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## CDSG Special Tour to Lorraine, France: Maginot Line, Festen, & Westwall Defenses

By Terrance McGovern and Charles Blackwood

Photos by Rebbecca and Rachel McGovern

Over the years CDSG members have talked about which international fortifications are the most famous and the ones they would most like to explore. Often mentioned were the World War II works of the Maginot Line in France and the Westwall (or Siegfried Line) in Germany. Also discussed were the World War I works of the German *Festen* in Lorraine and the French Séré de Rivières forts of the same era. This year (June 18 to June 27, 2010) we translated our interest in a week-long tour of all these fortification systems. The tour was primarily based in Metz, France, the capital of Lorraine, as all these fortification systems were within a reasonable driving distance. Through the combined efforts of several of our European CDSG members our years of talk were turned into a reality.

The largest challenge facing the tour organizers was gaining the approvals to visit the numerous sites which are controlled today by different groups, as well as insuring that these owners would be willing to open up the site and give us a guide tour that fit our schedule. The most important approval would be that of the French Army (in fact we delayed our tour from 2009 to 2010 to gain their approval). With the help of Raymond Decker (now a honorary CDSG member) we were able to receive approval from the French Army in Metz to visit several restricted forts and *ouvrages*, an approval that is very difficult to arrange (as many have tried and been turned down). The sites are patrolled by the military police and they do arrest and fine those who visit without permission. This approval made the tour quite unique and a one-time event. Also key to the tour's success were the services of Michel van Best, the Vermeulen's (Hans, Lia, and Caspar) and

Dieter Wernet who have visited most of these sites and are fluent in several languages allowing us to liaison with the site owners (both in arranging our visit and to translate during our visit). This tour would have never happened without their efforts and we owe them many thanks.

Another challenge was sheer number of fortifications sites to visit along the border region between France and Germany. With thousands of remaining sites to select from (many that saw military action in 1940 and 1944, as well as some during World War I) we focused on trying to visit an example of each type of defense and those sites were we had permission to visit (both for safety and law enforcement reasons). The logistics of the tour were similar to other CDSG Special Tours. Each of the tour's 26 members arranged for their own transportation to the **Novotel Metz Hauconcourt Hotel** (located between Metz and Thionville) on June 18. Breakfast was included as part of the room, while lunches were in the field so members had to purchase their own supplies the night before, and dinners where up to each member (if they had any time for them, as given our full schedule and long days -sunset was not until 9pm). Tour members shared rides in rental cars each morning when we left at 8am for our first objective. Given the era of these fortifications their design called for most of the sites to be underground so we ended up spending a good part of the day inside concrete fighting blocks or long galleries where good flashlights, warm coats, sturdy boots, and a desire for small spaces were a plus. After spending seven nights at the Novotel we relocated our base of operations to the **Mercure Hotel Saarbrücken Sued** in nearby Germany for two nights. On June 27 the tour ended and our members made their way home independently.

Given that during our eight days of touring we visited exteriors and interiors of over a hundred and fifty defensive works this report will focus on the key sites visited. The basic outline of the tour was three days to the Maginot Line, one day in the forts around Nancy, two and a half days in the German *Festen* to the



Douaumont Ossuary

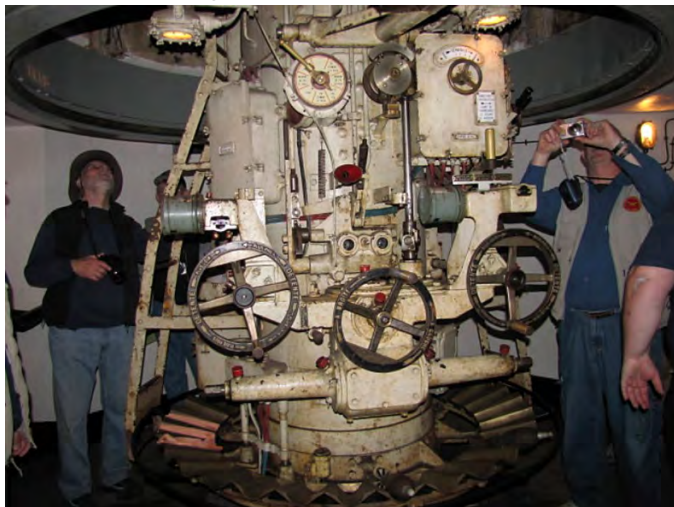
west of Metz and Thionville, and one and a half days amongst Westwall works in Germany, mostly in the area of Saarbrücken.

Most of the tour members visited the battlefield of Verdun on the way to Metz from the Paris airport. Though **Verdun** was not on the tour itinerary the attraction of its famous fortifications and infamous events that took place there during World War I proved to be a strong draw for members. Part of the battlefield is a memorial (similar to American Civil War battlefield parks) where the primary focus is the **Douaumont Ossuary** which contain the bones of 130,000 French and German soldiers. Well-known fortifications, such as **Fort Douaumont**, **Fort de Vaux**, **Fort de Souville**, **Ouvrage Froideterre**, were visited by members as were some of the individual works such as the **Pamart** casemates, Bussière system eclipse gun turret for two 155 mm canons, and other strongpoint's.



Pamart casemate - Fort de Souville

The first day of our tour started the following morning heading northeast of Thionville to make a small loop through the Maginot works of Site fortifié de Cattenom: **Gros Ouvrage (GO) du Galgenberg** (both interior/exterior portions of this ouvrage – arranged by Philippe Schmaltz), **GO Kobenbusch** (drive-by visit to the material entrance as the underground works are flooded), **Abri du Bois de Cattenom** (well kept, busy group), **Blockhouse (bois de Cattenom)** (half full of water). After a field lunch we visited **Petite Ouvrage (PO) du Bois Karre** (beautifully kept and



75mm Turret - GO Galgenberg

presented, MG eclipse turret in full working order – arranged by Philippe Schmaltz and Jean-Louis Goby), **PO Immerhof** (all in fine form and working order, our guides in period uniform. Bloc III eclipse 81mm mortar turret – arranged through its Association) and **Casemate Double du Grand Lot** (operated by Mr. Boudrenghien and his son who had filled it with all the period equipment, changed the guns over for us and fitted a cloche with its MG, two vision blocks and periscope), and **GO Rochonvillers** (exterior visit only of several blocks).



135mm Turret - GO Rochonvillers



47mm AVT Gun - Casemate Grand Lot

The following Maginot day took us on a longer loop east of Thionville, visiting **Artillery Casemate Stocken** for three 75mm M1897 guns (steep steps down, three staggered artillery casemates), **PO Bambesch** (exterior only - one block well shot up by German 88's), **Camp Ferrange**, peacetime barracks at **Zimming**, a surviving **65mm M1902/1909** gun in a circular anti-tank pit at Brecklange, an outside look at **Abri Colming**. After a field lunch we visited the interior of **GO Michelsberg** (drop-down mess tables in the tunnels – arranged by Michel Braun), **GO du Hackenberg** (visited only the west ouvrage and a great underground train ride – arranged by Robert Varoqui), and ending at **Abri Bichel Sud** where a young group of enthusiasts had done a sterling job restoring the bunker and its warm welcoming kitchen (arranged by Nicolas Hentzen) and they fed us a fine barbecue (chicken, bacon, burgers, beer, and great pastries).





60cm Electric Train &amp; Main Gallery - GO Michelsberg



GFM Cloche - PO Bambesch



Muntions Enternce - GO Hackenberg

Our last Maginot day saw us heading on a long drive to the northwest beyond the Fortress of Montmédy (very nice on its hill in the sunshine) to **PO de la Ferté** where the crew of 107 men perished of asphyxiation following a fire during the German attack in May 1940 – arranged by Mr. Totot). We then travelled to **GO de Fermont** (great museum, a work in progress, with cut-away turrets, Bloc 4 for three 75mm cannons - still in place, a fine exhibition – arranged by Hans) and a field lunch. Last visit of the day was to **PO Bois du Four** (beautifully finished and presented, especially the mortars). Several tour members drove on to visit the site of German long-range 38cm battery at **Duzey**. While the World War I guns are long gone, the concrete emplacements and supporting underground works remain. The emplacements themselves are very similar to coast artillery sites as the German used surplus naval artillery when they built this site to bombard Verdun.

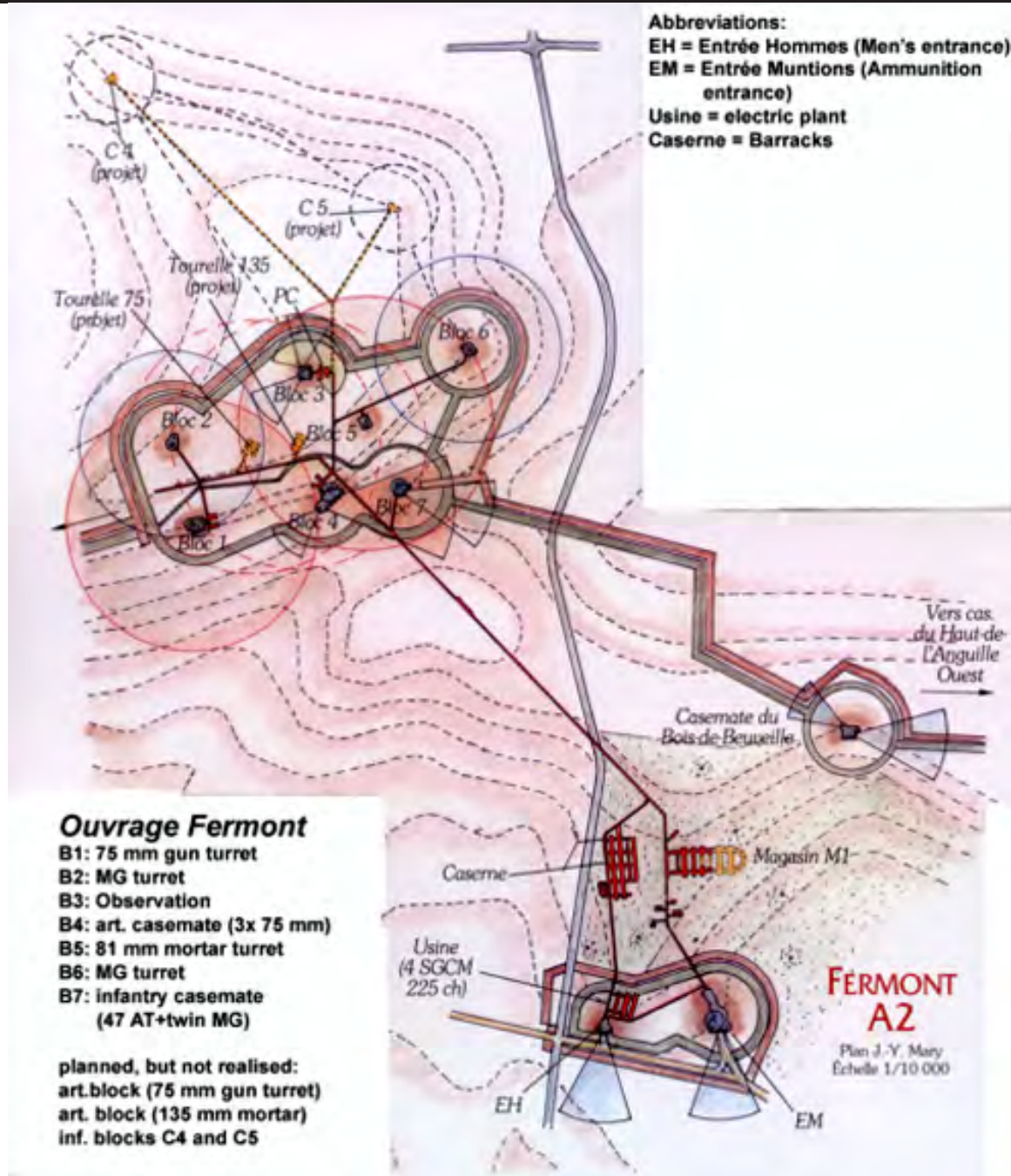


Block 4 - GO Fermont



Block 4 75mm Gun - GO Fermont









81mm Mortars - PO Bois du Four

Our first day to the German *Festen* works of the early 1900s was around Metz as Lorraine was annexed by Germany after the Franco-Prussian War 1870-71 and they built an outer defense of forts around Metz, while the French built opposing works along the Verdun to Toul axis. Metz was taken aback by France in 1919 and then Germany reclaimed it in 1940, but the city reverted to France in 1945 after a very hard fought defense by the Germans against the American Army in 1944. The inner ring was French (1867-70) which was augmented by the Germans after 1870; the outer ring was German, from 1895 and this was the ring we visited starting with **Feste Wagner** (1904-1910), south of Metz (forts and works have both French and German names – we stuck to the German names).



French Barbeque - Feste Wagner



Armoured Battery - Feste Wagner

We were greeted and guided by Raymond Decker and his colleagues of the ADFM (L'Association pour la Découverte de la Fortification Messine) who took us to: the site for two rail-mobile 15cm cannons, a battery for four 15cm howitzers, a battery for four 10cm cannon, Ouvrage d'Avigy and Ouvrage de la Seille. There are numerous rotating turrets with guns in and more are being added as they are removed from other derelict forts. In d'Avigy there is a ferocious internal *fosse à pieux*, a false plank floor over a pit full of vicious spikes, echoing those surrounding the fort – you need to walk very carefully off *piste*. The ADFM provided us an excellent barbecue lunch (sausages, cheese, and wine). **Feste Luitpold** (1907-1914) was visited next, derelict but with a fine set of fading murals in the caserne. We also ran into the French Military police but luckily we had Raymond Decker with us to prove that we had permission to visit this *feste*.

The next day we traveled south to the French defenses of Nancy & Toul, where we visited **Batterie de l'Éperon** (1879-1883, modernized 1901-1907) linked to **Fort Frouard** (1879-83, modernized 1894, 1901-1907). The Batterie is well maintained by the Association de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine Fortifié de Frouard (ASPFF – our contact was Alain Mariotte) who made us very welcome, and which boasts a huge twin 155mm eclipsing Galopin turret, whose monstrous mechanism is under cathedral-like arches, and two 155mm Mougin casemates. Fort Frouard is derelict but a corner has been cleared to see machine gun turrets, an eclipsing searchlight turret, and another monstrous Mougin turret for two 155mm *longs de Bange*, painted as a ladybird. After a field lunch, we drove northwest from Nancy and to the north-east part of the Séré de Rivières ring around Toul where the forêt de Villey Saint-Etienne contains a resistance point with a whole



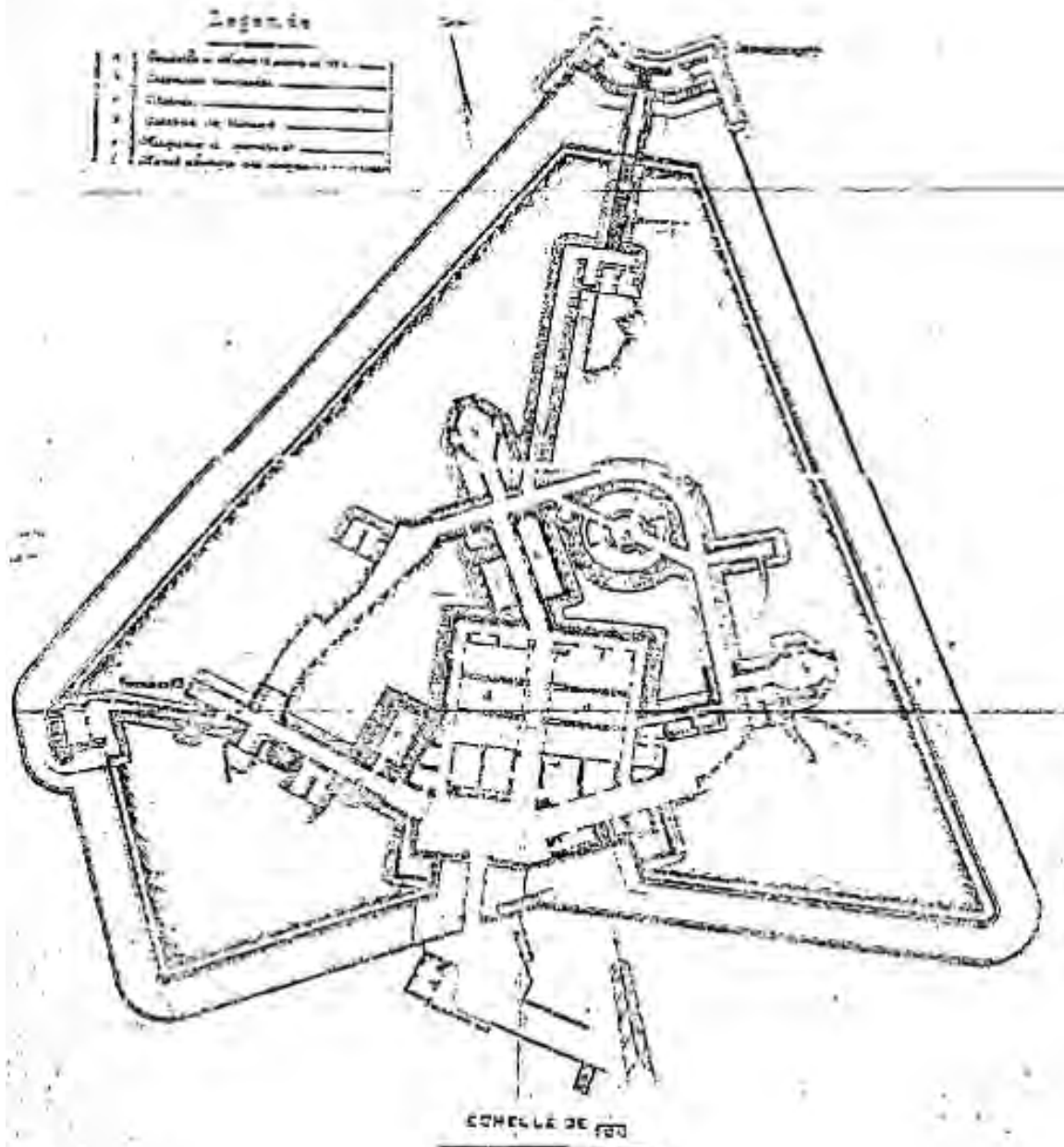
155mm Galopin turret - Batterie de l'Éperon



155mm Mougin turret - Fort Frouard

## BATTERIE DE L'ÉPERON

PLAN DES DESSOUS



complex of works in the woods, of which we saw four: **Ouvrage Est du Vieux Canton** (1887-1913) modified 1909 to take two 75mm cannon in an eclipsing turret (still there, the turret not the guns). **Fort de Vieux Canton** (1906-09) with two 75mm turrets, special concrete, counterscarp gallery, **Ouvrage du Bas-du-Chêne** (1910), two rooms, infantry parapet over, and **Abri de combat No 2** (1899), four chambers. The Maire de Villey Saint-Etienne has taken the lead in stabilizing these defenses and making them accessible (our visit was arranged by Mr. Burkhard).

We returned to the Metz *Festen* works the following day, this time to the outer ring west, where we met Raymond Decker who led us on a tour of **Feste Kaiserin** (1899-1905) which is overgrown and derelict. These work provided us with a challenging tunnel passage from the infantry caserne to the armored battery caserne (about 300 meters) as the cabling was stripped out of the tunnel (2.5 meters high by 1.5 meters wide) and the trench covering slabs were all over the place. The site is used as a military training ground, but is also a rich source of spare guns





Sallyport - Fort Frouard



Main Gate - Feste Kronprinz



Central Casemate - Fort de Vieux Canton

and turrets to the ADFM at Feste Wagner. **Feste Kronprinz** (1899-1905) was next after a field lunch and here the emphasis was on the American attack of 1944 where we were guided to many emotional sites by Elisabeth Gozzo who works on recovering and identifying bodies of missing soldiers and meeting with their relatives. She showed us several locations where remains were found in the 1980s and 1990s. A very moving experience. The *Festen* is spread over a wide area and is made up of four armored batteries, four protected casernes, a large infantry fort and many infantry works, all surrounded by fields of barbed wire and dry ditches, all connected by personnel tunnels. At this point *Festen*

fatigue set in and only some hardier members went on to **Feste Prinz Friedrich-Karl** (1872-1892) where they visited a small part of the defensive complex on top of Mont Saint-Quentin. We visited several armored batteries associated with Fort Plappeville and a 21cm mortar turret site in the center of Fort Manstein.

The next day was our last *Festen* day, firstly **Feste Ober-Gentringen** (Fr. Guentrange) northeast of Thionville where we walked through many underground tunnels and saw those wonderful moss-covered concrete trenches. The work is in excellent order



Main Barracks - Feste Ober-Gentringen



Armoured Battery - Feste Kronprinz



Main Powerplant - Feste Ober-Gentringen









Concrete trenchworks - Feste Ober-Gentrungen



105mm turret - Feste Ober-Gentrungen

and numerous casemates now provide a wide range of exhibitions under the care of our hosts, the Amicale du Groupe Fortifié de Guentrange (AGFG). We ate our field lunch next to another common *Festen* feature - the *schnecken* (snails), small sentry posts which come in metal and concrete. We drove on to **Feste d'Illange** which is now a regional park and only above ground *Festen* components are accessible, such as the protected caserne and armored batteries. The next stop was **Feste Koenigsmacker** another of the eleven German forts of the *Mosellstellung* built round Metz and Thionville to hold any French advance into Germany while the Germans advanced into France/Belgium. Here too what we saw was above ground, mostly overgrown, with a fine double counterscarp gallery covering the ditch and in front of the barracks a new memorial to American soldiers who lost their lives taking the *Feste* in 1944.

We then left France and headed for Germany, finding our way to Westwall **B-werk Besseringen** (1938-39), a three-level *Panzerwerk* at Merzig, just over the border. This is very well maintained and we were guided above and below ground, being comprehensively informed. On top are a machine gun turret, an observation turret, automatic mortar embrasure, and a close-in defense flame thrower fitting.



Sechsschartentürme 20P7 - B-werk Besseringen

Our day ended with a trip down the autobahn to our hotel at Saarbrücken (which was built on the site of a former concentration camp).

Our final day focused on the Westwall again with a long drive to the **Westwall Museum** in the unfinished tunnel system of **Festungswerk Gerstfeldhohe** at Niedersimmten; here was a fine range of bunker models, some vehicles and guns (a Panther turret outside), and a range of exhibition rooms. Coffee was served by our host Deitz Schortz and the closed bookshop assaulted by our tour members. We traveled to **Halberg Stellung** by Saarbrücken where we visited a set of four casemates, one of which had been restored (Bunker 316) and very well presented as it was stuffed with period equipment and weapons by an enthusiastic and dedicated group – led by Jorg Funrmeister and Thomas & Frank Holzer. After our field lunch we drove to **St Arnual** to view rows of **Hoeckerhindernisse** “Dragons teeth” that are buried deep in the bushes and it is impossible to get an idea of them en masse.



Casemate MG - Halberg Stellung

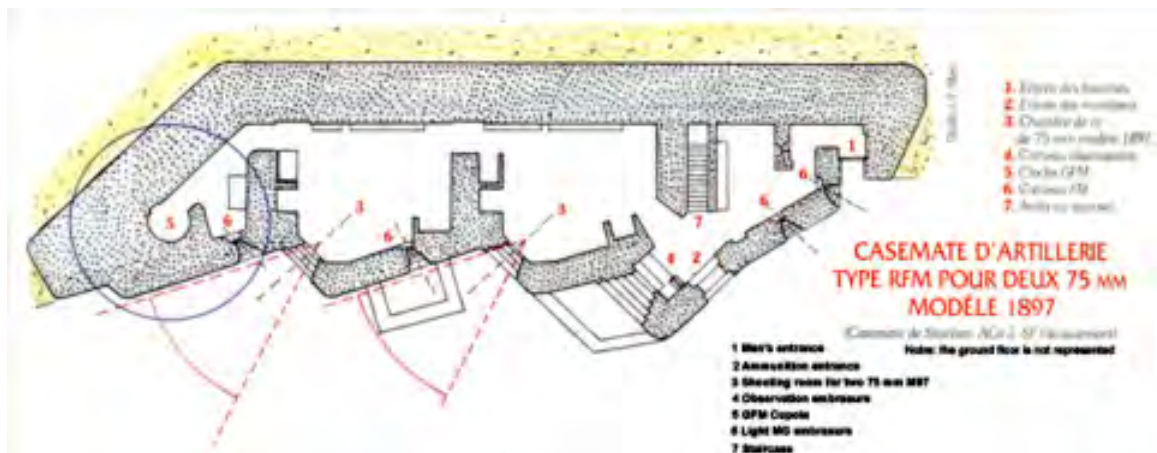
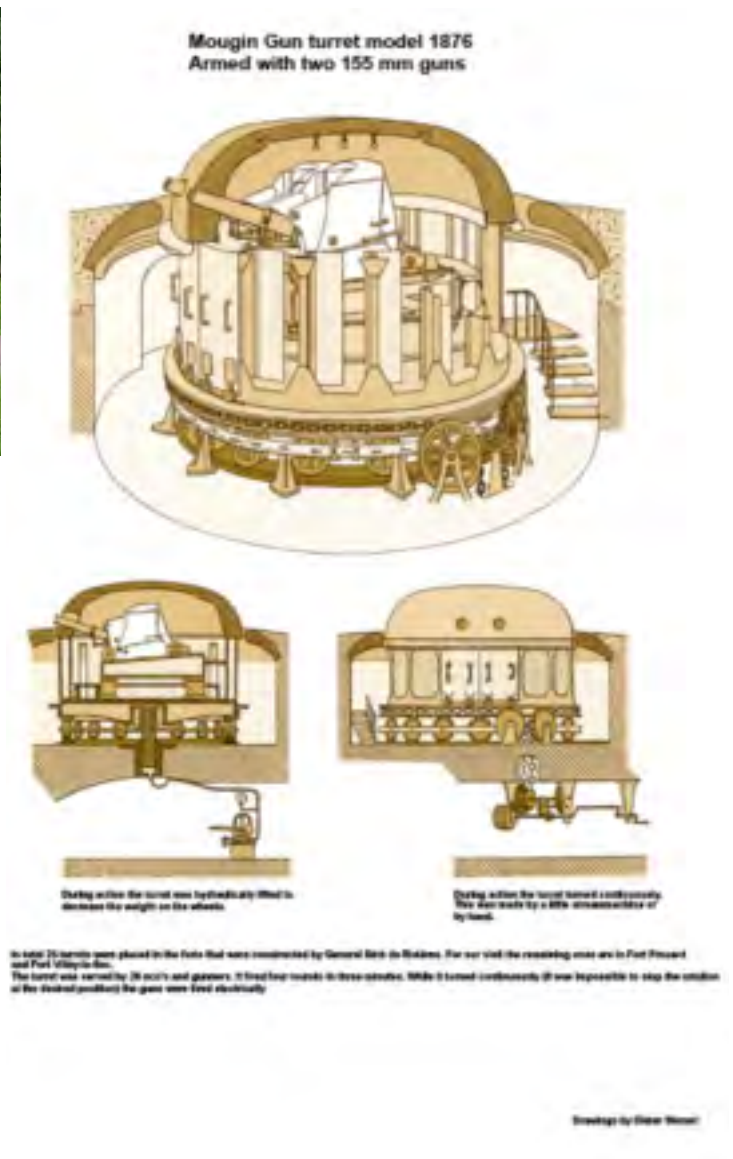




Fixed Panther turret - Festungswerk Gersfeldhöhe

Our last site of the day was a collection of 30 Westwall bunkers on **Spichern Hohe** (which also was the site of important battle during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871). Several rare types of bunkers were noted as the last of energy was consumed. Our farewell dinner followed at famous Restaurant Woll on the Spichern Heights thus ended the official Tour.

The next day tour members began their travels homeward, which some visiting more fortification or battlefield sites, such as Verdun, Sedan, Bastogne, and other sites. Attending the tour was Charles Blackwood, Chris Bristow, Charles & Mary Bogart, Al Chiswell, Roger Davis, Mike & Pam Fiorini, Alan Hardey, Tom Kavanagh, Danny Malone, Terry McGovern, Svein Olsen, Gary Paliwoda, Karl Schmidt, Michel van Best, Casper Vermeulen, Hans & Lia Vermeulen, Dieter Wernet, Glen Wiliford, Larry Wing, and our youngest tour members - Alana, Rachel, and Rebecca McGovern. Our grateful thanks to the numerous small dedicated Groups who opened up their treasured sites for us, gave us their time and showed them off so well.





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## The CDSG Fund

The CDSG Fund supports the efforts of the Coast Defense Study Group, Inc., by raising funds to support preservation and interpretation efforts concerning seacoast defenses around the United States. The CDSG Fund is seeking donations for preservation projects around the United States consistent with the goals of the CDSG. Donations are tax-deductible for federal tax purposes, and 100% of your gift will go toward the project selected. The CDSG Fund will acknowledge your gift and keep you informed on the status of its projects. Make checks or money orders payable in US funds to The CDSG Fund.

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Send all donations and proposals to:

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C/O Alan Hardey, Trustee  
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To order your T-shirt or patch, please complete the order form below and send it along with your check (made out to CDSG, Inc.) to Terry McGovern at 1700 Oak Lane, McLean, VA 22101-3326 USA (e-mail: tcmcgovern@att.net).

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Total Number: \_\_\_ times \$\_\_\_ = Total \$\_\_\_  
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