



A SW Base in Provence

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Scouts in France fight again the fire from SW Base. Lise is 17 years old. She is team leader and member of a Venture-Scout unit in Belgium. Next summer, his unit will camp in Provence, in the south of France. This is a very attractive region for tourists: It is sunny most of the time, with beautiful old villages, large forests, good wine and the sea is not far.

However, Lise will not do a tourist journey. Her Venture Scout unit has decided to take part in a large environment project launched by French Scouting.

In South of France, there is a Mediterranean climate, warm and dry in summer. The forest is mainly made of pines and plants, which burn very easily. A strong wind, called 'mistral', often comes from the north along the Rhone valley. Drought, hot temperature, inflammable vegetation and strong wind form an explosive mixture. A cigarette end not well -extinguished is enough to trigger off a big forest fire, which will destroy thousands of hectares of forest, and often houses, before the firemen are able to stop it. Once destroyed, the forest is replaced by brushwood, which is far more vulnerable to fire than trees and do not retain water in the ground. So the drought is more intense, the risk of fire is higher and the natural environment is step by step destroyed.

Fighting the fire is very dangerous because the ground is difficult with steep and rocky hills. Sometimes, the wind changes its course and can trap firemen surrounded by the flames.

That happens twenty years ago, when 6 young firemen were burnt alive. Alex, a Venture Scout leader, was so shocked by this tragic event that he decided to do something. If forest fires are frequent, this is because the number of farmers has decreased. Now, large areas of countryside are uninhabited and nobody takes care of cleaning the forest by taking off dead trees and cutting brushwood. Alex decided to call all young people to join the Scouts during a weekend and clean the forest near the city of Marseilles. It was a success: more than 10,000 young people responded to the call and took part in this operation, which attracted the interest of media and local authorities.

Alex decided to go further. He had noticed that many tourists were not informed of the danger of forest fires. They were smoking while hiking in the forest or lighting open fires when camping. Furthermore, even if the firemen were better and better equipped with four-drive vehicles, helicopters and seaplanes able to drop water on the flames, they were not enough numerous to watch all the forest and detect the fires when they started.

Therefore, with some friends, and the support of local authorities, he decided to launch a project to protect the Mediterranean environment.

Every summer Venture-Scout and Rover camps are organised in the most threatened areas. Scouts receive a special training in order to be able to camp without threatening the environment. Part of their activities is focused on preventing forest fires. Equipped with binoculars, radio-transmitters and compasses, they take their turn in watching towers in order to detect smokes and give their precise location to the firemen. They have the responsibility to make a Canadair plane take off and drop water on the starting fire. No mistake is permitted. Also they patrol in the forest with mountain-bikes and inform the tourists on the risks of forest fire.

In Autumn and wintertime, other camps are organised to clean up the forest. Scouts are trained to use chainsaw and other tools used to clear undergrowth. In springtime training courses are proposed to Scout leaders and Rovers, who will prepare camps and coach Venture Scouts during summer time.

Lise has spent two weeks in July watching and patrolling the forest, educating tourists and working with firemen. She understood the complexity and the fragility of an ecosystem and how it is today necessary to learn about how to protect the natural environment. She has visited the base organised by Alex and his staff in the suburbs of Marseille: a large former factory equipped with a garage where the project vehicles are parked and maintained in good state as well as dozen of chainsaws, mountain-bikes, helmets, ropes, etc. There is also a well-equipped office, a library, several meeting rooms and dormitories for training courses.

Next year, Lise will become Rover. Her decision is made: she will come back in Provence in November to follow a training course and be prepared to be an effective voluntary staff during the summertime. She knows that similar projects exist also in Spain and in Sicily, where young people from all over Europe come and contribute to protect the environment.

Lise has met Alex. She was impressed by his commitment and the way he is challenging young people to do their best to serve the community, Alex inform her about the Scouts of the World programme launched by the World Scout Bureau. The base of the project will be one of the first Scouts of the World base. The training courses, which are organised for Rovers, will become Scouts of the World Discoveries. And if Lise works as voluntary staff next summer, this will be recognised as a Scouts of the World Voluntary Service, enabling her to get the Scouts of the World Award and to become member of the Scouts of the World Network.

Alex added that thousands of Rovers will join the Scouts of theWorld Network and help each other to develop projects in the fields of environment, development and peace. He was persuaded that through this network, Scouts will be able to make a difference and contribute to make the world a better place.