



Dear Reader,

Within the framework of the commemoration of the beginning of World War 2 in the low countries I'll focus in this number on the famous Maginot Line, especially on the Scheldt region. Enjoy.

MAGINOT LINE

70 years ago, the Germans broke through the Maginot Line in the Scheldt sector



The region that we are going to discuss lies in France just over the Belgian border on the southern bank of the river Scheldt, to the north of Valenciennes.

The northern border of France was created after the defeat of Napoleon with the intention not to be defensible.

In 1923 the '*Commission de Défense du Territoire*' proposed a number of defensible points, among which the forest of Mormal between Valenciennes and Maubeuge and the forest of Raismes which is to the north of Valenciennes. In these woods a line of CORF casemates were built to prevent the enemy from infiltrating and the French could take up their positions behind it. 13 were built in the forest of Mormal and 12 in the forest of Raismes between 1931 and 1932.

In 1932 new budgets were released under political pressure to expand the defences of the north with a defence line in an arc to the north of Maubeuge, a small work Eth and a few casemates to the east of Valenciennes.

Due to the situation in Germany in 1936, a new line of casemates was designed to connect the line of Maubeuge and the group of the small work Eth. The '*Ancien Front*' casemates of Mormal and Raismes became the second line. To the north of Valenciennes the line followed the river Scheldt with the old rearmed fort of Maulde as connection with the Belgian army. The construction of the new casemates and the change to the fort started in 1937.

This sector and the one of Maubeuge were under the command of the French 1st Army of General Blanchard.

The German 27th Army Corps with the 253rd, 217th and 269th Infantry Division stood on 19 May on this line between Maulde and Condé-sur-l'Escaut.

Let's look more in detail.

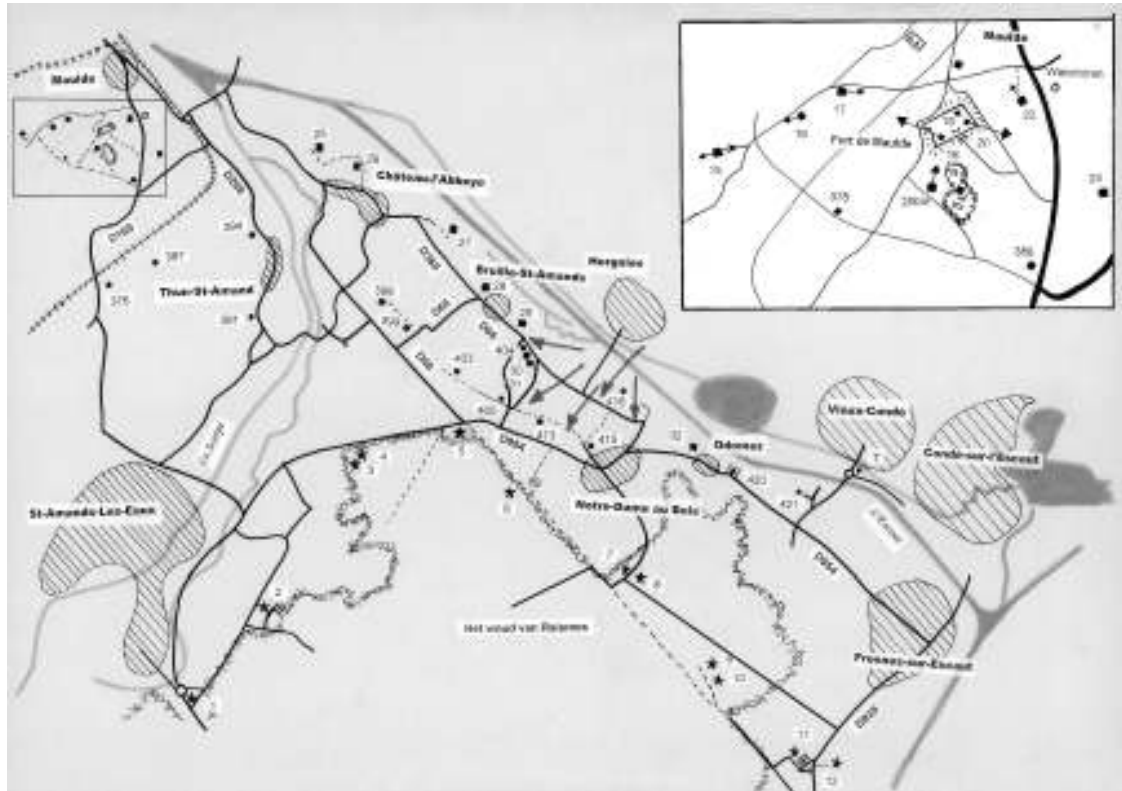
The fort of Maulde was built in 1881 and called initially Fort Beurnonville. It was rearmed between 1937 and 1940 with two casemates (18, 20) with each 2 x 75 mm Mle 1897/33 guns with a range of 11 Km. An observation block (19) was also built in the fort with two copula's.



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A gun-casemate (**20bis**) was built on the friendly side of the hill of the fort for a 155 mm GPF Mle 1917 gun (GPF = *Grand Puissance Fillioux*) with a range of 18,6 Km. This gun had to keep the bridges of Tournai and the locks of Antoing under fire. It was the heaviest piece used in the Maginot Line! On the north site of the fort five STG-casemates with one copula were built in a semi arc around the fort. They were armed with 6 x 37 mm and 1 x 25 mm anti-tank guns and 7 machine guns. The casemates were connected by an anti-tank moat.



In the direction of Condé-sur-l'Escaut the line consisted of a main resistance line with STG casemates (STG = "Service Technique du Genie"). Behind that one there was a support line with light 1st RM blocs (Région Militaire = Military Region) to cover the STG's in the rear. Both lines were completed with light bunkers and reinforced field positions, a network of transmission points and an anti-tank moat with barbed wire. The second line were the "Ancien Front" CORF casemates (CORF = "Commission d'Organisation des Régions Fortifiées") of the Raimes forest.



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The most important Works between Maulde and Condé were occupied by battalion I/54th Fortress Infantry Regiment. The fort was manned by the 107th CEO (CEO = "Companie d'Equipage d'Ouvrage" Company Fortress Troops) under the command of Captain Schwenger with 6 officers, 1 candidate, 1 assistant doctor, 15 NCO's and 149 men.

To the north of Maulde there lay two British infantry divisions, the 2nd and the 48th in the Defensive Sector of Lille. On the 19th the 2nd North African Infantry division (DINA) and the 22nd and 13th Regiment Algerian Infantry (RTA) took up position between the Britons and Château-l'Abbaye. During the night of 19 and 20 May the 1st, 43rd and the 110th Infantry Regiment of the 1st and 15th DIM (DIM = Division d'Infanterie Marocaine). South-west of the fort there lay the 40th North African Artillery Regiment (RANA) with two groups of artillery.

Opposite the French stood General Waeger with his 27th Army Corps of the 6th Army with the 253rd, 217th and 269th Infantry Division. The 253th ID lay between Antoing and Hergnies and the 269th ID between Hergnies and Condé.

The first 155 mm and 75 mm shells were shot by the casemates of the fort on May 20. The German 464th Infantry Regiment of 253. ID made a first attempt around 1900 Hr to approach the junction of the rivers Scarpe and the Scheldt, but the satellite casemates and the artillery of the 40th RANA stopped them.



Armoured vehicles of Panzerjäger Bataljon 670 executed a recce to the bridges of Vieux-Condé, but at the demolished bridge of Sartiau a machinegun fired at them. It was a sectional turret, type Dufieux, armed with a Hotchkiss machinegun. It was only manned by one soldier, Beaulieux, who stayed behind despite orders to withdraw. A Panzerjäger I with a 47 mm (t) gun fired three shots on it at a distance of 50 whereby Beaulieu died. Afterwards, the Germans could built a bridgehead at the other river bank.

The next day, one of the artillery casemates of the fort of Maulde prevented the German advance between Flines les Mortagne and the lock of Rodignies. The whole day the fort was shelled and was threatened by encirclement. At Hergnies the Germans succeeded in building a temporary bridge. They were able to pass some armoured vehicles until the French discovered it and destroyed it with artillery fire. At the same day the blocs Tour du Moulin and Mairie de Bruille were shelled.

On May 22, the Germans installed two heavy howitzers Skoda of 30,5 cm of s Art Abt 641 to fire at the fort. The Germans concentrated their artillery fire at the region between Bruille and Nortedame-au-Bois. During the day the fort fired at the German troop concentrations at the north bank. In the evening the British withdrew to the line Maulde - Tournai and during the night the Germans were able to cross the river between Condé and Thiers.

The battery of 30.5 cm received reinforcement of a battery of 24 cm on 23 May and the first shots reached the fort. A 30.5 cm shell caused serious damage at the basement of the observation bloc. The same day the line of casemates was the target of the Luftwaffe and at Hergnies Infantry Regiment 489 succeeded to pass the Scheldt. At the same moment Infantry Regiment 464 opened an assault at the fort to distract the French attention from the advance of the 269. ID, but this one failed. A French attempt of Regiment 43 to get back the lost bloc Château Forêt failed also.



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The next day the Germans passed the Scheldt at Bruille and fired at the blocs of the support line with 37 mm anti-tank guns. Units of the 43rd Infantry Regiment attempted two counter attacks from the bloc Tour du Moulin to conquer again the bridge at Hergnies and the bloc Château Forêt, but these failed. In the afternoon the Germans took the village Odomez and meanwhile the Bloc Tour du Moulin was pierced. Around the fort the STG casemates resisted, in spite of the risk of encirclement. Meanwhile the artillery kept on going hampering the German advance and the 155 mm gun took action against a German railroad gun in the neighbourhood of Tournai. The artillery bombardment increased and caused serious damage to the eastern casemate. The resistance of the fort was so embarrassing that the Engineers Battalion 42 received the order of the 6th Army to disable it.



Bloc Tour du Moulin

On the 25th, the fort was still under artillery fire and the 40th RANA left the region. At Bruille a French counter attack of the 110th and 43rd Infantry Regiment failed again. The German 269 ID was released by the 217. ID. That day the bloc Bruille-Sud and Mairie de Bruille stopped a German attack.

26 May became a fatal day for the region. The Germans lay a barrage around the Bloc de Hauterive whereby they could easily approach it and neutralise it. At the same time an assault started to the west of Notre-Dame-au-Bois, supported by tanks (tank battalion 560). Around 1200 hr bloc Tour du Moulin was conquered and during the afternoon the other blocs of the main line were disabled too (Petit Marais, Long Buhot, Couple de Bruille). The action moved then to the support line. Around 2100 Hr the commander of the 43rd Infantry Regiment decided to move the defence to the line of the CORF casemates of the

Raismes forest, but the high command decided at 2300 Hr to withdraw at 0030 Hr to a line to the south-east of Lille. Meanwhile the bombardment of the fort was stopped and patrols were sent out to gather information about the status of the fort to prepare the assault. During the night the French garrison prepared their departure. The 155 mm and the 75 mm guns were sabotaged and shortly after midnight the French left the fort. The next morning a German patrol found an empty fort.

All right, that's the history, but what are the must sees in the field? What remains actually of the battle field? The region has plenty of casemates and I will show the most interesting. It's recommended to make the tour in spring, when foliage and high grass will not hamper your photos.

First there's the fort of Maulde. It lies on the top of a hill next to the D169, opposite the water tower. Beware that the fort is private land and you may not enter it. However there's no fence. Watch out for deep craters of the 30.5 cm shells. Watch also out for the holes in the floors of the gun casemates. The famous painted heads are in a small waiters' room on the right when you enter the fort via the main entrance. Unfortunately graffiti covered almost 80% of it. Look also at the ceilings of the brick galleries



The observation bloc of the Fort de Maulde



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and notice the damage of the impacts of the heavy shells. Dirt and cobble stoned roads lead around the fort and you can easily visit the STG blocs. Notice also the huge damage on the roofs caused by experiments with explosives by the Germans after 1940. Last but not least see also the casemate for the biggest gun of the Maginot Line (**20bis**), the 155 mm GPF. The Germans never saw the casemate because it's on the other side of the hill where the fort is on top of it. A little bit further on the D169, behind a villa there is the restored bloc Mont de Justice (**23**) (see the museum section).



The copula of bloc Long Buhot

A bit further you come back on the main road and turn left. In Château l'Abbaye you drive straight on, this is the D368. Outside the village turn to the left on a dirt road that runs parallel to the main road.

This one leads to Bloc de Petit Marais (**27**). The copula shows several impacts of 88 mm shells of the 269. ID. Return to the main road and continue to the left to Bruille St-Amands. Bloc du Long Buhot (**28**) is just before the village on your left. It's a casemate with one gun side. The back of the casemate and the copula is heavily damaged by shell fire.

Continue through Long Buhot. The road is now D66. Continue and a bit further you can go the right. Drive on until you are at a crossroad. To the right there's the heavy shelled Bloc de Bruille Sud (**405**) and on the left you can follow a dirt road to the Bloc de la Mairie de Bruille (**413**). This is the support line. The bunkers are types of the 1st RM. They were equipped with a 25 mm gun, a Hotchkiss machine gun and three light machine guns.

Return to the D66 and continue to the right. The road turns to the village Notre-Dame au Bois. Here you can follow the road-sign to the monument of the 43rd Infantry Regiment. You go in the village and at the next crossroad you go right. You will see the curious Bloc de la Tour du Moulin (**415**). It was camouflaged like a mill and it was armed with two 25 mm guns. This one belongs also to the support line.

Go back to the crossroad with the D66 and turn right, via Odomez to Vieux-Condé. On your left you will pass Bloc Emeraude and the 1st RM bloc Abri de tir d'Odomez. At the crossroad you turn to the left, to Vieux-Condé and then you take a small road on your left. This one leads to a car

To continue you will start again in Maulde. Now you go left, this is the D68. The road leads over the railroad and the river. Just over the bridge you turn to the right. It's still the D68. Here you have the STG blocs of the main line. They are armed with two 25 mm or 47 mm guns and two Hotchkiss machine guns and one copula GFM ("Guèt, fusil mitrailleur" = observation and machine gun) The Bloc de Rodignies (**25**) lies on the left behind some bushes in a field. Take the dirt road on the left. Close to the bloc there's also a small bloc for a 25 mm gun. Continue on the dirt road and you will see Bloc Château l'Abbaye (**26**). All three are well preserved.



Bloc de Bruille Sud



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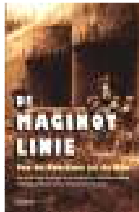
Bloc de la Tour Carré

park and from there you walk to an old mine shaft in which the Bloc de la Tour Carrée (**421**) is built. The tower was also reinforced for machine guns and for observation purposes.

Continue on the main road to Vieux-Condé, pass the bridge and at your right you will see the turret of soldier Beaulieux (**T**) that became a monument for the 54th Infantry Regiment. Notice the impacts of the 47 mm gun.

The second line with CORF casemates is well hidden in the forest, but there's a museum casemate and another one that lies next to the main road.

You have to drive back to Notre-Dame au Bois and follow the D954 to St-Amands-les-Eaux. Continue on D169 to Valenciennes, then chose a road on the right to the village La Croisette. Take care, at the church, you have to turn to the right to Mont-de-Bruyères. In this village you turn to the left and once more to the left. This is the Rue du 54 RIF. Casemate Mont-de-bruyères (**2**) lies close to cemetery of that village. (see the museum section) This is a single casemate with one combat room. The next casemate is Notre-Dame-d'Amour (**1**). Return to the D169 and continue to Valenciennes. At the roundabout turn to the left. You will see the casemate immediately on the left. This is a double casemate, but with two differences, namely a rail road ran over it and in the other combat room the embrasure for the twin machine guns was replaced by a machine gun copula.



If you want to read more about this region, check out the book which is the source for this article : "De Maginotlinie. Van de Noordzee tot de Rijn" by Frank Philippart. Published in 2008 by Lannoo. ISBN : 978-90-209-7163-7. Language : dutch. Pages : 487.



If you want to know more about the whole region of the north border of France, read the following book : "Le Nord, Frontière militaire. Tôme 2" by Julien Depret. Published by the author in 2005. ISBN : 2-9520574-2-7 Language : French. Pages : 287

Frank Philippart



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SPOTLIGHT ON A MUSEUM

Bloc du Mont de Justice



This restored STG casemate lies next to the D169 after the water tower behind the second villa when you come from Maulde. The casemate is a type 16A with two gun rooms with each two embrasures and a lower floor for the crew. The armament consisted of two 47 mm or 25 mm anti-tank guns and two Hotchkiss machine guns. The casemate has also a GFM copula for observation and machine guns. Inside you have a filter installation, a radio, the nice restored copula, an interesting armoured plate (type A2R) for the Hotchkiss and drawings of the region above each embrasure. Unfortunately the casemate is not armed anymore, but nevertheless it's the only casemate of his kind that is restored in the region. The person to contact for an appointment is Mr Gaby at number 33 (0) 681.53.19.37.

Casemate du Mont des Bruyères



This interesting CORF casemate lies hidden behind a small barrack. When you are in front of the gate of the cemetery, then the entrance to the casemate is on your left.

It's what the French called a "casemate single" which means that it has only one combat room. The combat room has two embrasures, one for a twin machine gun, type MAC 31 and one for a 47 mm anti-tank gun. The gun was mounted on a rail, so that the crew could withdraw it and install another twin machine gun in its place. Last but not least, the casemate has also a GFM copula and four light machine guns Model 24/29 for close defence. The casemate was manned by 16 men. The commander was Staff-Sergeant Pintiaux and he had 2 corporals and 13 soldiers under his command. They belonged to the 108th CEO (Compagnie d'Equipage d'Ouvrage (Fortress garrison company)).

It's one of the best preserved casemates I know. It has its two twin machine guns and its gun. The filter installation and diesel engine are working and next to that the association reinstalled the crew rooms and many other items. Certainly worth a visit!



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The casemate's address is : Rue du 54 RIF, 59230 St Amands les Eaux
The association that takes casemate is Association Maginot-Escaut 54^{ieme} RIF. Its address is 6 rue Thiers, F 59139 Wattignies
The association in on internet at Maginotescaut.centerblog.net
The person to contact for an appointment is Mr Denis Cassez. 33 (0) 320.97.06.44. Portal : 33 (0) 689.95.14.42.

BOOKS

Maginot Line 1940. Battles on the French Frontier

The intro of the book gives a short overview about the start of the Maginot Line, its components and a description of the opposing forces. The main focus of the book is the description of the German operations against the Maginot Line in the north-east. The authors were able to inspect the German sources. The authors used many new photos and nice coloured 3D maps on which the battles are explained. The book contains also three paintings of John White showing assaults on a Maginot fortress. The book contains 96 pages and the language is English. The authors are Marc Romanych and Martin Rupp. The book is published by Osprey in 2010. ISBN number : 978-1-84603-499-2.



Thanks to Yvonne Mayo for the spell check.

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