



An original black and white still of Compagnoni on the summit and the hand-tinted version. Note that his windproofs are incorrectly coloured blue: they were in reality khaki.

due to pneumonia and pleurisy. He hallucinated on the way up to the summit and had a breakdown when he got there, both signs of hypoxia. If it hadn't been for Lacedelli's cool head, he might never have returned.

In a way though, it's what the film doesn't show that is most significant. Bar a few shots of oxygen cylinders at base camp and porters humping them up the mountain, there is no footage at all of anyone climbing on oxygen, apart from a single shot at the climax. This is not because the editor wasn't interested, or because no one filmed them: it's because the Italian team simply didn't use oxygen for climbing, apart from on the summit day.

The 1953 British Everest team had tried out their oxygen sets in North Wales and on the march in to Everest and from the Western Cwm upwards. They were familiar with their faults and foibles and needed to be because the equipment frequently went wrong. Compagnoni and Lacedelli had no such training. The oxygen sets they used on the summit day spent the previous two nights out in the open and unlike Hillary and Tenzing, they were not able to check or prepare them. Is it really so hard to accept that they were telling the truth, that either equipment or user error caused the oxygen to run out early?

There's no film of the moment when this happened, but there is one piece of visual evidence, which offers a clue. In Lacedelli's memoir, *The Price of Conquest*, he recalls that some time after their oxygen crisis, the clouds cleared and they were able to see down into their eighth camp where Walter Bonatti and Pino Gallotti were stationed. Seeing his friends below gave him the courage to carry on. The same moment is recorded in Gallotti's diary, where he remembered being dragged out of his tent by Isakhan, one of the Hunza porters, pointing at two figures on the summit ridge. It was around 5.30pm, about half an hour before they reached the summit. This makes sense of Desio's first press release and Lacedelli's memoir, released many years later where he recalled the oxygen running out between 50m and 100m from the summit. Gallotti burst into silent tears of joy, knowing that victory was assured. If he could have seen into the future, and all the angst that would surround the expedition, he might have wept differently.

ERIC VOLA

## The First Ascent of the Barre des Écrins



A portrait of French army surveyors: 'ingénieurs géographes'.  
(All illustrations courtesy of Editions du Fourmel)

During the 150th anniversary of the first ascent of the Barre des Écrins, climbed on 25 June 1864 by Edward Whymper and party, a claim was made that a French army officer had climbed the mountain 11 years earlier and the credit should go to him. Lieutenant Meusnier was one of the French army's cartographers who in 1853 were mapping the Briançon area. The new theory was based on a digitised document published by the Institut Géographique National (IGN) in 2012. It is a draft of the 1/40,000 Briançon map, which includes an abbreviation of the word 'Signal' beside the name 'Les Écrins', what we now call Barre des Écrins. In 1853, before the Treaty of Turin of 1860 sealed the French annexation of Savoy and with

it Mont Blanc, 'Les Écrins' was the highest peak in France. The implication was obvious: if there was a constructed surveying station, a *signal*, marked on the map, then someone must have gone there.

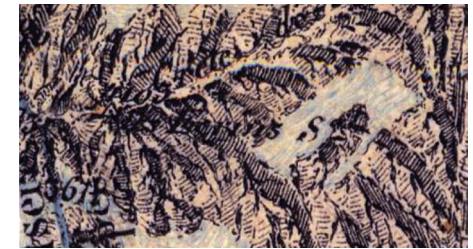
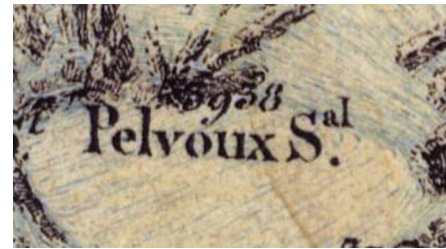
On the basis of this detail two researchers from Vallouise, Olivier Joseph and Paul-Billon Grand, claimed the summit had in fact been reached more than a decade before Whymper and his companions. They presented the discovery as a revolution in the history of alpinism and, with the co-operation of freelance cartographer Alexandre Nicolas from Pelvoux and boosted by the work of Eugenio Garoglio from the Centro Studi e Ricerche Storiche sull'Architettura Militare del Piemonte at the University of Turin, began questioning other first ascents in the Écrins and Viso areas, including those by Francis Fox Tuckett, William Mathews and W A B Coolidge.

Joseph and his group presented their theories at conferences and questioned the established narrative of specialist historians, the French Alpine Club (CAF) and the Alpine Club. The controversy was picked up by the press and on social media. At a conference in Vallouise in August 2016, AC member Sue Hare was present, prompting Olivier Joseph to comment afterwards on his website: 'As far as Sue Hare, Alpine Club secretary, was concerned, she did not hide her enthusiasm at the end of our conference.' Sue was not the AC secretary, although she serves as part of the AC Photo Library team, and while she does admire Olivier Joseph's dedication, she did not endorse his theory.

My friend Claude Deck (GHM-CAF) who ran *La Montagne et Alpinisme's* chronicle for some 40 years until 2016 was first to react, asking me to contact the Alpine Club to fire up a joint response to what he judged was a questionable thesis. He also sent a series of questions to Olivier Joseph. Joseph's response was both adamant and surprising. Not only had Lieutenant Meusnier climbed Les Écrins by himself 11 years before Adolphus Moore, Horace Walker, Edward Whymper and the best guides of the time, Christian Almer and Michel Croz, but also the Pelvoux, the Ailefroide Orientale, Pic de Neige Cordier, Pointe Nérot and more.

Deck asked Joseph: 'Challenging ascents of the most famous British alpinists is a real thunderclap in the history of alpinism ... Have you obtained the Alpine Club's opinion?' Joseph's response was dismissive: 'this is of no interest whatsoever to us. The history of alpinism was written by a small circle largely unconnected to local and scientific archives, which show quite a different view of human presence on the high summits of the Alps. We work with military and scientific historians and archaeologists to reconstitute this human presence in the high mountains before the alpinists' arrival. For us, alpinism represents a minor episode of little interest in the human history of mountains ...'

Such a prejudicial response made us question the objectivity of these historians. However, since Claude and I are neither cartographers nor academic historians, we could not challenge the validity of their work. Luckily we did not have to wait too long. Two French historians, Michèle Janin-Thivos from the University of Aix and Marseille and Michel



Details from the draft released by the French Géoportail website illustration the abbreviations following the peak names for Pelvoux and Les Écrins.



An equivalent extract from the completed 1866 Briancçon sheet for the 1/80,000 Carte d'État-Major keeps the reference to a *signal* for Pelvoux, but there is no abbreviation now for Les Écrins.

Tailland from Toulon University, soon published a comprehensive response: *Des Ascensions Oubliées? Les opérations de la carte d'État-major de Briancçon au XIXème siècle* (Editions du Fournel, 2016). They opened their book thus:

*Revisiting established history is a sound and legitimate enterprise provided it is based on the crosschecking of sources and a verifiable scientific argument. The methodological inadequacies of this theory led us to look at the whole issue and analyse the idea of a signal being located on the Écrins, to check the nature of the document used (a draft published on the Géoportail website) and match it to the sources of the ordnance survey map in the history department of the ministry of defence ... Then we went to the IGN to see the draft they used ... Those documents prove definitely that there have been no 'forgotten ascents'.*

On the 1/40,000 draft the well-known *signal* on top of Pelvoux is indicated by the abbreviation 'S<sup>al</sup>'. On the same draft the Les Écrins also has an abbreviation after its name, but it is actually quite difficult to tell whether it says 'S<sup>al</sup>' for *signal* or 'S<sup>et</sup>' for *sommet*. Assuming it could be the former, as Joseph and Grand claim, Janin-Thivos and Tailland examined the table of geographical points on the side of the same draft, where they found the Pelvoux *signal* mentioned but no corresponding entry of a *signal* for



Points trigonométriques de départ.

NOMS DES OBJETS PAR ORDRE ALPHABÉTIQUE.	HAUTEUR ABSOLUE DES POINTS TRIGONOMÉTRIQUES DE DÉPART.	
	Point de mire.	Sol.
S <sup>al</sup> des Écrins	↔ 1103.	1103.
Montée C <sup>al</sup>	↔ 1543.1	1543.
Bez C <sup>al</sup>	↔ 1411.2	.....
Pelvoux S <sup>al</sup>	↔ 3937.6	.....
lie A. St. du Sablier	↔ 2933.	2933.
lie B. N <sup>al</sup> Bouchard	↔ 2906.	2906.
lie C. sur la crête de Combeyron	↔ 3089.	3089.
lie G. Crête de Cucumelle	↔ 2703.	2703.
lie J. sur la crête de G <sup>al</sup> Pelvoux	↔ 3854.	3854.
lie I	↔ 3118.	3118.
lie de Neige (1)	↔ 3613.4	3613.4
lie de Neige (2)	↔ 3537.	3537.
lie S <sup>al</sup> avec Crête	↔ 2757.	2757.
lie S <sup>al</sup>	↔ 2572.1	.....
lie Signalé au fort de Dammillieux	↔ 3660.	3660.
lie Signalé H	↔ 3355.	3355.
	↔ .....	.....
	↔ .....	.....
	↔ .....	.....
	↔ .....	.....
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	↔ .....	.....
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	↔ .....	.....

Tableau N° 8 ter.

Meusnier's notes reveal entries for S<sup>al</sup>, an abbreviation for *sommet*, des Écrins and Pelvoux S<sup>al</sup>, short for *signal*.

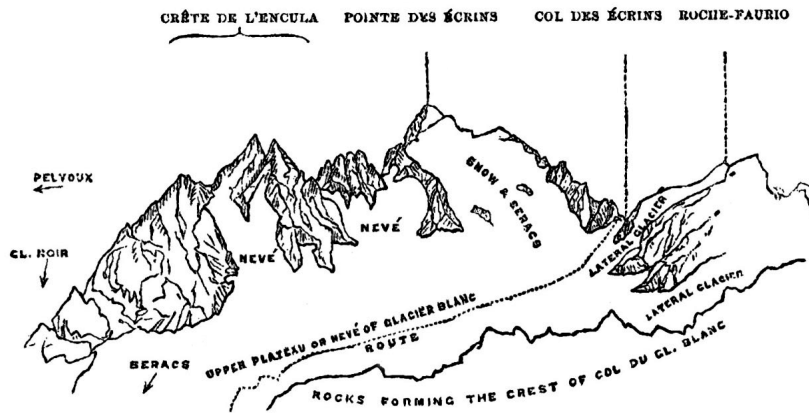
his name. But there was no mention of the so-called first ascent of 1853. Durand didn't see the point of going on another 500m to reach Pelvoux's main snowy summit; his task was not to climb summits but map the area, and that was the case for the army cartographers who continued his work in the 1851-3 survey. They worked in difficult weather conditions and Durand himself suffered such strain that he died a few years after his work on Pelvoux at the age of just 48. Jean Puiseux made the first ascent of the main summit in 1848; it was known for a while as *Pointe Puiseux*.

Henri Beraldi (1849-1931), a writer and historian attached to the ministry of defence, also documented the ascent and mapping feats of Captain Durand on Pelvoux and those of his successor, Captain Davout, in his book *Balaïtous and Pelvoux* (1907), yet does not mention Meusnier or others as having climbed other summits. Later in his book, he does admire the 1864 ascent of the Écrins by Whymper, Moore, Walker, Almer and Croz. Why would a writer sometimes quite critical of alpinism ignore major ascents by his army colleagues, having had full access to the archives?

The many contacts between the French army, alpine clubs and alpinists like Tuckett and Anthony Adams Reilly, who actually climbed with some of those French army officers, rather proves the contrary. Janin-Thivos and Tailland mention a visit by Tuckett to the *Dépôt de la Guerre*, the military unit in charge of producing the *Carte d'État-Major*, showing the strong and open links between the French scientific community, French army officers in charge of mapping and Alpine Club members. This visit is described in a detailed article Tuckett published in the *Alpine Journal*<sup>1</sup>. He was given access to the Briançon map and 'the original memoranda of the officers of the *État-Major*'.

... I met with the most courteous reception from General Blondel, director of the 'Dépôt', who gave me the freest access to maps and MSS including the original memoranda of the officers of the *État-Major*, allowed me the utmost liberty in making notes, and, besides permitting me to have printed copies of several unfinished and of course unpublished sheets, furnished me with a manuscript one, beautifully executed by draughtsmen of the 'Bureau' of the most important portion of the four MS sheets of the *Feuille Briançon* on the same scale as the original ... This last is partially engraved, being now, as it is termed, 'au trait'; i.e. the rivers, roads, names of places, heights and outlines (dotted) of mountains and glaciers are given, but no shading, nothing that represent relief. M le Commandant Brossard, head of the engraving department, informed me that this sheet would certainly be ready for publication in six years, and very probably in five. The superintendent of the topographical department, M le Colonel Bertrand, handed me over, after reading the general's order, to M le Commandant Loupôt, a most pleasant, polite, and intelligent gentleman, whose kindness I shall not soon forget. He seemed as though he could not do enough to meet my wishes, and

1. F F Tuckett 'Explorations in The Alps of Dauphiné during the month of July 1862', *Alpine Journal*, vol 1, 1863, pp145-79.



THE POINTE DES ÉCRINS COL AND NÉVÉ OF GLACIER BLANC, FROM COL DU GLACIER BLANC.

A sketch from July 1862 of the Écrins massif by F F Tuckett included with his article on the region published in the *Alpine Journal* the following year.

*most energetically seconded all my applications to his chef. The four original MS sheets, on a scale of 1/40,000, which form the basis of the future Feuille Briançon, are the result of the following labours:*

*Première Triangulation – 1828-9-30 ... M le Commandant Durand.  
Seconde Triangulation – 1851-2 ... M. Davoût (Capitaine?)*

*La Topographie (détails) ... MM les Capitaines Viroux, Valette, Taffin, Beaudouin, Bourgeois, Smet, Vuillemot, Courier, Cousinard, Versigny, and le lieutenant Meusnier [sic].*

*Of these gentlemen, MM Bourgeois, Courier, Cousinard and Meunier [sic] executed that portion which is included in the copy supplied to me, and of which a photographic reduction has been deposited at the rooms of the Alpine Club. From the large number of lofty summits ascended by them, I was led to anticipate a degree of accuracy which subsequent minute examination on the spot completely confirmed. With Commandant Durand the survey of this group of mountains was a labour of love to which he devoted all his energies. Indeed, to such an extent did he identify himself with the successful completion of his tasks cost him his reason ... His successors appear, however, to have worked with equal intelligence and accuracy, and the result is a map which for faithful rendering of details will almost compare with those of the Swiss survey ... I have reason to believe that the future Briançon sheet, N°189, will be a credit to the French engineers.*

This is justified recognition for the work done by French officers but also clear evidence that he was told what summits they had climbed and not climbed, certainly none of the summits claimed by Joseph and Grand. The documentation allowed Whymper to climb the Écrins and this co-

operation between alpinists and French army cartographers continued until all the Alps were fully and properly mapped, in particular the French climbers and topographers Paul Helbronner and Henri Vallot. French army officers and members of CAF came, in the 19th century, from the same upper-middle class as AC members and shared their work quite openly. Indeed a number of those army officers were members of CAF from its foundation in 1874. The notion of a 'plot' between the AC and CAF to hog the glory is laughable.

The presence of the British in early mountaineering can be irritating to some French, but it is a reality well established. It is also true that the mapping work undertaken by French army officers in difficult and often dangerous conditions was a feat significant enough to be remembered. This achievement deserves more recognition than it has received, but surely not at the expense of historical truth.