

Crash au mont Blanc ...some excerpts from the book of Françoise Rey (1991)

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Chapter I Gateway of India

Bombay, Sunday 23rd January 1966.

To mark their last day in India, Bertoli had invited young Cornu to dine with him at the Tanjore, one of the city's best restaurants. Also, undoubtedly one of its most elegant, situated in the famous Taj Mahâl Hotel; a city within a city. Bertoli invariably chose to stay here during his business trips to Bombay, trips which had become increasingly frequent over the past fifteen years, since he'd been working in European operations for Air India, Geneva. The most senior figure there, he was at the top of his game. The Taj Mahâl was pretty much the address of choice for every self-respecting business man with dealings in Bombay. Even those who didn't stay there would come to drink and dine in one of its many bars or restaurants. Referred to simply as the Taj by the "in" crowd; like the Jet Society members who had made it one of their preferred stop-overs. The jewel of hotels in the Orient, a sumptuous Victorian palace with stunning façades proudly facing the Arabian Sea, next to the famous Gateway of India, the monument erected to commemorate the landing of their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary on Indian soil. Gateway of India, its dreams and promises.

J C Cornu alighted from his taxi and headed straight for the monument. Stopping directly underneath it, facing the ocean, he put down his bulky, blue canvas suitcase and leather briefcase. With his hands rooted in the deep pockets of his linen trousers, and his shoulders thrust back, he slowly looked up and breathed in deeply, appreciatively. His chest swelled. Then he closed his eyes. He stood there motionless for a good minute. Perhaps longer.

"I'll remember it all, I won't forget a thing.. God this country gets to you!" He gave himself a little shake, gathered up his bags and made his way towards the vast entrance hall of the Taj Mahâl.

Cornu, 28, also worked for the European arm of Air India. He was still learning the ropes, having only started his new job a few weeks earlier and this was his first time in the East. As a "trainee", he had been put up in a more modest hotel, on Marine Drive. His decision to arrive several hours before he was due to meet up with Bertoli was intentional. He planned to spend his last afternoon in India taking in the Taj's ornate and sumptuous surroundings, enjoying a drink by the pool, reading, finishing off his postcards, doing some last-minute shopping in the hotel boutiques...

He knew his boss was visiting the Prince of Wales Museum with one of his old Bombay friends. Bertoli could never leave the city without first reacquainting himself with the treasures housed in this magnificent museum. 17th century miniatures, sculpted ivories... by dint of time, passion, and curiosity, he had acquired a respectable knowledge on Indian art. He was familiar with the names and different representations of numerous deities, and had memorized several of the 28,000 verses from the Râmâyana epic, one of the most important Hindu scriptures. Although young Cornu found this all highly admirable, he wasn't drawn towards the great museum in the same way as his learned director.

There hadn't been enough time to see very much, but in any case he didn't have the stamina to do all the sites and historical monuments, jumping in and out of taxis, traipsing round endlessly. There was a great deal still to be discovered, but this was bound to be the first of many business trips courtesy of his employer. And if not, he would come back on holiday here with Christine. Perhaps even for their next vacation together. They would definitely stay at the Taj, Christine would be captivated by it.

He entered the hall and hesitated a moment. Maharaja style, the staff were wearing red turbans and wide gilded belts pulled tightly around their waists. Lightly, gracefully, they moved around like dancers, gliding silently over the marble floor, as if gently propelled by the flow of air from the copper fans whose droning was deadened but not silenced by the thick velvet drapes hanging from the huge windows.

Cornu handed in his bag at reception and followed the signs to the garden. The immaculate lawn, mango trees, clusters of fragrant jasmine, gleaming white filigree table and chairs, created an exquisite, private oasis, protected from the city's noise and smells by the opulent chambers buildings. And everywhere, blending in with the décor, attentive employees in regal costume, ready to pander to their clientele's slightest whim. Some circulated freely with silver trays, permanently smiling. Others watched on solemnly, anchored between the columns. These ones were armed with some sort of cricket bat. Intrigued, Cornu soon gathered that the weapon was to ward off crows - inauspicious scavengers, carriers of city filth - who foolishly dared to alight in this paradise.

It was still early afternoon. Inspired by the time and setting, Cornu felt the urge to pen a long, loving letter to his young wife. He chose a table set back from the rest, and within seconds a charming, diminutive maharajah was hovering over him. He ordered a red martini and some sheets of writing paper. Time on his hands, he opened an English-language Indian newspaper. Skipping over the international section, he dived into the local news. There was a lot going on. Demonstrations and scenes of violence had flared up again in Kerala in the south, as well as in the central province of Madhya Pradesh which was being ravaged by famine on the back of two long years of drought.

Since the 9th of January, the daily rice ration - the staple, if not only food available - had been reduced from 160 to 120 grams and things were going to get even worse. There were also several long articles on the Tashkent agreements marking the end of the Indo-Pakistani war. Numerous column inches were devoted to the recent death of the prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and the official handover of office to Mrs Indirâ Gândhi, due to take place the next day. And of course there was a lot of coverage of the 26th of January Republic Day celebrations. And Mahashivarati, the next festival in the Hindu calendar where thousands of pilgrims gather along the river banks every year, the lower castes chanting obscene mantras in Shiva's honour.

Cornu turned his attention to the international news. An American bomber had been struck by its supply plane in mid-flight over Almeria in Spain resulting in seven deaths, but as if that wasn't bad enough, the thermonuclear bombs which the plane had been carrying still hadn't been found - and the accident had happened a week ago. A worrying affair. Cornu's reading was interrupted.

The waiter carefully placed his drink down on the table in front of him, together with some Taj Mahâl writing paper. Cornu folded up the newspaper. Time passed by. He had promised himself he would write to Christine. He smiled. It was a pointless exercise, since the letter would arrive in Geneva well after him. He almost gave up on the idea. But each time he put down his pen, it found its way back into his hand again. Something was compelling him to write to her. Perhaps he was being seduced by the Taj letterhead and the chance to lick a carefully chosen stamp on the envelope to enhance his wife's collection? Who knows? But this was out of character. He had already sent her two postcards. "Everything's going really well, I'll tell you all about it. Missing you. Love you." Nothing much else. Christine wouldn't mind, she knew what he was like. It wasn't his style to gush about things too much. This desire to write about his day, his thoughts, like this at the last moment, took him by surprise. He would already have had the chance to relate his trip to her a hundred times over by the time this envelope finally slipped through their letterbox in Geneva. But the urge was too strong.

He unscrewed the top of his Mont Blanc pen, which he had been fiddling with nervously, and started to form the first letters. The words flowed easily from his pen. He told her about the hotel, daily life, the rickshaws, the prostitutes and the long-haired American hippies with weird clothes who hang out in the red light "Cages" district. Hurrying over descriptions of lepers' faces and the beseeching stares of amputees looking up from the pavements, he preferred to write lengthy prose capturing the city's beauty. The Elephanta Island where he had spent time strolling around the previous day, the sculptures, in particular the three-headed Shiva statue. He described the street lamps along Marine Drive, which as night falls, shimmer like "a queen's necklace strung along the perfectly curved bay." Yet he admitted that he hadn't taken in very much. Neither the culture, nor the poverty of the people - both way off any scale he had ever previously encountered. This was a completely different world and he had fallen under its spell. "Night and day, wherever you look, there are so many gods and so many people worshipping them that I wonder if all this spirituality isn't starting to rub off on me. I promise to bring you here to see this magical country with your own eyes." He added a few pleasantries about Bertoli. "He's looking forward to introducing his daughter to us. She's meeting him at the airport. They seem really close. He's bringing her back loads of presents. Given how many times he comes here, his house must look like a homage to India! I've also got some nice surprises for you in my bags. The people at the next table are talking quite loudly, in English, and I couldn't help but hear that one of them is called Robinson and he'll be on our flight this evening. Then he's flying on to New York. It's a small world. I can't wait to get back home to you. I love you. Never forget that. How are our mountains? It's 25 degrees here and it's hard to imagine that next weekend we'll be skiing in Chamonix. Have you remembered to book us a hotel in Paris by the way? How stupid of me to be talking to you like this, as if you were here with me. I'll go and join Bertoli at the bar, and leave you in peace for a few hours..."

After signing off, he felt strange, uneasy. His legs were twitching under the table. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead. He found himself staring intently at this "Robinson" chap seated at the next table. The American had a reassuring, relaxed look about him. About to seal the envelope, Cornu wavered, took out the folded sheets of paper and re-read his letter. Abruptly, he frowned, took hold of it in both hands, and screwed it up. Forcefully. The sudden movement, or maybe the noise, caught Robinson's attention. Their eyes met and they smiled at one another. Tossed into an ashtray, the crumpled ball of paper was promptly whisked away by the turbaned waiter, anxious to please. Cornu watched the letter disappear into the distance. He opened his

leather briefcase and extracted a small box covered in pink tissue paper. Inside nestled an exquisite set of sapphire jewellery. Delicately, he picked up an earring and slowly turned it round, inspecting it in the light. Mr Robinson was watching him and Cornu felt his gaze. They exchanged a second polite acknowledgement. The earring carefully replaced in its blue velvet cushioning, and the box back in the briefcase, Cornu stood up. He walked past Robinson's table, smiled, crossed the garden, and headed for Harbour Bar where Bertoli would now be waiting for him. It was 7 o'clock.

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Meanwhile, in New Delhi, Mr and Mrs Bruce were fastening up the last of their trunks. They were also bickering. Over nothing really, just last minute nerves to be expected before a big move. The excitement of the journey ahead, mingled with the expectation of soon being reunited with their family in London, but also the sadness of leaving behind an empty house and saying farewell to their friends. They were already feeling homesick. The memories of the many long years spent here in the heavenly Chanyakyapuri district, the sophisticated drinks parties in the scented floral gardens... the summer heat which had taken them so long to get acclimatised to. In the middle of the huge reception room, sat still on a large wooden trunk in which she had packed statuettes and other valuable ornaments, Mrs Bruce's head was filled with nostalgic thoughts. She let out a sigh. Emptied of its furniture, rugs, paintings and curtains, the room's acoustics had altered, transforming the small sigh into a long groan. Her husband moved towards her.

"Try not to upset yourself Florence, we'll be back soon enough."

"Don't be foolish Robert, I'm 67 and you're 70 and you know full well that we'll never come back. Face up to it. We're going home to grow old and we'll die without ever seeing India again."

Robert Bruce didn't try to convince his wife otherwise. He followed her out onto the veranda. He held her tightly against him and tenderly stroked her neck, gently playing with the loose strands of grey hairs escaped from the confines of her tightly coiled up bun. There was a distant look in his eyes and his thoughts were elsewhere. In fact he knew she was right, this really was the end of a chapter. They were leaving indefinitely, for ever.

"For ever...", he had spoken out loud.

"Always and for ever..." he repeated, letting his words linger in the air. Florence could no longer hold back the tears. Robert realised they needed to pull themselves together. Wasn't his wife, like him, impatient to see their son Harold, daughter-in-law Joyce and little Cheryl again, he cajoled? He thought the children might well have organised a party for them at Mitcham Road. A big welcome home party!

"Cheryl will have completely changed. She was still a small child when we saw her eight years ago, just six years old! Do you think she'll recognise us?"

"We'll see. Florence, concentrate on what book to take for the journey instead, and look at me. Do I look ridiculous in this coat? It must be completely outdated now in London! Come on, let's get off. How about a quick stroll before the Smiths come to run us to the airport? I'd like to walk

around the lily ponds in Lodi Garden for one last time. This moonlight evening will bring back fond memories."

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It was shortly after 9.30pm. In Bombay, Bertoli and Cornu had just finished their meal. They were waiting in the Taj Mahâl entrance hall for their taxi to take them to the airport, admiring the procession of brightly coloured silk saris of Indian high society shimmying by.

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It was nightfall in Beirut, around 5:30pm.

In the nondescript restaurant of a hotel airport, business was confined to just one table, occupied by a lively group of a dozen or so. Unusually, this particular evening practically all of the second Bombay-London crew were gathered together in one place. Captain D'Souza, First Officer Wilks, Asnani the navigator, Borooah the flight engineer, and also the flight support staff including two attractive air hostesses, Miss Sahany and Doris Ludy. Despite their sobriety - boarding was due at 4.30am - they were in high spirits. Amusing work-related anecdotes were being raked up. Mishaps, stories about exacting passengers, famous encounters. The previous year, hadn't the captain been asked to fly Pope Paul VI from Rome to Bombay? What an honour! Not one to boast, he was, nevertheless, considered one of their best pilots. Recruited in November 1947, aged 25, he had logged 14,664 flight hours, including 2,651 in a Boeing 707, without one single untoward incident.

"And how about you Wilks, how many hours have you done?"

I believe I'm up to 12,890 hours. Actually no, I forgot Bombay to Beirut yesterday, plus 8 and a half hours, rounded up makes 12,899."

They continued to compare their respective qualifications, recent flight simulator training, landings across various airports. "Geneva? How many times have you flown into Geneva in the past year?" "Seven?" "Same here!"

The conversation carried on in the same good-natured vein. Over a hastily ordered dessert, they all agreed that theirs was a fabulous career, and when they weren't working they were never short of holiday destination ideas. One day here, the next day at the other end of the world, from one smart hotel to the next. Yesterday Bombay, today Beirut, tomorrow London... stopovers in Geneva and Paris. What a great life!

The two air hostesses weren't side-lined, yet Doris Ludy, the Swiss girl, seemed to be finding it hard to join in, barely even managing a smile. Not because she was shy - having joined Air India eighteen months earlier, she had already worked with all of them - nor was she aloof, or even finding the conversation wanting. However for the past few hours she had been suffering from excruciating stomach pains. By the time the coffee arrived, she couldn't stand it any longer and left the table ahead of the others to go and lie down in her room.

Shortly after, Miss Sahany, concerned for her colleague, also made her excuses and in a display of feminine solidarity went to check on her. Doris admitted that she was feeling terrible, doubled-up in pain at times. "It happens sometimes when I'm nervous or stressed, but it's never usually as bad this. This time it's agony. But look I'll be ok.. it'll go away if I can get some rest. Tonight I'll be back on my feet, ready for off. In any case I have to make the flight. I promised my brother I'd visit him in London."

Even so, she agreed to let Miss Sahany call for the airport doctor. Whilst he was examining her, Miss Sahany took her leave and went for a quick lie-down herself. The doctor's orders were categorical: Miss Ludy would not be flying anywhere tonight. She needed to stay in bed for the time being.

Captain D'Souza and Air India's management team at the airport were immediately informed and it was decided that she would be replaced by Miss Eranee - probably a member of the first crew on the same Air India 101 flight, due to depart shortly.

It was now 7pm in Beirut, 10:30pm in India.

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The call for last boarding for the flight, destination London, rang out in the departure lounge of Bombay-Santacruz airport. Expected departure time: 11:10pm.

It was Demello, an unaccompanied child in the charge of two air hostesses, who had the privilege of boarding first. He was shown a seat at the back of the plane as is customary for children travelling alone. Eight years old, the young boy would be met by his parents in London.

Despite cutting their arrival at the airport quite fine, Bertoli and Cornu couldn't resist the offer of a quick glass of champagne in the VIP lounge. There they learnt that apparently a prominent Indian figure, a leader in his field, had just left the lounge to board the same plane as them: Professor Homi Jehangir Bhabha, heading for Vienna where he would be attending a conference.

"He's a world-renowned nuclear physicist," Bertoli told Cornu. "He chairs the Indian Atomic Energy Commission. In fact I think it was him who founded the organization back in 1945. He also presided over the first international conference on the peaceful use of atomic energy in Geneva in 1955. Plus he's a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna and sits on the UN's Scientific Committee. A real boffin..."

Once again Bertoli, a walking Indian encyclopaedia, had impressed his young companion with his knowledge about Bhabha, this great atomic scientist, but they now needed to get a move on. At the foot of the airplane steps, Cornu wasn't surprised to bump into the gentleman who had been sitting at the neighbouring table in the Taj Mahâl gardens. Robinson tipped his hat in recognition. The two men greeted one another and exchanged a few brief words. Robinson's work as a manager at Union Carbide Company, entailed frequent business trips between Bombay and New York. Whilst the two men exchanged pleasantries at the bottom of the steps, a young man at the top of the steps was waving enthusiastically in the direction of the terminal's huge paned window. On the airport side of the glass, two women and a man were blowing kisses

back. It was a big day. At 23 years old, Hasmukhray Gokaldas Shah was leaving India to pursue his studies at a large university in New Mexico. He would return in several years as a qualified chemical engineer. His sisters and brother-in-law had made the long journey from Jâmnagar in the state of Gujarat, three hundred miles away, to come to see him off.

H. G. Shah was having trouble committing to the final goodbye wave. Resolved to waiting until the very last passengers had boarded, he finally turned away and followed Bertoli, Cornu and Robinson onto the plane. The hostess showed him to his seat. Then the plane doors were closed, the night shut out.

The airport lights danced on the Boeing's fuselage and wings. Behind the huge rectangle of glass, Shah's two sisters, graceful in their elegant saris, slowly lowered their arms to their sides, Kohl smudges streaked around their large raven eyes. For a moment, passengers and on-lookers shared a faraway look. The atmosphere was solemn. With heavy hearts, their thoughts turned to the long letters to follow. Heart-warming letters which would criss-cross each other over the oceans.

Tiny next to the plane, the uniformed staff pushed back the steps. The Boeing began to move back from the gate. The plane's name was painted on the outside of the cabin, just underneath the cockpit windows: Kangchenjunga. A mountain in the Himalayas. Rising to 8,598 metres, the third highest in the world.

"The third highest" declared Bertoli, "but arguably the most beautiful on the planet. Way more impressive than Everest. It has a very distinctive outline. The main summit is flanked by two smaller peaks. It looks over Darjeeling, the "Land of Thunder". Try to get to see Darjeeling one day Cornu. You need to get up before dawn and head for the top of Tiger Hill. From there, the sunrise over Kangchenjunga is awesome. Truly incredible, you get the impression that the sun is about to fall out of the sky on top of you. I'm not exaggerating, Cornu. It's got to be the most spectacular view in the world. The locals are extremely wary of Kangchenjunga, holding the gods who live there responsible for all of Sikkim's misfortunes. And this isn't just some old legend. As recently as 1955, one day in May if my memory serves me correctly, when two intrepid English climbers, Mr Brown and Mr Band, violated, according to "local sources" the huge mountain. The two gentlemen swear they respected the solemn promise they gave to the local Darjeeling people, not to set foot the pinnacle of the mountain. To leave the final metre alone, so as not to upset the gods. But who knows whether the pair kept to their word? Perhaps the gods were in a particularly foul mood that day. Whatever the reason, since then Kangchenjunga has been infernal. One of the worst approach walks in the Himalayas, extreme weather patterns - even by usual standards. She doesn't take many prisoners. This mountain has claimed so many lives. But forgive me, I must be boring you with my stories. Are you comfortable? It's strange to think that in thirteen hours we'll be in Geneva.. We'll be flying over Mont Blanc at dawn - it's not Kangchenjunga, but impressive all the same. If there's a clear view it'll be fabulous. Yes fabulous.. really."

Cornu sensed some disquiet in Bertoli's last words. There was something in the tone of his voice. Something left unsaid. Before Cornu had chance to ask, Bertoli was off again...

"How old were you in 1950, Cornu?"

"Twelve, why? I bet you want to know whether I remember the French conquest of Annapurna. Of course... It was gripping!"

"No, something else that was also huge news in Geneva. You don't remember?" "I don't think so. 1950? No."

"The Malabar Princess?"

"No..."

The plane took off.

XXVII Operation Chabert

Codename: Chabert. Chosen by Philippe Réal

"Chabert," he explained to his superiors in Grenoble, "an eccentric person, an idiot or a freakish animal. Something incredible." Incredible, like this mission.

Everything was ready. The helicopter chartered from Paris had arrived, not into Grenoble, but somewhere in the Albertville valley - ever mindful of the need for discretion. They had the latest transmitter-receivers, the first Stornos. The bags were fastened, laden with enough Himalayan survival equipment and food to last five people for fifteen days. Réal surveyed it all anxiously. Operation Chabert could get underway. At least once the weather improved, because right now it was bad over the whole area. Impossible to fly up to the massif in these conditions. They'd have to sit tight and hope for a window in the weather. Meanwhile, sheets of rain were coming down and each member of the "commando" knew that up there, silently, large snowflakes would be falling, piling up on an increasingly treacherous terrain. The pilot was especially worried. He was used to working with teams from the ORTF, the French public broadcasting service, often covering the Tour de France for them-, but he had the feeling that this mission was going to be "highly unusual". He was no "pro" at flying in the mountains and to make matters worse, he was now aware that the landing was likely to be tricky. Furthermore, weather permitting, there was talk of flying straight on to the Infranchissable pass... as far as the refuge. In Italy. Which meant that they would be violating Italian airspace since no authorisation had been requested. "Hum..." The pilot weighed up the options. No doubt he had his reasons for accepting. On one condition however: the French side of the Infranchissable pass would remain the official drop off point. He made them all swear not to breathe a word to anyone. He didn't want any trouble. Meanwhile, they had more immediate problems. It was still pouring down, the low ceiling of grey cloud depositing relentless rain. They spent one night, and then a second in a small hotel just outside Albertville. Long hours, waiting, sat around the table in the local bistro, discussing the rain and the weather forecast and re-iterating the importance of saying as little as possible to anyone about anything. It would be too stupid to get rumbled now. Meanwhile, the helicopter was hidden in a farmer's barn. Their co-conspirator having been well "recompensed" for his silence. All the same, in 1966, a helicopter - even passing overhead - didn't go unnoticed, and the local police were aware that one had landed in the valley. Their curiosity aroused, they drove around the country lanes in their blue patrol van, trying to locate the elusive flying object. "You wouldn't have happened to see a helicopter around here? A helicopter? Where? What direction was it heading

in? A helicopter didn't land in your field by any chance?" All these questions were starting to worry the locals. The "commando's" cover could have been blown at any time. But it wasn't.

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And then, on Tuesday 22nd February, the weather turned. They seized their chance. The first flight would take Desmaison, Troksiar and an ORTF engineer.

"So where are we going? The Col Infranchissable?"

"No, for God's sake, it's clear over to Italy, let's make the most of it. Direction Quintino Sella." Italy...

It was a magnificent flight, appreciated all the more by the men as they sensed that the lull in the weather wasn't going to last very long. From above, the refuge, in reality just a tiny wooden hut, was hard to spot against the immense backdrop, right in the middle of the massif, perched above the Dôme glacier on one side, and on the other side the Mont Blanc glacier "flowing" vertiginously down the steep face of the mountain towards the huge, extended Miage glacier. The top of the world. A panorama of magnificent white chaos in the soft light afforded by the temporary break in the clouds. Magnificent and treacherous. The wildest part of the massif, way beyond the cable cars and the classic routes, the utter isolation of the high Alpine range, the "poor man's Himalayas", as the mountaineer, Patrick Gabarrou referred to it.

"So how do we get back down René if the bad weather comes in again?" shouted Troksiar. The one sure thing was that this was going to be tough. Very tough. But René couldn't hear him over the sound of the helicopter. The pilot was looking for somewhere to set down his passengers. Desmaison got ready to take a leap into the deep powder. He jumped. Without mishap. Troksiar threw the bags down to Desmaison and jumped in turn, followed by the engineer. The helicopter left.

A few seconds later, the three men and their pile of supplies were no more than two minuscule dots, and then out of the pilot's sight altogether, as he headed back to Albertville. He picked up the rest of the team and the equipment. Everything went without incident. He dropped off the men. It had all happened so quickly, the engineers hadn't yet taken in the enormity of the adventure they had just plunged themselves into. But they were excited and keen to get on with the job.

The five men installed themselves in their luxury hotel. Who had the crazy idea to build a refuge here in the first place? And how on earth did they transport all the material... on their backs? What route did they take? Apparently it's been here since the beginning of the century! "Its 'renovation' in the '50s was bad enough." Desmaison recounted the sad story of the Italian guide who spent every day over an entire summer climbing up with a 60 kilo load on his back. The poor guy didn't realise that he was pushing his body to the limit, and in the autumn, his task finally completed, he dropped down dead.

Story-time over, it was time to get down to business.

"Right, let's get things organised here! Stack the wood over there. Food here. And the radio equipment together with the camera staying in the refuge in the far corner. That pile there is coming up with us. Be careful. The door doesn't shut properly, same for the window. The snow will blow inside so don't put anything next to them. And watch out for the wind which could well get up. Bring the crampons and ice-axes inside!"

It was still daytime but very cold; already extremely cold. The nights were going to be freezing. "By the way, watch out guys, if you need to get up in the middle of the night to take a piss, the balcony is decrepit, narrow and slippery. If you fall, you'll be a goner!"

Adventure, it was an adventure all right. Philippe Réal hadn't been kidding. Right. Still they must stay focused. They needed to get on and test the much-lauded Storno that same afternoon. The idea was to try to hook up with La Plagne. Just to test the signal. After some cake and a hot drink, they deployed the antennas. The weather was already deteriorating.

Way down below them, in the ski resort where Philippe Réal and his team had driven to straight after the "pioneers" had left, the battle of the antennas was underway. It should have been fairly straightforward to "hide" one in and amongst the others, except that in order to obtain a clear signal, they needed to take the lift up quite high. But not all the way. The best solution would be to stop it at a given point. Not such an easy manoeuvre to explain away in the context of filming *Interneige*, and it wouldn't go unnoticed. So they invented various excuses and ruses to cover their tracks.

Unfortunately, at the appointed test time.. nothing. Just crackling down the line. Despite their having chosen the apparent ideal spot, they weren't able to make contact with Desmaison. It was a heavy blow. Perhaps they should abort everything. Did this failure mean that the whole operation was about to go up in smoke? A complete fiasco, ending with a humiliating dressing-down by Paris? They would be a laughing stock. No, Philippe Réal had seen it happen to others and he wasn't going to be defeated so easily. Tomorrow was another day.

The stars didn't come out that night. Despite their frustrations, the La Plagne team got a good night's sleep in a comfortable hotel; in contrast to their colleagues shivering on their straw-filled mattresses in the Quintino Sella refuge. It started to snow during the night and the wind picked up. Because of the ill-fitting door and windows, the men battled all night to keep out the snow, and the temperature plummeted. Troksiar and Desmaison tried to keep up everyone's spirits. Fortunately, "Zatopek" had a ready stock of "yarns" to share. He was a "talker", good company. And the engineers seemed really solid. Operation Chabert was only just beginning. There would be no messing around once they started the ascent up the Mont Blanc glacier. They joked about the fact that the ORTF had provided them with good life insurance policies, covering them for accidents in the air and on the mountains.

Frozen stiff in their sleeping bags, they finally saw daybreak. Shivering, they lit the stove and heated up a pan of snow. The weather was now abysmal, visibility down to two metres. The storm howled all around them.

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Below, Philippe Réal made an early start to try to find another place to get a signal. Before leaving, he called Delgado in Paris, and assured him that all was going to plan and that the men, who were supposed to have been dropped off at the Col Infranchissable, hadn't yet made it to the "Sella" refuge. Remember that was the official line. Réal repeated the same thing to the newsdesk of the French national radio station, France Inter, who were also in on the plan. He reminded them both again that for the time being there was a strict media embargo and that under no circumstances could they broadcast the story until Desmanson's team had reached the crash site. "Absolute silence, ok?" He sensed Paris's impatience on the other end of the line. Stress levels were starting to rise. The weather continued to deteriorate. But one way or another he had to make this work. For them, up there. These useless walkie talkies. He took the cable car up several times and kept trying. In vain. Silence and despair. Until, heading back down on the point of giving up, he made one last attempt, and suddenly he made contact. From there he had to fine-tune his position, trying not to look conspicuous as he walked around amongst the exuberant Interneige crew. Before long he had managed to get a clear signal. Good enough to be broadcast over the airwaves. At least the Stornos were guaranteed a good press on the back of all this!

Desmanson gave a rundown on the weather, the practicalities and day-to-day conditions they were going to be enduring, and he explained what their goals were for that day. The two expedition "leaders" fixed three contact times each day. Then as promised, the journalist relayed the technical information that the guide needed: isotherm data and the 24 hour forecast over the next three days, before wishing the climbers good luck.

Whilst waiting in Albertville, they had come up with a series of coded messages to use if, quite likely, their cover was blown. Along the lines of: "London here, the birds have sung." Short phrases to indicate that they had found something interesting, that they were in such and such a place, they were in difficulty, etc. Everything was coded. Good work.

At any time the PC radio in La Plagne might be detected, their messages intercepted, and the Quintino Sella team discovered. In which case, they might try to confuse them, but there was very little chance of their going up to knock the birds off their perch. "Severe" weather had set in, forbidding any helicopters to fly in the sector, and only the most experienced alpinists could attempt the climb. It was much too dangerous. To send men on foot in these conditions would be to re-open the wounds from the René Payot tragedy. Besides, why? Despite his letter rogatory, Mollaret did not have permission to operate in the sector, and the Italians had preferred to distance themselves from the outset. That was the silver lining to the bad weather. But the expedition was going to be hell because of it.

Réal had already spent two days setting up and manning communications, antenna amongst antennas, to ensure radio contact with Desmanson, Troksiar, Alain Franck, Philippe Biessy and Jean Pontanier. Two long days during which it was impossible to venture out of the hut. But Desmanson was not giving up hope. No matter what, Troksiar and he would make it up to the crash site. He would make it happen. At least the radio transceivers were working perfectly and a reliable connection had now been established. Réal had found a perfect strategic point. That was a good result. The La Plagne team's cameraman had plenty of time to experiment with the best angle to shoot from: Philippe Réal with Mont Blanc in the far background, commentating and conducting live radio interviews with the team at the crash site. Now they just needed some

sensational news to break. Patience. The scoop was surely waiting for them somewhere up there, buried under the snow, snagged on the rockface of the Envers du Mont Blanc, and they would be the ones to track it down. Meanwhile, lips sealed.

* **

There was no let-up in the weather, but time was slipping by, and on Thursday 24th, despite heavy snowfall and strong winds, Desmason and his friend Zatopek made their decision and set off in the search of the plane. Heavily laden like mules: a huge Storno handset, a Bell & Howell camera, rolls of film and other photographic equipment, food provisions for several days, and all their bivouacking gear. It was likely that they would stay up at the advance camp for a few days.

The gradient of the first slope was very steep. Progress was painfully slow. According to their information, a large amount of debris was scattered across a sort of plateau on the glacier, at about 3,600 metres. Accordingly, they had decided to set up camp there, at the base of Mont Blanc under the spectacular rocky spurs on its west face - some of which had still never been tackled - with the mountain itself looming over them 1,500 metres above. In reality it was only 300 metres above the refuge, from whose comparative shelter the engineers had no intention of being prised away. 300 metres, but 300 metres of daunting conditions. Every 15 metres, they swapped the lead as they battled to beat a path through the deep snow. Never before had an alpinist ventured out onto the glacier in the middle of winter, in such weather. This was a "first". But Desmason and Troksiar were confident; they had seen and conquered several firsts. In fact the heavier their rucksacks felt, the more energised and determined they became. No doubt with a touch of apprehension all the same. What were they going to discover? What horrific scene were they stumbling towards?

They were gradually getting closer to the savage burial site. It started once they had made it onto the plateau. Through the blizzard, they began to hear noises which sounded out of place in the natural surroundings. Then, through the floating white veil of cloud and snow, the terrible reality of the Indian tragedy revealed itself. A small piece of corrugated iron here, another there, a larger section over there and piles of it elsewhere, papers, bags, torsos still attached to their seats by their safety belts, monkey corpses, long strips of silk cloth, rolled up and frozen to the metal, tins of canned food, engine parts, life vests, an inflatable dinghy, a large section of the tail, sandals, the toilet door planted in the snow, its washbasin thrown nearby, a suitcase gaping open, Air India crockery, a thousand and one "still-lives", disparate objects that the snow and ice had already snatched for its own spectacular theatrical production. From now on, all these components of a puzzle that no-one would ever put back in order, belonged to the hostile world of the mountains. Secretly placed statues, meant for no-one's eyes. The frozen aftermath of one fatal moment, one single instant when man's control over the most sophisticated aircraft was lost. When one short second's inattention became suspended in time. They felt numb. It wasn't even horrible. It was just as it was. Things became truly incomprehensible when trying to square the vision of this giant skip tipped upside down in the snow, with the "error" scenario. If you accepted the collision theory. The sky is such an immense place, and Mont Blanc so close. If something was going to stop the plane dead, it ought to have been the mountain's prerogative. Certainly not a military aircraft. Too too stupid. Unfair. But no, seen from here, at the foot of Europe's highest peak, the collision theory seemed totally ridiculous. It was the fault of the clouds, Mont Blanc, but surely not a chance encounter with another aircraft. The sky is huge! The probability negligible.

Nevertheless, defying logic, Desmaison and Troksiar were there to search for evidence of a flight collision and they remained resolutely convinced that one had indeed taken place. Would they have undertaken such a dangerous task if there was the slightest doubt in their minds? Would they have asked the ORTF guys to accompany them? Now they needed to substantiate their claim by identifying parts in and amongst the wreckage which would categorically prove them right. Anything would do, parts with serial numbers which could absolutely not have belonged to a Boeing, for example. They needed to pay meticulous attention to detail.

Both mavericks, Desmaison and Troksiar had taken it on themselves to conduct an investigation which the experts had declared strategically impossible, and they were convinced that they would uncover the truth. A truth that certain people in authority had taken great care to cover up. Now no-one could prevent them bearing witness. They would forage Mont Blanc until it gave up its secret. In the four corners of the globe, innocent men, women and children were waiting for the day when the body of a loved one would be returned to them. Unfortunately, since the aircraft had been pulverised, that wouldn't be possible, but they deserved to know the truth, rather than having to endure endless rumours. Not that it would lessen their grief.

The two roped figures, bent double under the wind, continued climbing up, through the white, half-buried cemetery, wading through snow up to their thighs, suffering, out-of-breath - the altitude and the wind further sapping their strength - their legs moving like lead through the snow, each step demanding tremendous effort. To stop and catch their breath, they had to lean all their weight onto their long ski poles.

Before starting to dig around, they needed to organise their bivouac and deposit their camera and recording equipment. By the time they returned it would probably be nightfall. They climbed further up the glacier to the Rochers du Mont Blanc area. This was familiar terrain, and René knew that it was one of the few places protected from avalanches and falling seracs. They set up the "advance camp of the specialist team", as described by Philippe Réal in the "Operation Chabert" plans. It was -25°. The wind was gusting at up to 80 miles per hour. They needed to firmly secure their tents. From now on, they would be venturing out with the sole purpose of digging through the debris, searching for "unusual elements".

"Well?" The same question was doing the rounds over the radio transceivers. "Well?" From La Plagne to the other ORTF team based in the refuge, which in turn was relayed to the advance party.

"Well?" which really meant: "When do we get the green light?" "When can we go live with the story?"

XXVIII Top secret

As it turned out that very same day.

On closer inspection, there was no doubt about it; the debris had come from two planes. One of which was a military aircraft. Desmaison and Troksiar didn't have to search very long before identifying "a section of fuselage - yellow, inside and out, with an alloy structure - a piece of

plastic patch panel, some armour plating" and other items. None of which could have come from a Boeing. Some parts were painted in camouflage for example and others carried unique identification marks. This confirmed their claim, the proof was here right in front of their eyes. They took stock for a moment, pulled out their camera and walkie talkies and headed back to re-join Alain Frank at the Quintino Sella refuge. "Bull's eye!" Desmaison reported back on what they had found, describing in as much detail as possible what was there, the location, exactly how and where the debris was scattered, and other macabre details. And then of course, they recounted their slow progress, the difficulties, the general atmosphere. They described their camp and informed them what the next step would be. Sat at the small wooden table in the hut, Alain Frank noted it all down. "Wow! OK René, I'll contact La Plagne now." That meant that in a few minutes the operation would be announced, live over the airwaves...

As far as Philippe Réal was concerned, it was already a success. A scoop! The storm hadn't stopped any of them; neither the guides nor the ORTF engineers, the radios had been near-perfect, and they now had the proof in front of their very eyes. Fantastic work! But brace yourselves, everyone, the shit's about to hit the fan."(.....)

(....)

Nobody could accuse Operation Chabert of being ill-prepared. As with the codes they had devised to confuse the opposition, far from being naive and easily stopped in their tracks, Desmaison, Réal and their sidekicks had been anticipating trouble all the way. They expected to be arrested on their return, and anything brought back from the crash site to be confiscated - along with their film and photos. So they had come up with a ploy to scupper any dirty tricks or traps that might be sprung on them; they had shot two films, each reporting on a different aspect of the expedition. The first focused on the "extreme survival" aspect: base camp, the difficulties of walking through the deep snow, the "men's fortitude", the technical challenges, some shots of the wreckage, but not many, just a "discreet" glimpse. By contrast, the second film, the one which they were going to try to "smuggle" to Paris, reported on the full horror of the tragedy, a tragedy all the more shocking given their discovery of inexplicable parts amongst the "Boeing" wreckage which would seem to collaborate the theory that a second plane was involved. Twice the work, all down to Desmaison, since Philippe Biessy had not been able to go up to the advance camp. The mountaineer had already shown he was a natural with the Bell & Howell camera.

One reel of film would therefore be handed over to the authorities who would want to confiscate the footage, whilst the other would be despatched to Paris where it would be developed and broadcast, catching everyone off-guard. Don't forget that the Chabert expedition had the backing of the head of news and the director for local news coordination - ORTF employees certainly, but journalists first and foremost. This was also the age of big news stories. Risks went with the territory.

The main hurdle was to devise a means to offload the contentious film before being arrested, to get it into the safe hands of an accomplice who could take it to Paris. Here again, our "heroes" were leaving nothing to chance. The only viable way to get down - since it was out of the question to use the helicopter this time - was to descend via the Miage glacier, then to "ski" the Vény valley to Entrèves, almost level with the entrance to the Mont-Blanc tunnel. The good snow cover would work in their favour. They knew that the authorities would be able to easily pick them up from

there, the tunnel entrance acting as a funnel. No need for the police to tire themselves out trekking up to intercept them. Therefore, they just needed "someone in their camp" to climb a little way up the Vény valley, discreetly, on skis perhaps, like a tourist, to meet them and take away the evidence. Desmaison's excellent knowledge of the area was once again put to good use; he had a hiding place in mind where they could stash the "interesting" films and photos until their contact was able to pick them up.

(.....)

XXIX Back down to earth

In the mountaineering world, notoriety and drama go hand in hand. And here we were, providing the ultimate cliff hanger!

Simone Desmaison, Montagnes Magazine, October 1987

For the ORTF engineers, the descent was a nightmare; trudging through the deep powder was exhausting, and they were only too aware of the avalanche risk. They were having a tough time of it. This was their seventh day spent above 3000 metres, battling against the cold, wind, limited food rations and all the other discomforts that go hand and hand with extreme altitude survival, but they didn't crack. Added to their fatigue, was the stress of carrying out a difficult professional mission - one that definitely wouldn't please everyone. Stuffed full with audio-visual equipment, the tents, and especially the "evidence", the combined weight of the rucksacks was at least 40 kilos. Troksiar and Desmaison carried more than the others, but still, on more than occasion Jean Pontamer collapsed under the weight of his. He was struggling. Really struggling. He had to stop several times, unstrap his bag and compose himself. Each time, he would jettison a scrap of metal. Whilst making their way down the steep glacier face beneath the refuge, several extremely long hours, they stayed roped together, looking out for each other, on their guard for crevasses and avalanche triggers. Even so, Zatopek fell into a pothole, fortunately not very deep: they were able to pull him out and no-one was hurt. Once they finally reached the Vény valley at the bottom of the Miage glacier, they unroped themselves, put on their skis and split into two groups. Desmaison went ahead with Alain Frank and Philippe Biessy, whilst Troksiar brought up the rear with Jean Pontanier. Now able to make faster progress, the lead group skied on and deposited the "material" in the designated hiding place, somewhere along the edge of the Miage glacier, and then carried on towards Entrèves. The two back markers watched the distance quickly grow between them and the leaders. There was still a lot of ground to cover before nightfall. They strapped on their head torches, took a swig of gnôle to put some fire in their bellies, and allowed themselves to imagine a warm comfortable bed. They were all determined, no matter what, to make it to Entrèves that evening. Despite the heavy blanket of snow, despite the fog and despite the darkness, Desmaison, Frank and Biessy, kept on going, no longer worrying about the other two. At about 11pm, utterly exhausted and sodden, they arrived at the border, bent double under the weight of their huge, heavy rucksacks. The three of them presented themselves at the French checkpoint, manned by the CRS border police.

Usually, at this time in January, it would be deserted. Not so today. It was packed with representatives from the prefecture, intelligence, national security police, and the rest - a huge crowd had come out to greet them! Then there was also the pack of reporters who were already huddled around their colleague, Philippe Réal. Responsible for the whole operation, at least in the eyes of the ORTF, the journalist had taken it on himself to "prepare the ground" ahead of the arrival of his accomplices. He had left La Plagne after lunch.

He didn't get much time with the press. One of the Haute-Savoie prefects asked him to follow him: he had Monsieur Barbot on the line, head of local law enforcement with whom Réal had already spoken. He was made to renew his promise to hand over all specimens from the crash site to the Italian authorities.

"Monsieur Barbot warned me that there could be serious diplomatic repercussions," wrote Philippe Réal later in his report to the ORTF. "Funnily enough," he continued, "not only were the Italian authorities not present then, but they didn't show up at any time during the afternoon or the evening in Courmayeur, where all the journalists were waiting for the expedition to return.

Eventually, at 1am, two Italian representatives finally turned up to officially pick up the specimens. After asking us a few quick questions about what we'd seen, they thanked us and left, without even bothering about the reel of film or photos."

Whilst the material was being handed over to the Italian authorities, a journalist from the local paper, Dauphiné, managed to take a few photos. "The Italians let them do it," remembers Réal. "They didn't give a toss. Unlike the French officials who were yelling "what's going on? You mustn't let them take photos, tell them to stop per favor!" They even tried to confiscate the photos that had just been taken, but the photographers refused to hand them over. They were still officially under Italian jurisdiction, so it was the Italian's call but they chose to do nothing." It was pandemonium that night, arms waving around frantically, people shouting over the top of each other. Unshaven, dark circles under their eyes, weathered skin, rough hands, blistered feet, cracked lips... but René Desmaison, Alain Frank and Philippe Biessy were more concerned about their accomplice, who all being well, should be on the road to Paris. The young woman had played her part perfectly up to now, slipping through customs undetected. She was eating up the kilometres behind the wheel of a seriously fast car.

(....)

And that was basically it. A huge result actually. The press had plenty to "go on". The conviction of the protagonists was now based on tangible evidence and not just on rumours. What's more, this scenario wasn't being put forward by just anyone, but by a seasoned alpinist - accomplished guide of the highly respected Compagnie de Chamonix on the one hand, and Philippe Réal - regional director of the ORTF in Grenoble, journalist with a proven track record in aeronautics on the other. For all that, the opinions of Troksiar, Desmaison and Réal counted for nothing in official circles. It was now necessary to wait for the parts handed over to the Italian authorities to be examined and for the experts to pronounce their verdict.

The five men were questioned again the next day, this time by the Maresciallo Giuseppe Malatesta, head of customs. Desmaison and Troksiar confirmed that they had seen bodies

strewn everywhere. The Maresciallo was insistent; were the bodies intact or in pieces? Finally, exasperated, Desmaison "explained" through the interpreter that in fact the air steward was standing frozen to the spot, carrying a tray with a bottle of whisky and two glasses.. "So when we got there, we helped ourselves to a drink, which did us a world of good!" The interpreter faithfully translated his words. The "marshal" didn't appreciate the joke...

XXX Chamonix couldn't care less

The customs officers eventually agreed to return the rucksacks to each "Chabert",

then they proceeded to make an inventory of all the parts. Everything was counted and detailed in a statement. Using Desmaison's testimony, they wrote down exactly where each item was discovered. Desmaison's and Troksiar's request for a certified copy conforming to the list of all the items taken, was met with a flat refusal. A copy was, however, given to the Haute-Savoie authorities. The wording of the statement was quite vague: "twelve medium- and small-sized pieces of nondescript metal; six small pieces of nondescript plastic; a scrap of black corrugated iron with silver writing; a strip of material from a green and yellow silk shawl."

The items were then put in plastic bags and handed over to a Valdôtain police officer, charged with getting it to Rome for expert analysis.

The key to the mystery, if there was a mystery, was in the hands of the experts. Everything would depend on their findings.

Desmaison and Réal gave each other a knowing look. They suspected this was a sham and no matter what, the spoils would be formally confirmed as belonging to Air India's Boeing. But in a laboratory in Paris, someone was holding a document which could blow the official investigation out of the water. Their contact had insisted that the films be ready for the 8pm news. Patience.

It was only 6pm and we were all waiting to hear when the men would be allowed back into France.

(...)

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Once back over the border in the Chamonix valley, they still weren't free to come and go as they pleased. A PSHM mountain rescue vehicle was waiting for them at the other side of the tunnel and the five of them were driven directly to Lieutenant Mollaret's offices. Acting under letters rogatory from the Bonneville examining magistrate, he requested a statement from them.

But not before subjecting them to a long lecture. According to Réal, the mountain rescue service felt they were being accused of not having carried out their job properly. But the journalist knew to be diplomatic; he calmly and respectfully explained: "Listen Lieutenant, if we'd taken the same route up there as you and eventually succeeded in reaching the air crash site on the Italian side,

well then, yes, perhaps it might look like we were saying you hadn't done your job properly, but that isn't the case, not at all! By accessing it directly from the Italian side, we chose a completely different option. No-one is pointing the finger at you."

Still, after a while Philippe Réal couldn't help himself: "reacting so badly to us going up there, it's as if you've got something to hide!"

"But he denied it of course," continued Réal, saying he was concerned for our safety. "You've been reckless and risked your life needlessly. And the lives of the journalists..."

"Yes," we acknowledged. "it was tough, but not impossible. Otherwise we wouldn't be here talking to you now!"

René Desmaison kept coming back to the point that they'd seen bodies everywhere, bodies which could well be brought down. There was some uncomfortable shifting of feet. Why had the security perimeter around the "dangerous" zone been established so quickly? Why were the search and rescue operations to recover the bodies and to investigate the causes of the accident, stopped so abruptly? In fact these two questions, coupled with the rumours circulating in Italy, had sowed the seeds for Operation Chabert. Philippe Réal recalls Desmaison telling him he'd carried out his own little private investigation in Chamonix "circles". "He was convinced they'd already found whatever they were looking for. Otherwise why stop the search operations when they could have carried on? One of the first guides on the scene of the crash had told him there was no point going back, they wouldn't find anything interesting - the most important things had been taken away. I remember that very well. We even had good reason to believe that the black box had been recovered the very first day."

"Did you take any other photos, apart from the ones handed over?" "We said not", remembers Troksiar.

That same day, 1st March 1966, the film was developed. Everything had gone to plan.

Today, Mollaret can't recall there having been an official interrogation of the Chabert members. However, the five verbal witness statements, taken under letters rogatory clearly figure in the investigation report. Signed by the investigating police officer, Mollaret...

XLV Mrs X

1969three years after the Air India Boeing drama.

(...)

More than a pilgrimage, he wanted to honour the promise he had made to his mother to climb Mont Blanc and to explore the crash site area. His mother had found it impossible to live with the idea that the bodies couldn't be recovered.

(...)

"We stopped below the Arête des Bosses, by the Rochers de la Tournette.

Leaving him safely attached, I walked on ahead to the Italian side - it was very steep and craggy. Almost immediately, I literally stumbled across a huge pile of debris. It was unreal, mad. There were things scattered all down the length of the slope, everywhere, objects snagged in and amongst the rocks. Shoes, bits of suitcases. Stretching out into the distance, I saw all sorts of different stuff, papers etc. Bending down, I dug into one pile and found a post bag with a stringed up bundle of letters posted in India inside. All with Swedish addresses. (I posted them later). I went back down to my American and told him we needed to focus our search on the Italian side.

Since there was no question of him climbing over there, he hired a helicopter. We took off from the foot of the Miage glacier and flew over the Envers du Mont Blanc. We could see debris strewn all along, but nothing that resembled a body. We were flying low, flush with the rockface. My stomach was churning. That side is extremely unstable, characterised by constant rock fall and we were having to fly in zigzags to avoid falling rocks. I kept my eyes firmly fixed above us, looking out for stones ricocheting off the mountain side. Just one small stone caught in the helicopter blades would have been enough to knock us out of the sky. "Watch out!" I yelled at one point. The pilot swerved us out of danger. Just. That was when our American spotted something; level with the Petite Bosse, a seat with someone sitting upright in it! The body was absolutely intact, but decapitated. Only about ten minutes from the ridge, part of the usual route up to Mont Blanc, hundreds of climbers must have walked past it over the previous four summers, without anyone noticing it. Incredible! The helicopter put me down on the arête. I attached my crampons and clambered down to it. The man was impeccably dressed in a suit with a white shirt and a red long-sleeved woollen waistcoat. A load of papers had got caught in his seat belt. When we got back, I immediately alerted the PGHM mountain police squad. They didn't thank me for it... Was I serious, expecting them to divert expensive resources at the peak of the season to go and pick up a three and a half year old corpse! Actually I was. They went up there a few days later. And the body was able to be identified. Unfortunately it wasn't my American's father but Robinson was pleased to have done what he could and even a bit more. He was able to go back to America having finally drawn a line under the accident."

It was Mollaret and the police officer, Arbez-Gindre who went up. The poor man was trapped in the ice. Identification wasn't rocket science; they found a wallet in one of his back trouser pockets. It was Gangaikondan Venkatajuba Sivaswadi, an employee of Air India, Bombay.

Not long after, Claude Jaccoux and Bernard Domenech were attempting the first climb of a rocky spur on the Italian side, right above the Quintino Sella refuge. Bernard Domenech remembers also seeing a passenger sitting in his seat.

The press got hold of these latest discoveries, and once again letters full of hope inundated the examining magistrate's office.

Jean-Jacques Mollaret reflected: "The most disturbing thing about this whole affair, is when you imagine that a hundred passengers have, for want of a better way to put it, vaporised. They haunt

the mountain, turning up from time to time. Such a random scenario. In this sense, the crash was truly extraordinary."

And when you think about it, this former police officer is quite right. Random acts are just that, and as such can create something "truly extraordinary" from commonplace banality, transforming protagonists into heroes, victims into martyrs, feeding the press, and animating dinner tables. As time passes, dramas become, more simply, big historic events appropriated by a community. Little by little, the absolute facts and the precise details become eroded, sowing incredible stories. The truth? Whatever anyone wishes to believe or prefers to forget.

Air India, felled twice, is still shamed by these accidents and does not want them discussed.

The investigations have been wound up, many questions never properly addressed. In Chamonix, people aren't interested in raking it up any more, questions often being met with stony silence.

In both Mont Blanc crashes, there were some who found death or misfortune, some glory and riches, others found inspiration.

In Bombay and in London, in France, Belgium or the US, broken hearts have slowly mended.

The glaciers continue to drag the Air India passengers downwards along with them, on their long, slow journey.

In cupboards and garages, plane parts and scraps of kerosene-scented papers pile up.

Jumbled up, just as in our memories.

In a Chamonix cemetery, stands an ageing plaque dedicated to Josette Bonnargent, from her colleagues at Air France New York. No other details.

What would old Émile make of those who go around collecting Indian hands in their backpacks, stealing engine parts, putting together exhibits for the tourists?

He would be ashamed.

Each time he heard of a limb being found in the Bossons, his thoughts would surely turn to Bertoli, to Munkund, to Robinson, to little Demello, to Steward Ganesh, to Captain Saint...

THE END