
ERIC VOLA

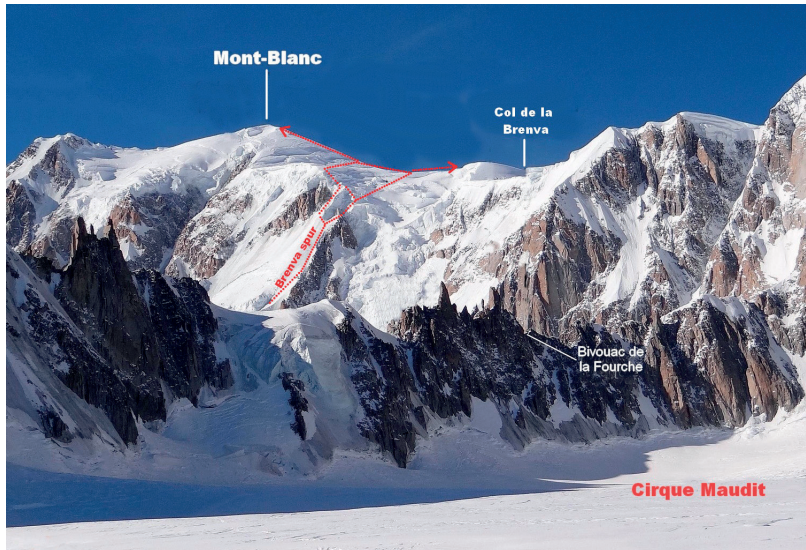
Shipwrecked on Mont Blanc

How the Vincendon and Henry
Tragedy Changed Alpinism



'Shipwrecked on Mont Blanc': The cover of *Paris Match* from January 1957. An Alouette stands beside the Vallot refuge at the grim conclusion of attempts to rescue François Henry and Jean Vincendon, preparing to evacuate eight rescuers who have been trapped there.

Christmas, 1956: all of France and Belgium are following the protracted agonies of two young climbers marooned on Mont Blanc. Two hundred journalists crowd Chamonix. The tragedy fills the airwaves of Radio Télévision France and the pages of *Paris Match* creating as great an impact on the French public as the Matterhorn disaster did on the British in 1865. It will lead to major reform in French mountain rescue with the founding of the Pelotons de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne, France's police mountain rescue units. It sees the public arrival of helicopters in mountain rescue. It will also mark French alpinists, professionals and amateurs alike, for generations



A photo-diagram illustrating the Col de la Fourche and the Brenva face beyond. The young Vincendon and Henry planned a winter ascent of the Brenva, inspired by recent successes on the route.

to come, as questions are asked about what went so badly wrong. Forty years after the tragedy, French author Yves Ballu publishes a history of this harrowing event: *Naufrage au Mont Blanc* (Glénat, 1997): Shipwreck on Mont Blanc. Twenty years later the story's importance warrants another edition (Guérin, 2017), with a new foreword from my old friend Claude Dufourmantelle, who tried more than most to save the lives of his fellow alpinists. 'Le Duf' is one of the last survivors of the tragedy; his foreword sets the scene.

May 1956, Algeria: the ambush at Palestro¹. Guy Mollet [then prime minister] pushes France into the sort of peacekeeping mission that quickly becomes a fully-fledged war. Khrushchev crushes Hungary as a distracted Eisenhower looks on, too busy defending Aramco's interests in Saudi Arabia at the expense of the French and British then entangled in their Suez affair. Morocco becomes independent; pan-Arabism and political Islam establish themselves in the world of geo-politics with the objective of telling us what the price of oil will be.

Kids and teenagers from the war are now young adults; for them, war with its wounds has drifted into the past and in its place America, enriched by the conflict, spreads over a convalescent Europe the image of James Dean and his rage to live. Those young men, those kids take up mountaineering as part of this revival. The new generation's mantra is to do better than its elders, tearing up alpinism like it was rock'n'roll and they were Elvis.

1. Fighters from the Armée de Libération Nationale killed 21 men from a French army platoon, several being murdered after their capture.

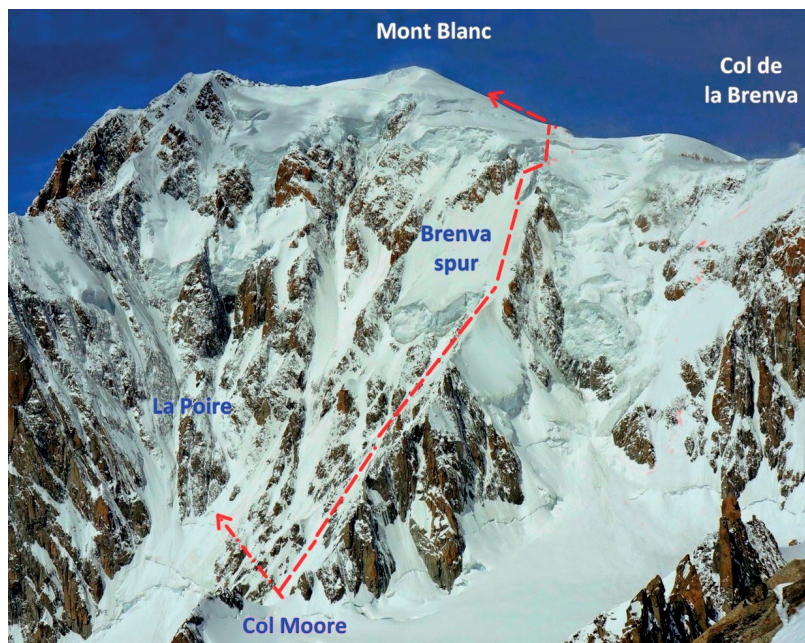
So 1956 was, in Le Duf's words, 'a pivotal year', and it ended with what became known as the Vincendon and Henry affair: two young men, city boys, setting out in winter to climb a route on the Italian side of Mont Blanc. This was a serious enterprise. Winter climbing was not then accepted among the majority of climbers and was taboo for guides. What these young men planned was a transgression, or to use today's term, a disruption. Like Le Duf, Jean Vincendon was 23 years old. Born and educated in Paris, he started climbing on the Fontainebleau sandstone boulders. Just 5ft 6in and slim in build, he had not yet done any big routes apart from the south ridge of Aiguille Noire de Peuterey in 1955, or any serious ice climbs. Even so, that year he was admitted to the aspirant guide course at the *École Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme* (ENSA). His teachers were Armand Charlet, André Contamine and Louis Lachenal, who impressed him the most. Like his heroes, he dreams of the Himalaya and climbing major Alpine routes that will open the doors of the *Groupe de Haute Montagne* (GHM), French alpinism's most exclusive club.

Vincendon met François Henry climbing at Freyr in the Ardennes. Born in Brussels, he was just 21 but had been climbing for four years. Unlike Henry, he was tall: 6ft 3in. His father Louis was a chemist but during the war had been active in the *Zéro* resistance network with Henry's mother Jeanne. Arrested by the Gestapo they were sent to Dachau, Ravensbrück and Mauthausen but miraculously survived, although Jeanne died in 1950 from the aftereffects.

Like their heroes Terray and Lachenal, the two young men wanted to climb major routes: the Croz and Walker spurs – and why not the Eiger's north face? Except Vincendon has to work that July as a UNCM² instructor in the Pyrenees and by early August has his leg in a cast from a fall, putting an end to that summer's climbing ambitions. They set themselves another goal: the Brenva in winter. It is the easiest of the big routes on the Italian side of Mont Blanc but remains a serious ice route even for seasoned ice climbers, let alone in winter. Winter ascents were then so uncommon the Chamonix guides office is closed. As Claude Deck put it, climbing in winter was only for 'those strong enough to rely on themselves.' That opinion was largely shared by Chamonix mountain guides and would only change with a new generation in the 1960s.

Vincendon got the idea for the Brenva in Chamonix, listening to Du-fourmantelle describe his first winter attempt in 1955 with partners François-Xavier Caseneuve, nicknamed 'the Yeti', and André Brun. All three were students at the *École Centrale* in Paris. They had given up at the start of the spur itself in the face of heavy snowfalls, deciding to make another attempt the following December. Several weeks later, on 26 February 1956, the well-known Paris alpinists Jean Couzy and André Vialatte made the first winter ascent. They took the brand new *Aiguille du Midi* cable car, opened in the summer of 1955, skied down the first part of the

2. The *Union Nationale des Centres de Montagne* was born in 1944 from the *Jeunesse et Montagne* movement and in 1965 itself became part of the UCPA under French sports minister Maurice Herzog.



The Brenva face, illustrating the spur and the Pear, the objective of Walter Bonatti and Silvano Gheser who abandoned the first winter ascent in the face of heavy snow and traversed into the Brenva above the slower-moving Franco-Belgian team.

Vallée Blanche and climbed up to La Fourche bivouac hut. Starting from there at 4.45am, they reached the Mur de la Côte at 7.30pm and descended directly by the Corridor, pausing on the Grand Plateau to wait for the moon to reach the Grands Mulets hut at midnight. Next day Vialatte was in time for the train back to Paris. Speed climbing is not so new.

Vincendon would like to have joined Dufourmantelle and Caseneuve, who were the same age but already seasoned alpinists. Le Duf had started climbing at the age of 15 and the pair had serious ice routes under their belts. Both were students at the École Centrale, had climbed together for several years and were technically on a par. They made a very strong team: Lionel Terray certainly rated them. Late in the morning of 17 December Le Duf and the Yeti took the Aiguille du Midi cable car, a special dispensation since it was closed, and like Couzy and Vialatte skied the first part of the Vallée Blanche before climbing the steep 150m couloir to La Fourche. Unlike the first pair, they didn't set out until 7am but still reached the top of the Brenva at 6pm, using their headlamps for the last hour as darkness fell. Like Jean Couzy and Vialatte, they ignored the summit and headed straight down to Chamonix, benefitting from their decision to climb fast and light during the full moon and so avoid a bivouac. Things had gone like clockwork but next day, below the hut at Jonction, Le Duf fell 20m down a crevasse, losing his ice axe and a crampon in the process. The Yeti was able to help him to safety

after much effort using loops in the rope.

Back in Chamonix, on 21 December, the pair meet Vincendon and Henry at Le Choucas³, giving them details of their ascent and advising them in case of bad weather to descend the Brenva or if at the top to go over the summit to the Vallot bivouac hut. The snow going down directly to the Grands Mulets is deep and they should look out for crevasses. Another friend, Bob Xueref tells them: 'whatever, go to the summit for safety. If we have to come and fetch you, it will be by the Aiguille du Goûter.'⁴

Vincendon and Henry leave Chamonix on 22 December carrying huge rucksacks. Unlike Le Duf and the Yeti, or Couzy and Vialatte, they have decided on a more heavyweight approach. They have even packed a tent. Like the others, they take the cable car and plan to ski but their loads are heavy and they dump the skis at the bottom of the first slope. Soon after they meet Walter Bonatti. Bonatti has been planning the first winter ascent of the Pear: a much more difficult route than the Brenva but also starting from La Fourche. His rope mate is Silvano Gheser, a lieutenant and instructor in the Alpini. Four days earlier these two had made a reconnaissance to La Fourche and found ideal conditions. Coming down they had seen two dots high on the Brenva: Le Duf and the Yeti, moving swiftly. Now Bonatti is ski touring in the same area. He does not tell the French and Belgian climbers that in two days he will attempt the Pear: he believes that by then they will be in Chamonix.

At 4.30pm, at the Torino refuge, before descending, Bonatti sees two dots on the Géant glacier coming towards him, presumably Vincendon and Henry who have decided to give up. Two days later, on 24 December, Bonatti and Gheser take the cable car back up to the Torino and are told about two French who have spent the previous night at the refuge. Approaching the slope up to La Fourche, they see two figures coming down. Vincendon and Henry have given up after waking that morning to a veil of clouds. Bonatti can't see a cloud anywhere. When Bonatti tells them who he is and that he is going to make the first winter ascent of the Pear, Vincendon and Henry change their minds, following the other rope back to the La Fourche hut. Days later, Bonatti tells *Nuova Stampa* that conditions that day 'were ideal, better than in summer.'

From the refuge, Bonatti and Gheser cross the Brenva glacier to the Col Moore to assess conditions; part of the route is shared with the Brenva and their tracks will benefit Vincendon and Henry. The snow is good but while cutting steps Bonatti's axe suffers a thin but lengthy crack down its shaft. Back at La Fourche, Bonatti makes a makeshift repair to the axe, 'wrapping it in a tight corset of strong twine, which made it perfectly serviceable.'⁵ Henry, second on the French-Belgian rope and so not required to cut steps, offers Bonatti his own axe, which the Italian accepts. 'La Poire needs perfect equipment,' Henry tells him, downplaying his act of generosity. Bonatti notes the

3. Le Choucas, the 'Jackdaw', was for French climbers what the 'Bar Nash' was for the British.

4. Quoted in Ballu.

5. Bonatti *My Mountains – Christmas on Mont-Blanc*.



Having finished the Brenva spur after a bivouac and a storm, with Vincendon and Henry on his rope, Bonatti and Gheser split again to summit Mont Blanc and descend to the Vallot on the evening of 26 December. The Franco-Belgian team never arrived, bivouacking and then descending towards the Grands Mulets, bivouacking again and then missing the exit to become marooned above the Combe Maudite.

superiority of their equipment, ‘particularly their long down sleeping bags capable of dealing with low temperatures.’⁶ In return Bonatti suggests they join him on the Pear, knowing Vincendon and Henry will likely not accept since their training and acclimatisation are insufficient for such a difficult climb. Vincendon know this and decides to stick with the Brenva.

The climbers wake at 2.30am on Christmas Day, a Tuesday. They leave the hut at 4am. The first minutes in the winter cold are painful. At the Col Moore, the two parties separate, the Italians traversing left to the foot of the Pear while the French and Belgian start on the Brenva. Bonatti soon realises they have started too late: the sun rises as they reach a steep couloir below the Pear itself that is full of loose snow. The route is prone to avalanche. At 8:30am they give up on the Pear and make a long diagonal traverse to the Brenva. Just as they get there, an avalanche falls a thousand metres filling the Brenva cirque below. Bonatti is astonished to find the Franco-Belgian party is still below them. Heavily laden, they have been slow, but they do not seem in difficulty.

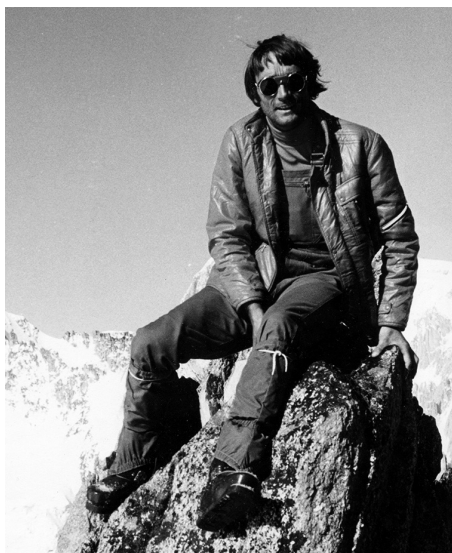
Bonatti and Gheser start up the tracks left by Dufourmantelle and Caseneuve and at 2pm stop for an hour to eat. Vincendon and Henry still do not catch them. Bonatti starts again, knowing the last part of the route is steeper and may require step cutting. At 3.30pm he and Gheser are 100m below the last seracs near the steep section that ends the spur. In normal

6. Bonatti *My Mountains – Christmas on Mont-Blanc*.

conditions, it would take an hour or two to reach the summit of Mont Blanc and another half hour or so to reach the Vallot bivouac hut below the Bosses ridge. But it is winter, and as they climb the last steep slope of the spur night falls and the wind strengthens. 'A little altimeter-barometer would have been enough to warn us the previous night,' Bonatti wrote in *Mountains of my Life*. 'But in those days no one made much use of them. (I used one constantly from then on precisely because of this experience.) Nor were there any reliable weather forecasts. At that time everyone trusted his own empirical observation and relied on vague premonitory signs.' This hasn't been enough. A storm has broken; the wind speed reaches more than 40mph. 'In those circumstances, it would have been normal to lose our life.'

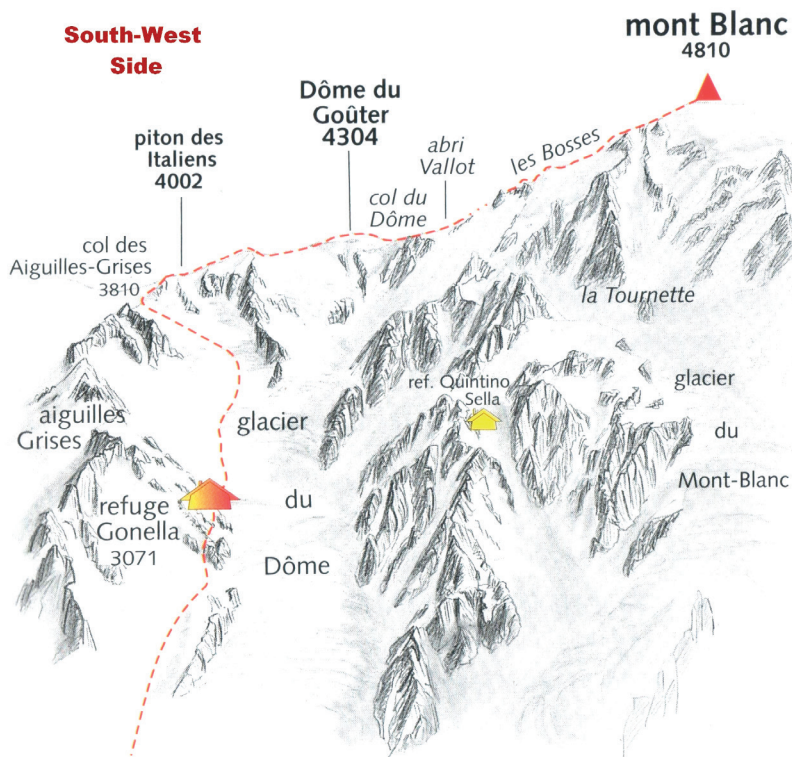
He looks for shelter and finds a hole he enlarges with his borrowed axe. Gheser's feet are freezing; he's made the mistake of wearing cotton socks. Bonatti gives him his *pied d'éléphant* half sleeping bag. A hundred metres below, Vincendon and Henry shelter in a snow-hole. There is no chance of sleep. By morning 40cm of fresh snow has fallen and the storm continues. Thick cloud blankets the mountain. Vincendon and Henry aren't well but don't want to go down as Dufourmantelle and Caseneuve advised. As Bonatti says later, they were already too high, near the top of the spur, and the fresh snow meant descending would be dangerous. In the morning, Bonatti goes down to fetch them using his two ropes tied together for the first 80m. They all join Gheser. Henry's left foot is frozen but with Bonatti's appearance their spirits are high.

Bonatti senses that without his help the other pair won't make it. He puts them on his rope, Gheser, then Henry and Vincendon. Blinded by the storm he finds a way through the snowy maze. Missing the easy exit on the right leading to the Brenva Col, he takes the middle exit of the three, heading straight up to tackle the final seracs with technical difficulties that Dufourmantelle and Caseneuve didn't encounter. Suddenly, at around 3pm, the sky clears: they can see the summit. The climbers are some 150m above the Brenva Col (4303m), at the top of the ridge of the Mur de la Côte, 350m below the summit between the Lower and Upper Red Rocks.⁷



Claude Dufourmantelle on the summit of the Breithorn. His rapid ascent of the Brenva was an inspiration for Vincendon and Henry, and who raised the alarm when he thought they were in trouble.

7. W Bonatti's estimates in *To My Mountains: - Christmas on Mont-Blanc*.



A diagram illustrating the route taken by Bonatti and Gheser to the Gonella hut, which they reached from the Vallot on 28 December after another bivouac. Rescuers reached them there on 30 December.

Bonatti's instinct and experience seems to have saved them. But they are not yet out of danger. Bonatti starts for the Grands Mulets via the old lower route, the *Passage Balmat*⁸, but after 100m with snow up to his waist he discovers the fresh snow is unstable and dangerous. They return to their starting point at around 4,450m. One solution is to cross diagonally to the Vallot hut (4362m) but the snow looks deep and avalanche prone. The easiest and safest solution is to climb to the summit of Mont Blanc and descend the Bosses ridge to the Vallot. The bitter northerly has blown it clear of loose snow; the slope is firm and straightforward. Yet climbing in a fierce wind is exhausting, particularly after the ordeal of their bivouac. Bonatti is worried. Night will be on them in an hour and he knows a second night out in the open could mean death. With a wind of 40mph and a temperature dropping to -30°C , the wind chill will be ferocious: -70°C . He has to reach the Vallot before sunset and Gheser is weakening. As Bonatti recalls afterwards, 'there

8. *The Passage Balmat*, also called the 'Old Route' or the 'Forbidden Route' was forbidden by the Chamonix guides after the famous Arkwright accident on 13 October 1866.

was no difficulty, we only had to walk.' Visibility was 'now good' and the two parties split again in order to 'go as fast as possible.'⁹

Having set off together, after half an hour or so Vincendon and Henry slow down. A hundred metres below the summit, above the Petits Mulets, Bonatti sees them lagging behind some 60m to 90m.¹⁰ He shouts into the wind to go faster. They respond, 'No problem.' Bonatti then concentrates on the task in hand, thinking that on such straightforward ground and with their tracks Vincendon and Henry will soon join him. As night falls he reaches the summit, blasted by the freezing wind. Without stopping, Bonatti and Gheser go down the Bosses ridge. By the time they reach the Vallot it's pitch-dark.

The sheet-metal refuge is in an appalling state. Everything is frozen and it's impossible to light a fire. There's no food or medicine, nothing but frozen blankets. The temperature inside that night is -18°C. Realising how bad Gheser's feet are, he uses methylated spirits from their stove to rub his feet. He also lights a candle on the windowsill for Vincendon and Henry, but they don't arrive. Bonatti keeps looking out of the door. Why haven't they arrived? He suggests going to look for them but Gheser tells him that will be suicide. Day breaks, the morning of Thursday 27 December. The storm still rages and there is no sign of the others. 'I could not imagine,' Bonatti wrote later, 'that so high up Vincendon and Henry, only a little distance behind us, were going to take, without us knowing, the most absurd of decisions: turn back down (but this is what they did!) and then go for the couloir of the Old [Balmat] Passage, which we had avoided as being extremely dangerous. Why would Vincendon and Henry do such a folly?'¹¹ He decides against going down to Chamonix, although it's much shorter, preferring to descend the Bionassay ridge to the Gonella. He thinks the snow on that side will be less avalanche-prone. Friends coming up from Courmayeur should be at the Gonella waiting for them.

Gheser's feet are so swollen he can't put his boots on. With blankets from the Vallot and bits of a sleeping bag Bonatti fashions some makeshift shoes, fixing Gheser's crampons to them with lanyards, belts and wire. They finally leave the Vallot at 10am, descending through a maze of seracs, crevasses and mounds of snow. A snow bridge breaks and Bonatti falls 20m into the crevasse beneath before being stopped by the mass of snow forming between his legs. Gheser holds the rope and Bonatti climbs up it to where the crevasse narrows. Then he continues with his crampons but the final part is overhanging. He asks Gheser to make loops on one of the rope's ends, lower it to him and fix it securely. Using this, he swings his body until he can reach the crevasse's lip and then with Gheser's help escapes its clutches. This manoeuvre has taken 2h 30m. The time is 5pm and the Gonella is still 700m below them. They must bivouac again and take shelter against a serac.

9. W Bonatti, *La Rivista Mensile*, CAI, 1957 and 'Christmas on Mont Blanc', *To My Mountains*, 1961.

10. W Bonatti, *Una Vita Così*, Milan, RCS Libri, 2014. Published three years after Bonatti's death.

11. W Bonatti, *Montagnes d'Une Vie*, Arthaud, 1997.

The cold is intense. Bonatti gives Gheser his thicker mittens and the hood of his anorak. Like on K2 during his terrible bivouac at 8,100m he keeps beating his boots with his ice axe until the pain returns and he's confident blood is flowing again. At 5am the moon emerges. The weather is now perfect and the sun rises brightly. They know they will survive. It will take them a full day, advancing slowly, sometimes on all fours, to reach Gonella where they find good blankets and wood to make a fire but no food. Bonatti's Italian friends have organised a rescue party from Courmayeur and reach them two days later on 30 December.

Two Castaways on Mont Blanc

When Bonatti last presses Vincendon and Henry to keep following him, they stopped two or three rope lengths below the Petits Mulets, the last rocks some 110m below the summit of Mont Blanc. Unlike Bonatti and Gheser, Vincendon and Henry aren't acclimatised, which may be a factor in their subsequent decision to descend. It's likely they bivouacked near the Petits Rochers Rouges but we can't be sure. Nor is there any way of knowing whether they attempt to reach the summit the following morning of 27 December.¹² At some point they clearly begin descending the slopes between the Petits Rochers Rouges and the lower Rochers Rouges, the old Passage Balmat, aiming for the Grand Plateau and the Grands Mulets refuge.

The Chamonix guide Joseph Maffioli is at the Brévent with a telescope and reports that Vincendon is falling frequently, held by Henry. At some point, not witnessed, Vincendon takes Henry with him and they tumble 60m down a steep couloir, losing their glacier glasses, rucksacks and gloves. François Henry also loses his crampons and over-boots. They bivouac again at the bottom of the Rochers Rouges at around 4,200m, having descended just 400m in a full day.¹³ The following morning, Friday 28 December, as Bonatti and Gheser begin their final descent to the Gonella, Henry manages to get Vincendon down to the Grand Plateau. But perhaps partially blind due to the loss of their sunglasses, they lose their way and instead of going left towards the Grands Mulets they go straight down and find themselves on the brink of the 300m icefall that hangs above the Combe Maudite at around 3,900m, perched on an unstable cornice. Exhausted and frostbitten, they cannot turn around and climb back up. They are essentially trapped. Only a rescue can save them now.

Until the end of the war there was no national rescue system in France. Rescues were local volunteer efforts. Lucien Devies, the powerful president of the Fédération Française de la Montagne (FFM),¹⁴ instituted the first national system based on the established Austrian mountain rescue organisation, coordinating some 20 different organisations by 1948. He was

12. Testimony of Blanc who spoke with François Henry after the crash of his helicopter three days later.

13. According to the observers from Planpraz and the Brévent, Simond, Pellin and Maffioli.

14. Fédération Française de la Montagne, created in 1945 by the sports minister with the delegation to organise mountain rescues in France. Its president Lucien Devies was also in charge of its rescue committee.

particularly active in Chamonix, where the larger number of rescues required the task be shared between different bodies and coordinated through the Société Chamoniarde de Secours en Montagne (SCSM). Although the SCSM reports to the FFM rescue committee, its role is simply to delegate rescues to one of the three organisations in Chamonix with the necessary men and equipment. These are the powerful Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix, jealous of its privileges; the École de Haute Montagne (EHM), whose guides train French mountain troops; and ENSA, which is fairly new and attached to the sports department of the French education ministry. However, in winter ENSA runs only skiing instructor courses, and so many of the instructors are not available.

The head of the SCSM is Pierre Dartigue, a well-regarded doctor, but he can't simply order a rescue. Each of these organisations has their own rules and chains of command. And apart from the EHM, it's up to each guide to make his own decision. Rescues in winter are exceptional and there is a real gulf between local professionals and city-dwelling amateurs. After the tragedy, the *France Observateur* quotes the president of the guides: 'The Chamonix ... company refuses to risk the life of Chamonix fathers to save two reckless individuals who are not from here.' Even the more sober Claude Deck, in the first 'official' account of the tragedy for *La Montagne et Alpinisme* published in 1983, will write: 'in 1956, the brotherly pre-war emulation between amateurs and professionals had given way to somewhat bitter competition and rivalries.'

There are other players in the rescue: the Compagnie des Guides de Saint-Gervais Mont-Blanc, which is not part of the SCSM, much smaller than its Chamonix equivalent and more easy-going. The Saint Gervais guides had participated in the famous 1950 Malabar Princess rescue and their leader Louis Piraly will now prove sympathetic and helpful. Apart from these official structures, alpinists from outside the valley, amateurs from the cities, mostly Paris and Geneva such as Claude Dufourmantelle, Marcel Bron and their friends, will also get involved.

On 26 December, while both ropes are struggling to reach the summit of Mont Blanc, Le Duf, unaware that Vincendon and Henry have waited two days before starting their ascent, assumes something has gone wrong. He contacts Dartigue who tells him there is no rescue in winter but suggests he contact Joseph Burnet of the Chamonix guides. Two rescue parties could be sent up, one from St Gervais and the Goûter hut, the other from Chamonix and the Grands Mulets. This is what had happened after the Malabar Princess crash.¹⁵ Burnet refuses, telling Le Duf: 'Go yourself if you want.'¹⁶ The night's heavy snowfall, Burnet adds, has made a rescue too dangerous. Most guides then had little experience of winter climbing, fearing avalanches, like the one that took the life of René Payot during the Malabar Princess rescue.

15. Air India Flight 245, a Lockheed L-749 Constellation named *Malabar Princess* on the Bombay-Istanbul-Geneva-London route with 40 passengers and eight crew crashed into Mont Blanc on the morning of 3 November 1950 at the Rochers de la Tournette (4677m) on the Italian side, killing all on board.

16. C Deck, *La Montagne et Alpinisme*, 1983.



Bonatti and the Italian rescuers descend in heavy snow with Gheser on a sledge.

And as Le Duf points out, 60 years later, it is peak skiing season and the guides are busy. Burnet having refused, Dartigue calls Louis Piraly, president of the St Gervais guides. Le Duf speaks with him but Piraly has no guides available to organise a rescue. Both Piraly and Burnet agree the avalanche risk is too high and they must first locate the missing climbers. Pierre Dartigue is like a general without soldiers.

Le Duf and his friend Rémy de Vivie now ask Rébuffat for help but he tells them he has no spare equipment to lend them and is not interested in a private rescue. Jean Franco, of Makalu fame, is the manager of UNCM and will soon be director of ENSA. He also declines but as a gesture of goodwill gives Le Duf his own ice axe to replace the one Dufourmantelle lost when he fell in the crevasse at the Jonction. The EHM seems more promising. They are guides but being military have no clients and no insurance issues. They can also count on the French army's greater resources. An Auster 5 pilot is available at Le Fayet's tiny airstrip but he cannot take off until the runway is cleared of snow. No flight is possible that day. Le Duf's partner Caseneuve has gone back to Paris and since he can't do anything on his own tries to find friends to form a rescue party. He also calls Vincendon's parents to alert them that their son may be in trouble. That same afternoon, Le Duf finds two friends, François Aubert and Noel Blotti, also planning a winter ascent and consequently well equipped. They agree to go up to Tête Rousse from Les Houches the next day, 27 December.

While Le Duf and his friends are slogging through deep snow towards the Nid d'Aigle, Dartigue has an idea: why not use a helicopter? The notion of helicopter rescue in the mountains is still new. Lucien Devies had initiated some experimental flights two years earlier: a Bell 47 flew 11 sorties, reaching an altitude of 4,500m. The pilot even made two rescues, one on the Mer de Glace and another on the Argentière glacier, the first helicopter rescues in the Mont Blanc range. There were still stringent technical limits but testing continued and won approval from well-known alpinists and guides like Roger Frison-Roche, Maurice Herzog, Gaston Rébuffat and Louis Lachenal who all accompanied flights. Armand Charlet estimated that a helicopter could do as much work in half an hour as three rescue parties over two days.

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Dartigue asks the Haute-Savoie prefect for two search helicopters, preferably the new Alouettes powered by revolutionary gas-turbine engines. Dartigue knows all about the altitude record Sud-Aviation's test pilot Jean Boulet set in 1955, reaching an altitude of 8,209m. During the summer of 1956 Boulet had rescued an alpinist at the Vallot refuge in his Alouette II. The machine was superbly adapted to mountain flight. Apart from its turbine, the Alouette's low cockpit offered easy access and its two long skates ensured stability on snow. The Alouette could hover easily. It was also light, weighing 900kg, far less than the alternative: heavy-wheeled, piston-engine Sikorskys.

The army agrees to Dartigue's request, but rather than Alouettes sends two much heavier machines from Le Bourget-du-Lac airbase. The first is a Sikorsky S-55, a stalwart of the Indochina War. The pilot is Jacques Petetin, a 25-year-old flying instructor who has climbed Mont Blanc – aged 14 – and knows mountaineering and the area well. His co-pilot is Raymond Dupret. Petetin's S-55, which he calls the 'Happy Elephant', has an official ceiling of 10,900ft, around 3,300m, but the pilot knows how to push that by over-revving the engine, something he has done before to land a glaciologist on the Col du Dôme (4260m). With them is a new model, the Sikorsky S-58, forerunner of the Westland Sea King, with its more powerful engine. Its ceiling is even lower, the aircraft being designed for submarine warfare. Pilot André Blanc, born in Algeria, has never set foot on a mountain.

At 1.15pm on 27 December, Petetin lands the Happy Elephant on Le Fayet's tiny airstrip to pick up Piraly, president of the St Gervais guides. They take off but the Grand Plateau is covered in clouds. Fifty minutes later they are back having seen nothing but they know almost for certain that Vincendon and Henry are not at Tête Rousse, the Goûter or Vallot huts. They have also seen Le Duf and his two companions near the Nid d'Aigle, stopped by heavy snow. Then news arrives that Joseph Maffioli, guide and head of the ski patrol at Le Brévent, has spotted one, perhaps two alpinists above and to the right of the Rochers Rouges and approaching the Passage Balmat. Petetin puts more fuel in the Happy Elephant and takes off again, but even guided from Le Brévent where the climbers are clearly visible, cloud prevents Petetin and Piraly from seeing anything and they turn back. Petetin reaches Le Bourget that evening in falling snow with just 150m of visibility, flying just above the main road so he can find his way by the lights of trucks. It has been a miserable day, not least because the parents of Vincendon arrive to face the gathering flock of journalists from Paris, Lyon, Grenoble. News reaches Chamonix that Bonatti and Gheser are on their way to Gonella. Everyone is now certain that the Mont Blanc castaways are Jean Vincendon and François Henry.

At noon next day, 28 December, the day Bonatti and Gheser reach the Gonella, the Auster 5 pilot takes Piraly up to locate the missing climbers. Through binoculars he sees their tracks and guiding the pilot, Vincendon and Henry come into view. On their return they have a meeting with Petetin who has flown back to Le Fayet in the Happy Elephant. They know now

that the two alpinists have not moved since the previous day. The weather is perfect and Petetin proposes landing the Happy Elephant near the two climbers. Piraly takes a 20m rope and takes off with him. Yet after passing within yards of the two castaways, Petetin realises he cannot land: the snow on the glacier is too deep, there are crevasses and the slope is not flat enough. The helicopter would simply sink in and topple over. He could stop much higher on the Dôme du Goûter (4304m) but who will bring the stricken climbers up there? Piraly alone cannot do it. And how will he get down? There's no chance of being lowered from the chopper. At this altitude an S-55 can't manage a stationary hover. Like a bicycle, it has to move forward to stay upright. Petetin has come so close that he sees clearly the smiling faces of Vincendon and Henry. 'How sad to know, feel, listen in my head and my heart, those two boys the same age as mine, dying there, and unable to do more.'¹⁷

Piraly, the only guide so far to get involved, has already called the press to explain his plan for the morning. He will try to get Vincendon and Henry to move further up towards the Dôme du Gouter where he can get out of the helicopter on a rope ladder and then clip them to a rope to help them get in the helicopter. If landing on the Grand Plateau is impossible then he could be dropped on the Dôme du Gouter itself with several other guides to prepare a landing ground. If the weather is fine, the two climbers, for the first time in a week, could be sleeping in a bed. But Piraly has no one to go with him. Joseph Burnet categorically refuses to ask any of his guides to take what he considers too high a risk. He suggests instead Piraly contacts Lionel Terray but he is not in Chamonix. Piraly actually needs at least six guides and with no volunteers his rescue is stillborn.

In the meantime, Claude Dufourmantelle and his friends François Aubert and Noel Blotti have abandoned their attempt to reach the Dôme du Gouter because of deep snow. Blotti has also twisted an ankle and is no longer fit enough to participate. Le Duf now wants to go up to the Grands Mulets. He finds more friends besides François Aubert: Rémy de Vivie, Marcel Bize and the Swiss Marcel Bron, Roger Habersaat, Claudi Asper and Mario Grossi, all experienced alpinists from the Androsace, although they only have their skiing gear. He asks the SCSM president Dartigue to lend him some equipment. Dartigue calls the FFM in Paris, but gear from there will take too long to arrive.

At 3.30pm Petetin and Piraly take off again to drop backpacks with blankets, food, drugs and five identical messages attached to smoke grenades: 'Go up immediately 200m to the Grand Plateau. It is the only place where the helicopter will be able to land and collect you.' Piraly takes a photo with one castaway standing and the second in a coiled position. This appears in the newspapers. Vincendon and Henry cannot open the rucksacks: their hands are frozen hard. But they read one of the messages and at 4pm start moving up, extremely slowly. By 5.20pm they have climbed up only 50m. It is too late for the S-55 to take off again.

17. Ballu, *ibid.*

The Military Moves In

Gilbert Chappaz is one of the EHM ski and climbing instructors and also a member of the Chamonix guides. Hearing about Piraly's rescue plan he goes to Le Fayet to meet him but must first get approval from his commanding officer Yves Le Gall. Le Gall is 44 and recently returned from the Indochina War. A military man, he has no experience of mountaineering. Dartigue is only too happy to give all the rescue authority and responsibilities to Yves Le Gall, who now takes charge of all operations. The helicopter operation Piraly has proposed is accepted but Le Gall prohibits any rescue party on foot. With the agreement of Nollet, commanding officer at Le Bourget, and Lacroix, commanding officer of the helicopter squadron, he decides to fly 12 EHM guides in two parties to land on the Dôme du Goûter. That will allow seven hours to reach the castaways and bring them up to the Col du Dôme. For this he needs a second helicopter. Nollet and Lacroix allocate the new Sikorsky S-58 under the command of Alexis Santini, a Corsican veteran of the Indochina War. Santini hesitates. His S-58 has never been tested in the mountains or on snow but he has little choice: his commanding officers insist.

Le Gall's operation needs seven hours and he will only give the green light with a whole day of good weather and acceptable flight conditions, despite being told the Vallot hut can be used as a base for the rescuers. He follows tactics learned in the Indochina War for retrieving wounded soldiers from the field. In the morning, 29 December, the airstrip is covered in clouds and the helicopters are grounded. Only in the early afternoon does the weather clear. Piraly is waiting to take off with Petetin in the Happy Elephant when a large amount of equipment is loaded on board and he is told Le Gall is taking his place. His mountaineering and rescue experience is brushed aside. From the helicopter Petetin sees Vincendon and Henry still moving towards the Grand Plateau. They see the hole in which they have bivouacked the night before. The rucksacks they dropped are no longer where they fell so it's assumed they have taken them. The helicopter drops more food, clothes and stoves six yards from Vincendon, and a second load is dropped 12 yards from Henry. They see them seize the loads and wave their arms.

Hopes that Vincendon and Henry can still be saved are high that night. Journalist Philippe Gaussois writes in *Le Dauphiné Libéré* how the fresh supplies 'should allow them to hold on another 24 hours and even without being over optimistic, three or four days.' Santini, arriving at Le Fayet in his S-58, is confident that if the weather is fine tomorrow he will get them to safety. Dufourmantelle asks Le Gall if he can be dropped with two or three of his friends near Vincendon and Henry with the aim of bringing them down to the Grands Mulets. Le Gall refuses. As a military commander he won't tolerate 'amateurs' or be responsible for their safety. Only EHM guides will work on this rescue: no civilians.

Le Duf then meets Lionel Terray, who has been at a conference in Val d'Isère. On his way home he has picked up a hitchhiker, Bob Xueref, a climbing pal of Jean Vincendon who is on the way from Lyon having

heard the news. Terray is indignant the Chamonix guides have refused to organise a rescue. The hero of Annapurna, one of the few 'outsiders' in the Chamonix guides, has already fallen out with the company's leadership over a rescue the year before on Les Droites. He meets Vincendon's parents and then several of the EHM. It's a heated exchange. Terray asks them why they haven't organised a rescue party on foot. He is told he is not required. Le Gall wouldn't change his plan for Le Duf and he won't do it for Terray either. Terray tells him he will organise a ground rescue on his own.

Later that same day Terray is asked if he wouldn't mind showing the EHM team how to use the oxygen systems they want to take with them. So at 7.30am on Sunday 30 December, Terray runs an impromptu seminar using Gilbert Chappaz as guinea pig. Then, at 9am, Santini, André Blanc and a member of the EHM take off in the S-58 for a reconnaissance flight. It's the first time the chopper has flown in the mountains and at altitude. During a test hover, the S-58 stalls. Weather conditions are not good and the wind is strong. Above 1,800m visibility is nil, says Santini. As the weather worsens, it's clear the whole day will be lost.

Furious, Terray is convinced too much time has been lost relying on helicopters that can't operate in poor weather when a traditional ground rescue is still possible. He organises a party with Claude Dufourmantelle, Rémy de Vivie, François Aubert and his friend Hubert Josserand, an ENSA teacher, the only one who will volunteer. The SCSM refuses to cover their insurance, at least until Lucien Devies gets wind of this and reverses the decision. A second team is also available, the Swiss Marcel Bron and his friends from the Androsace, and Terray asks Bob Xueref to stay behind in order to sort out equipment arriving from the FFM in Paris. They will aim to catch up the following day at the Grands Mulets, following the first party's tracks.

Terray and the others set off, taking the Aiguille du Midi cable car to the Plan de l'Aiguille. The company refuses to let them use cableway to the service platform at the Aiguille des Glaciers, which would save them three hours and allow them to reach the Grands Mulets that evening. Instead they have to bivouac in the remains of the top station of the defunct Glaciers cable car. The same thing happens to the second party, which sets out when the EHM finally agree to lend it equipment.

On the morning of Monday 31 December, Le Gall's EHM teams are ready at Le Fayet airstrip, but the two Sikorskys need more preparation. Finally, at 9am, Santini and Blanc take off in their S-58 taking with them the guide Honoré Bonnet.¹⁸ But the wind is too strong and half an hour later they are back to Le Fayet. Night will fall at 5pm so if Le Gall sticks to his seven-hour window, then by 10am another day will be lost. At noon, the weather turns fine but the EHM guides will not now be in situ before 1pm and won't finish their mission before 7pm, too late for the helicopters to fly. Terray's team is now leaving Jonction and at best they will sleep at the Grands Mulets. Vincendon and Henry seem doomed.

18. Future coach of a highly successful French skiing team that won more than 32 Olympic medals in 10 years.



A badly frostbitten Gheser arrives at Courmayeur on a sledge.

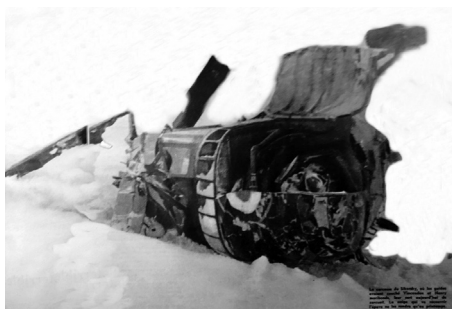


Vincendon and Henri spotted on top of a serac overhanging the Combe Maudite. The two black dots above right are the tent and food dropped which they didn't have the strength to use.

Then news arrives from Le Brévent: one of the castaways is moving. He's still alive. The Corsican Alexis Santini, has become increasingly irritated at the presence of his commanding officers. The air minister is also on the strip. He decides to have a go anyway, despite the low chances of success. He says he will attempt to pick up Vincendon and Henry direct from the Grand Plateau. With Blanc as pilot and himself as co-pilot they will try



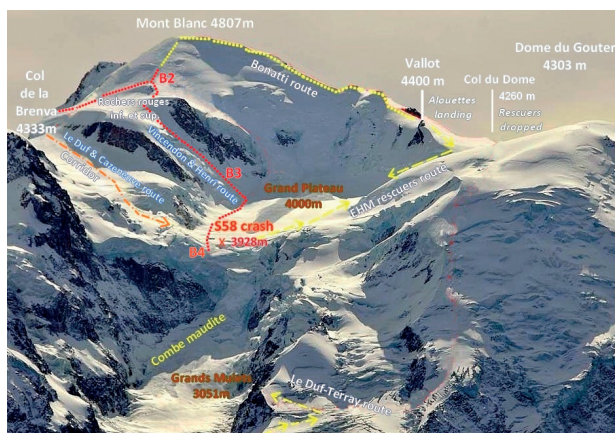
Above: EHM guides Honoré Bonnet and Charles Germain in the Sikorsky S-58 shortly before the crash. In the cockpit are André Blanc and Alexis Santini. The S-58 was the forerunner of the Sea King but ill-suited to flying at altitude or hovering. Neither Blanc nor Santini had mountain experience and had to be persuaded to wear mountain clothes.



Above: The crashed S-58 and a contemporary newspaper illustration showing the EHM guides putting Vincendon and Henry in the wreckage. It would become their resting place until the spring.

to stabilise the helicopter long enough for the guides to get Vincendon and Henry into the cabin. Petetin advises him to get properly equipped. The Corsican replies he has no intention of staying up there. But Petetin insists and eventually Santini and Blanc put on mountain boots, fur flying-suits and gloves. As well as Bonnet, they take a second guide, Charles Germain.

Petetin and Le Gall take off first in the Happy Elephant to mark the landing zone for Santini. They see the castaways have not moved for the last two days and they haven't put up the tent, but they are alive and wave their hands to them. He also sees that the snow is powdery and deep and his helicopter is caught in the downwash of a strong southerly. The S-58's manoeuvre will be difficult. Petetin radios the information to Santini who tells him to stand by. At 12.45pm, the S-58 takes off. At the Grand Plateau they see the two climbers. Blanc starts the landing approach, trying to stabilize his heavy aircraft: to no avail. The rotor blades whip up a maelstrom of powdery snow, which floods the helicopter's cockpit, blinding the pilot and unbalancing the S-58. Its rotor blades hit the snow and the aircraft crashes onto its side,



A photo-diagram showing the location of the S-58 crash and the directions of approach by the two rescue parties, the EHM from above and Terray and Le Duf from below.

its tail broken. All the occupants get out safely and no one is seriously wounded, although Germain is badly bruised by Bonnet falling on him. Now six men are shipwrecked above the Combe Maudite.

Nollet, base commander at Le Bourget, asks Petetin to get the men out in three or four flights. Petetin refuses. He knows the only place he can land safely is the Dôme du Gouter, which he has done before. Visibility is always better there and the winds more predictable. The decision is taken to drop four guides on the Dôme du Gouter to rescue the two pilots first, then Vincendon and Henry. Petetin lands safely and drops Gilbert Chappaz. On the next flight he drops Jean Minster and some equipment. Two more flights and there are now four on the Dôme du Gouter. The last flight had been quite risky: Petetin needed three attempts to take off and he says that's it for the day. His engine filter has frozen and he says it's like flying a fixed wing, not a helicopter.¹⁹ Yet the mission is accomplished. The guides agree that Chappaz and Minster will go to the Grand Plateau while the other two head for the Vallot where they will regroup later.

Meanwhile, on the Grand Plateau, Honoré Bonnet has decided to get the two pilots, neither with mountaineering experience, up to the Vallot and then come back for Vincendon and Henry who are terribly frostbitten. Their hands and feet are blocks of wood but they don't comprehend how badly they are injured. They have been incapable of using any of the equipment and food dropped in previous days but they are able to converse with Bonnet. Learning Bonnet is a member of the GHM, which they dream of joining, they mention climbs they could do together in the future. Years later, the memory of that conversation will leave Bonnet in tears. He gives the pair a shot of Benzadrine. François Henry looks in a better condition

19. J Belliard & R Romet, *Secours Extrême*, Flammarion, 1986.



Vincendon, left, and Henry half buried in the snow, unable to move, hands, feet and faces frozen but still semi-lucid. Charles Germain faces the camera.

than Jean who says that without François he would not be alive.

Bonnet and the others are with them for two hours and then at 3pm the two guides leave with the two pilots. Once again Vincendon and Henry are alone. The party of four hasn't gone 30m before André Blanc falls into a crevasse, stopping his 90kg at the surface on his arms. Blanc is already in shock from the crash and feels a growing sense of guilt. He slips two metres into the crevasse but Bonnet holds him, and is then able to crawl on his belly to the edge of the slot. He tells Blanc he will drop him a loop of rope to put his foot in to get up and out. But Blanc doesn't understand or react. He's gone berserk, believing he's going to die in the crevasse.

So Germain and Bonnet set up a rope system to haul him up and Bonnet finally manages to grab the pilot and pull him out. Blanc is unable to move so Bonnet drags him to the crashed helicopter and puts him

beside Vincendon and Henry, who tries to raise his spirits and warm his hands with his own, even though they are as hard as rocks. The sight leaves Bonnet in tears. Later, in hospital, Blanc will tell François' father what his son told him about their ordeal. Having untied from Bonatti's rope, Vincendon had become more and more tired. Henry tried to make him follow Bonatti's tracks but night fell and they were forced to bivouac for the second time. The following day, they turned downhill, trying to reach the Grands Mulets. He told Blanc about Vincendon's fall and the equipment they lost, the bivouac at the base of the Rochers Rouges and losing their way next day. On the Saturday or Sunday François had managed to drag Vincendon back onto the Grand Plateau. Blanc said that all the time Henry was talking to him, the young man didn't stop trying to warm Blanc with his frozen hands.

Now Minster and Chappaz arrive and evaluate the situation. Vincendon and Henry are in a desperate state. Their feet and lower legs are blocks of ice; their hands are useless, their arms frozen to the elbow. They don't seem to comprehend the dreadful state they're in. They seem happy, dreamy even, apologising for the trouble they are causing and telling the EHM guides they will help out on future rescues. Bruised badly during the crash, Germain is not in good shape and Blanc is still shocked, his hands and arms

not functioning. Minster gives him some Coramine to get him moving. The four EHM guides then consider their options: stay put and wait for reinforcements; split into two teams, one taking the pilots to the Vallot and the second staying with Vincendon and Henry; stick together, get the pilots to the Vallot and come back the following day with reinforcements for the two stricken climbers.

The first option is judged pointless; they will just sit there and freeze. The second is possible but with threatening weather and the state of the pilot Blanc, the third is chosen. A lamp is lit in the helicopter and with an aching heart Chappaz tells the two castaways: 'We will come back.' Once again the two are alone.

Bonnet and Germain leave first with Santini, Minster and Chappaz follow with Blanc. Night is on them and a north-west wind brings snow. Blanc is suffering and it takes eight hours of painful toil on the part of the two guides to reach the Vallot at 1.30am. Germain, Bonnet and Santini aren't there. Deteriorating weather and a malfunctioning compass force them to bivouac in the bergschrund below the Vallot at 11.30pm.

Lionel Terray is now at the Grands Mulets hut after a confusing day. Soon after the S-58 crash, Terray and Dufourmantelle are approaching the Grands Mulets when they see the Auster 5 flying over several times. The pilot then shouts through his open window: 'The helicopter fell!' They think he's said, 'They fell!' meaning the climbers. They turn back and then meet the second party, which has bivouacked 200m below. They discover from Marcel Bron, who has a radio link with Le Gall, that it's the S-58 that has crashed. Le Duf now decides to return to the valley but Terray and other volunteers go back up to the Grands Mulets for the night even though he is now convinced that Vincendon and Henry are dead.

For the last few days, the weather has not been bad: misty and cloudy enough to stop helicopters flying but with negligible snowfall. Any rescue party leaving before 28 December would have reached and likely saved the two castaways. This explains Terray's fury at the Chamonix guides and the EHM commander Le Gall, who all refused to organise a ground rescue. For the last two days they have been following the trail Le Duf and the Yeti made as they descended before Christmas. Now, on New Year's Day, the weather is awful and it snows hard, making the slopes above avalanche prone. Terray decides to descend, which is difficult with this heavy snowfall. Back in Chamonix, Terray is sharply critical of the whole rescue organisation. *Le Dauphiné* publishes the reaction to this from the Chamonix guides, who accuse Terray of organising an amateur rescue, that the dangers were too great and he was after publicity. Terray was defiant, telling journalists that guides who had judged conditions too dangerous had stayed put in the valley, 'their arms crossed', without testing the premise.

Years later, Le Duf still argues that a ground party, moving on foot, should have been agreed at once, which would 'in all instances' have reached Vincendon and Henry. 'That Le Gall decided against this was probably to limit the risks, but in difficult conditions there is no rescue possible without



Jean Boulet landing his Alouette near the Vallot to evacuate the EHM rescue party. Had the helicopters been used from the start, Vincendon and Henry would have survived.

the commitment of the rescuers and a risk that they accept.' He sees Terray, 'one of the greatest French guides as well as one of the greatest French amateur climbers', as 'an ideal link between the two worlds.' Le Duf also acknowledges that as a famous man, Terray didn't need to give skiing lessons and didn't have a family to support, so his position was more comfortable than 'his comrades in the Chamonix guides who were just doing their job.'

At the Vallot hut, the EHM guides have organised themselves and take care of Blanc who is in a poor state. Bad weather hampers flying for the next two days. Petetin tries to land the Happy Elephant near the Vallot, flying up alone to save weight. Having watched from the hut, Santini radios Nolleto to stop Petetin from trying again: 'He's going to break his neck!'²⁰

The decision is finally taken to use the Alouettes. The air force has a dozen brand new machines based at Mont-de-Marsan north of Pau in the Pyrenees. The boss of Sud-Aviation offers the services of his two test pilots Jean Boulet and Gérard Henry, the only Alouette pilots with mountain flying experience. During the afternoon of 2 January the Alouettes land in Chamonix, where the skies are clear, because of cloud at Le Fayet.

Next morning, 3 January, the Auster 5 pilot flies over the wreckage of the S-58: it's almost buried in snow and there's no sign of life. The first Alouette takes off at 9am and picks up Santini from a landing pad the EHM guides have prepared outside the Vallot. He's flown to Chamonix hospital and is soon joined by Blanc, arriving in the second Alouette. Everyone at the Vallot is brought down in an hour and a half. Jean Boulet proposes flying a rescuer to the site of the S-58 crash, now buried in fresh snow, and then hovering as he climbs down a rope ladder to assess the situation.

20. J Belliard & R Romet, *Secours Extrême*, Flammarion, 1986.

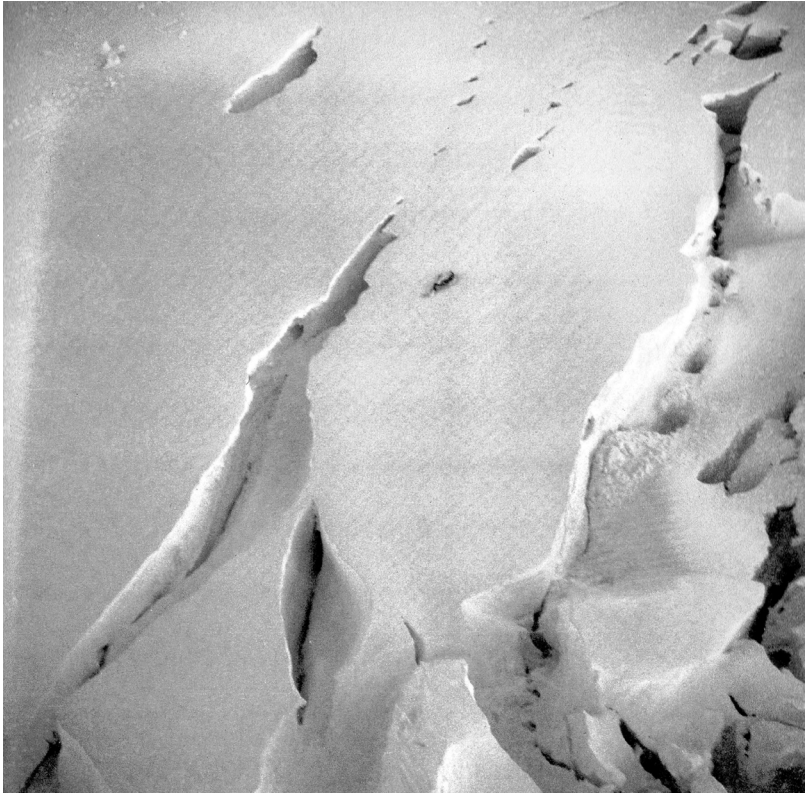


The pilot Blanc taken out of the Alouette in a field 40m from Chamonix hospital.

Le Gall decides to fly up there with him to assess the situation, with the second Alouette following behind. There are no signs of life. Le Gall concludes 'without,' as Terray puts it, 'leaving his seat,' that Vincendon and Henry are dead. He announces an end to operations. There is one final flight over the crash site. The Swiss glacier pilot Hermann Geiger, the 'Eagle of Sion', who has flown scores of mountain rescue missions in his Piper Super Cub, also flies over the wreckage and also fails to spot any signs of life. He proposes landing on the Grand Plateau and Piraly volunteers to go with him, but it's too late: no one believes the two young men are still alive.

The media storm falls away although the backlash continues for a while. The FFM president Lucien Devies tries to calm the situation, proposing all parties join forces to bring down the bodies. The attempt brings a bitter response from the parents of Jean Vincendon. 'Rémy de Vivie, a friend of my son, tells me the French Alpine Club has taken the initiative to organise a party to bring down the bodies of my son and François Henry. This party of alpinists from Paris would include several Chamonix guides. During the agony the two boys suffered, they refused to help: it was their right. Now they must stay with their feet in their slippers.'²¹ The guides are unrepentant. 'Those who through vanity attempt climbs beyond their capabilities ... dismiss too easily the risks taken by their rescuers.' The French army are no more sympathetic, calculating the financial cost of the rescue at €3m in today's money and complaining that the loss of the helicopter would impact the training of pilots heading to the conflict in Algeria.

21. Ballu.



The crashed Sikorsky half buried in snow with Vincendon and Henry inside.

It's an opinion shared by many, but not the FFM and Lucien Devies, whose committee states that 'rescuing our fellow human beings in distress is a human duty, even if risks have to be taken'. Among the well-known personalities questioned by the press for their view is Georges Carpentier, the ageing French boxing champion who in 1921 fought Jack Dempsey for the world heavyweight crown: 'Everything had to be attempted, even beyond reason, even if it was folly. Two men have risked their life for something difficult and noble. Taking risks to save them was paying tribute to their courage and guts.'²²

The SCSM and the military high command ask Lucien Devies to review the controversy and soon after the end of rescue operations, on 10 January 1957, Devies announces the FFM will explore what lessons can be learned from the 'first major rescue failure since the end of the war' in the place with the most personnel and equipment. The enquiry concluded that co-operation had failed, with the guides refusing to participate. Not only that, as Terray claimed volunteers were actively discouraged. Established proto-

22. Ballu.

cols were ignored in favour of helicopters whose use was unproven. The helicopters used lacked the required capabilities and not all the pilots were sufficiently experienced. The SCSM, the co-ordinating body, was impotent, shut out by the EHM command, which closed itself off from outside influence. Delays and serious confusions appeared in the decisions. The failure to mount a rescue effort on foot was particularly criticised, since it most likely resulted in the death of Vincendon and Henry.

Several months later Devies and his FFM committee publish an outline of a new national organisation for mountain rescue. In August 1958, new regulations are passed making the rescue system a national service reporting to the interior ministry. Most significantly, new rescue units are formed by the *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS), the gendarmerie and the army. In 1961, a special unit of the *Gendarmerie Nationale* is created which will eventually become the highly efficient PGHM mountain rescue unit. They will train highly effective rescuers and progressively take over all mountain rescues from the volunteer associations. Helicopters dramatically change things, but it is not until 1972, when the PGHM takes over all mountain rescue that controversies with the Chamonix guides ceases.²³ Lucien Devies does what he can to dampen the controversy that follows this tragic drama, refusing to publish anything in the CAF magazine *La Montagne et Alpinisme*. Only in 1983, three years after Devies' death, is my old friend Claude Deck allowed to publish the first detailed article. Fifteen years later Yves Ballu publishes his book.

The guides who feel most guilt about the fate of Vincendon and Henry are those who have done most, particularly Gilbert Chappaz and Jean Minster. Just after the end of the rescue operation, Chappaz tells a journalist: 'In leaving them there, I had the feeling of committing a crime.' For 50 years Gilbert Chappaz is haunted by the fact that he did not fulfil his promise and that François Henry died despising him.

In June 2007, Yves Ballu organises a meeting at the Chamonix cemetery between them and Jean Henry, older brother and climbing companion of François Henry.²⁴ Gilbert Chappaz tells Jean: 'If you knew all the miseries we suffered ... I went last and I told him [François Henry] I will come back to get you.' Jean tells him gently that he doesn't have to excuse himself. 'By going there you showed them that they had not been abandoned.' As one of Chappaz' sons recalled later: 'It was as if suddenly my father had taken off a rucksack filled with a huge rock. All at once he stood straighter.' Gilbert Chappaz dies five months later, relieved and at peace.

23. E Vola, 'The 1966 Drus Rescue', Summitpost.

24. Epilogue written by Jean Henry in January 2017 on Yves Ballu's blog.