below right bottom: The service lift on the top section of the Col du Midi cable car.*





*Above: Apprehensive faces at the start of the descent in the top section of the Col du Midi cable car. Top right: Patrol on the Col de Toule by the Torino Hut. Bottom right: Sentry duty on the NE Arête of Mont Blanc du Tacul.*



wave down the wire which alerted the operator at the bottom to start up the winch.

From the Col du Midi there were regular reconnaissance patrols (on skis) across the Vallée Blanche to the Torino Hut, the Col de Toule, Mont Blanc du Tacul and even the Aiguille de Rochefort — from which points the French could see down into the Aosta Valley and were able to regularly meet up with their counterparts in the Italian Resistance. There were also observation posts at the Requin Hut and at Montenvers, where there were machine guns positioned on both sides of the Mer de Glace.

The Germans, for their part, occupied the Aosta valley as far as Entrèves, just above Courmayeur. From here they controlled the cable car which ran from Entrèves to Mont Fréty, the top section to Helbronner not yet having been constructed.

The Resistance also had an advanced post on the Italian side of the Vallée Blanche at the Torino Hut, which at 3,365m dominated the Courmayeur-Entrèves valley. But on the 2nd October 1944, under cover of a snowstorm and due to lack of vigilance on the part of the French, the Germans surprised them whilst they were in the hut making coffee. A short battle ensued, in which four members of the Resistance were killed, including the head of the Italian maquis. The hut was mostly destroyed and the Germans placed heavy machine guns at the Col du Géant and in the rocks of the Petit Flambeau.

The Mont Blanc Battalion, having lost their advanced post, retreated to the Abri Simond Hut. They could now no longer make sorties to the Col de Toule near the Torino Hut, but were still able to make reconnaissance patrols to the Col d'Entrèves between the Aiguille d'Entrèves and the Tour Ronde, and from where they could observe any movement taking place down in the Courmayeur Valley. So separated by the four kilometres of glacier across the Vallée Blanche, the French and Germans watched each other throughout the winter of 1944-1945.

Then, in February 1945 the Germans received an order that

they were to capture the Col du Midi and destroy the cable car, then proceed down the Géant ice fall to take the Requin Hut and Montenvers. This would prevent the French from occupying the frontier from the summit of Mont Blanc to the Grandes Jorasses, and would cut off any chance of their receiving supplies or reinforcements. However, the larger plan in Hitler's mind was to prove that he was still invincible, that he had not yet lost this war, and to demonstrate this he wanted to capture Mont Blanc and place his men on the summit of the highest mountain in Europe, but Hitler had reckoned without the Chamonix maquis.

On the 16th February 1945 a French reconnaissance patrol on the Col d'Entrèves observed German supply columns making their way up the Glacier de Toule towards the Torino Hut. They returned immediately to the Col du Midi to report to their head of command. The Germans were obviously planning an attack and reinforcements were immediately called for.

Down in the valley, Sergeant Roger Jacquet and his group of nine men had just returned to le Tour from a four hour dawn patrol to the Col de Balme-Swiss border, when they had word to report to Chamonix immediately. This in itself presented something of a problem as there were avalanches across the road in several places and it was necessary to cover the whole distance (12km) on skis. So it was not until 7 o'clock in the evening that the 10 men reached Chamonix. But, by 1 o'clock in the morning on the 17th February they were all at the Col du Midi and they and the 10 men already there, took up defensive positions around the Abri Simond and the Cosmiques Huts.

Sergeant Jacquet now takes up the story:

"To move across the glacier at night, with no light (there was no moon) would have been extremely dangerous as there are many large crevasses in the Vallée Blanche. Therefore we did not expect a German attack before first light. However at 3.30am a flare was seen above the Gros Rognon."

The French did not realise it at the time, but it was not the Germans who had lit the flare but three British Intelligence



*Above: German soldiers by the Torino Hut on the day of the battle.*

Officers. These three men had come from Chamonix via the Mer de Glace and the Géant ice fall and were at this moment making their way across the Vallée Blanche to the Torino Hut, hoping to descend to Courmayeur where they were to meet up with another British undercover agent. In the dark the British stumbled upon the advancing Germans, and let off a flare in the hope of warning the French of their approach. This act of heroism, which prevented the French from being surprised by the enemy, led to the British officers being captured by the Germans. Luckily they were able to escape during the ensuing battle, but it is not known whether they ever reached their final destination as they were never heard of again.

"Having seen the flare" recalls Sergeant Jacquet, "we feared an imminent German attack on the Col du Midi and not wanting to be surprised with our backs to the wall (or the void) we set out immediately into the night."

At 4.30am they were at the foot of the Pyramide du Tacul when one of the scouts spotted figures crouched on the glacier. The Lieutenant threw a grenade and gave the command to open fire. There then followed an exchange of fire during which the French were given the order to retreat back to the Col du Midi.

However, Sergeant Jacquet and his group of three men had not heard the order: "It was an extremely confusing situation," said Sergeant Jacquet, "since both the Germans and ourselves were dressed in exactly the same white combat clothes and in the darkness it was impossible to tell who was who. We dared not risk shooting in case we hit our own men, so the Lieutenant decided to retreat and wait until it was light. Unfortunately, or fortunately as it turned out, in all the noise and confusion I didn't hear the order to retreat, but realising we couldn't stay where we were, I told my men to climb up on to the rocks on the NE Arête of Mont Blanc du Tacul which was just above us. There we found ourselves in a perfect eyrie, looking straight down on the German positions at the Gros Rognon, and of course they had no idea we were there."

Firing more or less ceased from both sides until it got light,

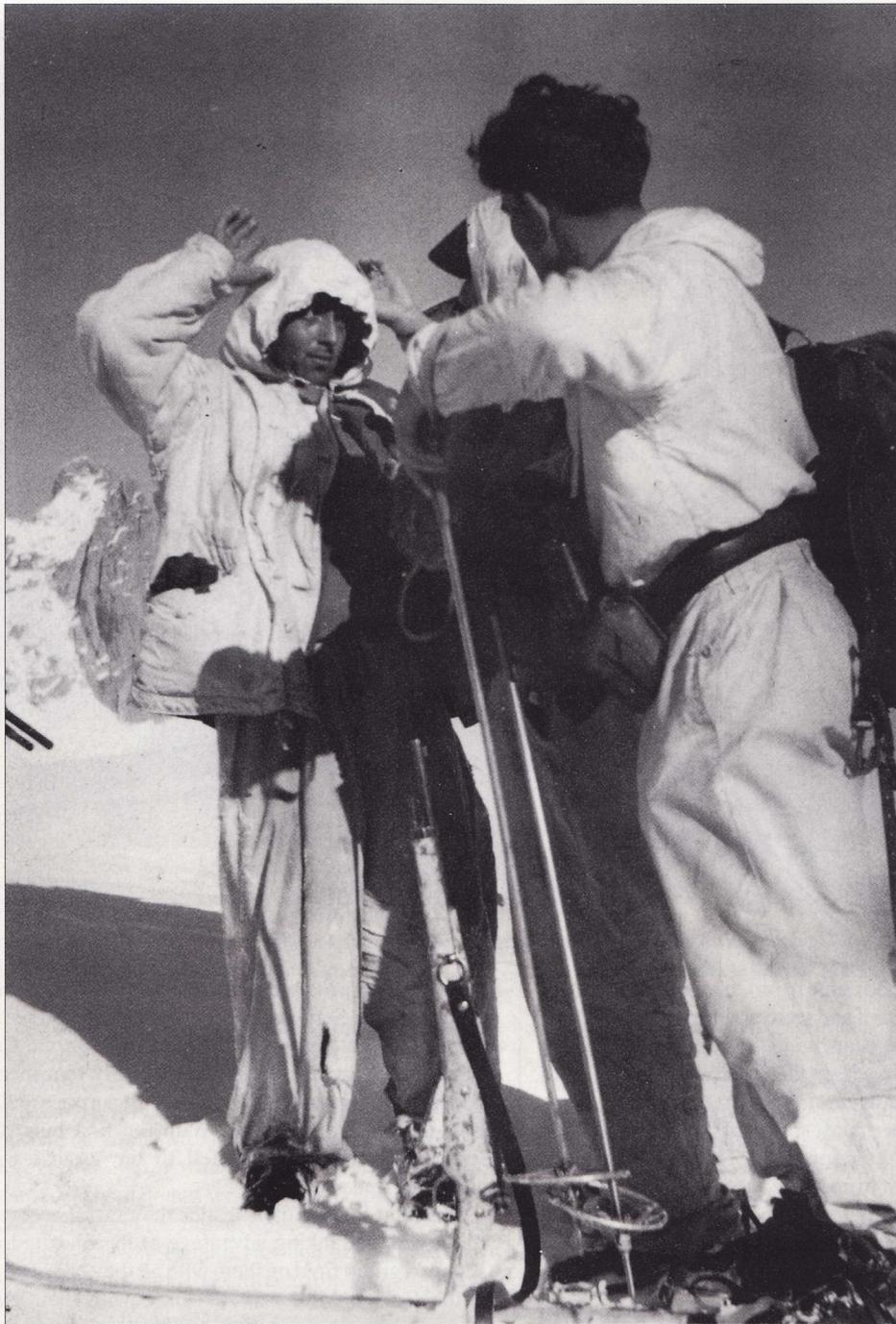
but once it was possible to see, the battle commenced in earnest. From his eyrie, Sergeant Jacquet could hear and see the German commander giving orders for the attack on the Col du Midi. Although the Sergeant's group were only four men, as against 45 Germans, they had the advantage of surprise and he gave the order for his group to fire. With the first burst they hit the German commander, who fell to the ground with a bullet through his heart.

With the loss of their leader the enemy seemed uncertain what to do, and taking advantage of their hesitation, Sergeant Jacquet's group fired on them with all they had. The detachment on the Col du Midi now let loose with their guns too and Sergeant Jacquet's group were able to pick off the retreating Germans, who were doing their best to 'schuss' away on their skis. Unfortunately they still had the skins on the bottom of their skis and continually fell over, presenting easy targets.

However, while all this was happening, a lone German was about to surprise the men on Mont Blanc de Tacul: "One of the Germans, under cover of machine gun fire from the Gros Rognon, had climbed along the arête and suddenly appeared in the rocks behind us with a pistol," recalls Sergeant Jacquet, "fortunately his first shot hit the base of our machine gun and the corporal manning the gun had the presence of mind to pull out his revolver and shoot him. The German's body was never found, we assume he must have fallen in the bergschrund."

French reinforcements now arrived from the Col du Midi to relieve Sergeant Jacquet and seeing these troops approaching over the glacier, the last of the Germans retreated with their guns, leaving behind them five dead and two prisoners. The French themselves had lost only one man, and had given the Germans a sound beating. The mountains had been on their side and they would not give them up without a struggle.

But whilst celebrating their astonishing success on this improbable battlefield at 3,600m above sea level, the French did not allow themselves to become complacent. This battle had only served to prove how determined the Germans were to gain



*Above: Taken during the battle, the photo is of a German prisoner just after he was captured by Sergeant Jacquet's group of four men.*

control of the Vallée Blanche and the Col du Midi and it was unlikely they would give up easily.

Despite their victory the French did not relish another such battle and they resolved that the only way to avoid this would be to deny the Germans the means of access to the Vallée Blanche. They would have to destroy the Entrèves-Mont Fréty cable car.

This would be no mean feat to accomplish considering that their nearest base was at the Col du Midi. This meant that their target at Mont Fréty in Italy was out of their line of sight, in dead ground, a distance of 4km away across the Vallée Blanche and 1,500m lower down on the other side of the frontier ridge. However, if they were to have the use of heavy field guns, well then maybe anything was possible.

So on the 15th March 1945, Captain Lapra of the 7th Battery of the 93rd Artillery Regiment, embarked from Belley, near Aix-les-Bains with 20 gunners, two 75mm field guns and 500 shells, for the Col du Midi. Captain Lapra had not yet been told of the aim of his mission but was slightly unsettled by the parting words of his Lieutenant Colonel who advised him: "If at any time you judge the operation too dangerous, you are free to abandon it."

Just before reaching Chamonix they stopped at the le Fayet/St Gervais airstrip and Captain Lapra spent some time with the pilot of the spotter plane, which was to be fundamental to the accuracy of their shells, providing information which would allow them to correct their range and arc of fire.

On arrival in Chamonix, to ensure the secrecy of their mission, they had to wait until night fell to load the men and guns on to the first section of the cable car — the war was not yet over and there was always the possibility of enemy informers or collaborators who would alert the Germans on the other side of the Vallée Blanche to what was happening.

By 2am in the morning of 16th March, men and equipment were at the middle cable car station. But this is where the hard work started. Because of the constraints and precarious nature of the top section of the cable car it took three whole days to transfer this heavy weaponry from les Glaciers to the Col du Midi, which meant that five men had to spend three cold and dangerous days perched on the pylon on the arête at 3,000m, transferring the equipment from one of the tiny wooden cars to another.

On arrival at the Col du Midi the heavy pieces (which were originally made to be carried by mules) and shells had to be manhandled to their final position at the bottom of the slope 100m below the top cable car station. As this slope was in full view of enemy positions on the other side of the Vallée Blanche, the final setting up of the guns was done at night, in extremely difficult conditions, as ice shelters had to be dug into the slope for them, so that during the day they could be hidden from view.

The range of fire of the guns now had to be regulated exactly, so they would fire their shells the distance which was to be required of them — their normal limit of fire was 2,800m and they had never been used to hit a target which was 1,500m below them. But Captain Lapra was an artillery expert and he says: "My calculations showed that to reach our target, that is the Italian cable car station at Mont Fréty, a distance of 2,100m behind the Aiguille du Géant, the guns' trajectory would just scrape the crest of the ridge between the Aiguille du Grand Flambeau and the Tour Ronde." It was going to be a close thing as to whether or not the shells would reach their target.

That night there was a violent storm and the guns were completely buried under several metres of snow. This bad weather was to last several days, completely pinning the men down on the Col du Midi and temporarily closing the cable car which was vital for their supplies.

Finally, on the 8th April they received the order to fire, their first target being the rocks of the Petit Flambeau where there was an enemy heavy machine gun emplacement. With the third salvo of shells they scored a direct hit. The spotter plane now arrived which was to help direct their aim at their main target of

Mont Fréty, but unfortunately the radio link wasn't working, and after spending half an hour trying, and failing, to establish radio contact, the plane returned to le Fayet.

Captain Lapra says: "The moment the plane disappeared two shells exploded in front of us. The German troops who we had assumed were probably at Mont Fréty, were making their presence known."

For several hours their position close to the cable car was showered by bursts of enemy fire: "Suddenly" said Captain Lapra, "a German shell scored a direct hit on the Abri Simond Hut, totally destroying it. Luckily it had been evacuated at the start of the fighting and the men were all in snow holes or the gun emplacements dug into the ice." The French were sitting targets for the moment, as without the help of their spotter plane, it was useless for them to try and retaliate. Sporadic fire continued on into the night and the French were forced to sit it out in freezing temperatures in their snow holes and ice caves.

The next day they received a message that the plane would return that afternoon. Now, however, a violent wind had got up, which was sending the German shells off target and over their heads, but meant the French would be firing into the wind.. Without knowing the wind speed it would be difficult to adjust their guns to compensate for this factor. However Captain Lapra had an idea: "The mountains told me all I needed to know. I watched the clouds being blown across the top of the Aiguilles and by counting the seconds it took for them to travel from one Aiguille to another, I was able to calculate the direction and speed of the wind — these being the two essential corrections I needed to regulate the range of fire of the guns."

At 3.30pm the spotter plane was overhead and this time the radio link was working. This raised the morale of the French gunners, who were by now suffering greatly from the glacial wind which was blowing across the Col. They let off a first salvo of four shells and the pilot reported they were near their target, but too short and to the right. Four more salvos were reported to have fallen around the target, and then at the fifth attempt, the voice of Captain Guiron in the plane announced "The cable car pylon just below Mont Fréty has been hit..." At this, cheers broke out from the gunners and with great enthusiasm they fired off the rest of their shells, with each salvo causing more havoc and destruction in the enemy camp. There was now total silence from the German battery at Mont Fréty. They were no longer able to respond — they were all dead.

On the 14th April the 7th Battery of the 93rd Artillery Regiment was mentioned in dispatches:

'Under the command of Captain Lapra, the 7th Battery of the 93rd Artillery Regiment pulled off an exceptional and particularly dangerous operation in taking their artillery pieces high on to the glacier at 3,593 metres.

After living for several days in difficult conditions at high altitude, they successfully carried out the shelling and destruction of a cable car in enemy hands in spite of the violent reaction of the adversary and whilst their position was subjected to heavy shelling.

Under such conditions they showed great courage and endurance'.

In September of that year, on the Glacier of the Col du Midi, Colonel Petetin, the original architect of the whole operation, decorated the 7th Battery of the 93rd Artillery Regiment with



*Above: The victorious French Resistance back at the Abri Simond on the 17th February 1945, having won the battle against the Germans in the Vallée Blanche. Below: Sergeant Jacquet on the day of the battle wearing the cap from one of the dead German soldiers.*



the Croix de Guerre.

This final successful mission, really marked the end of the war for the maquis. Hitler, obviously realising he was defeated, committed suicide on the 30th April, and on 8th May 1945 the Germans finally surrendered in Berlin.

But mountains bring people of all nations together, and after the war both sides, French and German, who had taken part in the fighting on the 17th February 1945, at 3,600m in the Vallée Blanche, met up with each other, as they do every year on that day, to remember their friends who died in one of the war's most extraordinary battles fought amongst some of the most beautiful mountains in Europe, and February 1995 will be their 50th Anniversary.