

= Ouvrage La Ferté =

Ouvrage La Ferté , also known as Ouvrage Villy @-@ La Ferté , is a petit ouvrage of the Maginot Line , located in the Fortified Sector of Montmédy , facing Belgium . The ouvrage lies between the towns of Villy and La Ferté @-@ sur @-@ Chiers . It possesses two combat blocks linked by an underground gallery . The westernmost position in its sector , it was a comparatively weakly armed fortification in an exposed position that left it vulnerable to isolation and attack . After a sustained attack during the Battle of France the position was overwhelmed by German forces and was destroyed with its entire garrison killed . The fighting at La Ferté was the heaviest of any position in the Maginot Line . It is preserved as a war memorial .

= = Design and construction = =

La Ferté is one of four positions in the so @-@ called Tête du Pont de Montmédy (" Montmédy Bridgehead ") , a salient in the French defensive lines along the Belgian border . The isolated area was one of the " New Fronts " to the west of the main Maginot Line , created to defend against the increased threat of a German advance through Belgium . The New Front positions suffered from restricted funding , as well as discontinuity in the fortification lines . Large distances between fortifications compared to earlier portions of the Line made mutual support between ouvrages difficult .

The site was approved in 1934 , under the supervision of CORF (Commission d 'Organisation des Régions Fortifiées) , the Maginot Line 's design and construction agency . Work by the contractor Chanel of Antibes began in 1935 at a cost of 14 @.@ 5 million francs . A second phase was planned to add an artillery block . This was scaled back to a pair of separate artillery casemates . A separate entrance block was proposed in April 1940 , linking to the casemates . As the initial confrontation with Germany was already underway , it was too late to be built , with a projected construction time of 18 months .

Compared to earlier Maginot positions , the La Ferté site suffered from a number of design and construction deficiencies . The site contours around Block 2 required a great deal of rubble fill to cover the sides of the block . This rubble had not yet stabilized by the spring of 1940 and could be dislodged by artillery fire . Block 2 suffered from restricted fields of fire to the west and southwest , which were covered only by an automatic rifle cloche . The nearby road ran in a cutting that could not be swept by direct fire . Since La Ferté lacked mortars , the road was dead ground .

The separate artillery casemates were not habitable for any extended period and lacked close @-@ in defenses . With unusually large gun embrasures measuring 1 @.@ 3 meters (4 @.@ 3 ft) by 1 @.@ 7 meters (5 @.@ 6 ft) , they afforded little protection to their crews against accurate fire , while coverage from the main ouvrage was poor .

= = Description = =

La Ferté is a petit ouvrage . It is located immediately to the west of the Chiers river , with two semi @-@ buried reinforced concrete combat blocks containing the position 's armament and observation posts , linked by a deep underground gallery .

Block 1 : infantry / entry block with one automatic rifle cloche (GFM @-@ B) , one observation cloche (VDP) , two mixed @-@ arms cloches (AM) , one twin machine gun embrasure and one machine gun / 47mm anti @-@ tank gun (JM / AC47) embrasure .

Block 2 : infantry block with one retractable mixed @-@ arms turret , one AM cloche , one GFM @-@ B cloche and one GFM @-@ B observation cloche . Block 2 was the principal focus of the German assault .

A separate entry block was planned , adjacent to the Villy Est casemate . The underground gallery system at La Ferté is simple , limited to a gallery linking the two blocks , which were initially designed to function as separate units with separate generating plants and ventilation facilities in each block . The 275 @-@ meter (902 ft) gallery contained some shared facilities , such as a

kitchen , a laundry and an infirmary , at an average depth of 24 meters (79 ft) below the surface . The gallery 's small size made it most useful as a link , rather than as the garrison , magazine , command post and long @-@ term shelter afforded by the gallery systems of most Maginot ouvrages . Unlike most ouvrages , La Ferté 's living spaces were near the surface in the two combat blocks . A more typical Maginot position would have such spaces under 30 meters (98 ft) of earth or rock cover . Unlike many Maginot positions , the main drain at La Ferté was not configured as an emergency exit . The mixed @-@ arms turret used on Block 2 was known to be mechanically trouble @-@ prone , and La Ferté 's turret particularly so .

== Casemates ==

A number of small blockhouses are associated with La Ferté , as well as unconnected casemates :

Casemate de Margut : Double block with one JM / AC47 embrasure , one JM embrasure , two AM cloches and one GFM @-@ B cloche , about 2 kilometres (1 @.@ 2 mi) to the east @-@ southeast on the far side of the Chiers .

Casemate de Villy Ouest : Artillery block with one 75mm gun .

Casemate de Villy Est : Artillery block with one 75mm gun .

The Villy gun casemates are close to Block 2 , directly adjacent to the 1940 road . They replaced the planned 75mm gun turret block . The casemates are not connected to each other or to the main ouvrage , a weakness that influenced the 1940 combat action .

== Villy ==

The village of Villy lies about one kilometer to the northwest of ouvrage La Ferté . Villy itself was fortified with more than a dozen blockhouses , along with networks of barbed wire and tank obstacles . The blockhouses were primarily prepared , reinforced firing positions and did not necessarily possess fixed armament .

== Manning ==

The 1940 manning of the ouvrage under the command of Lieutenant Bourguignon comprised 97 men and 3 officers of the 155th Fortress Infantry Regiment (155th RIF) and the 169th Position Artillery Regiment (169th RAP) . The units were under the umbrella of the Second Army , Army Group 1 . The Casernement de Montmédy provided peacetime above @-@ ground barracks and support services to La Ferté and other fortifications in the area .

Lieutenant Bourguignon had exchanged commands with Lieutenant Guiard on 20 March 1940 , Guiard taking Bourguignon 's former position at the casemate of Thonne @-@ le @-@ Thil . Bourguignon was assisted by Sub @-@ Lieutenant Thouémont , who commanded Block 2 . Thouémont , who had been previously posted to a machine gun battalion in the 149th and 132nd RIF , lacked specific training on Maginot systems . He replaced Captain André , a reservist and mayor of Villy , who had been promoted . Bourguignon was responsible for command of Block 1 , as well as for overall command . Compared to similar positions , La Ferté was understaffed with officers .

== Strategic situation ==

The Second Army was commanded by General Charles Huntziger , who was responsible for the defense of the Ardennes region of the frontier , including the Fortified Sector of Montmédy . The sector was composed of two parts . The eastern portion was defended by the Maginot positions of La Ferté , Chesnois , Thonnelle and Vélosnes , widely spaced and small , compared to the massive fortifications of other sectors like Thionville . The western portion of the Montmédy sector was even more lightly defended , with several lines of fortifications ranging from fortified houses near the border to small blockhouses farther back . None of the western defenses were of a scale sufficient

to support La Ferté or to act as a significant block to an invading force without the organized support of mobile army formations . The relatively weak La Ferté position effectively acted as the western end of fixed fortifications .

On 13 ? 14 May , German forces crossed the Meuse near Sedan using integrated land and air tactics that broke the morale of the French 55th Infantry Division , driving them out of the blockhouse line and allowing the Germans to gain a strong position from which to exploit the breakthrough . A progressive collapse of the French Second and Ninth Armies from 14 May to 17 May allowed German forces to move to the west of La Ferté , cutting La Ferté off from much of its mobile support .

= = 1940 = =

See Fortified Sector of Montmédy for a broader discussion of the events of 1940 in the Montmédy sector of the Maginot Line .

On 13 May advance elements of the German 71st Infantry Division approached La Ferté (which the Germans called Panzerwerke 505) and occupied the surrounding area , out of range of fire from the ouvrage . The 71st ID had trained specifically for an assault on the Maginot Line , and were provided with shaped charge explosives of the type used in the assault on the Belgian Fort Eben @-@ Emael a few days before . The night of the 13th and 14th La Ferté installed a periscope in its machine gun turret , which had been just been delivered on the 11th . On 15 May the Villy Est casemate opened fire on German troops advancing on a nearby farm . On the 16th the Germans took nearby Hill 226 , which overlooked La Ferté from the west and attacked the higher Hill 311 (overlooking La Ferté from the southwest) despite fire from the Villy Ouest casemate . That evening , German reconnaissance around La Ferté and the Moiry and Sainte Marie casemates drew supporting fire from Ouvrage Chesnois 's 75mm guns . Chesnois fired 1200 rounds in seven hours . On 17 May , German forces made a series of determined attacks on Hill 311 , and German artillery began bombardment of La Ferté with 21 cm mortars and 88mm high @-@ velocity anti @-@ tank guns . About midday on the 17th , La Ferté 's telephone communications were cut , forcing the position to communicate by radio , which could be monitored by the Germans , and which required Bourguignon to transmit through Chesnois to reach headquarters .

The Germans eventually captured Hill 311 just before nightfall , driving off the first battalion of the 23rd Colonial Infantry Regiment with losses . During the afternoon of the 17th , the Villy artillery casemates were evacuated , while German bombardment continued amid French fire from Chesnois . At about this time , General Huntziger ordered that Villy and La Ferté be relieved to prevent their encirclement , emphasizing the importance of French possession of Hill 311 , and directing that the town of Inor to the southwest be held at all costs . General Brochard , responsible for the area , decided to counterattack from the south through Hill 311 to La Ferté using the 3rd North African Infantry Division and the newly arrived 6th Infantry Division . Through the ensuing night La Ferté requested and received supporting fire from Chesnois to suppress German movements on top of the ouvrage .

Telephone service was restored the morning of the 18th , allowing better artillery coordination in support of La Ferté . By the afternoon of 18 May , the Germans had occupied the village of Villy , completing the encirclement of the ouvrage . Between 1400 and 1500 hours on the 18th , Block 2 's automatic rifle / observation (GFM) cloche was hit by German fire , killing three . At about the same time , the retractable mixed arms turret on Block 2 became stuck in the opened position , facing to the rear and unable to aim . As this comprised La Ferté 's heaviest armament , it significantly reduced the position 's defensive strength . At 1700 hours , Germans entered the vacant Villy Est casemate , occupying Villy Ouest an hour later . Both had been evacuated by the French amid concerns about the German presence on Hill 311 . From 1800 ? 1830 three batteries of German 210mm howitzers fired on La Ferté with supporting fire on the fort 's surroundings from 155mm howitzers . At 1810 four German 88mm guns opened fire on the exposed portions of the main ouvrage . The combined artillery fire destroyed the barbed wire entanglements surrounding La Ferté and cratered the ground . Firing ceased after 20 minutes to allow German sappers to destroy the

previously damaged GFM cloche . They then threw smoke bombs into the resulting hole and destroyed the stuck turret and two more cloches , leaving Block 2 incapable of further resistance . Supporting fire from Chesnois was hampered by smoke shells that obscured French observation posts ' view of La Ferté .

The French counterattack was ordered from French lines using ten Char B tanks supported by two battalions of the 119th Infantry Regiment of the 6th Infantry Division . The attack was launched at 1930 hours . With the infantry making a late start , the tanks halted at the saddle between Hill 311 and La Ferté to let them catch up . The infantry was met on the slopes of Hill 311 by two battalions of the German 119th Infantry Regiment , while three tanks were lost , two to enemy fire . The counterattack failed to reach La Ferté . In the meantime , Chesnois was ordered to cease supporting fire for fear of hitting the French rescue force , allowing the Germans to move freely about the surface . After dark on the 18th the Germans opened artillery fire on Block 1 , while at the same time blasting the Block 2 mixed arms turret into the air so that it landed askew in its opening . At 2300 a ground assault on Block 1 was launched . Two hours later all of Block 1 's cloches were out of action . Chesnois was directly ordered not to fire on La Ferté by the 6th ID artillery director , despite continuing assertions from observers that the Germans were on top of the position . Lieutenant Bouguignon repeatedly asked General Aymé , his commander at the 3rd Colonial Infantry Division for permission to abandon the position . Aymé refused Bourguignon permission to evacuate , saying " Your mission has not changed . " The commander of Chesnois , Bourguignon 's former commander who pleaded with the divisional staff to allow Bourguignon to evacuate , advised him that " A Maginot Line ouvrage is like a submarine . One doesn 't leave a submarine : one sinks with it . " Contact was lost with La Ferté overnight .

By the morning of the 19th , resistance ceased . There was no response to repeated telephone calls from the French headquarters . It became apparent that the interior of Block 2 was on fire . On the 20th , equipped with respirators , the Germans entered Block 2 , encountering no one . The next day they were able to enter Block 1 . Finding no resistance , the Germans moved on to other objectives . French patrols reached La Ferté on the 28th and 29th , reporting dense smoke within , but were unable to advance . On 2 June a German patrol made a full survey of the ouvrage , finding " the most difficult conditions imaginable , " and discovering the corpses of the garrison , apparently suffocated , most wearing gas masks . By 9 June the area was firmly under German control . The bodies of the garrison were recovered by a German disciplinary battalion and buried . Examination indicated that the garrison died of carbon monoxide poisoning . While the gas masks were effective against low concentrations of carbon monoxide , they could not cope with a concentration greater than 2 % .

The entire garrison was posthumously awarded the Ordre de l 'Armée and Bourguignon was made a chevalier of the Legion d 'Honneur . On the German side , Oberleutnant Alfred Germer , who led the assault on Block 2 , was awarded the Knight 's Cross . Belated Unteroffizier Walter Pape was also awarded the Knight 's Cross for conquering Panzerwerk 505 and for his leading of a stormtroop (Sturmtruppführer) against Verdun in June 1940 .

= = Current condition = =

La Ferté is preserved as it was in 1940 , with the scars of shellfire visible on cloches and concrete . The site includes a military memorial facing the new road alignment . A small cemetery , established in 1960 opposite the memorial , is the burial site for the majority of the garrison . The ouvrage and surrounding casemates are recorded as French historic monuments . The interior is open to the public on stated days .