

The stereoviews of Alfred Charbonnier - War in Depth

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The archive of La Section Photographique de l'Armée (SPA) contains 539 albums^[1] with photos categorized by location or theme. The collection is now known as Album Valois, named after the location of the SPA archive at Rue de Valois in Paris^[1]. The albums Meuse contain a series of photos of the battle of Verdun. At the top left of each photo is the name of the photographer: Lieutenant Charbonnier. It appears that this lieutenant was a photographer of the SPA and took these photos during a mission. An example is this photo of Fort de Tavannes:



Fort de Tavannes from album 29

Source: [Argonnaute](#)

It is remarkable that the same photo is sold as a stereoview after the war by La Stéréoscopie Universelle. Both images are identical and show the same blemishes, proving that they were printed from the same negative. How is it possible that photos from the SPA archive were sold by commercial publishers?



L.S.U. Fort Tavannes 1916

45x107mm glass stereoview, published by La Stéréoscopie Universelle

The website nosmilitaires.com was created by the descendants of Lieutenant Charbonnier and tells about his life and his stereo photos. It turns out that Alfred Charbonnier was part of a machine gun section of the 53rd Infantry Regiment of the French Army during the First World War. He was wounded twice but survived the war and retired as captain in 1937^[2]. So Alfred Charbonnier was not a SPA photographer, but how did his photos end up in the *Albums Valois*?

The SPA also collected photos of military personnel and even civilians to complete their archive. This was initially intended to fill the gap between the outbreak of war in 1914 and the establishment of the SPA in May 1915^[3]. Donated photos were also added to *Albums Valois* afterwards. In 1918, 1777 donations were registered with 28.000 photos^[3]. Most of the photos were taken by officers at the front. Alfred Charbonnier made prints of his stereo negatives and sent them to the SPA. His photos from June 1916 of the battle of Verdun were apparently a welcome addition to the archive.

The *Albums Valois* collection contains 26 photos of Charbonnier in seven albums with the name *Meuse*. 24 photos are dated June 1916. Two other photos don't contain the name Charbonnier and the date is missing.



Fort de Tavannes from album 29

Source: Argonnaute



L.S.U. 2247 – Tunnel de Tavannes – Sortie du côté Allemand

6x13cm glass stereoview, published by La Stéréoscopie Universelle

After the war, Alfred Charbonnier sold his negatives or the rights to publisher La Stéréoscopie Universelle, who sold the stereoviews in the 45x107mm and 6x13cm format. The two sizes indicate that Charbonnier was shooting with a 6x13cm stereo camera as the 45x107mm views were cropped versions of the larger negatives. 8 photos have been found that were sold as stereoviews after the war.

References

1. *Fonds des albums Valois* – via: argonnaute.parisnante.fr
2. *Alfred Charbonnier* – via: nosmilitaires.com
3. Guillot, Hélène, *Les soldats de la mémoire*, 2017

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