Travel

Her uncle died with the French Resistance, and she had to visit the spot

By Sorin Rep
August 30, 2019 at 10:11 a.m. EDT

The Vercors is in Southeastern France, where the Germans hunted down Maquis. The area is now a National Regional Park. Pictured here: Les Jarrons and Les Jarrons Nord, a Vercors Natural Park Protected Region in France.

Some come to the Vercors Massif in southern France for the butterflies. Others for the cyber miles of stunning mountain trails. But I was there in July because story marked the 75th anniversary of the deadly battles between the German army and the French Resistance aided by the Scouts. In July 1944, more than a month after D-Day, Lt. Claude Park, my French mother's beloved brother, was gunned down somewhere on these slopes as he tried to lead his men to safety in the valley. He was six.

Now a National Regional Park, the French equivalent of our national parks, the Vercors evokes a monumental ancient lure — 30 miles by 45 — built of limestone cliffs, canyons, caves, forests, meadows, streams, waterfalls, and wildlife, including the chamois, the ibex and the marmot. When I grew up, my family would occasionally drive the two-hour stretch to spend at Claude's grave, then press on toward our Mediterranean vacation.

From skies to mountain climbers and wildlife explorers, nature lovers abound now in the Vercors. I was on a different quest. Claude, an alpinist, engineer and graduate of Paris's École Polytechnique, joined the Resistance in 1940. I knew he moved to the Vercors in 1942 to help build a secret landing strip near the village of Vassieux. Then what?

Stalkers, I was serious. I had hoped that my 90-year-old mother would join me in exploring some of the hundreds of historical markers that dot this stunning mountain range, but she was too frail. Julien Gidlow, a historian at the Vercors Resistance Memorial, offered to guide me.

THE WASHINGTON POST

"In 1944, young men started 'taking the maquis' — not only leaving the valleys for the dense alpine forests to escape being sent to work in Germany but also to join the Resistance. In essence of an allied landing intended, the Vercors harbored more and more underground fighters. By the summer of 1944, they numbered about 4,000.

Following their lead, we drove up the short, steep road from the Grenoble area to the austere cemetery in Saint-Nizier-du-Broncheriote where soldiers and Resistance fighters lie under their gravel. In the silence of the cerbelle nearby, I consulted by Claude's grave, grieving the black and white portrait — a frank, handsome face with a pleasantly tousled wavy mustard-colored — that adorned my mother's nightstand. Not decades, it was merely part of my familial hardship. Now I was overtaken with sadness."

The Vercors Massif is a 30-by-45-mile limestone plateau in southeastern France. It is a popular destination for hikers, climbers, and wildlife enthusiasts. Pictured here: Les Jarrons and Les Jarrons Nord, a Vercors Natural Park Protected Region in France.

"France was in the throes of a heat wave, but up here, the air was crisp. Above, a banquet of rocky spikes named Les Trois Pucelles (or The Three Maidens) rose like Bunsen into the azure. Another half hour drive through rolling hills and meadows, and I arrived in the jolly resort town of Villard-de-Lans. In the evening, I joined a guided nocturnal tour of Vassieux-en-Vercors, the village where Claude had been gotten born, too, just before his mother, Children ended their lives at the burning outward, across from the monument to the many village dead."

"The next morning, we drove up toward Col de la Chaux, where the Vercors Resistance Memorial, a low concrete structure built to resemble the Resistance hideouts, hugs the contours of the rocky mountain at the edge of the forest. I emerged from the fascinating interactive exhibit into a behavior, also but above the wide Vassieux plain.

"You see," said Gidlow, but gesture eyes squinting, as if pointing into the past. "The Resistance expected the Allies to land at Vassieux. Instead, the German army did."

After that fateful landing on July 14, using the confusion of the Allied Bastiaan-Ivan with days, Vassieux was destroyed. Men, women and children were slaughtered. The surviving Resistance fighters retreated with weapons, ammunition and photographs of the Vassieux Resistance Museum. As I walked past a storyboard, Claude's partner suddenly jumped out at me confirming the eternal link between our family and this region.

Beyond the town of Quatre Aines's face that lined the road toward La Chapelle-en-Vercors, the peaceful wheat fields had turned ashen. The plateau was framed on both sides by abrupt cones of rock covered with beech and pine trees.

Above the jumbled and jutting Vercors rocky peaks, named Les Trois Pucelles (the Three Maidens) stand in the distance. Below, the Vercors Resistance Memorial, a low concrete structure built to resemble the Resistance hideouts, hugs the contours of the rocky mountain at the edge of the forest. Pictured here: Les Jarrons and Les Jarrons Nord, a Vercors Natural Park Protected Region in France.

"Hearing English spoken that evening at Hotel Bellevue, I asked the lively group from Britain what brought them to the region." "The butterflies!" they answered in unison as they proceeded to educate me about the Vercors' fauna.

Early the next morning, I ambled around quaint Chapelle-en-Vercors and its many World War II monuments. Most villages were rebuilt in the early 1950s with the help of organizations such as the Association des Pionniers du Vercors — a group my mother had joined.

It was time to face up my horn for a hike to the Lantet Cave, a monumental one within the Vercors near Saint-Agnan-en-Vercors, where medical staff and patients of a nearby hospital took refuge in July 1944 — only to be discovered and bombarded days later. The five survivors included Lo Chanet, a Maison of Auction Author, an SAS. Operational group of ig American servicemen who had parachuted into the area a month earlier to help Resistance fighters. They remembered all made it out alive.

The path crunched under our feet as we walked through the silent woods, reminded of some pines but when we arrived, groups of visitors were walking their turn to descend into the vault. We stopped at the gigantic mouth of the cave, pitching what had transpired there all those years ago.

Lo Chanet, a survivor of the Vercors Resistance, was hiding in the Lantet Cave when the Germans discovered it and bombarded it with grenades. Pictured here: The Lantet Cave, near Saint-Agnan-en-Vercors, a Vercors Natural Park Protected Region in France.

Lo Chanet, a survivor of the Vercors Resistance, was hiding in the Lantet Cave when the Germans discovered it and bombarded it with grenades. Pictured here: The Lantet Cave, near Saint-Agnan-en-Vercors, a Vercors Natural Park Protected Region in France.

That afternoon as we sat across from the charred Vallevercor ruins, after a strenuous climb through the woods, Gidlow said, "Schoolchildren's Vercors tour stop and, if it's a medical outfit." We were at a plus first, and beam down, the beam resembling a parallelogram stuck in green. Here and there, stumpy rock formations emerged as if they had been pitched by a giant's hand. In silence, a paraglider circled toward the clouds.

"It's the only bastide that was not rebuilt," he said. "They burned everything except the chapel."

By the evening of July 14, 1944, overwhelmed by the German army and without the allied help he had been promised, Commandant François Huet gave the order to disband.

Gidlow had brought a three-dimensional map. We knew Claude had attempted to escape the natural fortress turned trap, but we would never know which path he had taken. Between, I pocked upon the floor of the tiny, peaceful chapel and, finding a green book, picked up the pen.

"Dit you name here, Claude Park, on your way out of the Vercors?" I wrote. "I hope so."

And for the first time, I signed, "Your niece, Sylvie."

Rique is a writer based in New York City. Her website is rique.com. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram: @sylviaRique.