

## **Michel Reboton**

### **Two Schoolchildren during the Bombardment of Chambéry.**

June 1944 (*sic – This is in the original document in spite of the fact that the raid took place on Friday, 26 May 1944*), the Groupe Mobile de Réserve (a paramilitary group that can be equated to heavily armed riot police) took over part of the Caffé Elementary School. The school had access to the bomb shelters that had been dug into rock at the base of the Bellevue neighborhood. Because of the presence of the Groupe Mobile de Réserve, some of the students were transferred across the city to the high school. I was one of them as well as my brother.

When the sirens went off, we all went to the nearest bomb shelter that, in our case, was just a covered trench. Air raid warnings were familiar event, and needless to say, we were grateful for this unscheduled class break. The entrance to our shelter was an open stairway. It was a beautiful day. I was only 10 years old. I was next to Mr.Mingoz, my teacher, and we counted the bombers as they flew high overhead. There were 42 in this wave.

### **It's Raining Bombs**

The explosion of the first bomb froze everyone. The succeeding explosions, of an unbelievable force, brought screams and tears! To calm things down, a teacher yelled that the railroad yard was the target. At this point, some students started to scream while others started to pray. It was out of the question for anyone to stick his head out. All around us, it was raining bombs.

At the end of the air raid, it was total confusion. Everyone was wondering around in the courtyard. I was looking for my brother who I finally saw walking calmly towards me. Happy to be together, we left for Chambéry, which was burning. We wanted to get home. We lived the Mérande neighborhood, a part of the city that was outside of the evacuation zone. Everything was burning in the Rue Doppet, Rue St. Antoine, and the area near the marketplace. Turning around and holding each other's hand, we went towards the Château to get around the burning area.

The German ambulance was racing down the little streets. On the running board, a soldier with a pistol yelled for us to get out of the way. We threw our backs up against the wall as it sped by. Glancing down the Rue Juivre, we saw that the lower part of the street was caved in with burning rubble. As we continued on, we saw that the upper end of the portique (this is the main historical street with arched sidewalks in the center of the city) was burning. Being school children without our schoolbooks, we were completely dumbfounded but very calm because we were together.

### **What We Saw Frightened Our Little Friends**

Heading for Caffé Place, the teachers, who were standing around the entrance to the bomb shelter, saw us walking calmly towards them. The sun was blocked out by the smoke. Everyone was yelling, giving orders: "The raid is not over. You have to get into the bomb shelter." After what we had seen, the teachers did not have the same authority. We were the ones that told them about the condition in the center of the city. Those who lived there listened intently, full of worry. Deeper in the bomb shelter, the other students asked us a lot of questions. Because the bomb shelter was dug into solid rock, the noise of the explosions had been muffled. We were the stars, for what we had seen as 8 and 10 year olds, frightened all our little friends.

At the end of the air raid, the teachers separated us into groups by neighborhood for better supervision while they escorted us home. For us, it was Mr.Maignier who escorted the students of the Joppet and Mérande neighborhoods. He avoided taking us by the professional trade school, perhaps, because there was a delayed action bomb. Going by the Carmes Bridge and

Bassens Avenue, we finally made it home safely.

Back at home in a quiet neighborhood our mother wanted to hug and kiss us. But we had so much to tell her. Our father, a member of the Civil Defense, had left to help clear debris and extract people trapped in the rubble.

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## **Armand Mathiez**

### **I Was Only Three Years Old, but I Will Never Forget...**

Born on 26 May 1941. I was only three years old, but what happened that day is engraved in my memory. We lived at 3 Rue Léon Ménabréa (actually 27 Rue Léon Ménabréa today), in the Calamine neighborhood. That day my father came home early from work and took us all to the top of the Calamine Field. We had to lie flat on our stomachs but curious and intrigued, I kept turning over to see flying debris and big black clouds of smoke above the city.

A few minutes of the intense emotion marked the beginning of my existence.

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## **Marcel Rivol**

### **I Knew That There Was a Chance That We Would Be Bomb.**

The day of the air raid, I was only 13 years old. My parents lived where there is now the Hotel France. I went to Waldeck-Rousseau School, but because the Germans took over the school, we had to go to this Caffé Elementary School part-time; one week in the morning, the next in the afternoon. That week I had to go to school in the afternoon.

I knew that there was a chance that Chambéry would be bomb, because when I didn't go to school, I delivered medicines for the Girard Pharmacy (Rue Sommeiller). I heard the doctors at the Cléret Clinic talk about it and make arrangements for extra beds. I also heard that, in the case of an air raid, the siren would sound one time, stop and then start again. I also saw groups of Germans, going down the Rue Sommeiller towards the train station. Finally, my brother who worked at the Ricou Garage had been warned by the Germans of the coming air raid.

That day, the weather was beautiful. The sky was blue with a slight breeze from the north.

### **They Were Beautiful, Those Airplanes That Shined in the Sunlight.**

Around 10 a.m., the siren went off. After some hesitation, my brother and I left the city center to go to the lime oven that was located at the intersection of the Lemenc Boulevard and the Faubourg Reclus. We saw the waves of bombers overhead. They were so beautiful, these planes that were shining in the sunshine. *(Actually, the planes were not shining. In May 1944, most of bombers, if not all, were still painted olive drab. What was shining was Window that had been dropped from the bombers.)* Suddenly we saw the group of bomber explode like fireworks with what looked like bricks falling from the planes. *(A very interesting "ground level" description of "bombs away".)* We dove into the lime oven. We were a long ways from the bombs, but I thought the explosions were going to rip my lungs out. I had to open my mouth. Thank God it didn't last a long time.

When there was no more noise, we went out. He went to the edge of the parapet. There was

dust in the air to a height of 60 feet. Next to the train station, the warehouses were burning. We move on. With great difficulty, we managed to get home in spite of the Civil Defense stopping us from going where there might be danger. At home there was nothing; no gas, no electricity, no water. There was dust and small rocks everywhere. In our garden on the side near the train station, we had a pump. We used it to get some water to make something to eat.

### **I Saw People Throw Everything Out the Windows.**

From my bedroom window, I saw the Rue Saint Antoine burning. I saw people throw everything from the windows. Other people picked everything up and put it in the church... Sometimes they just took it. An unexploded bomb had landed in front of the church Notre Dame. Prisoners were called in to remove it. Since we could not stay at Chambéry, my brother and I took our bikes and went my grandmother's at Sainte Helene du Lac where we stayed.

We found papers from the Bank of Savoie which was in front of the Madelon, at La Rochette. On the Rue Favre, there were some beautiful buildings. At the Place Charrière Tissus, there was the Pollet Grain Store. It was a beautiful store that was at the least to 20 feet high. The Rue Saint Antoine had a paved walkway under the buildings that connected it to the Rue Favre. Next to it, there was the Costa Château with its high gates. Everything had disappeared. The Cassine neighborhood was torn apart by the bombs. In the railroad yard, equipment weighing at least 100 tons had been flipped over. Everything was roughed up. They had to work for two months to put everything back together.

### **A shock that I will never get over.**

Since the railroad yard was the target, I have always wondered why they started by bombing the city. *(In this case, the author's recollection is incorrect. The 459th Bomb Group, who was leading the mission, bombed the northern part of the railroad yard. Also, this part of the railroad yard was next to the city's cemetery. Most of the destruction of the center of the city was caused by the 454th Bomb Group, which was trailing the 459th.)* The first bomb landed at the corner of the Place Saint Lèger and the Rue Juiverie. Then the bombardment continued to the train depot without even missing the Gendarmerie next to the bus station. Also, I never understood why they dropped incendiary bombs to stop the trains. *(Again, the author is incorrect. The ordinance of the mission was 500lbs. General Purpose bombs. No incendiaries. Broken gas and electrical lines as well as hot stoves caused the fires. To make matters worse, the city firefighters had been called to Grenoble which was bombed that day by the 455th and the 456th Bomb Groups. Also, what firefighters who were on hand were hindered in their efforts to control the fires by people moving furniture in an effort to save their belongings.)* I also heard that the Germans had proposed to use explosives to stop the fire. The city firefighters refused this offer. The end result was everything burned.

I also saw the bombing of Royale Bridge. *(This may be incorrect as I don't remember reading anything about the bombing of this bridge or the Isere River. As I recall, the bridge was destroyed by the Germans during their retreat to Italy in August 1944.)* We were worried because we knew that the planes flying overhead were loaded with bombs. On the nights with a full moon, we would watch English planes flying overhead on their way to bomb the Fiat factory. From time to time, they would drop a flare or even a bomb as they did at the Motte. That would always shake me up and I would lose my appetite. When the weather was clear, we were certain that the siren would sound that night. My father was also at Modane during their air raid. He took his locomotive into a tunnel.

It is horrible for a child when you come home and you find everything broken and that you have nothing left and that the streets are full of debris and dust is everywhere. It's a shock from which you never really recover.

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## **Gisèle Passion-Coën**

### **The Air Raid Took Everything That We Had**

I was 15. We lived in a building on the corner of the Place des Elephants and the Rue Boigne.

That day, I did not go to school because I was studying for my exams. It was around 10:30 AM. Everything was quiet and suddenly the siren went off. I was hesitant to go to the air raid shelter as had been recommended.

The unusual and intense noise of the planes caused me to rapidly to descend the stairs from our third-floor apartment. I had no doubt that it was going to be the last time that I took those stairs. I ran out onto the Place des Elephants. It was full of sunlight. What a beautiful day but I knew that it would not last and that it would certainly not be a "nice" day.

The noise of the bombers was deafening. I was frightened, and I jumped into the closest shelter. The shelter was in the middle of the street between two movie theaters: the Astrée and the Paris.

### **The Screams, the Crying, the Pushing, the Dust...**

I had hardly gotten into the shelter when the bombs started to explode. I have no idea how long it lasted. The only things that I remember are the screams, the crying, the pushing and the thick dust that filled our eyes and mouths. I thought that it would never end.

It was complete pandemonium in the shelter. (*The shelter was a zig-zag covered trench. The sector of the shelter next to where Mme Coen was received a direct hit killing all of the people in that part of the shelter.*) When I was finally able to get out, and in spite of a sense of total panic, I was able to find my family. Everyone was safe and sound but our home was destroyed by the bombs and the subsequent fire. We'd lost everything. It was a difficult time but we were lucky to have friends who gave us a place to live and helped us while we found a new home.

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## **Jean Pétrini**

### **The Day of the Air Raid, I was at the railroad yard.**

The day of the air raid, I was guarding the tracks with my friend P. who was who was killed next to me. We always work together. We had a hunting rifle with two cartridges. That day we were guarding the water pump next to St. Cassin.

When the siren went off the whole depot went to the Cassine neighborhood to hide. We stayed, however, and we saw our boss coming, who didn't have any instructions and didn't know what we were supposed to do. Suddenly we heard the explosions coming from the Villeneuve neighborhood. I jumped into the Leysse River but P. did not want to follow me. He was too frightened to move. Bombs started explode around us. We were told that when there were explosions, you have to scream and open your mouth so that your lungs do not explode. So I opened my mouth and closed my eyes. I was completely in the dark with dust all around me. I had the impression of being the area to live. There had been days, when we saw planes flying overhead, but this day it was for us. It happened around 10:40 a.m. and lasted about a minute. I had the impression that it lasted a lot longer.

**"We don't need machine guns. We need stretchers."**

When I got out of the river. I found my friend, P., from the Jacob neighborhood dead. His body had turned yellow, and his guts ripped out. I was covered with dust and shaking. I had been hit by a lot of small rocks and I was covered in bruises because a tree and some of its branches had hit me on the head. Suddenly I saw a Milicien with a machine gun. *(A Milicien was a member of a fascist paramilitary group created under Vichy. In late 1944, the Milice provided a significant number of recruits for the Waffen SS.)* I yelled at him, "We don't need machine guns. We need stretchers!" The Germans were at railroad yard in the process of falling back. They were young, almost children. They gave us blankets. They then returned to the train station. There was a fountain at a farm across the street. We took the wounded there. I finally got home at 1:30 in the morning, but I have no idea how. When my father found out that I had been in the middle of the air raid, he turned white. My brother had been in the Calvaire neighborhood, only a few meters from two young people who were killed.

### **The Traffic Was Stopped for Only 10 Hours.**

That evening I was requisitioned by the Milice to clear the railroad tracks. Once again the trains started to roll on Track 1. The traffic had only been stopped to for 10 hours! *(An understanding or, rather, a "misunderstanding" about the bombing of marshalling yard, was the idea of stopping rail traffic by destroying tracks and maintenance facilities. This is incorrect. Marshalling yards were targeted to reduce (not stop) traffic by destroying rolling stock and locomotives. As Mr. Pétrini so correctly points at, filling bomb crater and laying track is not a time consuming process. However, the replacement of locomotives requires weeks, if not months, of heavy industrial production. To cite an interesting example, two "electrical" locomotives destroyed during the Chambéry air raid could not be repair. Eventually, "working" halves of these locomotives were welded together to create one locomotive. That locomotive was in service until the 1970s.)*

During the night, unexploded bombs continue to go off. But they weren't delayed action bombs, as everyone said. They were just bombs that had not exploded.

It was war: destruction for the sake of destruction. If one of the pilots had been close to me, I would have probably strangled him because I was so angry.

I went back to the place where I had been during the air raid. A bomb with its tail fan was still stuck halfway in the ground. In the radius of 30 feet, there must have been 10 of them! *(Note: I remember a figure of around 44 unexploded bombs that were defused and eventually dumped in the Lac Bourget, a 600-foot deep lake just north of Chambéry. Considering that 720 bombs were dropped, there was, thus, a 6% dud-rate. That means that the 10 unexploded unexploded bombs in a radius of 30 feet is improbable. It is more likely that Mr. Pétrini was seeing just tail-fin assemblies that had separated from some exploded bombs.)*

I had the fright of my life; the fear of being buried alive. It was terrible.