

# Defense of the Normandy Invasions and Life on the Atlantic Wall in 250 Photos and Summary

By Tom and Jennifer O'Brien

As arguably the most important battle in human history and one where the Wehrmacht soldier participants are regularly reenacted around the world, can often be misrepresented by reenactors on a macro and micro scale. There are reasons for this; reenactor politics, interest in promoting one's own impression, lack of interest in "2<sup>nd</sup> line" impressions and the fact that troops stationed on the Atlantic Wall were quite different from most of the traditionally popular and most-reenacted German units. It is difficult to find primary photos and references specifically that show troops combat ready. The Germans were well aware that French resistance and locals were reporting regularly on troop movements and development of the wall defenses. By the time of the building up of the wall in the Normandy coast, information was highly confidential and the grounds off limits with exception to only the German soldiers meant to be working and training there. This article is meant to act as a general overview and reference for reenactors who have or are considering a related impression. This article is written in a casual format and I have included minimal source references. Reenactors wanting additional information or references are welcome to contact the author directly for further discussion.

The Atlantic Wall was informally started in 1940 and 41 when the Germans began to build defenses around key and valuable port facilities, but then in 1942 Hitler ordered to the full scale construction of the Atlantic wall starting in Northern Norway and ending on the Spanish border on the French Atlantic coast. The wall was mainly constructed under the leadership of Organization Todt and they drafted half a million French citizens to begin. They made progress but most of the defenses remained around key ports or Calais, the area most expected for an Allied invasion.

In very late 1943, Erwin Rommel was ordered to review the Atlantic Wall by Hitler, and eventually take command of what would be the D-Day landing area. The state of the wall was

pathetic and much of the area had been ignored with no practical defenses. Mines that had earlier been placed by Org. Todt or RAD were rusted to point of no functionality due to the length of time they were in the sea water. Defensive fortifications were nonexistent or incomplete. Rommel immediately ordered the military to take over construction of the wall defenses and fortifications while streamlining former complications and conflict. Org. Todt and RAD components by this time were relegated to repairing railways and infrastructure that were continuously being destroyed by Allied bombing. Due to the shortage of fuel and vehicles, small portable usually man-powered railways were laid to transport concrete from mixing locations to the fortifications. In the 6 months under Rommel's command, three times the amount of work was accomplished than had been accomplished by Org. Todt when they started on the wall in 1942. The Normandy beaches had bunkers, fortifications, casemates and trenches continually under construction, many still under construction up until the day of the invasion. 6 million mines were laid and obstacles of all kinds were increased many times over. Units placed behind the beach, built obstacles, mine fields and fortifications to defend against glider landings and paratrooper drops. This was the main purpose of the placement of Fallschirmjäger troops in the areas they were assigned. The assumption was they would have expertise in repulsing airborne attacks.

From a Gestapo report, the placement of Rommel over the Atlantikwall and the progress of the defense construction made many Germans feel that any Allied invasion would be stopped on the beach, then allow Western divisions to swing towards Russia with the additional forces to victory in Russia. Moral was actually high in the Normandy area. Most Germans believed the repelling of the Allied landing to be the final deciding battle of the war. Rommel personally said that Germany had 48 hours after the initial invasion to repel the attack or the war was lost.

The formations that manned the coastal defenses were the 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division and the 709<sup>th</sup> and the 716<sup>th</sup> Static Divisions. They were organized to man formations of heavily defended hard points called Weiderstandnesten (WN) positions that were placed and designed to have overlapping firing lanes that covered the Atlantic coastline. Some areas were stronger than others but again there were construction projects all across the coast. Roughly 40% of the soldiers present did not speak German and likely over 30 different nationalities were present in their formations. Having critical shortages of troops, the Wehrmacht had filled shortages by enlisting Red Army prisoners of war (Eastern Volunteers) and foreigners with German heritage (Volksdeutsche-mostly Polish but could be from any German occupied country). The only standard Infantry Division, the 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, was 20% foreign, had only 30% of the officer had combat experience, and mainly drafted younger underweight (grew up under war rations) soldiers from Germany. The 716<sup>th</sup> and 709<sup>th</sup> static divisions had been on the Normandy coast since 1941 and neither had any combat experience. By the time of the Normandy invasion, their troop strength had been reduced almost by half, losing many soldiers from transfer to the Eastern front. They were also shored up with foreign troops, historians have estimated they were likely consisted of around 50% or more of foreign born troops. Weapons, from large caliber down to small arms, were approximately 50% of current German

manufacture, 30% of Soviet or other European manufacture and 20% of prewar or WWI German manufacture.

By June 6<sup>th</sup>, Coastal artillery in Normandy had almost been completely transferred to Heer operation and only one battery, Merccouf, remained under Kriegsmarine control but actually consisted of a larger Heer garrison than KM. KM originated batteries were inland usually by a kilometer or so and were intended mainly for firing at enemy vessels as opposed to land based forces, though they certainly could. There was logic to manning these few batteries with troops trained in maritime combat; however, the shortage in available KM troops likely led to the continual transfer of coastal KM operations to Heer. There were maritime KM troops in the city of LeHavre, about 20 miles east of the D-Day landings. They had 4 small torpedo S-boats that did briefly attack the Allied armada and then quickly retreated. There were Luftwaffe troops, even perhaps women, on or near the coastline serving as radar operators or manning aircraft lookout positions. Some Org. Todt and RAD soldiers did remain in the area. The first SS troops to engage enemy forces was the 12<sup>th</sup> SS on June 7<sup>th</sup>. On the morning June 6<sup>th</sup>, the Heer 352., 709., and 716. divisions had around roughly 20,000 soldiers on the beach or near behind. Merccouf battery had 200 KM coastal artillery soldiers and I estimate also that around 200 Luftwaffe troops were stationed on or near the wall. It is likely RAD and Org Todt soldiers were in the area for various reasons but numbers are unknown. There were no Kriegsmarine naval capable port or submarine pens in the invasion area. When the Allies landed, all non Heer units were absorbed into closest Heer division for tactical reasons. No other branches would have training, knowledge of the troops and terrain, etc. to remotely be capable of commanding.

It should be noted the Germans anticipated that there would likely be some type of Allied landing in Normandy weeks before the invasion. The British and US Air Forces were clearly targeting strong points and infrastructure behind the landing areas. Roads and railways became death traps and travel was usually limited to the hours of darkness. Additionally, it had been noted that the water in front of the future Allied landings had not been mined, as much of the English Channel had been. Despite the obvious signs that the Normandy beaches were likely some form of target, the German weather reports around the 6<sup>th</sup> of June predicted inclement weather, serious enough to make any landing impossible. Rommel left the Atlantic Wall to visit his wife in Germany on her birthday and possibly see Hitler. Officers at the regimental level and above (Majors and up) were sent for map and orientation exercises in Rennes, France; some 100 miles to the southeast of D-Day landing beaches. Personal opinion: The fact that this training was considered the best use of time for senior level officers may be a strong reflection of the quality of the German officer corps in Normandy. I estimate only 15% had combat experience. The 352. ID did plan on conducting invasion drills but likely most German soldiers were building defenses and fortifications as they had since Rommel's arrival.

Eisenhower's great gamble on clear weather paid off and the US landed on the morning of June 6<sup>th</sup> catching the Germans completely by surprise. The master strategist, Rommel, himself was absent as were most, if not all, of the senior command. I could go on about the division of

authority between Hitler, von Runstadt and Hitler himself in controlling the Panzer reserves, but this is well known. Standing between the most destructive air, land and sea force compiled in human history were 3 leaderless German divisions that lacked training, modern weaponry, ammo, fuel, soldiers and in many cases the ability to speak German. They had been working 12 hours a day for months and most were underweight. Reinforcements and resupply of ammunition were for all intent and purpose impossible due to Allied air cover, naval artillery, inland paratroopers and glider infantry.

So what did this motley crew do on June 6<sup>th</sup>, when the landings occurred? For what they had, they kicked ass. At Omaha beach, manned by the 352<sup>nd</sup>, for a short time they believed they had repelled the invasion. Other areas did not see such stiff resistance but the Allies met NONE of the first day objectives and it would take two weeks for them to finally be met. Atlantic wall defenders ran out of ammunition as often as they were over run. German counter attacks did happen and in some cases defenses were briefly recaptured. There were no major routes or retreats, independent of the national origins of the soldiers. The performance of foreign volunteer formations is argued among historians. It is clear that some fought very well and some not as well. However, some of the poorer performances can be blamed on the fact that if the translators or a trusted German commanding officer were killed, there was virtually no way to communicate and coordinate with their German command. Casualty rates on D-Day were at least 10/1 Allied to German. While the Allies did, in many areas but not all, have to cross large open beaches in front of (often partially) prepared defenses, they also owned the skies and had access to much greater artillery and armor. The rest of the story I will leave to history.

I believe that the essence of the German defensive experience on June 6<sup>th</sup>, opposite the Allied invasion forces could be described as follows.

Potentially the greatest tactician and leader in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Erwin Rommel, fought through almost everything to prepare a defense capable of stopping an Allied landing. His troops were second line at best and partially looked like the United Nations. He was subject to constant meddling with Hitler and the majority of OKW disagreed with his assessment that the invasion must be stopped at the beach. He had 6 months to prepare and in the weeks leading up to and after D-Day most travel and troop movement had to be conducted night due to air attack. German troops were pushed to the edge of human capability. Despite this, Rommel and his men built an Atlantic Wall that gave the Allies hell. I truly believe that had some of the many D-Day situational variables had been shifted in the favor of Germany, the Allied invasion could have been very well stopped. In the end, he was right but nothing mattered. The war was lost and a few months after the invasion Erwin Rommel was forced to take his own life for trying to save Germany by plotting to assassinate Hitler and to save his family.

The photo collection included below is the result of my study of German Forces defending the Allied landings over the last year. Given the lack of photos, I am have included photos from across the Atlantic Wall that I believe accurately reflect similar characteristics. The pictures range from 1941-1944 in date. Earlier images tend to be more propaganda in purpose and

better equipped. Later pictures are less common, more personal or taken by Allies. Until 1944, static units were drained of soldiers and equipment that was transferred to the eastern front and replaced with foreign troops. All foreign captured weapons stocks had been depleted by 1944. The area of the Normandy landings was not considered an area of invasion risk. Outdated and captured weapons and equipment were more prominent there than other places on the Atlantic wall.

The purpose of this study is not to label any event farby or wrong as many variables are required to make an event successful and often the relaxation of some standards is justifiable. However, I do believe the information contained in this article is typically missing from event planning and would significantly improve historical accuracy of any group or reenactor portraying a D-Day involved soldier. I would summarize the prominent impression features of a reenactment unit portraying a formation defending the Atlantic Wall as below. I am mostly excluding Osttruppen and foreign volunteers due to their unique and complicated status.

1. Generally, no Y-straps. Most Germans soldiers were not issued Y-straps in general. I theorize that the static divisions were not issued Y-straps in whole, while the 352. Infantry Division received them in very limited quantity. The book "Normandiefrent" by Vince Milano and Bruce Conner chronicles the history of the 352. Division. In the entire book, I could only find one soldier with Y-Straps (which happened to be web). It isn't 100% clear, but appears he is the only soldier to be wearing them in the squad.
2. Low boots were rarely worn with gaiters.
3. There was significant variation in uniforms and insignia. Prewar and converted captured uniform items were common. Many solders can be seen without insignia.
4. Mess tins, canteens, zelts and bread bags were issued to Atlantic Wall soldiers, but they are generally seen stored in sleeping locations, even during combat drills as these were static, not mobile units. The exceptions are the belt, bayonet, ammo pouches and gasmask canister with cape and bag, which are in every drill style photo. I would expect this is how the Germans would most likely have appeared in combat on the wall. Shovels and other tools seemed to be issued in extremely limited quantities.
5. Due to senior command being absent and most troops having never seen combat, awards and decorations would be very rare and mostly limited to the 352.
6. Both white, dyed Green and faded green drillich HBT uniforms could be encountered at any time, in work, formations and combat. They could be worn over woools in the winter for warmth and alone, or just as uniforms, possibly trousers alone, in the summer.
7. With the exception of 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer, there were no Panzerfausts, Panzerschrecks or most other hand held anti-tank weapons.
8. Outdated German or captured weapons, potentially from any occupied country, were not uncommon among German troops, the majority of Eastern volunteers carried Soviet weapons.

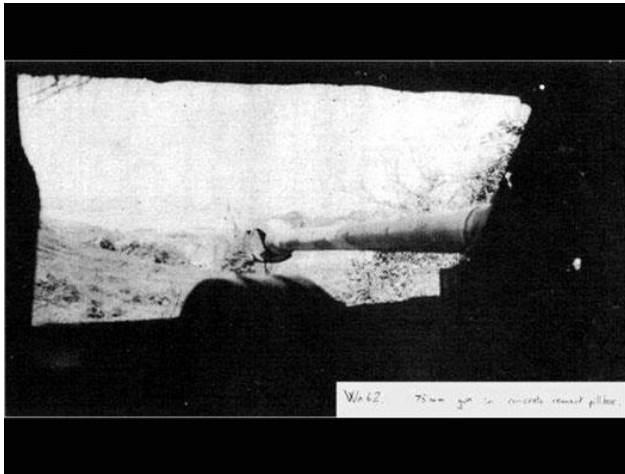
9. "Early war" style impression were as common as "late" due to the 716. and 709. divisions having been raised in 1941.
10. There were German tanks that made it to the beach on June 6<sup>th</sup>, though granted this is over a 5 mile long invasion front. The 352. had 14 Marder II/IIIs, 10 StuG III G tank destroyers and 9 FlakPanzer 38s. It is unknown how many reached of these vehicles reached what would be considered a beach defense position. On the night of June 6<sup>th</sup>, 6 Panzer IVs of Panzer Reg. 22 and soldiers of PzGrdr Reg. 11/192 from the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer counter attacked, reached the coastline, splitting the British landings on Sword beach. Ultimately they were met with heavy antitank fire and were ordered to fall back to protect Caen. 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer panzergrenadiers do seem to have been issued Y-straps. I recommend the book "The Combat History of the 21. Panzer Division" by Werner Kortenhaus for more information.
11. By 1944, everything military in nature would be camouflaged to the greatest extent possible due to Allied air superiority and reconnaissance. Fishing nets were commonly used with local foliage added due to the shortage of issued camouflaged nets.







Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-110-1860-23  
Foto: Falkner | 1943/1944

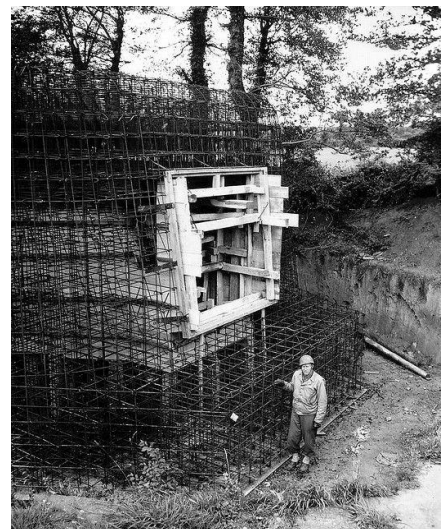


Wa 62. 75m gut in concrete covered pit.

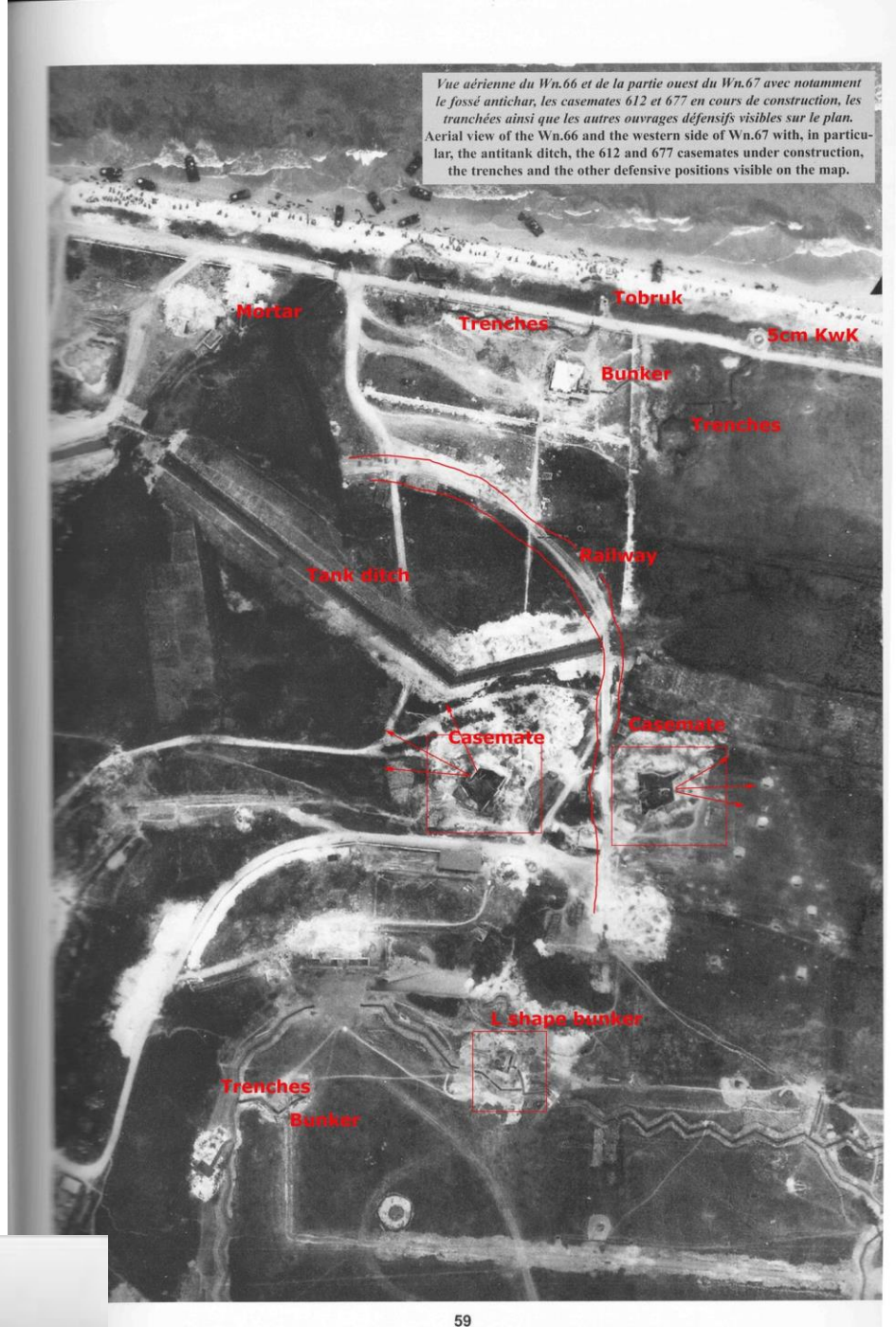
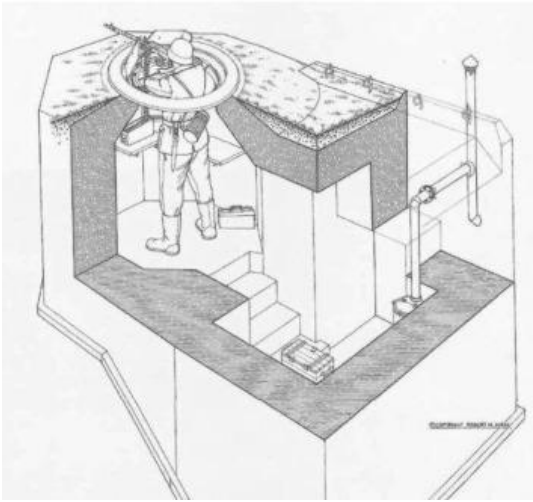
















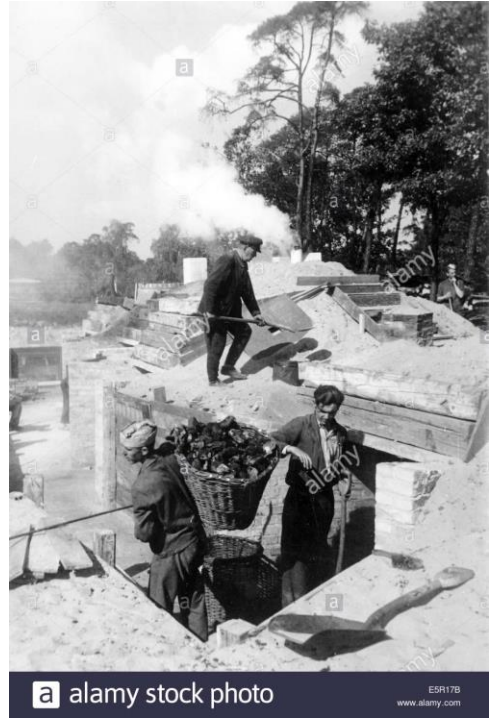








11-206-1682-04A  
Mar 1944





**Kameraden** vom WN 62  
 von links:  
 Heinrich Krieffewirth,  
 Hans Selbach,  
 Alois Reckers,  
 Bruno Plota,  
 Emil Drews,  
 A. Liermann,  
 rechts: Franz Gockel



Tschechisches Beutegeschütz, Kaliber 7,5 cm, wenige Wochen vor der Invasion noch in offener Feuerstellung.

**Personen** von links:  
 Alois Reckers,  
 Bruno Plota,  
 Hans Selbach



Zerschossene Kasematte WN 72 ,8,8cm Pak, in Vierville sur Mer

### 3. Kompanie, Infanterie – Regiment 726

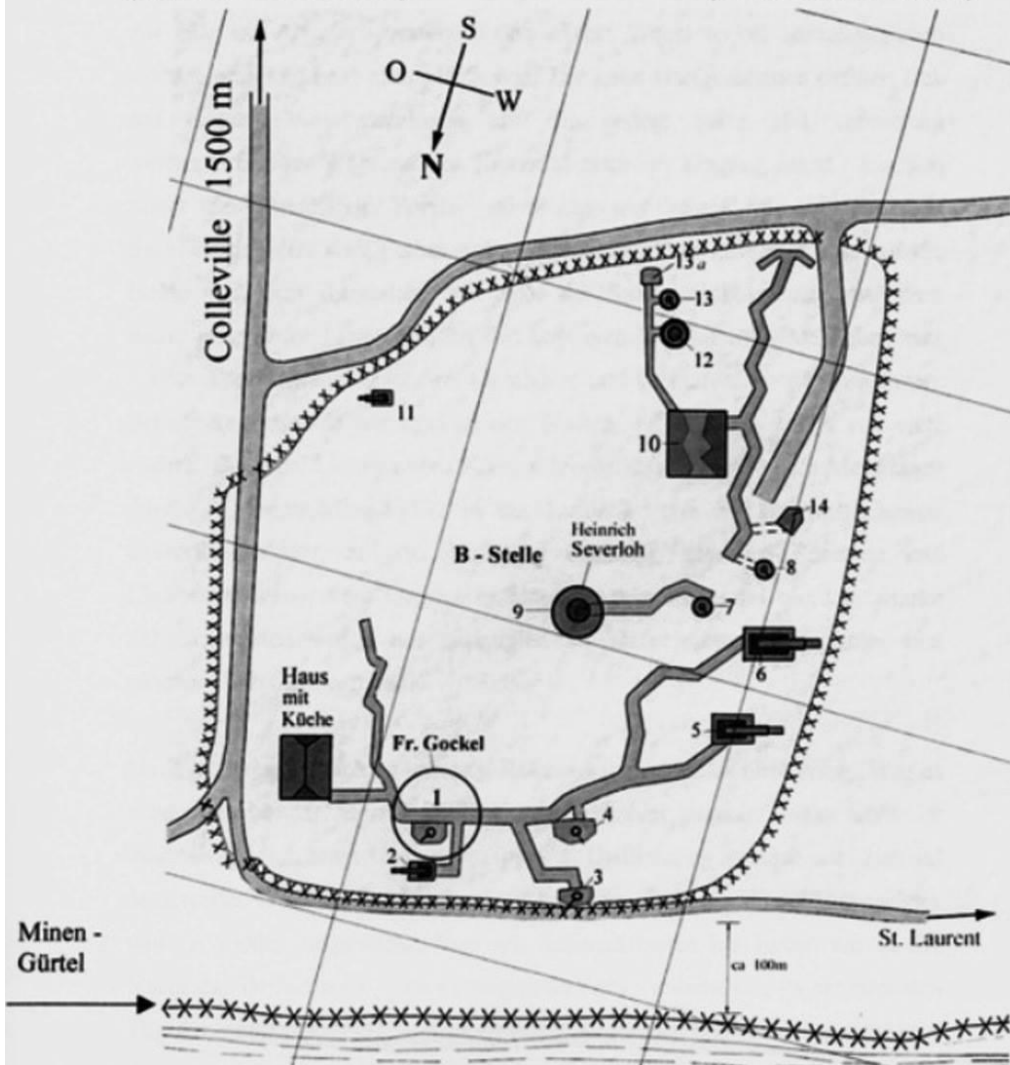
am 6. Juni 1944 in Colleville SUR MER (Omaha – Beach)

**Widerstands – Nest: WN 62 ,**

( besetzt mit 20 Mann )

**Beobachtungs – Stelle**

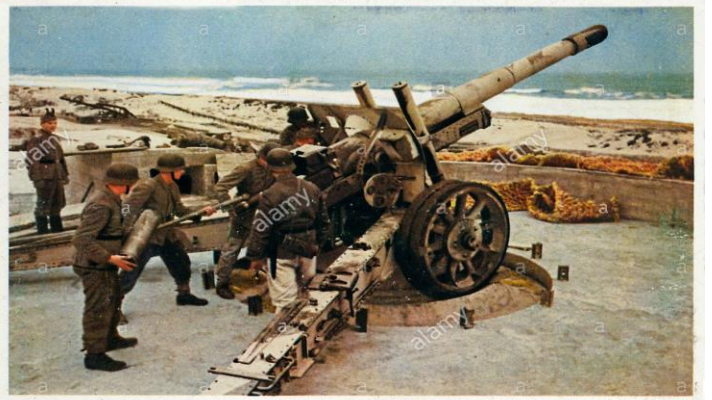
( besetzt mit 7 Mann )



#### Legende

- |   |                               |     |   |
|---|-------------------------------|-----|---|
| 1 | polnisches Maschinen Gewehr   | 9   | Maschinen Gewehr 42 und Artillerie – Beobachter |
| 2 | 5 cm Geschütz KWK             | 10  | Mannschafts bunker                              |
| 3 | leichtes Maschinen Gewehr     | 11  | 5 cm Panzer Abwehrkanone PAK                    |
| 4 | polnisches Maschinen Gewehr   | 12  | leichtes Maschinen Gewehr                       |
| 5 | tschechisches 7,5 cm Geschütz | 13  | Granatwerfer                                    |
| 6 | tschechisches 7,5 cm Geschütz | 13a | Beobachtungsbunker                              |
| 7 | leichtes Maschinen Gewehr     | 14  | Granatwerfer                                    |
| 8 | 5 cm Granatwerfer             |     |   |

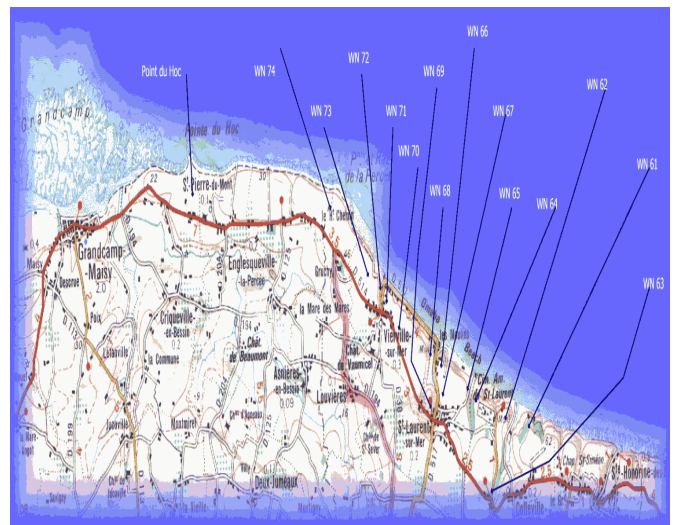
(Karte nach Skizze von Fr. Gockel)



Artilharia do exército alemão protegendo a costa.

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Bundesarchiv, Bild 101i/110-1004-33  
Foto: Mäthner | 1943/1944



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101i/259-1376-24A  
Foto: Mäthner | 1942

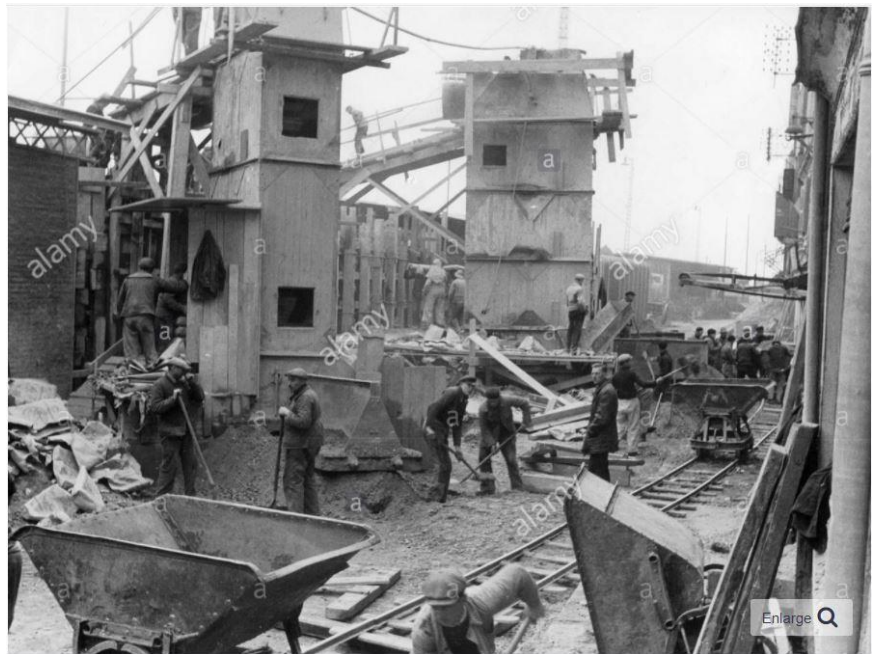




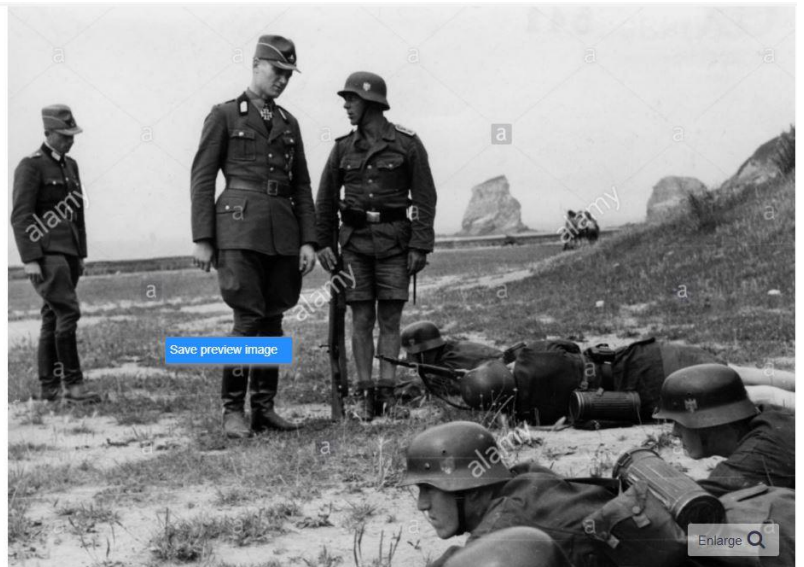
Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-310-1104-07  
Foto: Demmer | 1944



Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-MCENK-211-08A  
Foto: Vater | 1939/1940 ca.

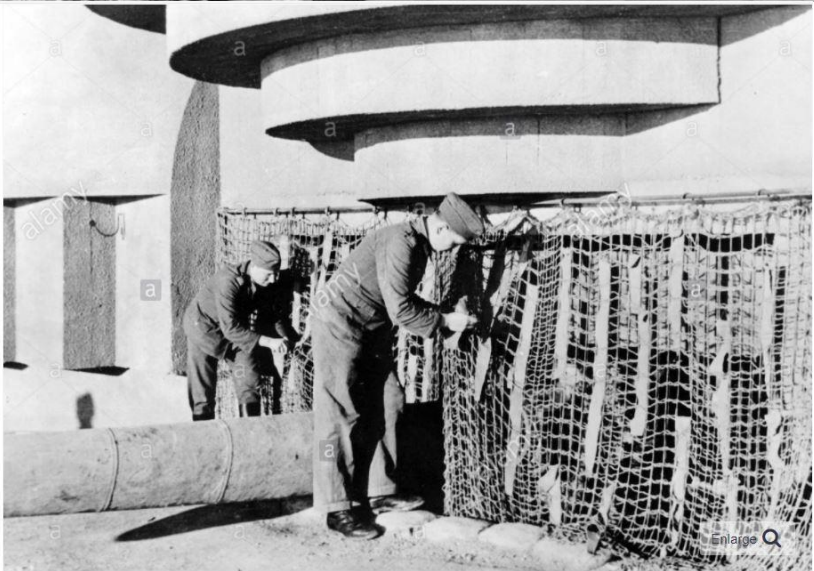


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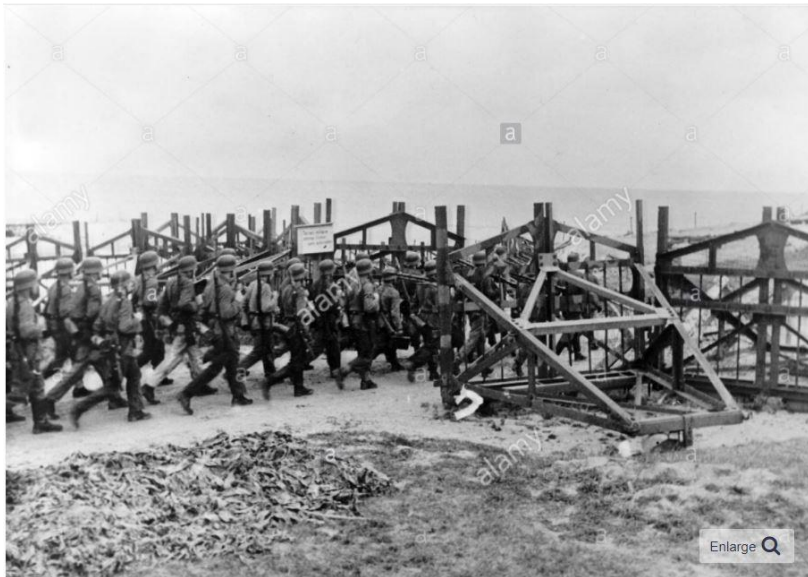


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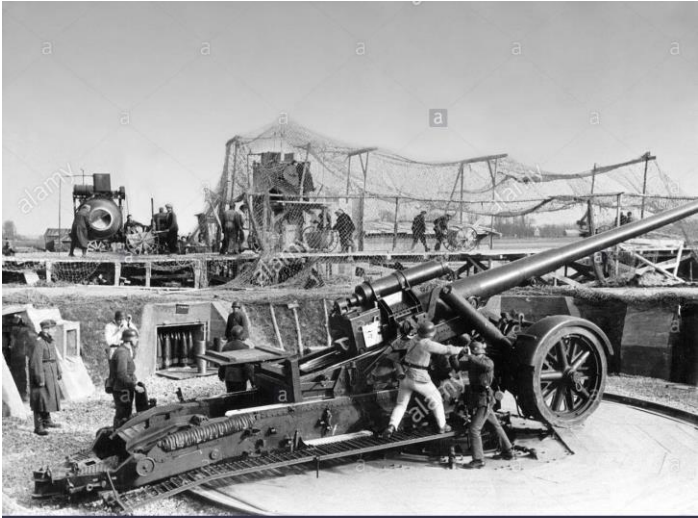
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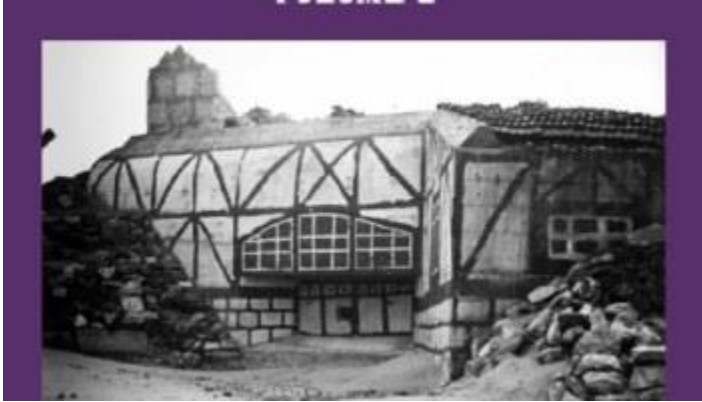
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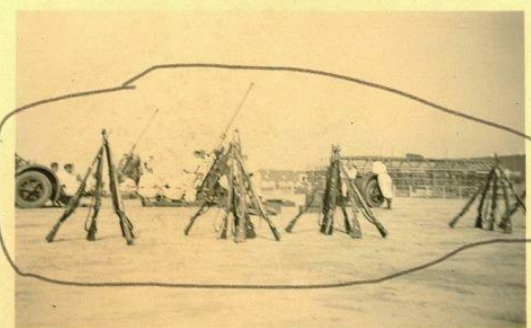


British soldiers accept captured German troops - almost certainly from 716th Infantry-Division - down to a collection point on the beach. The Germans look dejected, but relieved to be alive and out of it

Batterie Todt is now a museum that can be visited



crainsmilitaria





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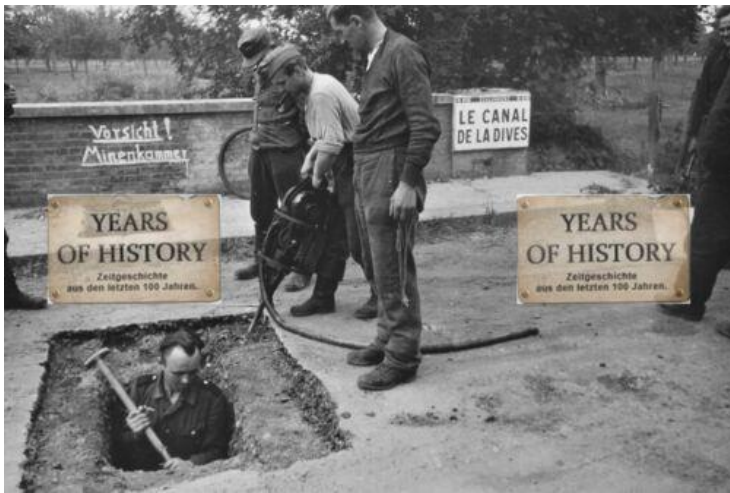
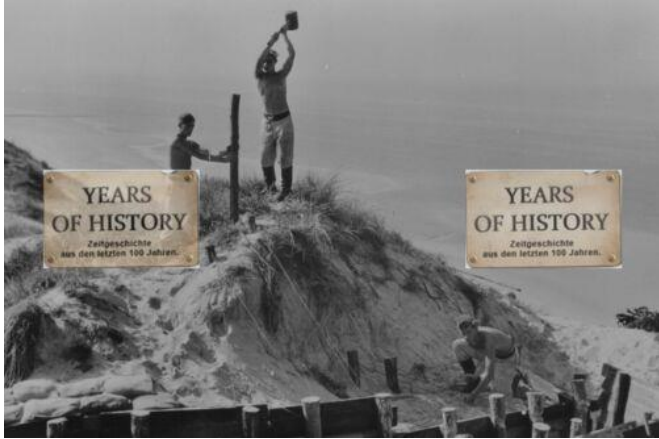
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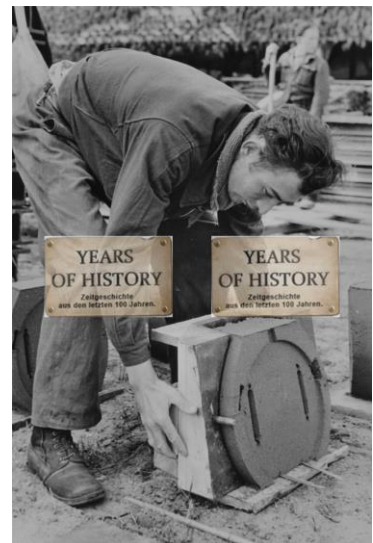
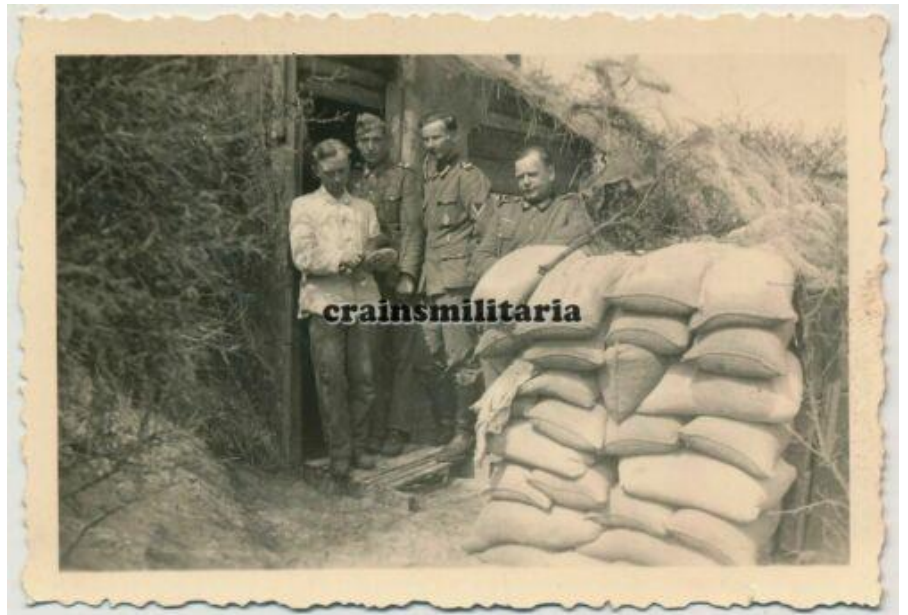
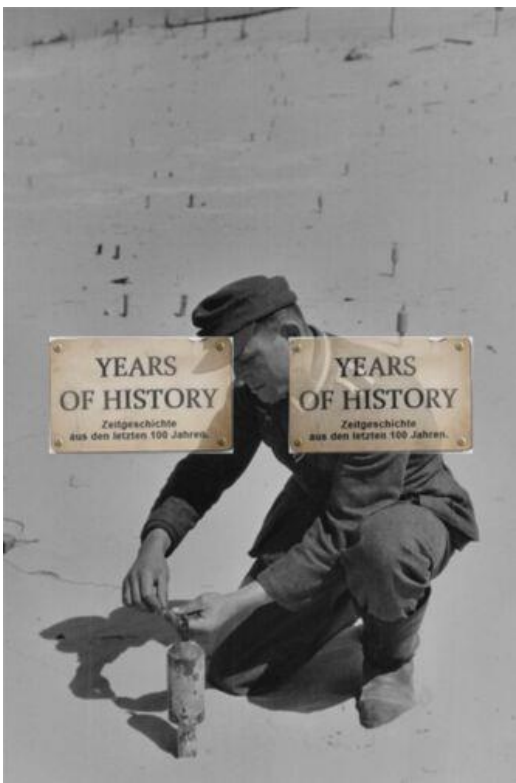
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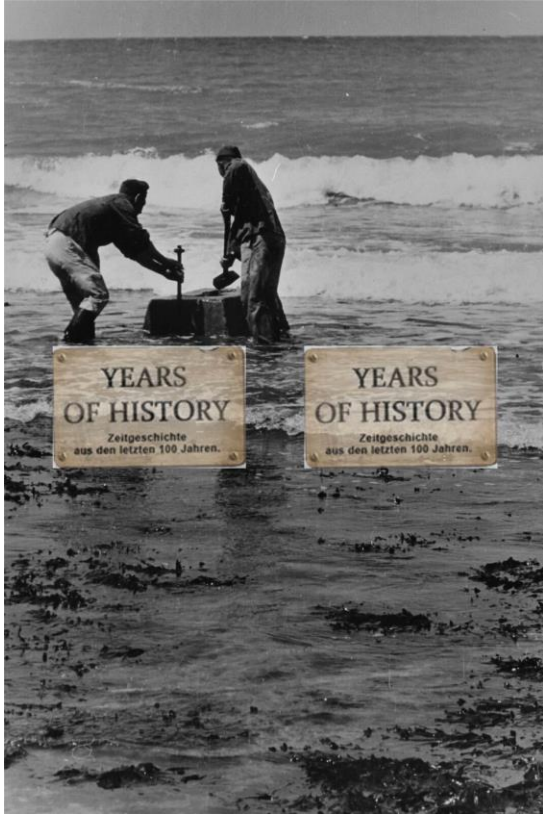
## German strongpoints on D-Day Beaches

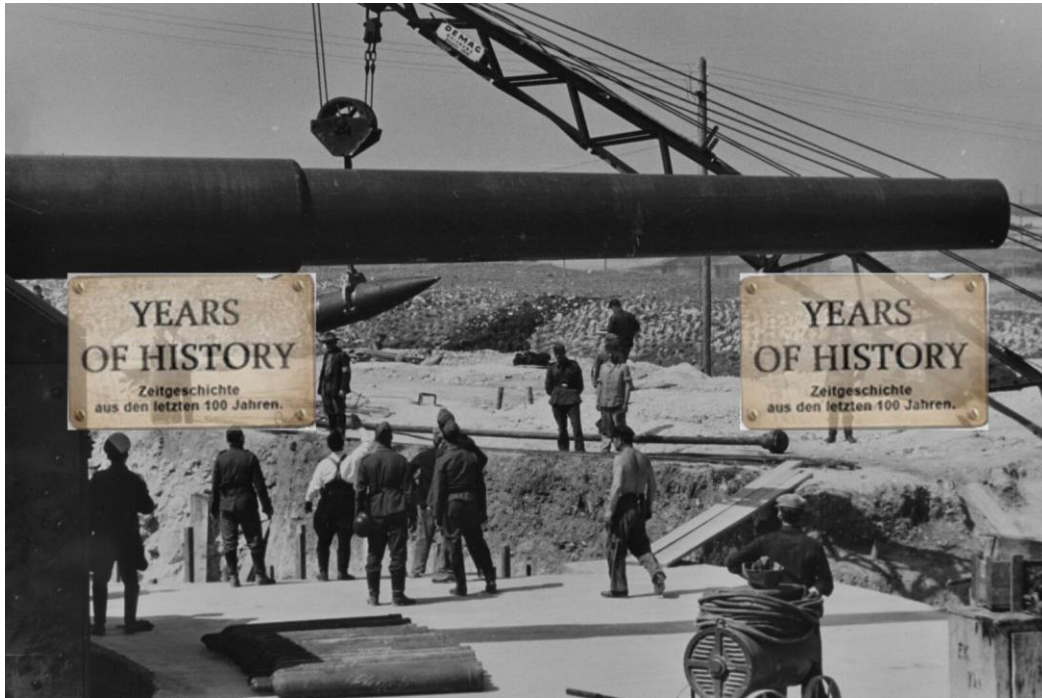
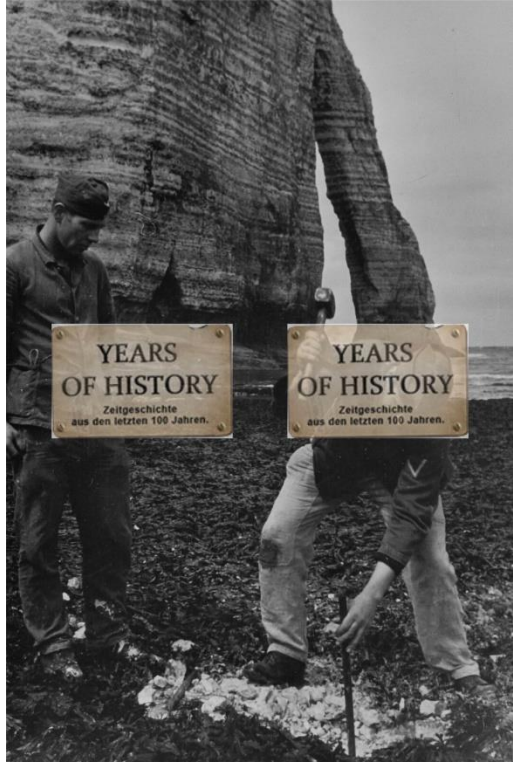
Strongpoint	Location	Unit	Major weapons (bunker type)
<b>Utah</b>			
W7 (WN105)	La Madeleine	3/IR.919	company command post
W5 (WN104)	La Grande Dune	2/IR.919	50mm (H667); 2 x 50mm (Vf600); 75mm FK38 (H612); 1 FT <i>Panzerstellung</i>
W4 (WN103)	La Madeleine	2/IR.919	
<b>Omaha</b>			
WN73	Near D-1 draw	11/GR.726	75mm FK231(f) (casemate)
WN72	D-1 draw	11/GR.726	88mm (H667); 75mm Pak 97/38(f) (pit); 50mm (casemate)
WN71	D-1 draw	11/GR.726	1 AT gun
WN70	D-1/D-3 draw	10/GR.726	80mm FK17(t) (H612); 75mm field gun (pit), 20mm Flak
WN69	D-3 draw	9/GR.726	20mm Flak
WN68	D-3 draw	9/GR.726	50mm (Vf600); 47mm Pak 181(f) (open pit); 2 <i>Panzerstellung</i>
WN67	St. Laurent	Nebel Abt.84	40x320mm <i>Nebelwerfers</i>
WN66	D-3 draw	8/GR.726	50mm (Vf600); other AT gun (pit); 2 <i>Panzerstellung</i>
WN65	E-1 draw	8/GR.726	50mm (H667); 50mm (Vf600); 75mm (open pit)
WN64	E-1 draw	7/GR.726	76.2 IKH 290(r); 20mm Flak
WN63	Cabourg	HQ III/GR.726	Company command bunker
WN62	E-3 draw	1/GR.726	2 x 75mm FK235(b) (H669); 2x50mm (pit)
WN61	E-3 draw	1/GR.726	88mm (H677); 2 x 50mm (Vf600); 1 <i>Panzerstellung</i> (APX-R)
WN60	F-1 draw	1/GR.726	2 x 75mm FK231(f); 20mm Flak; 1 <i>Panzerstellung</i> (APX-R)
<b>Gold</b>			
WN40	Puits d'Herode	Ost.441	observation bunker; tobruks
WN39	St. Come-de-Fresne	Ost.441	radar, 2 x 75mm FK 38 (H612)
WN38	St. Come-de-Fresne	Ost.441	2 x 50mm (casemate/mod Vf600)
WN37	Le Hamel	Ost.441	75mm FK (H612); 50mm (casemate)
WN36	Cabane des douanes	Ost.441	50mm (Vf600)
WN35	Hable de Heurlot	3/Ost.441	6 bunkers
WN35a	Mt. Fleury	3/HKAA.1260	4 x 122mm K390/1 (r) (H679)
WN35b	Hable de Heurlot	5/AR.1716	4 x 100mm leFH 14/19(t) (H669)
WN34	Mt. Fleury lighthouse	7/GR.736	50mm
WN33	La Riviere	7/GR.736	88mm(H677); 50mm (H667); 50mm (Vf600)
WN32	Ver-sur-Mer	6/AR.1716	4 x 100mm leFH 14/19 (t) (H669)
<b>Juno</b>			
WN31	Courseulles	6/GR.736	75mm FK 16 nArt (H612) + 2 x 50mm
WN30	Courseulles	6/GR.736	Reinforced houses
WN29	Courseulles	6/GR.736	88mm (H677); 75mm FK16 nArt (H612); 75mm FK231 (f) (H612); 50mm; 1 <i>Panzerstellung</i>
WN28a	Beny-sur-Mer	7/AR.1716	4 x 100mm IFH 14/19(t)
WN28	Bernieres-la-Rive	5/GR.736	75mm PaK 40 (H604); 50mm (timber casemate); 1 <i>Panzerstellung</i> (FT)
WN27	St. Aubin-sur-Mer	5/GR.736	50mm (Vf600 mod)
WN26	Langrune-sur-Mer	9/GR.736	75mm KF 231 (f) (field entrenchment)
<b>Sword</b>			
WN21 (Trout)	Lion-sur-Mer	10/GR.736	1 x 75mm; 2 x 50mm (Vf600)
WN20 (Cod)	La Breche	10/GR.736	88mm/H677, 3 x 50mm
WN18	Hermanville-la-Breche	10/GR.736	88mm (H677) + 2 x 50mm (casemates); 1 x 50mm (Vf600)
WN10(B)	Riva Bella	2/GR.736	75mm howitzer FK 38 (H626), 1 50mm
StP Caen 08	Riva Bella	1/HKAA.1260	6 x 155mm K418 (f) (gun pits); 1 <i>Panzerstellung</i> (APX-R)
WN17 (Hillman)	Colleville-Plage	HQ/GR.736	2 x AT guns (H605)
WN16 (Morris)	Colleville-Plage	2/AR.1716	4 x 100mm FH 14/19 (t) (H669)
WN15	St. Aubin	GR.736	Billets
WN14 (Sole)	Ouistreham	HQ 1/GR.736	battalion headquarters
WN12 (Daimler)	Ouistreham	4/AR.1716	4 x 155mm FH 414 (f) (H669); 2 x 20mm Flak
Notes:			
AR = artillery regiment    IR = infantry regiment    GR = grenadier regiment    HKAA = army coastal artillery battalion			



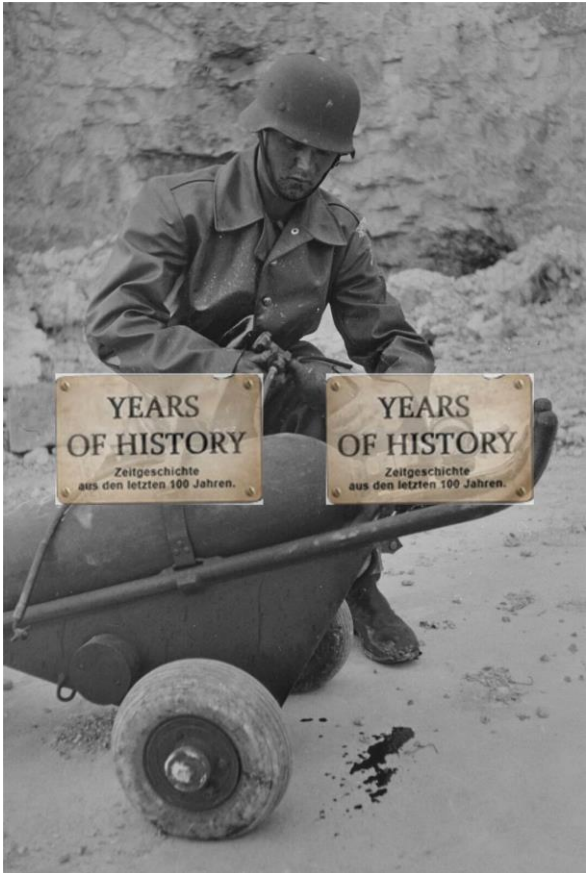
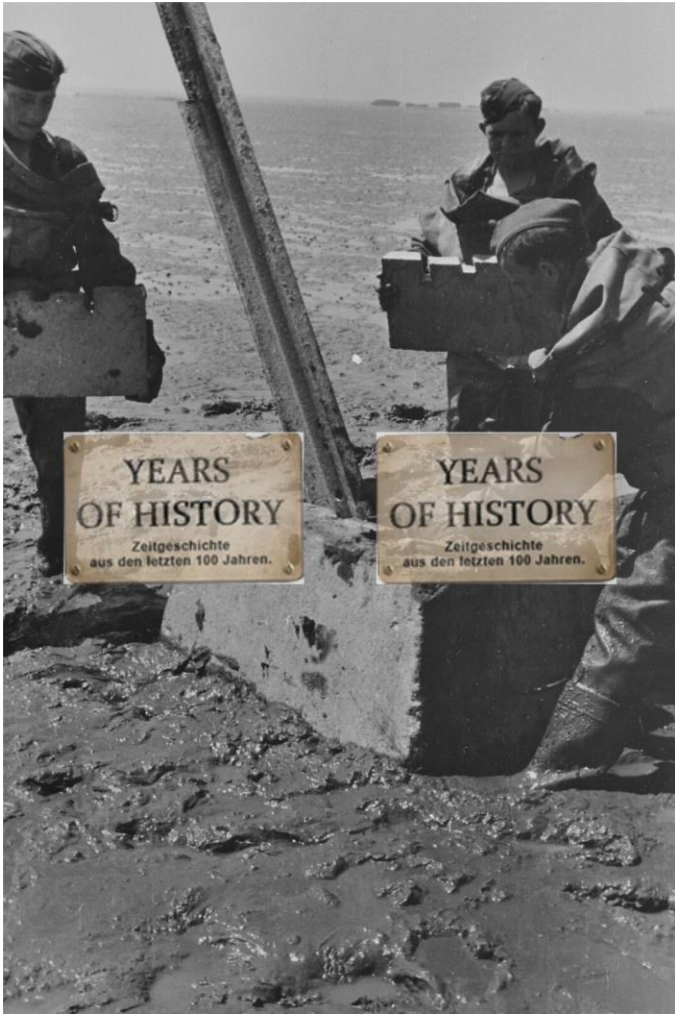


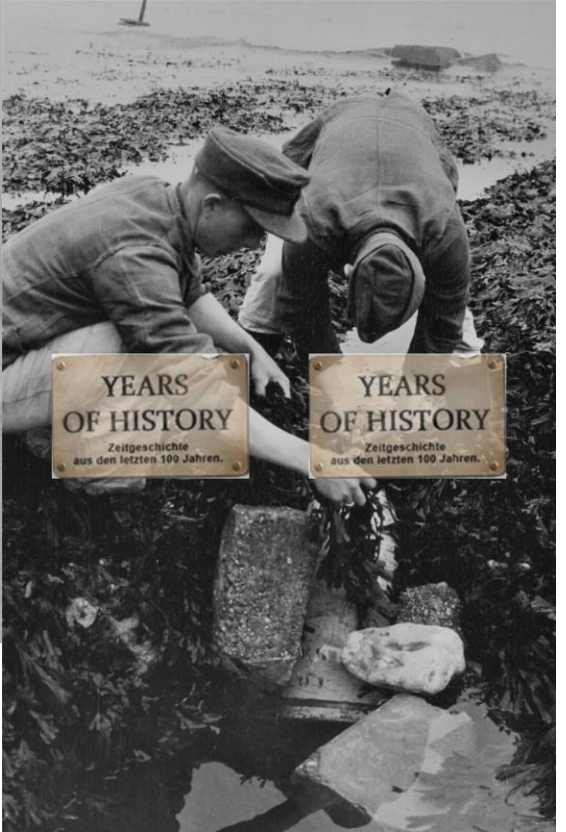
















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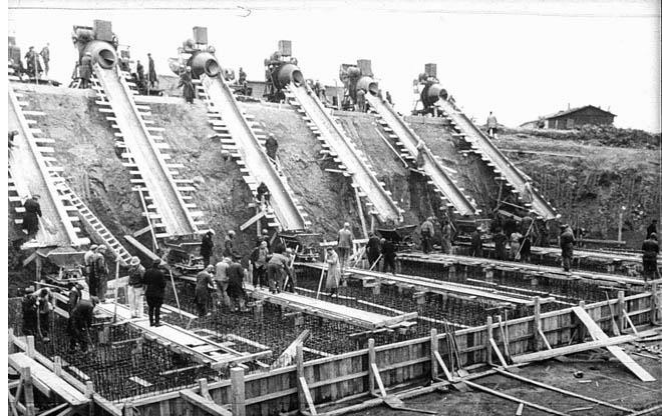
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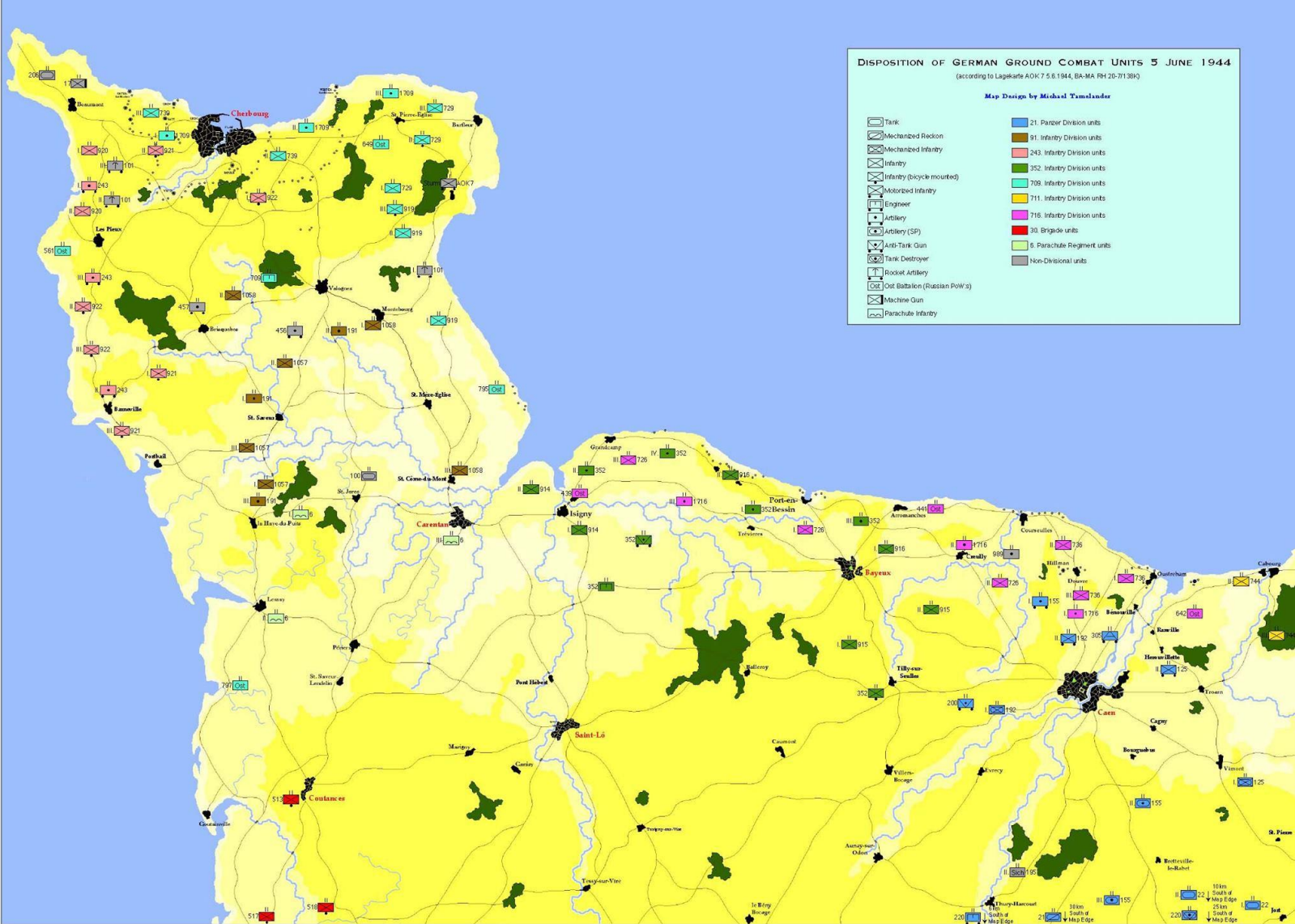




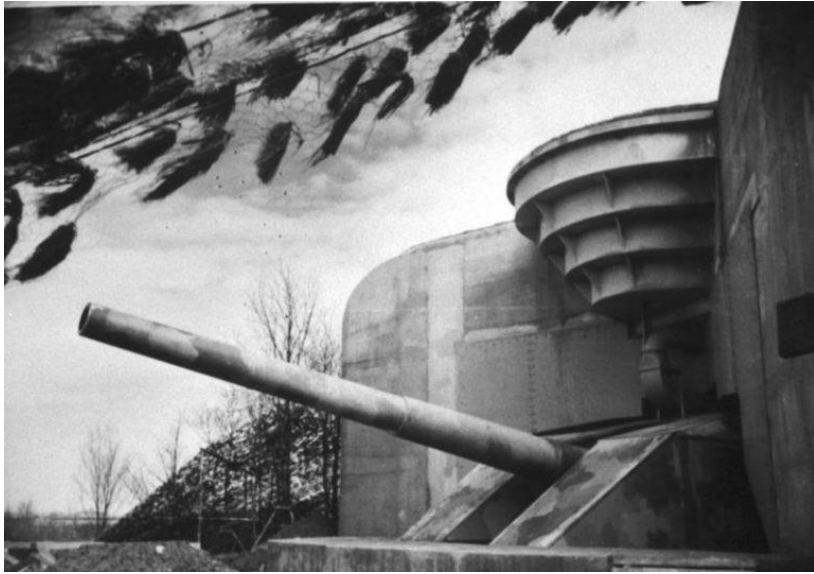
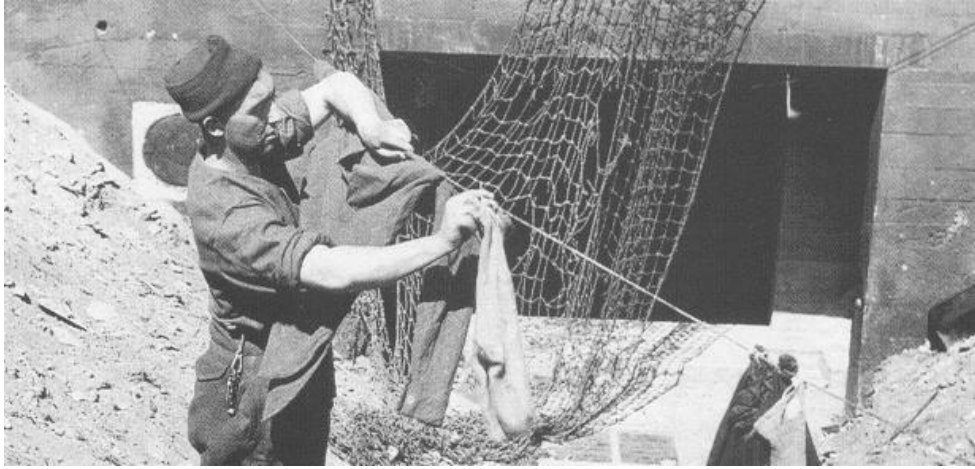
**DISPOSITION OF GERMAN GROUND COMBAT UNITS 5 JUNE 1944**  
 (according to Lagekarte AOK 7.5.6.1944, BA-MA RH 20-71389)

Map Design by Michael Yamalander

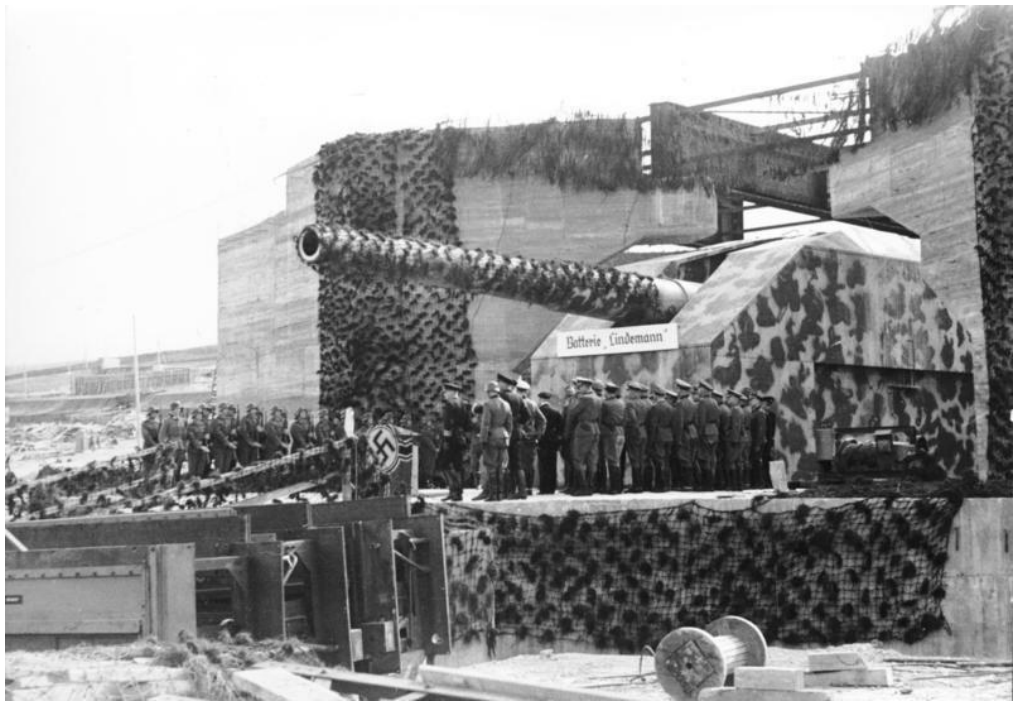
- |  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
|  | 21. Panzer Division units    |
|  | 91. Infantry Division units  |
|  | 243. Infantry Division units |
|  | 352. Infantry Division units |
|  | 709. Infantry Division units |
|  | 711. Infantry Division units |
|  | 716. Infantry Division units |
|  | 30. Brigade units            |
|  | 5. Parachute Regiment units  |
|  | Non-Divisional units         |
|  |                              |
|  |                              |
|  |                              |
|  |                              |
|  |                              |



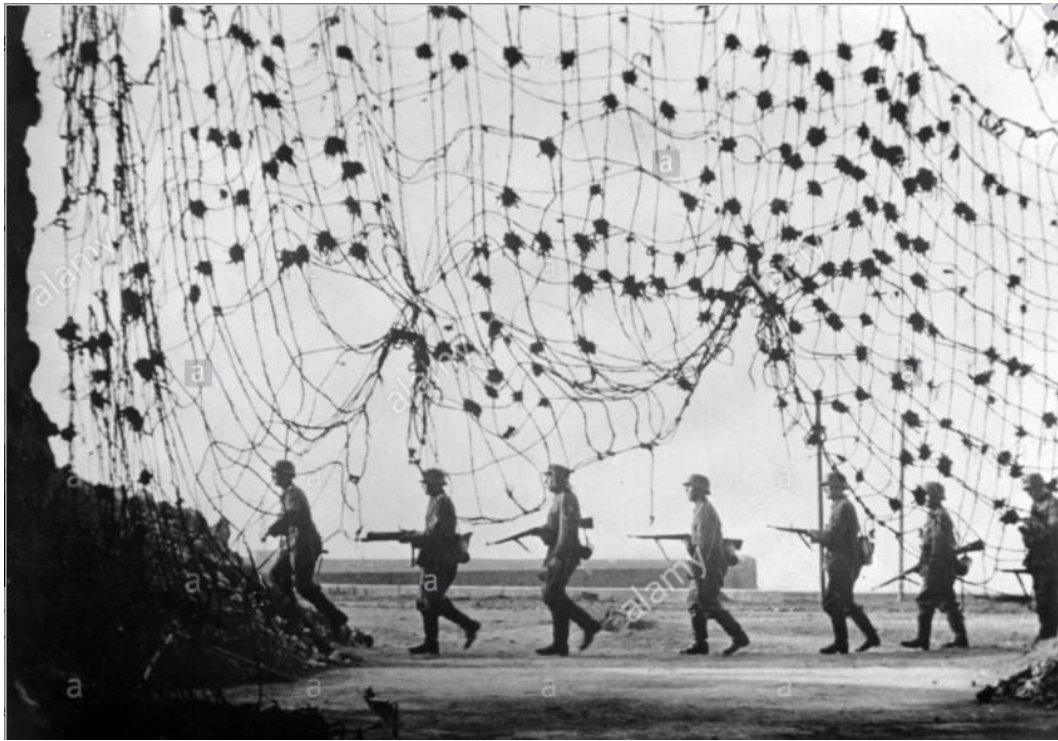


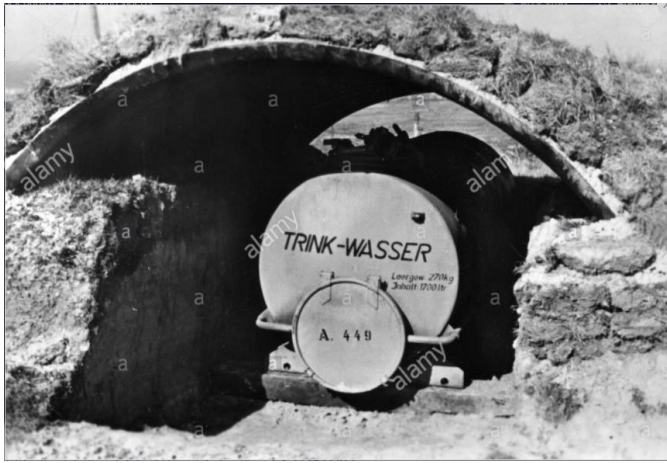


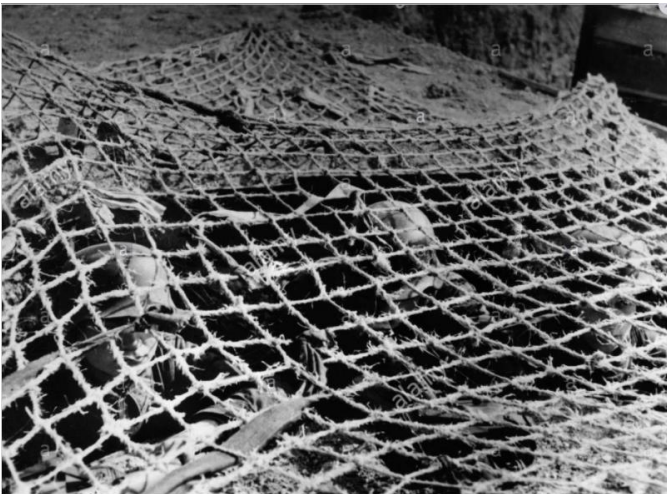




























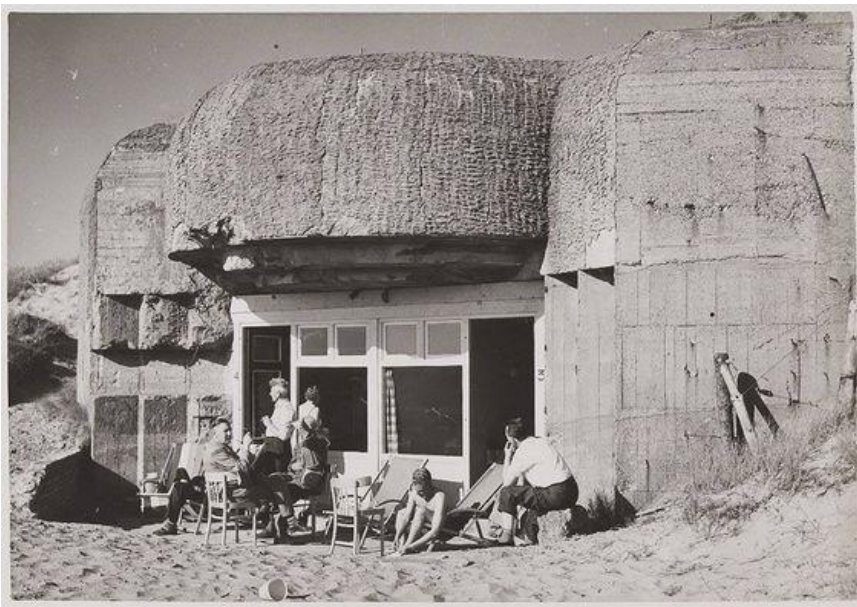
Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-263-1091-07A  
Foto: Völklinger | 1944 Frühling



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-254-100-12  
Foto: Schelm | 1944 Frühling

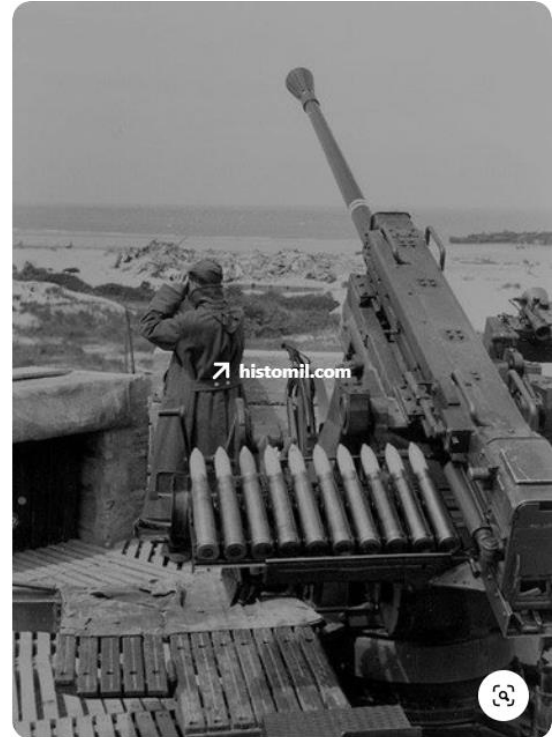


Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-204-1031-14  
Foto: Müller | 1943 Sommer



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-116-0046-20  
Foto: Lange | 1943





*Tobrukstände* with armour plate protection – note the range markings painted on the shield. The machine gun is a Czech LMG and the ancestor to the British Bren.





WAR IMAGES  
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Photo: Summer 1944



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-316-182-20  
Foto: Sommer 1944







Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-316-1190-27  
Foto: a. Ang. | 1944

