

# HISTORY OF THE FORT

## SUMMARY

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### 1. HISTORY

In 1886, General Brialmont was commissioned by the Belgian government to design two fortified belts around Liège and Namur.

Place de Liège was made up of 12 forts: 6 large and 6 small including Lantin was part. The 12 forts were built in 4 years which is a feat at the end of the 19th century

Fort Lantin is 4 to 5 km away from its neighbors, Loncin and Liers, and is about 8 km from Liège, maximum range of guns of the time.

It has the shape of an equilateral triangle whose 3 ditches 200 meters long are the sides.

Outside these ditches are glacis, gently sloping earth surfaces that were originally devoid of vegetation.

The base of the triangle corresponds to the ditch of the gorge which gives access to the service premises (wash house, laundry room, toilets, guardhouse) located in the counterscarp (outer part) and the central massif, the most important part of the fort. The other two ditches lead to the head box, top of the triangle and the most advanced part of the fort. The headbox housed 5.7 cm cannons placed on a carriage to defend the lateral ditches. It is connected to the central massif by an underground.

The central massif is a concrete construction in which the garrison is housed in time of war and where is the main armament of the fort intended to defend the city of Liege and the surroundings of the fort. The troop chambers are located along the moat ditch and windows are open on the moat. In wartime the windows were protected by steel beams and sandbags. Inside the massif, lie the two powder magazines buried under a thick layer of concrete and earth.

The assembly hall is the largest room in the fort; it was there that the commander of the fort gave his orders to the troop. This room gives access to the vital parts of the fortress: the engine room where were the steam engine and the dynamo that provided the lighting of the fort, the shooting room, the corridors to access the different large cupolas and underground.

The armament of the fort consists of a set of cupolas whose armored domes emerged from the concrete of the central massif. It is first of 3 small eclipse domes that housed a 5.7 cm gun to ensure the close defense of the fort. Then come the large cupolas: 2 cupolas with a 12 cm gun, a cupola with 2 x 15 cm guns and the 21 cm howitzer. The highest part of the central massif is formed by the dome-lighthouse

which served as an observation post at the fort and allowed him to possibly communicate with the strong neighbors by optical signals. This part of the central massif also has the shape of a triangle.

At the convenience level, there was a well 40 meters deep for the supply of drinking water; the rooms were heated by means of coal stoves. On the other hand, there were no toilets in the central massif nor any sanitary facilities that were located in the counterscarp premises. The absence of a tunnel between these premises and the central massif will pose important problems to the garrison during the bombing of the fort.

Finally, it should be noted that the concrete of the 14 forts was unarmed and its quality was poor. This state explains the importance of the destruction caused by the German bombing on the forts. Between the end of the works and 1914, the fort was occupied by soldiers who, during their military service, were part of the fortress artillery and practiced the use of the cupolas.

In order not to suffer the inconvenience of the moisture present in the fort, wooden buildings had been built outside the fort for the garrison's quarters.

## 2. From 1914 to 1983

On August 4, 1914, the German army crossed the Belgian border at Henri-Chapelle with the firm intention of attacking the fortified place of Liège.

The forts of the right bank resist a few days then go to allow the German army to occupy all this space and particularly the city of Liege. It was possible for them to attack the forts on the left bank from the inside of the square and thus to take them backwards. The fort was attacked from 10 August by the German artillery. The bombardments lasted until August 15th, rendering several cupolas out of service and causing major damage in the concrete of the central massif.

The troop was on the verge of asphyxiation; In agreement with the other officers and the doctor, the commander Fabry decided to go at noon. Fort Loncin will explode on the same day at 5:30 pm

The fort was then occupied until the end of the conflict by the German army. It has repaired the extensive damage caused by the bombings. Some modifications have been made in particular to the "entrance gate" at the entrance to the central massif and in the left part of the latter where a ventilation system and toilets have been put in place.

It is very likely the German army that dismantled the armament of the fort. The central massif was thus deprived of its cupolas of which there remained only wells open to the outside.

In the period between the two wars, the fort was occupied by the Belgian army which had made a deposit of ammunition. In 1940, it was deserted and remained in the state it was in 1918, unlike other forts of the time that were rearmed (eg: Barchon).

The fort thus constitutes a witness of the military archeology of the 19th century preserved in its entirety.

Until 1975, he remained abandoned to nature.

On this date, a group of Lantinois was interested in this military site decommissioned since the 50s to bring it back to life. The vegetation had invaded the place and rubble encumbered all the wells of the cupolas.

Several months were needed to make the site accessible to the public.

In 1980, the United States. "Friends of Fort Lantin" is formed.

Volunteers then decided to hold an annual party on the weekend following August 15 (date of the surrender of the fort in 1914). The first visits to the fort began at this time.

In 1983, the United States. becomes owner of the fort.

### 3. RESTORATION

Owned, the association was able to achieve, over time, the objectives it had set. Work has been done inside the Massif Central: installation of a new permanent electrical installation, layout of the toilets, cleaning of the various premises and drainage network, painting of the walls and ceilings of the rooms and lower corridors as well as the setting up of the first dome domes.

In 1988, the wheel bridge of Fort Boncelles was reinstated in the entrance gate of the fort after emptying the deep hole of 4 meters that had been backfilled.

The crane weighs 4.5 tons; it was maneuvered by 3 men who dragged it on 2 rails thus allowing to cover the hole for the passage of the men and the vehicles or on the contrary to leave it open in order to prevent the entry of the enemy. Currently, an electric motor and a mechanical system allow the displacement of the bridge.

In 1989, more work was undertaken by the members of the association. It was a question of dismantling the dome-lighthouse still in place at the fort of Emines (fortified position of Namur). Thanks to the kindness of the owner of the site (Mr. Hublet), we have recovered the entire dome. This is a unique copy dating from 1888; only the armored part of the dome is missing. The lifting and rotation systems are original. However, a new piston had to be machined at the arsenal of Rocourt because the original was in very bad condition and would no longer operate the lifting system.

In 1990, we also recovered a steam boiler of the same model as the one in the fort. It came from a former textile factory in Eupen. This boiler is currently visible in the engine room. The boiler steam operated a steam engine. So far, unfortunately, we have not had the opportunity to retrieve one of the same model as the one at the fort. We would be happy to be informed of the presence of such a machine either in Belgium or elsewhere. In the course of the same year, two cupola domes were put back in place; they cover the wells of the dome of 120 right and that of the howitzer of 210.

Finally, a last recovery of fortification material took place in 1995, at the military camp of Brasschaat. An exercise cupola equipped at the time with 2 guns of 120 was in the shooting range of the camp. It was unfortunately devoid of its armor but the raceway and chassis that supported the guns were still in place as well as the voussoirs (protective parts of the dome). Several weekends were necessary to overcome the dismantling. Transportation to Lantin was no easy task as the whole

weighed more than 25 tons. The whole was put back in place in the well of the dome of 120 left, we added the room of the dome and its dome which were realized by the firm

Currently, the central massif of the fort is in the state in which it was originally except that the domes are not battleships and the guns are lacking. However, by the work we have done, it is the only central massif of a fort of 1914 that can be observed today in its entirety

#### 4. THE SELF-GUIDING CIRCUIT

In 1995, the Provincial Company of Industrialization (currently of Investment) proposed to the association to invest in the tourism by carrying out important works. It was possible to obtain subsidies from the ERDF (Konver program 94-97) and from the Walloon Region (Commissariat Général au Tourisme). The Board of Directors responded favorably to this proposal and compiled a file detailing the different works. The investment was of the order of 20 million francs or about 500,000 Euros.

In 1997, we received the approval of the Walloon Region and calls for tender were launched. After some administrative problems, the first works were started in 1999, thanks to a loan of 4 million francs granted by the municipality of Juprelle. (The association had to invest 20% of the cost of the works to benefit from the first tranches of the subsidy).

The chronological order of the work was as follows:

- the soundproofing of the magazines;
  - the installation of central heating in the premises of the ground floor;
  - the realization of toilets;
  - the installation of a dome on the well of the cupola of the 15 cm guns and the installation of the track recovered at Brasschaat, as well as the chamber of the dome of 12 cm right;
  - the demolition of the cementing laid on the concrete of the central massif;
  - the laying of a new layer of concrete in the same place;
- the realization of the audio-guiding circuit.

We had problems with the safety of visitors and the property invested.

New work needed to be done; they focused on emergency lighting, fire and intrusion detection, ironwork and carpentry.

They involved the drafting of a new file and a new application for subsidies to the Walloon Region.

This additional work is causing the postponement of the opening of the site to the public.

Objective of setting up a self-guiding circuit

It joins the one formulated in the statutes of the association to know how to enhance the site by reliving particular moments of the past. The realization of the show-trail is a culmination. The French firm Sycomore, specialized in museum scenography, was selected to implement it.

Along the way, the visitor will discover the conditions of life of the troop during the 1914 conflict and more particularly during the bombing. Each person receives an audio guide that allows them to follow the course in the language of their choice (French, Dutch, English or German). The comments, the dialogues between the

soldiers, the sound and light effects are ordered either automatically or by an encrypted code composed on the keyboard of the audio-guide.

The route is made up of 11 commentary zones distributed inside and outside the central massif; its duration is approximately 1 hour 10. The other important objective is that these developments constitute a new pole of tourist attraction in Liege Hesbaye.

#### AND THE FUTURE?

At first, the site of Fort Lantin is part of the course entitled "The paths of Remembrance" which offers to visit the various forts that surround the city of Liège.

This circuit was launched at the initiative of the Federation of Tourism of the Province of Liège, and particularly by the former president, Mr. O. Hemel.

All forts of 14 and 40 that can be visited during the year are included in this circuit.

We will also try to complete some equipment, especially in the engine room and the dome of 12. To this end, we are looking for a steam engine similar to that which was in the fort.

In the future, we plan to build a small museum of the steam engine and an

#### 5. SUMMARY

The fort of Lantin constitutes a memory, a witness of an important moment of the past of Liège: the battle of 1914. The resistance of the forts, in front of an army incomparably stronger in men and in armament, was most heroic.

Remained in the original state since this shock, the fort is regularly visited by fans of fortifications.

To revive this momentous moment of the past so as to interest a wider public, is a goal that has been set by 1..a.s.b.l. "Friends of Fort Lantin". The association has acquired, preserved, maintained and improved this historic site for more than 20 years.

The show route set up is the realization of these objectives. It immerses the viewer in a re-enactment not only faithful but also very alive to what happened in the fort in 1914 highlighting both the military and social context in which these events were inscribed.

It is of course the result of an important work in team: gathering of lived stories, collection of historical data, realization of videos starting from archives ... with the concern to reproduce, most faithfully, the conditions of the 'time.

The implementation of this show-tour was carried out thanks to the interventions of the Feder, the Walloon Region, the organizations of the province of Liège (Tourism Federation, S.P.I. +, Cultural Affairs) and the municipality of Juprelle.

Beyond the obvious interest of creating a new center of tourist animation in Hesbaye Liégeoise, is also the possibility of constituting a starting point for the accumulation of testimonials, gathering data on this site and its environment close.