



Dear Reader,

In the last number of 2010 you'll find a third article to commemorate the invasion of the low countries 70 years ago. It's a back to the battlefield article about the anti-tank ditch above Antwerp.

Enjoy.

## Return to the battlefield May 1940 at the anti-tank ditch above Antwerp

Frank Philippart

70 years ago the Germans landed on Europe's largest fortress and neutralised it in no time. They rushed through the impenetrable Ardennes and entered France. Three German infantry divisions invaded the Netherlands and five days later they stood in front of the anti-tank ditch held by three Belgian divisions. But what's the anti-tank ditch and did it hold back the Germans?

When in 1925 the occupation of the Rhine ended, Belgium became interested again in its fortifications. A commission was created to study the rearmament of the existing forts and the organisation of defence lines. In 1932 the "Galet" Plan was proposed which entailed the defence of the big rivers (Maas and Schelde). Forts and bridgeheads would be built on the eastern bank of the cities on these rivers. These would become the TPA (Tête de Pont Anvers (Bridgehead Antwerp)) and TPG (Tête de Pont de Gant (Bridgehead Gent)). But there was some resistance against this plan because several regions would be given up without any battle. Therefore the Plan Galet was changed. There would come into being a line with defence centres in the

province of Luxemburg. A series of new forts would be constructed to the east of Luik and the construction of the forts around Antwerp and Gent was postponed.



That meant that the TPA became PFA (Position Fortifiée d'Anvers (Fortified Position of Antwerp)). It acquired another role, namely : to protect the Antwerp region against motorised assaults, being the left wing of the defence lines of the canals, being a strong line to withhold enemy forces from other area's and to be the bridgehead on the rivers Schelde - Rupel and Nete.

In 1934 a decision was made to reinstall 27 forts and redoubts as infantry strongpoints and to organise the intervals between the fortifications.

**The anti-tank ditch above Antwerp connecting the old reissued forts. Source : Google Maps.**



# WMF News

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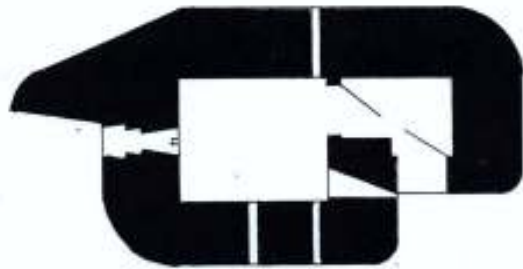
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In 1935 interval-bunkers were built between the canal of Turnhout and the Albert canal.

In October 1939 they started the construction of a wet anti-tank ditch and in 1939 a defence line was built between the Albert canal and the fort of Koningshooikt where started the famous KW-line.

The anti-tank ditch is a wet ditch and runs in a wide bow above Antwerp from the north (Berendrecht) to the east (Albert canal). The total length is about 33 km. It's connected to the World War I forts (Brasschaat, Oelegem,...). The challenge was to keep the water in the ditch because the highest point is 18.3 m and the lowest 2 m. The ditch was fed with water from the canal to Turnhout which is at the highest point, 18.3 m. To resolve the problem the engineers divided the ditch in 16 segments and each segment was separated by a lock. In total there were 15 locks, numbered from BA1 to BA15. The ditch is 13 to 18 m wide and has a depth of 2 to 2.5 m. It has a scissors-trace and each part has a length of 500 to 800 m.

Each length is defended by a machine-gun bunker in the re-entrant angle, thus two bunkers. There were 24 groups numbered from A1 to A24. The second bunker in a group



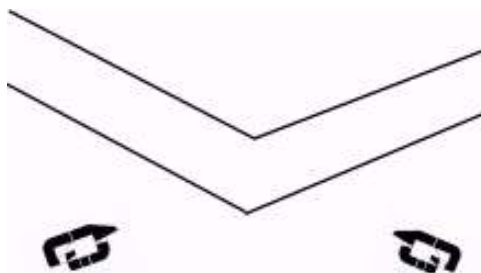
**The machine gun bunker for a Maxim MG 08.**



**Machine gun bunker A21bis.**



**A Chardome mounting inside such a bunker.**



**Each re-entrant angle was defended by a machine gun bunker.**

was numbered with "bis", like A16bis. These flanking bunkers have only one gun room and an entrance. The bunkers were armed with an ex-german machine gun Maxim MG 08. They were placed on a Chardome mounting. With direct fire they could reach 650 m, with indirect fire it was 3000 m. Each bunker has also a tube to throw grenades through.

The defence of the ditch and the locks were integrated. Here they had to face the difference in

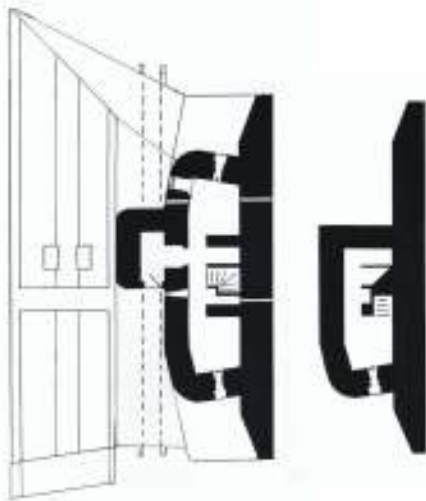


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water level too between the two segments of the ditch. A much larger bunker was built on these locations with the lock handling in the entrance of the bunker. The bunker has two gun rooms, one for each segment of the ditch and sometimes (if the difference of the water level was high enough) there were two floors with a gun room. So, such a bunker could have a maximum of three machine guns. The bunker was equipped with a periscope and had also an emergency exit which was not visible from outside. Regarding the numbers, the locks have a number and also the bunker, that means that such a bunker has two numbers. Ex. A21/BA14. These lock bunkers have also a sister bunker for protecting the dead corners. These are identical to the earlier discussed flanking bunkers and have also the "bis" number. The thickness of the outer walls is 1.30 m.



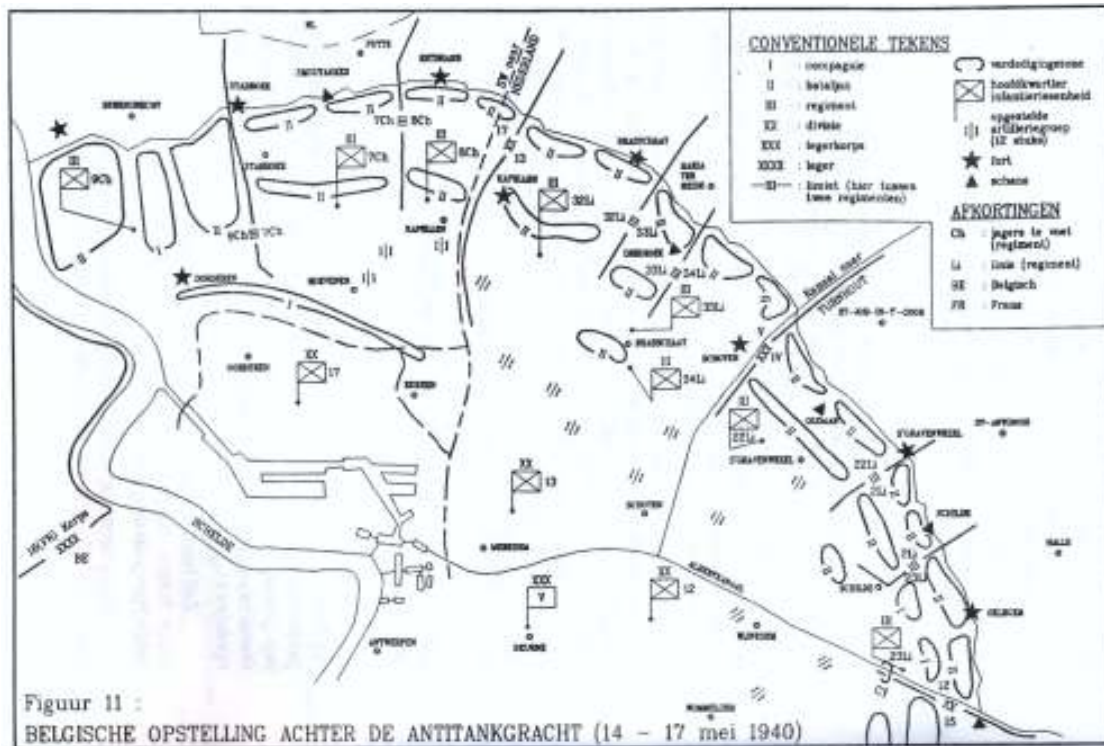
An example of a lock bunker with two stores. This BA14. the drawing on the right is the lower floor with a gun room and the left one is the ground floor with two gun rooms, the lock handle and the room for the periscope.



All the bunkers were camouflaged with a very typical egg-pattern and they had no electricity inside.



Each lock bunker has also a sister bunker for the defence of the dead corners.



The position of the Belgian troops behind the anti-tank ditch. Source : *De antitankgracht te Antwerpen*, J.de Hasque.

On The Belgian side the ditch was defended by the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The 13<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> belonged to the V Army Corps and the 12<sup>th</sup> to the IV Army Corps.

By means of the daily reports of the opposing parties we can reconstruct what happened in that period.

I have the reports of the German 208. and 256. Infantry Division. The 208. ID consisted of infantry regiments 309, 337, 338 and artillery regiment 208. The 256. ID had infantry regiments 456, 476, 481 and artillery regiment 256.

We can compare the reports of Battalion I of the 34<sup>th</sup> Line Regiment, made by the commander, Maj Laenen. The right wing of the battalion was the canal to Turnhout and approximately the Mikse Baan. They faced the 337<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 208. ID.

A very specific report of his action was made by a Sergeant of the 8<sup>th</sup> (?) company of Battalion II of the 34<sup>th</sup> Regiment. His action took place in the wood Inslag to the west of the Mikse Baan. His group faced also units of the 208. ID.

The third report we can compare is that of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Line Regiment, made by its intelligence officer Lt Noë JB. This regiment was located around the Bredabaan and the left wing was approximately near the Ploegsebaan at Brasschaat. They faced the 309<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 208. ID and units of the 256. ID. The 256. ID faced also the 32<sup>nd</sup> Line Regiment, but I don't have records of them. All these Belgian units belonged to the 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.





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The German time was one hour before the Belgian time. I recalculated their time to ours to compare. On the reports are also time stamps, but you have to read it as "approximately". Where I think we have a match, you will notice MATCH and the opposing unit.



The advance of the German infantry divisions.



The region discussed in the war diaries.



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## **I/34 Li opposing the 208. ID.**

The battalion had its positions around the N115 between the Fort of Schoten, the Zwan factory and St-Job-in-'t-Goor. The bridge over the anti-tank ditch was indicated with CH6. We read that there were Cointet elements on the passage.

- 11 May. A bombardment of Heinkel 111 bombers of the region is reported. (MATCH III/33Li)

- On the 13<sup>th</sup> they executed the destructions. That were trees that obstructed the road. They brought a 4.7 cm gun in position on the road, where the Cointets were not closed yet. At 1635 Hr they blew up the church tower of Brecht. We notice that there was a withdrawal of French troops on that day and on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

- At midnight of 14 to 15 May they closed the Cointet barriers and blew up the bridges over the Canal to Turnhout.

- 15 May.

1640 Hr. Reconnaissance troops on bicycles made a first contact with the Germans. There was a short gun fight. One of our men is wounded and taken prisoner. (MATCH 208. ID)

1800 Hr. Reconnaissance troops reported that the Germans were approaching.

2340 Hr. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cie received two 4.7 cm guns.

- 16 May.

0015Hr. Battalion II reported rifle fire at the front of the battalion on the left (III/33 Li)

1100 Hr, 1125Hr, 1145 Hr. Rifle fire and machine guns were reported in front of the front of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cie. Reconnaissance troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cie reported also in contact with the Germans. (MATCH 208.ID)

1700 Hr, 2230 Hr. Heavy fire activity was reported by the second battalion. (MATCH 208.ID)

- 17 May.

0120 Hr. The German artillery was firing at us.

0210 Hr. Our artillery responded. (MATCH 208.ID)

0450 Hr The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion reported heavy activity in the sector of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. (MATCH 208.ID)

0800 Hr. A light German assault along the Canal to Turnhout was broken by machine guns of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Line Regiment.

0925 Hr. German movements reported near the "Mikse Hoeve".

1050 Hr. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cie reported that it was under enemy fire. A part of the Zwan factory was in fire.

1100 Hr. The German brought some guns in position in front of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Cie. All units reported a heavy pressure from the Germans.

1145 Hr. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cie reported the presence of light mortars in front of its line. The mortars were destroyed by requested artillery fire.

1300 - 1530 Hr. The front is quiet.

1645 Hr. Major Laenen received the orders to withdraw. Briefing for the officers. Battalion II and III should leave at 2000 Hr, battalion I at 2300 Hr. The bunker crews should leave one hour later.

1930 Hr. The battalion is bombarded by 105 and 150 mm shells. (MATCH 337/208.ID)

2000 Hr. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Cie reported an assault over the entire length of its front. Bunkers A16 and A16bis were able to hold their position. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cie gave supporting fire in the flank of the Germans. (MATCH 309/208.ID)

Battalions II and III left their position following the orders.

The German bombardment became heavier.

German rifle and machine gun fire is reported on the left flank. The Germans conquered the abandoned positions. (MATCH 309/208.ID)

2300 Hr. Battalion I left their position. The bunkers kept on responding to keep up the appearance that the front is still occupied.

- 18 May.



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0300 Hr. The battalion reached the Albert Canal behind the church of Schoten and went in the direction of the Central Station of Antwerp.

1200 Hr. The battalion reached Haasdonk at the left bank of the Schelde.

## **Sergeant of II/34 Li opposing the 208. ID.**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> the sergeant was called to the company commander for instructions about the beginning of the hostilities. The company prepared to move to its sector. Their barracks were in the Ruiterskamp in the military camp of Brasschaat Polygoon.

The front of the II<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was from the road Antwerp to Breda to the road from Antwerp to the castle De Mik (Mikse Baan) at Maria Ter Heide. The command post of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cie was located in the woods of the castle Den Anker.

- 16 May.

Afternoon. The first Germans were signalled on the other side of the anti-tankditch. We fired at them and they retreated to the castle De Mick and from there they fired at us. More German unit came to reinforce the outposts. It looked like they were preparing a new assault. Our artillery fired upon the German positions.

At night. The sergeant heard from the commander that the battalion was going to retreat. The sergeant had to warn the troops in the bunkers (A15 and A15bis) on the first line. He started his tour with four men. But first he warned the platoon commander of the second line which was 300 m behind the first, about his mission to avoid that they would think they were Germans. After he had passed the instructions to the crews of the bunker they went back with as much equipment as they could. At the moment they took a little break, something made a little noise that alerted the Germans. They started firing in their direction so that they had to take cover for a couple of minutes. Finally they left half their equipment and got back without casualties.

17 May.

0500 Hr. The entire company was present to retreat but for one reason or another it didn't go through, so they went back to their positions.

The Germans tried to pass through our lines, but our men fought persistent back. (MATCH 208. ID)

1500 Hr. The battle reached a climax. Our artillery fired back to avoid a break-through.

1600 Hr. The sergeant was called by the commander because bunker A15bis was abandoned by its crew and he had to find the crew and to bring them back to their post. At the moment he was at the point to leave, he saw the crew coming to him. They got a dressing-down from their commander and the sergeant has to guide them back. Near the Mikse Baan they met the commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cie and he told them to get back. But the sergeant had the order to recover the arms from the bunkers and then the other commander asked him to tell the platoon on the left that they have to withdraw. Under heavy machine-gun fire they reached the bunker. They removed all arms and equipment and the sergeant locked the door and threw away the key somewhat further. At least they got back to their lines and several companies retreated to the castle Den Anker.

## **33 Li opposing the 208. ID.**

- 11 May.

1440 Hr, 1725 Hr. The III<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reported a bombardment of the 1<sup>st</sup> line on bunkers A13 and A13bis. Four wounded men were reported. (MATCH I/34Li)

- 13 May.

French troops were retreating. The Germans reached the Belgian border.

- 14 May. German attacks and French counter-attacks are reported in the villages Putte, Zwartenheuvel, Kruisstraat, Wustwezel and Brecht.



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- 15 May.

1610 Hr. The Germans reached the mine fields. First contact. (MATCH 208.ID)

1700 Hr, 1835 Hr. Patrols in front of our lines (32 Li, 34 Li and 33 Li) had nothing to report.

- 16 May.

1430 Hr. Two Germans were signalled in the trees opposite bunkers A13 and A13bis. They were releasing pigeons. Quartermaster Marcel Hendrickx went to have a look and returned with a German machine gun, a MG34.

1635 Hr. The Germans got reinforcements.

1900 Hr. We received a report that the Germans installed a small calibre gun.

2325 Hr. The III<sup>rd</sup> Battalion report that the German were assaulting. (MATCH 208. ID)

- 17 May.

0000 Hr. Activity over the entire front.

0105 Hr. Artillery bombardment on the village of Brasschaat.

0225 Hr. It became calm on the 1<sup>st</sup> line.

0600 Hr. The Germans retreated to their departure positions.

Evening. Retreat of the battalion behind the Schelde near St Niklaas.

## **208. ID opposing the 33 and 34 Li**

Records are available from 14 May on. The division followed a line from above Eindhoven (Best, Oirschot) over Baarle-Nassau to Hoogstraten and Brecht.

- 15 May.

0400 Hr. Reconnaissance patrols advanced to the canal (not specified which). No enemy signalled, except for a few isolated men.

0900 Hr. Oral order of the corps for the assault on Antwerp. The division had to conquer the positions for the departure on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

No time specified. Patrols reported several contacts with enemy forces. (MATCH 33, I/34 Li)

1550 Hr. Oral order of the division to take their positions for the assault.

1900 Hr 309 and 307IR. Received order for a recce of the anti-tank ditch.

1930 Hr. A company of each regiment moved to the start positions.

- 16 May.

The majority of the troops of the regiments reached Loenhout, Hoogstraten and Baarle-Nassau.

0800 Hr 309 IR. Vanguard and recognition patrols were sent. (MATCH II/34 Li).

0800 Hr 337 IR. Vanguard and recognition patrols were sent. (MATCH I/34 Li).

1230 Hr. A report mentioned that there was a large road block to the east of Maria Ter Heide. No enemy seen.

1600 Hr. Order given to send a strong patrol to the anti-tank ditch to see if the ditch is defended and if the enemy is resisting. They had also to try to cross the ditch.

1700 Hr. The reconnaissance patrol was fired upon by the enemy with machine guns and artillery at Maria Ter Heide. (MATCH I/34 Li)

1900 Hr. Reports by the reconnaissance patrol signalled that the northern side of the anti-tank ditch had a weak defence, but the southern side was heavy defended.

2200 Hr 309 IR. The regiment reported that they tried to approach as close as possible. (MATCH II/33 Li)

2200 Hr 337 IR. The regiment reported that they tried to approach as close as possible. (MATCH I/34 Li)

- 17 May.

0500 Hr. Report about the result of the reconnaissance patrol. Northern side of the ditch, nothing. Southern part : heavy artillery and machine gun fire. A passage could not be possible without a decent preparation and supporting artillery file is. (MATCH I/34, II/34 and 33 Li)

1310 Hr. Oral order of the corps to regiments 309 and 337 to attempt a passage with a strong assault force supported by artillery. They have define the hour.





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1600 Hr. The regiments reported that they would be ready at 2000 Hr (309 IR) and 1900 Hr (337 IR)

1900 Hr, 337IR. Start of the assault with a heavy concentration of artillery fire. Violent defence from the fort of Schoten. The crossing did not succeed. (MATCH I/34 Li)

2000 Hr, 309 IR. Start of the assault at Maria Ter Heide. New concentration of artillery fire. A few men succeeded to get on the bridge of Maria Ter Heide. Then a company on rafts could reach the other bank. Persistent enemy resistance. (MATCH I/34 Li)

2130 Hr, 309 IR. A second company crossed the anti-tank ditch.

2130 Hr, 337 IR. The battalion on the left is stopped by the fort of Schoten, the battalion at the right succeeded to pass near Mik.

2230 Hr, 337 IR. The bridgehead at Maria Ter Heide is enlarged.

2300 Hr, 309 IR. The regiment advanced quickly to Antwerp. Armoured vehicles couldn't follow due to a demolished bridge.

- 18 May.

0030 Hr, 309 IR. A recognition troop found the fort of Merksem abandoned.

0030 Hr, 337 IR. Small units were stopped at the anti-tank ditch by heavy fire from the fort of Schoten.

0500 Hr. The bridge at Maria Ter Heide has been repaired and the vehicle could continue their advance.

0730 Hr. A recognition troop reached the tunnel under the Schelde and somewhat later the cathedral.

0800 Hr. The fort of Schoten surrendered.

## **256. ID opposing the 32 Li**

The Germans penetrated the Netherlands near Gennep, Heijen and Afferden on 10 May. They followed a route via Uden, Veghel, Oirschot, Hilvarenbeek, Baarle-Nassau to Wustwezel and Achtmaal where they arrived on 14 May.

During the night of the 16<sup>th</sup>, they made a reconnaissance of the anti-tank ditch in preparation for the assault and noticed that it was hardly occupied. A description of the Belgian bunkers was passed to the troops.

-17 May.

The division made an assault plan. It had to be a surprise attack on a small front to the west of the fort of Brasschaat. Regiment 481 with the 1/PzJäg and the 1/Pi 256 would make the assault. After a successful assault they would advance towards the fort of Merksem. Regiment 476 would simulate an assault at the same time in its sector. The artillery would engage the enemy artillery. Concentrated fire would be given on the left and right flank of the assault and on the fort of Brasschaat. The division received also two artillery units for the assault at Antwerp : 15 cm Kan Battr 698 and sIGK (mot) 701. An assault with Stuka's was also planned.

1925 Hr. The Stuka assault was cancelled and the assault of the infantry was delayed to 2100 Hr because the artillery was not ready.

2100 Hr, 481 IR. Lt Mund of 1/Pi 256 had swum with his men over the ditch under heavy machine gun fire and created a first bridge head.

2130 Hr, 481 IR. A report mentioned that units crossed the anti-tank ditch at 1 Km to the west of the fort of Brasschaat. The passage was difficult due to the heavy flanking fire of the enemy. Only after support of the artillery the enemy resistance decreased. (*environment of bunkers A11 and A11bis*)

2300 Hr, 476 IR. The simulated assault of the left wing of the division camouflaged the assault of regiment 481 IR.



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2300 Hr 309 IR (208 ID). One battalion succeeded in crossing the bridge at Maria Ter Heide and forward troops reached the village of Brasschaat. (MATCH II/33 Li) The division decided that regiment 476 had to follow regiment 309 over that bridge.

- 18 May.

0000 Hr, 476 IR. The regiment started its advance.

0100, 481 IR. The fort of Brasschaat was taken by surprise by a section.

At dawn. The majority of the regiment crossed the ditch with pneumatic crafts and by gangways.

0445 Hr. Regiments 481, 476 and 309 (208 ID) entered the village of Brasschaat.

0548 Hr, 476 IR. The regiment reported heavy street-fighting. The division wanted to avoid this situation, because it came by the men's nervousness.

0755 Hr, 481 IR. Advanced units together with Art 208 reached the demolished bridges of Antwerp (*which ones?*). The enemy had give up any resistance and retreated over the Schelde. The battle value of the enemy as organised unit was not very high. In the first line it was blamed on bad command. But as isolated units the enemy was not to be under-valued. He defended himself often to last bullet.

## Conclusion

What the Belgian troops considered as an assault on 16 May was for the Germans a reconnaissance. The real German assault took place at the night of 17 to 18 May.

What the Germans didn't know was that the Belgians received the order to withdraw during the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup>. Some Belgian units could resist like I/34 Li, while other already retreated like 33 Li. That's the reason why the Germans (see the records of the 256. ID) reported a weak resistance.

On the other hand, when you read the daily reports of the Germans, our troops showed a persistent resistance!

Notice also that the fort of Schoten only surrendered one day after the retreat of the infantry regiments, namely on the 18<sup>th</sup>.

## Return to the battle field

I will start with the region of I/34 Li. Take the road from Schoten to St Job-in-'t Goor, the N115, also called Brechtse Baan. Stop at the bridge over the anti-tank ditch and walk to the east, to the Antwerpen-Turnhout canal.



**Tapsluis Noord (left) and Tapsluis Zuid (right)**

At the canal you'll see the lock bunker Tapsluis Noord. On the other side of the canal, there's Tapsluis Zuid. Next to the bunkers you'll notice a kind of a mooring mast to fix the cointet elements. The shell damage to Tapsluis Noord is not from 1940, but from 1944.



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Walk back to the bridge and continue on the other side along the Zwan factory.

Almost near the high-way you will encounter bunker A16 and A16bis (this one lies in a garden).

**Bunker A16.**

Drive back to Schoten. Turn at the traffic lights to the right, to Brasschaat. This is the N121, the Elshoutbaan. Continue on this road, under the high-way to a crossroad. Turn to the right, this is the Miksebaan. Along this road you will see a heavy machine gun bunker of the supporting line. You'll cross the anti-tank ditch and then turn to the left. This is the Kerkedreef. Continue until you reach a crossroad with dirt road in the wood. Park the car and continue on the dirt roads on the left. This one leads directly to the anti-tank ditch. You are now in the Inslag domain. At the bridge over the anti-tank ditch you have to go to the left. (Be aware that you may not enter here) Continue till the re-entrant angle. Here you find bunkers A15 and A15bis and also pipe drop Si14. The first bunker directed to the east is A15bis. This is the one that was abandoned by its crew and where the sergeant of the II/34 Li had to bring the men back. A couple of meter further stands bunker A15. Here you see impacts of small shell on the enemy facing wall.



**The flanking wall of A15 show still the impacts of the German shells..**



**A15bis was abandoned by its crew.**

Walk back to the bridge over the anti-tank ditch and continue on the other side. In another re-entrant angle you see bunkers A14 and A14bis. A14bis is open and can be visited inside.



**A14bis.**



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Walk back to the car and continue on the Kerkedreef until you reach the Bredabaan, this is the N1. Turn to the left, to Maria Ter Heide. After a while you cross the anti-tank ditch again where in 1940 the 208.ID passed.



**The crossing of the Bredabaan over the anti-tank ditch in 1940 (source Denkschrift) and the actual view in 2010.**

Just after the bridge you have to turn to the left. This is the Bethaniëlei. Follow this street until it makes a bow to the left. On the right you have a short street to the anti-tank ditch. At the ditch, turn to the left and you will see bunker A13.



**Bunker A13. Here are also shell impacts on the flanking wall.**

This is one of the bunkers where Quartermaster Marcel Hendrickx of the 33 Li saw two Germans releasing pigeons on the other side of the ditch. Notice also the impacts of shells on the concrete.

Continue on the Bethaniëlei to the crossing with the Ploegsebaan. Turn to the right. Have a look at the constructions the Germans made on the bridge over the anti-tank ditch. These are dating from 1943. Just before the ditch you have a street on the left, the Dullingen. Continue on this street. It continues in the Sionkloosterlaan. Before you drive into this street, you can turn to the right, to the anti-tank ditch again. If you follow it to the south you will see that the ditch makes a very weird, short angle here that is defended by bunker A12.



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Go back and continue in the Sionkloosterlaan which leads along the fort of Brasschaat. See that you can follow the anti-tank ditch again to the next re-entrant angle where bunkers A11 and A11bis are. Now you are very close to the domain Uitlegger or Leg Uit. This is the region where Lt Mund with his men of the 256.ID crossed the ditch.

### **Bunker A11bis**

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- "Kriegstagebuch Nr 3. 256 Inf Div. 9/5/1940 - 31/10/1940
- "225 ID. IV Einsatz im Westen" Extract from a not specified German source.

Thanks to Yvonne Mayo for the spell check.

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