



At the annual meeting of the NCSL in Boston, René Jalbert was presented with a plaque for his role leading to a peaceful surrender of the gunman who invaded the National Assembly last May. The plaque was presented by Bob Galg, President of the National Legislative Services and Security Association.

Interview with René Jalbert

On Wednesday, May 8, 1984, at 9:45 a.m. a person dressed in army commando fatigues and armed with a submachine gun, burst into the National Assembly building by the door situated on Grand-Allée Boulevard. After shooting a messenger (who subsequently died) and seriously wounding a receptionist the armed man ran down the hall leading to the Speaker's Gallery. He proceeded to the first floor where he entered the main chamber of the Legislature. A committee of the Assembly was preparing to hear the Chief Electoral Officer's budgetary estimates for 1984-1985. He fired three more rounds wounding several

*people, two mortally. One of the those killed and several of the wounded worked for the Chief Electoral Officer. The other person killed was a page who had worked for the National Assembly for several years. While the gunman was still in the Assembly chamber the Sergeant-at-Arms, René Jalbert, attempted to negotiate with him. The following account of the incident was given by the Sergeant-at-Arms during a press conference held on May 9, 1984. A transcript of the interview was published in *Actualité parlementaire*, vol. 3, no. 6. The English translation was prepared in Ottawa for the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*.*

Mr. Millette: How did you get into the chamber?

Mr. Jalbert: I arrived at 9:30 a.m. and headed toward my office. I was told there was someone in the National Assembly shooting a rifle. I got in the elevator and went up to the chamber. When I stepped out of the elevator, I heard a burst of gunfire. I moved forward and saw a man sitting in the Speaker's chair. As soon as he saw me, he fired another round. That is how I got into the chamber!

Mr. Millette: What kind of conversation did you have with him?

Mr. Jalbert: When I saw him he was dressed in a military uniform, I tried to introduce myself to him. I told him I too was a military man. I said that, if he let me, I would take out my Armed Forces' discharge card. He let me and I took out my identification card to show to him. I introduced myself and asked him: "Seeing as I showed you my identification card, could you show me your identification card too, so that I would know who I am talking to?" He said yes and he showed me his ID. That's when I saw he was a Mr. Denis Lortie.

Mr. Rhéaume: You were in the presence of Mr. Lortie for several hours; were you his hostage?

Mr. Jalbert: Not at all.

Mr. Rhéaume: You could have left him at any time?

Mr. Jalbert: No. It was not a matter of being a hostage. I managed to convince him to follow me to my office. When he got inside my office, I told him: "I don't want you pointing those weapons at me." He agreed to that. He said: "There are people in the National Assembly." At the time, I did not know that he had already killed somebody. I did not know that there was still somebody in the chamber. He was the one that told me. I said to him: "Listen! I want to negotiate with you, I really want to have a talk with you and help you, but we're going to do it in my office.

In the meantime, before going, you must promise me that the pages that are still in the chamber will be allowed to go." He told me: "Yes." I said: "Do you promise?" He did, then he raised his gun and I said to the pages: "All those who are in the chamber, leave right now!" Three pages left. When they had gone, the only person left was a policeman in the gallery with a walkie-talkie.

Mr. Rhéaume: During your conversations, did the Canadian soldier mention any demands or objectives? Did he want something and ask for it directly or in an incoherent manner?

Mr. Jalbert: I asked him: "Why are you doing this?" He said: "I want to make everyone aware. I want to make the federal government, the provincial government, and everyone aware. That's all." I said: "Listen! You want to make them aware, but why, what do you want to tell them?" "Oh!" he said, "It's too long, too difficult, we won't talk about it, talk to me about something else."

I changed the topic and went back to my invitation to go to my office and talk because I wanted to help him since we were both soldiers. I said: "Maybe we can find a solution to your problem." That's when he decided to go with me.

Mr. Rhéaume: Is it true that he wanted to give himself up to the Military Police rather than to the Quebec Provincial Police?

Mr. Jalbert: Yes. After having talked to him for a long time, I made a suggestion. "Listen! If you want, I'll phone Valcartier, the military authorities. I've got a friend there; maybe he can find a solution to your problem. Will you let me phone?" When he said yes, I phoned Base Valcartier and spoke to Colonel Armand Roy. I explained what was happening and also explained that he agreed to give himself up to the Military Police. I asked Col. Roy if he would send me two military

policemen. He said: "Yes, they will be there in half an hour or three quarters of an hour." I said: "Listen, it's Colonel Armand Roy on the phone; do you want to talk to him to make sure I'm really talking to a soldier at Valcartier?" He then took the phone and spoke to Colonel Roy. I don't know what the Colonel said to him, but he agreed with what the colonel was saying. He turned around and his revolver still had the safety catch off. I said: "Listen! You're making me nervous with that revolver. If you put it on the table, I won't be as nervous and we can talk some more."

Mr. Rhéaume: The revolver or the submachine gun?

Mr. Jalbert: At the time, it was the revolver, because he had put the submachine gun down on my desk. When we walked out of the Chamber he stayed very close to me with his submachine gun. I knew very well that the Quebec Provincial Police would see us coming out, and I told them we were coming. When we walked out, there was one policeman just to the right, about two or three feet away — he took his hands and lifted them up like this. That was enormously reassuring to Lortie and he calmed down a bit. Then I had some trouble getting on the elevator because he had fired at it and the buttons were smashed. I didn't know if the elevator was in working order. Luckily, it was. While getting in I said to him: "There's nothing to get upset about anymore, we're safe, we're alone, and we're in the elevator." Then he calmed down and lowered his weapon.

Mrs. Lafontaine: Just a minute ago you said you didn't consider yourself a hostage. Could you give us an idea of how you felt about all of this. If you didn't feel like a hostage was it because you felt safe? That seems impossible under the circumstances.

Mr. Jalbert: The reason I didn't feel like a hostage was because, from the beginning to when we went into my

office, we had already been negotiating and talking for maybe 20 or 24 minutes. So, he had already begun to accept me or to establish a type of relationship. It was maybe not exactly friendly but he started to have more confidence in me. When we went to my office to show him I was serious, that I didn't want to rush him or anything, I introduced him to my secretary.

Mr. Lacombe: Your secretary was there? Your secretary hadn't been evacuated by the police?

Mr. Jalbert: She was in my office. The police didn't know I was going to my office at that time.

Mr. Lacombe: That's unbelievable. The police hadn't evacuated the building.

Mr. Jalbert: Not at that time. This was at the beginning; they hadn't had the time. Upon entering my office, I introduced him to her; he leaned down and kissed her cheek. I congratulated him; I told him: "You are a gentleman, Corporal. You treated that woman very nicely." And then we went into my office. When we got there, I asked him to put his sub-machine gun on my desk, in front of him. A short time later, when he spoke to Colonel Roy on the phone, he took a 9-mm revolver out of his pocket that I didn't even know he had. Then he loaded it and he had it in his hand like this and I said to myself that an accident could happen. That was the only time I felt a bit uncomfortable.

Mr. Rivest: You seem to talk about this young man with a lot of kindness. What do you feel for him?

Mr. Jalbert: Well, here is a young man of 25 who got himself into one hell of a mess. Evidently, there was something not right. There was a problem and it bothered me to see a young man mess up his life like that. I said that to him about ten times when he was in my office. I tried to

make him understand that the thing he was doing was stupid and that if he did any more stupid things he would make matters worse. "There are two things you can do," I said, "You can give yourself up, not to the police, but to the provosts," (that's what they call the Military Police). I can even phone a padre, (that's what we call a priest, in the army). Colonel Arseneault is the camp padre at Valcartier. "I'll call him. I'll get him on the phone and you'll be able to talk to him on the phone. Maybe he'll help you. Maybe with him, you and I, we will find a way of working out your problem."

Mr. McKenzie: Did he talk to any other people?

Mr. Jalbert: Yes. I don't remember what time it was – I received a phone call from another military friend who is at the base they call the "mobile base" in Montreal. It was Colonel Painchaud who is a close friend and with whom I served in the army. He phoned me to find out how I was. I said: "Listen, Jacques, everything's fine. I have Corporal Lortie here in front of me. He's fine." Jacques said: "If you need anything, I'll jump in a helicopter and I'll come to help you. If you need anything at all." I said: "There's no problem. If you want, you can talk to Corporal Lortie. There will be no problem." I asked Corporal Lortie if he would like to speak to Colonel Painchaud? He said he would, so I said: "Listen, Jacques the corporal is going to talk to you and you will see that he's a regular guy." I handed him the telephone and he spoke to him for about four minutes.

That talk reassured him, I think. He was a lot less nervous. The more he talked to people the less nervous he got.

Mrs. Tellier: During your long conversation, did he talk to you about what had happened at the Citadel and did he explain why he had fired

shots at the Citadel before coming to the Assembly?

Mr. Jalbert: He was the one who told me he had gone to the Citadel. I asked him that question. He said: "I went there and I fired. I fired at the windows. Then I stopped and I came here." That's all he told me. I asked him again, why, and he gave me the same answer. He often said to me: "My 'esprit' did that, it's not me, it's my 'esprit'." (Translator's note: This French word, which can be rendered variously in English as 'esprit', 'mind', 'conscious thought', 'common sense', etc., is impossible to translate in this context. Using the original French is consistent with media coverage used at the time.) I said to him: "Why did your 'esprit' tell you to do that?" He told me: "I don't know, it's my 'esprit' that's making me do it. It's not me doing this, it's my 'esprit'." That's all he said.

Mr. Lacombe: Did he ask to talk to members of his family in the course of the day?

Mr. Jalbert: During our numerous conversations about this and that, I said to him: "Are you married, Corporal?" He told me: "I don't want you to talk to me about my personal affairs, change the topic." I said: "Listen! You must have a mother, you must have a wife or children. I'm married, and what you're doing here, if it were me who was doing it, would hurt my wife or my children." He said: "I don't want you to talk to me about my personal affairs." He wanted to change the topic.

Mr. DeBlois: Mr. Jalbert, I have been listening to you and I am somewhat fascinated. I would like to ask you if you were fully aware of what you were doing – you didn't have a bulletproof vest – in the first seconds you confronted Mr. Lortie. In essence, you were ready to give your life for the National Assembly. I would like to know what you felt at the precise moment. What forced you to make that gesture which, at first glance, was one of uncommon boldness.

Mr. Jalbert: I knew we had a committee that was to meet at 10:00. That's why I came at 9:30, to go to the chamber and see if everything in the room had been prepared by the pages. When I heard the first burst of gunfire, I was too curious to go see what was happening to be capable of passing judgement or making a decision and doing something. When I saw a man sitting in the Speaker's chair dressed in an army uniform, my first reaction was to think: If I can identify with him as a soldier, I'm sure I will be able to talk to him and stop him from shooting. That's exactly what happened. I didn't think then that I was in any danger. When he showed me his identification card I started to have a bit more confidence in him and above all in myself.

Mr. Tremblay: Did he fire in your direction when you went into the National Assembly? You said he fired a round. Was it in your direction?

Mr. Jalbert: The first round he fired was at the clock, I think. I don't remember any more. The second

burst was from the left to the right and it was directed towards the chairs on the right, about the fifth or the sixth or the fourth. I don't remember any more. Wood and cartridges were flying everywhere.

Mr. Girard: Mr. Jalbert, there was the possibility that explosives could have been placed somewhere in the building and a systematic search of the building was carried out. In the course of the talks you had with Corporal Lortie, did he inform you of something along those lines, and were explosives really found in the National Assembly building?

Mr. Jalbert: When he was in my office, I asked him if he had any bombs or grenades with him. He told me he didn't. I asked him to prove it to me? "Stand up, open your shirt and show me if you have any grenades." He stood up and I said: "Will you let me search you?" He came over to me – he had his revolver in his hand – and I searched his legs starting at the bottom and moving up. I asked him to turn around, because I didn't want to have

the gun in my face. He turned around to the right and I searched him from behind and checked his back.

He didn't have any grenades. I asked him: "Do you have any bombs or explosives in your car?" He said: "No. the only thing I've got in my car is my pack, my personal things."

Mr. Pelletier: You have said quite a bit about this individual. You got to know him. Did you feel that he regretted his actions?

Mr. Jalbert: He mentioned to me twice that he regretted the madness he had just wreaked. He had tears in his eyes. I said: "Listen, cry, that will make you feel better, don't hold it back, cry as much as you want, the two of us are alone and I won't tell a soul"...then he cried for maybe a minute or two. He pulled himself together. He was much calmer then.

Editor's note: At 2:15 p.m. the incident ended with the peaceful surrender of the gunman to law enforcement agents from the Quebec Provincial Police, the Quebec City Police Force and the security service of the National Assembly.