



A German soldier looking out to sea from a position in the Atlantikwall before D-Day.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ALLIED 21ST ARMY GROUP D-DAY, 6 JUNE 1944

THE GREATEST SEABORNE INVASION THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

by Ian R Gumm MSTJ TD VR BSc (Hons)

PART SIXTEEN – THE GERMAN DEFENCES AT OMAHA BEACH

The landings at OMAHA Beach are too big a story to tell in one article and I have broken it down into suitable chunks. In this first chunk, I look at the German defences along the OMAHA Beach sector and put some perspective on what the assaulting Allied forces faced.

The German defences along the Calvados coast between Caen and Carentan were originally assigned to Generalleutnant Wilhelm Richter's 716th Infanterie Division [716-ID]. This was a typical 'static' Division of around 8,000 men, created to carry out coastal defensive tasks. It was a 1944 pattern two-regiment infantry division, each with three battalions. It had little or no transport but was heavy in artillery. The 716-ID consisted of:

- Grenadier-Regiment 726 [GR-726] commanded by Oberst Walter Korfes with Ost-Bataillon 439 attached.

- Grenadier-Regiment 736 [GR-736] commanded by Oberst Ludwig Krug with Ost-Bataillon 642 attached.
- Artillerie-Regiment 1716 [AR-1716] commanded by Oberstleutnant Helmut Knüppe.
- Panzerjäger-Abteilung 716 [PzJbAbt-716] commanded by Oberleutnant Kurt Kaergel.
- Pionier-Bataillon 716 [PiBtl-716] commanded by Major Günter Koch.
- Nachrichten-Abteilung 716 [NachrAbt-716] commanded by Major Werner Liedloff.
- Ost-Bataillon 441 [OstB-441].

In November 1943, the 352nd Infanterie Division [352-ID] commanded by Generalleutnant Dietrich Kraiß had been formed in occupied France with its Command Post at Littry. It was one of ten new infantry divisions raised to replace losses on the Eastern Front and was intended to be a full attack capability division. It was to be combat-ready by May 1944, and once up to strength and trained the 352-ID was expected to be transferred to the Eastern Front. However, there was no clear date for their transfer to the Eastern front and with the threat of an Allied invasion in the West, the 352-ID received orders to prepare for the defence of the Atlantic Wall, in the Normandy area.

The 352-ID had 12,021 men, of which 6,800 were combat troops. it was a large Division by German standards at the time, but it was by no means the “elite” division described by some. The Division was a mix of experienced soldiers drawn from decimated divisions that had served on the Eastern front, young German conscripts (17–18-year-olds), Volksdeutsch: Alsatians (French Germans), Polish Germans and Czech Germans, and a significant number of Russian volunteers. The officers and NCOs, down to Unteroffizier (Corporal), were mainly hardened Eastern Front veterans, and approximately 29% of the division were Russian volunteers, these included Ukrainians, Georgians, Belarusians, and ex-Russian POWs among their number. Throughout the training period there were shortages of men, equipment, and fuel, and by early 1944 the Division, though nearly fully equipped, was not yet ready for combat.

With the Normandy coastal area extending 120 kilometres (75 miles), Generalfeldmarschall Rommel decided to place the 352-ID between the 709th Static Infanterie Division and the 716-ID to defend the 53 kilometres (33 miles) long 'Bayeux zone'. They were deployed east from the base of the Cotentin Peninsula along the coast to Arranches-les-Bains and covered an area that included the whole of OMAHA Beach and the western end of GOLD Beach. Two battalions from Oberst Walter Korfes' GR-726 and Hauptmann Hans Becker's OstB-439 were placed under the command of 352-ID. On D-Day, the 352-ID consisted of:

- GR-726, minus 1 Battalion, commanded by Oberst Walter Korfes.
- Grenadier-Regiment 914 [GR-914] commanded by Oberstleutnant Ernst Heyna.
- Grenadier-Regiment 915 [GR-915] commanded by Oberstleutnant Karl Meyer.
- Grenadier-Regiment 916 [GR-916] commanded by Oberst Ernst Goth.

- Artillerie-Regiment 352 [AR-352] commanded by Oberst Kurt-Wilhelm Ocker.
- Panzerjäger-Abteilung 352 [PzJgAbt-352] commanded by Hauptmann Werner Jahn.
- Pionier-Bataillon 352 [PiBtl-352] commanded by Hauptmann Paul Fritz.
- Füsilier-Bataillon 352 [FusBtl-352] commanded by Rittmeister Eitel Gerth.
- Nachrichten-Abteilung 352 [NachrAbt-352] commanded by Hauptmann Kurt Ehrhardt.
- Ost-Bataillon 439 [OstB-439] commanded by Hauptmann Hans Becker.

Generalleutnant Kraiß had four Grenadier-Regiments under his command, and he deployed three of them in defensive sectors and held one in reserve. On D-Day:

- Oberstleutnant Ernst Heyna's GR-914 with Hauptmann Hans Becker's OstB-439 was deployed in the left-hand sector between Carentan and Grandcamp with its command post at Neuilly-la-Forêt.
- Oberst Ernst Goth's GR-916 was deployed in the central sector between Grandcamp and Colleville-sur-Mer with its command post at Trévières. GR-916 had its 2nd Battalion [II/916] plus the 1st Battalion GR-726 [I/726] and the 3rd Battalion GR-726 [III/726] under their command on D-Day.
- Oberst Walter Korfes GR-726 defended the right-hand sector between Colleville-sur-Mer and Asnelles with its command post at the Château de Sully. GR-726 had Major Lehmann's II/726, and the 1st Battalion of GR-916 [I/916] under command on D-Day.
- Oberstleutnant Karl Meyer's GR-915, two battalions, was positioned just south of Bayeux with its command post at Saint-Paul-du-Vernay. GR-915 formed a counterattack reserve, along with Rittmeister Eitel Gerth's FusBtl-352. This would subsequently become known as Task-Force Meyer.

Hauptmann Werner Jahn's PzJgAbt-352 was in reserve with their self-propelled anti-tank guns, and assault guns between the left and centre of the divisional areas.

GR-916 was responsible for the defence of OMAHA Beach on D-day and Oberst Ernst Goth, the GR-916's commander, recalled how the German preparations to defend his sector were formulated:

“After a study of the analyses of the landings on Sicily and in Italy proper, it was clear to me, that as soon as possible upon landing, the enemy would attempt to capture ideal harbours such as the large harbour of Cherbourg and the harbours near Caen and St. Malo.

Afterwards, they would develop larger bridgeheads with the necessary elements (build-up of reserves and breakout) that assured the continued success of the Invasion.

Consequently, the large harbour of Cherbourg, because of its favourable short distances to the south coast of England, had the greatest importance.

At these conferences, General Marcks developed a scenario where the Allies would aim at taking Cherbourg harbour by first cutting off the Carentan Peninsula through a massive airborne landing at the base of the peninsula along the Lessay to Carentan line.

So, the deployment of our forces was guided by the high probability that the enemy will seek the spacious Cherbourg harbour, by first cutting off the Cotentin Peninsula. After strengthening his bridgehead with additional forces, he would then break out to the south and southeast (through the 352-ID's left-wing) and push on to Paris.

Therefore, the focus in the 352-ID's sector was to both reinforce the left wing from the mouth of the river Vire to the south-east of the Cotentin Peninsula with GR-914 and to use the 2nd Battalion from GR-916 [II/916] as a Division reserve to strengthen the areas around Saint Laurent and send its 1st Battalion [I/916] to Arromanches (what would become the GOLD Beach area). These areas had beaches most likely threatened by enemy landings by sea.

The 84th Army Corps Reserve (the reinforced GR-915) was kept in readiness on the Division's right wing, south of Bayeux, to deal with a possible withdrawal of the 21st Panzer Division [21-PzD], situated as counterattack reserves just to the east. There was some concern by General Marcks that the 21-PzD would be pulled out by the High Command leaving the right wing without reserve forces to back up the 716-ID Zone.

The 84th Army Corps had no forces of its own, which was the normal custom, to be available as reserves. The lack of Corps reserves in the manpower-strapped 84th Army Corps forced General Marks to appropriate 352-ID's battalions. This not only reduced 352-ID's ability to perform its own mission (defence of the 352-ID Zone) but the assignment of battalions outside their home regiment, affected their ability to coordinate operations with their new regimental commands.

Eventually, It became clear to us that the invasion was liable to happen by summer and directly involve our zone. This was supported by press reports about Russia's call for decisive intervention by the Western Powers, by a new stricter censorship in England and the curbing of diplomatic privileges, by the presence (according to the Army newspaper Wehrmacht) of enemy landing crafts gathering on the south coast of England and by the cancellation, from March on, of all furloughs for every commanding and general staff officers. The way the High Command (OKW) carefully monitored the tides also suggested that they expected an invasion soon.”



German dispositions in the OMAHA Beach sector. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

Hauptmann Grimme's II/916 had its headquarters in Formigny and its 5th and 8th Kompanies were deployed forward. Oberleutnant Hahn's No 5 Kompanie [5/916] had its command post at Saint Laurent-sur-Mer and Leutnant Backhaus' No 8 Kompanie had its command post at Colleville-sur-Mer. The 6th and 7th Kompanies were held in reserve east of Formigny with Leutnant Heller's No 6 Kompanie's command post at Le Buissonet and No 7 Kompanie's command post at Surrain.

III/726 was deployed covering the left (west) of GR-916's area of responsibility and its command post was located at the Château de Jucoville. Its No 9 Kompanie [9/726] was at Gruchy, No 10 Kompanie [10/726] at Isigny-sur-Mer, No 11 Kompanie [11/726] at Vierville-sur-Mer, and No 12 Kompanie [12/726] in reserve at Grandcamp.

Leutnant Edmund Bauch's No 3 Kompanie I/726 [3/726] was deployed on the extreme east of OMAHA Beach, northeast of Colleville-sur-Mer in the area surrounded by WN-60, WN-61, WN-62, and WN-63. No 2 Kompanie [2/726] was at Sainte-Honorine-des-Pertes and No 1 Kompanie [1/726] was at Port-en-Bessin.

The Artillery support came from Major Werner Pluskat's Abteilung-1 AR-352 [I/352] with its command post at the Château-d'Étreham. Its Batteries were:

- Oberleutnant Bernhard Frerking's Feld-Batterie 1 [1/352] had its command post at Houtteville and its four 10.5cm leFH 18/40 guns were deployed north of that village.
- Feld-Batterie 2 [2/352] had its command post at Cote 61 near Montigny and two of its four 10.5cm leFH 18/40 guns were deployed just east of Montigny and the remaining two were 1.5 kilometres north of Formigny.
- Hauptmann Wilkening's Feld-Batterie 3 [3/352] had its command post at Cote 63 and its four 10.5cm leFH 18/40 guns were south of Saint Laurent-sur-Mer.



A 10.5cm leFH 18/40 gun in action. [Bild 1011-675-7927-25A]

Abteilung-4 AR-352's [IV/352] command post was at Asnières-en-Bessin and its four 15cm sFH 18 howitzers were located north of Longueville.

Five captured French First World War vintage 15.5cm K 418(f) guns, the Pointe-du-Hoc guns, were located just south of the coastal highway near the Pointe.

Stützpunkte [StP] 74a was located on the clifftop northeast of Englesqueville-La-Percée and was the site of a German Radar Station. It was built by Organisation TODT in 1943 and had several types of Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine radar and antenna. StP-74a consisted of a small SK-type observatory, four radar bases, several shelters, Tobruks, and ammunition bunkers. The station was protected to the south by a minefield.

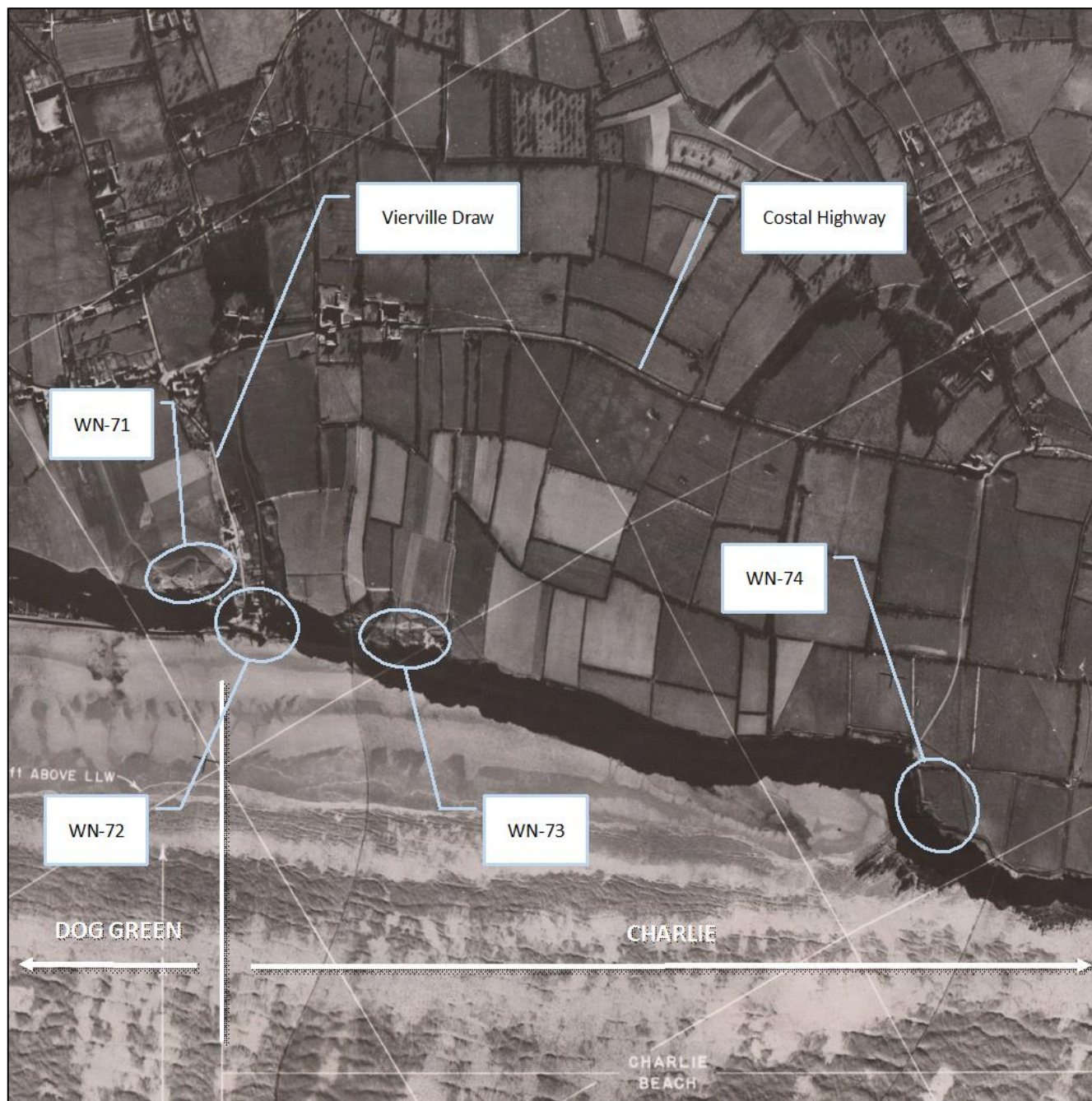


Stützpunkte [StP] 74a at Le Guay, Pointe de La Percée near Englesqueville- La-Percée.

It had four 2cm (Flak 30) anti-aircraft guns, two Würzburg (FuSE 65) radars, one Würzburg (FuSE 62D) radar, one Freya (FuMG 80) radar, one Freya (FUMG 450) radar, and several machine guns. The 120 Luftwaffe personnel were from 9 Flugmelde-Leit-Kompanie of Luftnachrichten-Regiment 53 and the 60 Kriegsmarine personnel from 2 Marine Funkmeßortung Abteilung.

StP-74a was heavily bombed and attacked with rockets and machine guns by the Allied Air Forces before D-Day and the radars were put out of action. On 23 May 1944, RAF Mosquito aircraft attacked the installation, dropping bombs and raking the site with their cannon. Photos taken after 30 May 1944, showed that it was 80% destroyed and the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel evacuated the site and took refuge in the farm opposite with their surviving equipment. The crews left the site and retreated inland to the lateral road, where they were captured by the Americans from OMAHA advancing westward.

The Germans identified that the D-1 Vierville-sur-Mer draw was crucial to the defence of this sector and built four Widerstandsnest (resistance nests), WN-74, WN-73, WN-72 and Wn-71, located in and around Vierville-sur-Mer to protect it. These were collectively known as Stützpunkte Vierville.



An aerial photograph showing the four Widerstandsnest of StP-Vierville. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

WN-74 was a small defensive location on the clifftop at Le Bec et Baie du Mont to the east of StP-74a. It was on the extreme right flank of OMAHA Beach, some distance from the D-1 Vierville draw, and its bunkers were scratch-built by the men stationed there. Elements of 9/726, whose Battalion Headquarters was at Château Castle-de-Gruchy, manned WN-74 and two captured Czech Skoda 7.65cm FK17(t) Feldkanones were within the position. There was a block-built artillery observation post, probably used by an Artillery Observation Officer from AR-352, a trench system and a minefield.



An aerial photograph of WN-74 taken just after D-Day.

The two Czech-built Skoda 76.5cm Fk17(t)s at WN-74 were dug in and covered with a corrugated iron and earthen roof supported by wooden beams.



The Skoda 7.65cm FK17(t) Feldkanones at WN-74 sited to fire along OMAHA Beach [SC-275422]

This would not have afforded much protection from aerial bombing or naval gunfire but would have helped camouflage the guns and afforded some protection against shrapnel. The photograph of the surviving gun at WN-74 clearly shows the wooden beam construction, and behind the American soldier is some camouflage netting that would have been draped across the front of the emplacement to conceal the gun when it was not being fired.

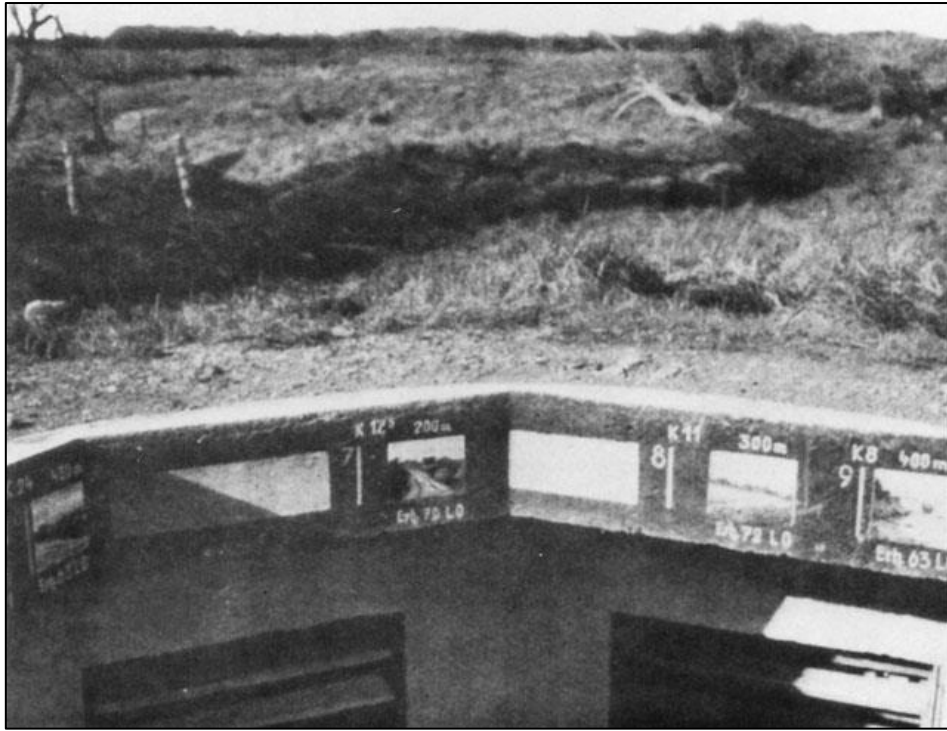
WN-73 was located west of the D-1 Vierville draw and built around the ruins of the Gambier farmhouse. It was manned by part of 11/726.



WN-73 in June 1945. The ruins of the Gambier farmhouse are in the centre.

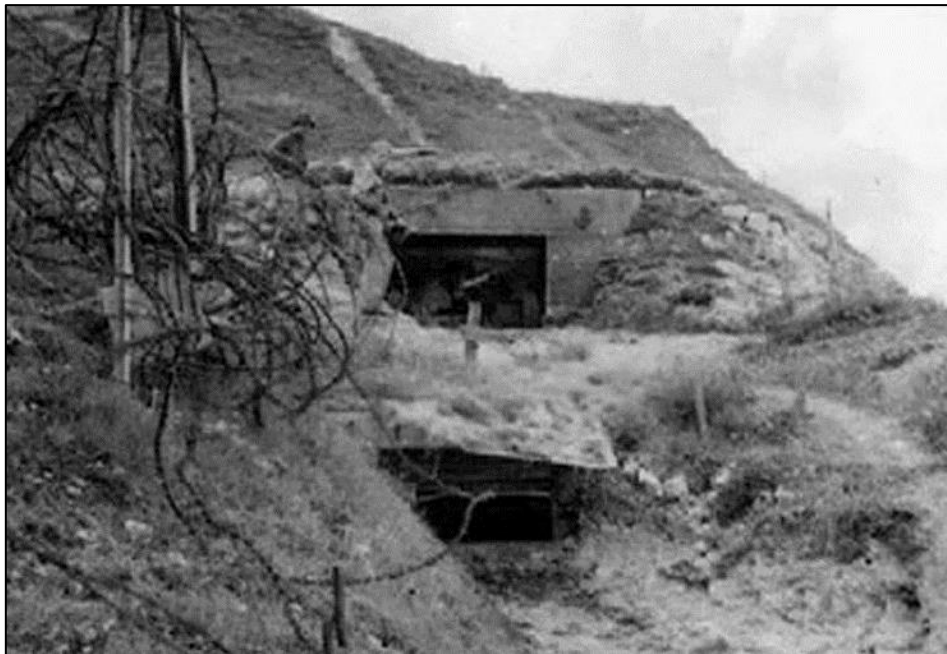
It had one Schneider 7.5cm Pak 97/38 in a Schartenstand bunker, two 8.14cm Granatenwerfer 278(f) Mortars in IC125 Mortar Tobruks, and several machine gun Tobruks and locally prepared positions. An observation bunker had been added to the forward of the two IC125 Mortar Tobruks and this looked straight down the length of OMAHA Beach to the east.

The Mortar Tobruks at WN-73 had oil-painted ranging detail added to the inside to facilitate target indication. From the Tobruk, there was an all-round 360° view and its raised position gave a great view along OMAHA Beach eastwards over WN-72.



The IC125 at WN-73 with its oil-painted ranging detail facilitates target indication.

In addition to the remains of the Gambier farmhouse, there were five Feldmässig concrete personnel bunkers, two IC116 Tobruks, a wooden barracks, a Wasser Tank, a tunnel and trench system and barbed wire entanglements. The Schartenstand bunker for the 7.5cm PaK was set into the hill and completely hidden from seaward.



The Schartenstand bunker and Schneider 7.5cm Pak 97/38 at WN-73.

A trench ran from behind it up the bank to the mortars above and another across the path and up the left side of the defence.

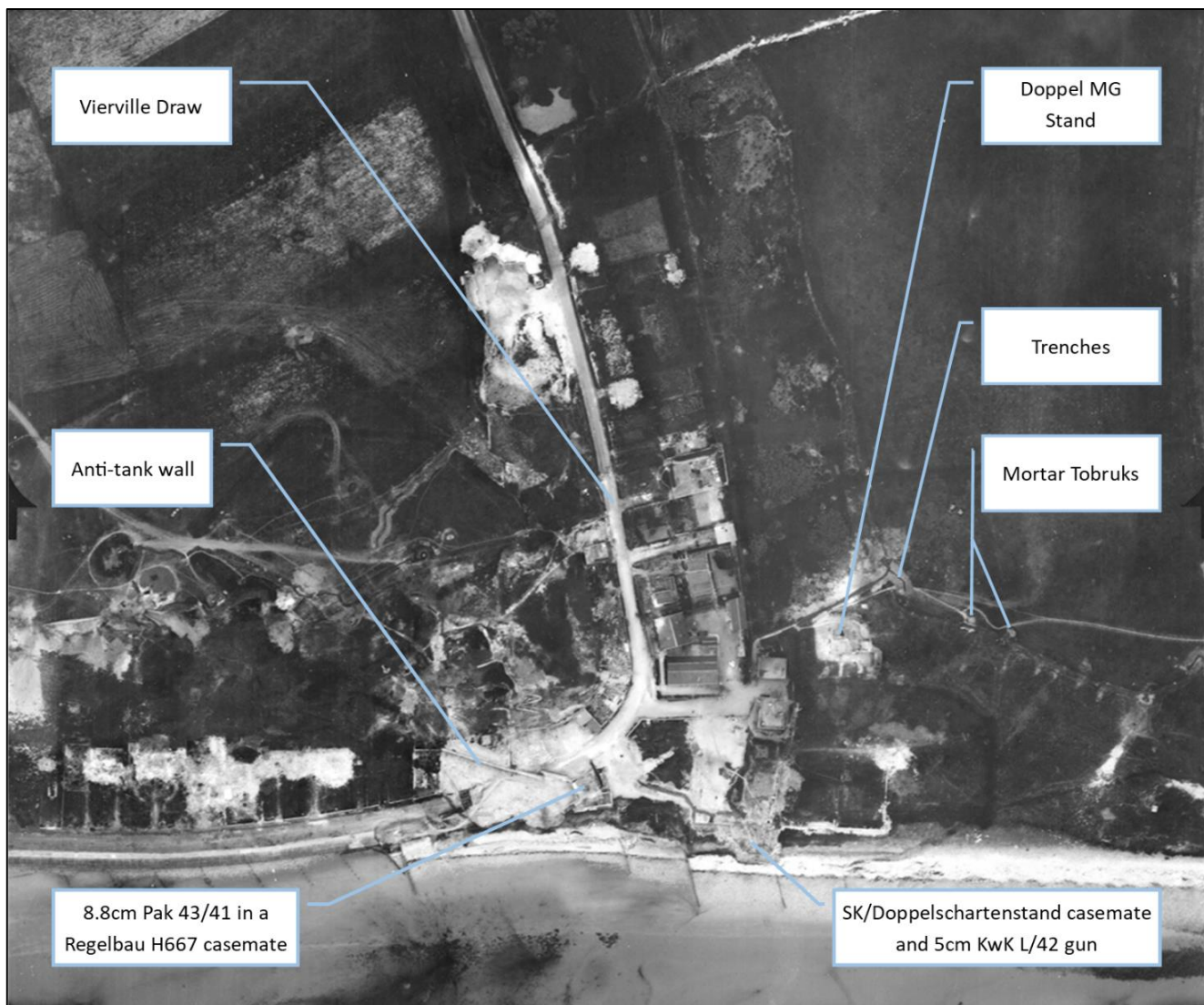


Looking west along OMAHA Beach towards WN-73 from WN-72.

WN-72 was located at the northern entrance of the D-1 Vierville draw and manned by part of 11/726, whose Battalion Headquarters was at Château-de-Jucoville. Before the war, a hotel and casino called the La Gallois had stood on the beachfront at Vierville-sur-Mer. The Germans had built a Regelbau H667 casemate, in which an 8.8cm Pak 43/41 was placed, within the remains of this hotel to camouflage it from the sea.



The remnants of the hotel can be seen in front of the Regelbau H667 casemate housing the 8.8cm Pak 43/41 at the seaward end of the D-1 Vierville draw. [72629-AC]



WN-72 positions. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

A SK/Doppelschartenstand (double embrasure) casemate housing a 5cm KwK L/42 anti-tank gun was built into the seawall just west of the Regelbau H667 casemate and a captured French FT17 tank turret was to be mounted on top behind a small wall, but this had not arrived and was not present on D-Day. There was also a Doppel MG Stand, at least two Mortar Tobruks and trenches on the cliff top to the west of the draw, and extending eastwards across the beachfront road from the Regelbau H667 casemate was an anti-tank wall.

WN-71 was the fourth of Vierville-sur-Mer's defensive strong points and was located on top of the cliffs above the D-1 Vierville draw covering its eastern side and the seaf front. It too was manned by part of 11/726 and had two 8cm Granatenwerfer 34 mortars and two MG-34 machine guns in IC116 Tobruks, one covering the rear and the other the eastern flank. More machine guns were placed in the two Doppel MG Stand bunkers and the trench system along the cliff top.

WN-70 was located on the cliff top between Vierville-sur-Mer and Saint Laurent-sur-Mer and was manned by elements of 10/726, whose command post was at Saint Laurent-sur-Mer. It had two 7.5cm Feldkanone, one 2cm (Flak 30) anti-aircraft gun, two 5cm Granatenwerfer light mortars, four Tobruks and one Regelbau R612 casemate under construction all linked by a trench system.

WN-69 was sited 1 Kilometre behind the beach at Saint Laurent-sur-Mer and manned by elements of 10/726, whose command bunker was located here. It had one 6-barreled 15cm Nebelwerfer 41 rocket launcher and ten Schweres Wurfgerät 41 rocket launchers, controlled by command cables dug into the ground. It was protected by machine guns and had a trench system surrounded by barbed wire entanglements.



An aerial photograph of the Saint Laurent draw showing WN-66, WN-67, WN-68 and the anti-tank ditches.
[© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

WN-68 was located on the western side of the D-3 Saint Laurent draw near the seawall and manned by elements of 10/726. It had one VK 30.01 (H) tank turret fitted with a 7.5cm KwK 37 L/24, one 5cm KwK L/60, one 5cm KwK L/40 in a Nr1694 open ringstand, a 4.7cm Pak 181(f) anti-tank gun, one captured French R35 3.7cm KwK 144(f) tank turret mounted on top of a Vf68c Tobruk, and one FT-MG.311(f) mounted on top of a Vf67 Tobruk. It had an anti-tank ditch with barbed wire in front of it across the draw, a Doppel MG Stand bunker, several machine gun positions and a trench system. It was positioned to deny an attacker access to the draw and was still under construction. Building work to place the 5cm KwK guns in casemates was in progress and a Regelbau H667 casemate was under construction to house a larger gun.

WN-67 was located on the higher ground to the rear of the beach and east of the D-3 Saint Laurent draw. It was an artillery position manned by artillerymen of the Werfer-Regiment 84 whose mission was to support WN-66 and WN-68 located close to the beach. It had up to 40 Schweres Wurfgerät 32cm rocket launchers, controlled by command cables dug into the ground, and just one concrete casemate.

WN-66 was located east of the D-3 Saint Laurent draw close to the beach and manned by elements of 10/726. It had one 5cm KwK L/60 in an Nr1694 ringstand, one MG-34 mounted in an IC116 Tobruk, two ringstands for Granatenwerfer mortars, several machine guns and Flammenwerfers. The "Villa Les Sables d'Or" was a fortified house and there was a small railway for moving shingle and stone to make concrete.

WN-65 was located west of the E-1 Le Ruquet draw close to the beach and manned by elements of 10/726. It had one 7.5cm Pak 40, one 5cm Pak 38, one 5cm KwK L/60 in a Regelbau H667 casemate, one 5cm KwK L/60 in a Nr1694 ringstand, a 3.7cm Pak in a Ringstand, one 5cm Granatwerfer 201(b) in a Tobruk, two 61a mortar ringstands, one Vf58c Tobruk, a small command post, and a bunker with 2-metre-thick reinforced walls built in the cellar of a house. There was an additional R667 casemate under construction, an 800-metre anti-tank ditch, minefields surrounding the forward zone, several locally made bunkers and an extensive trench network.

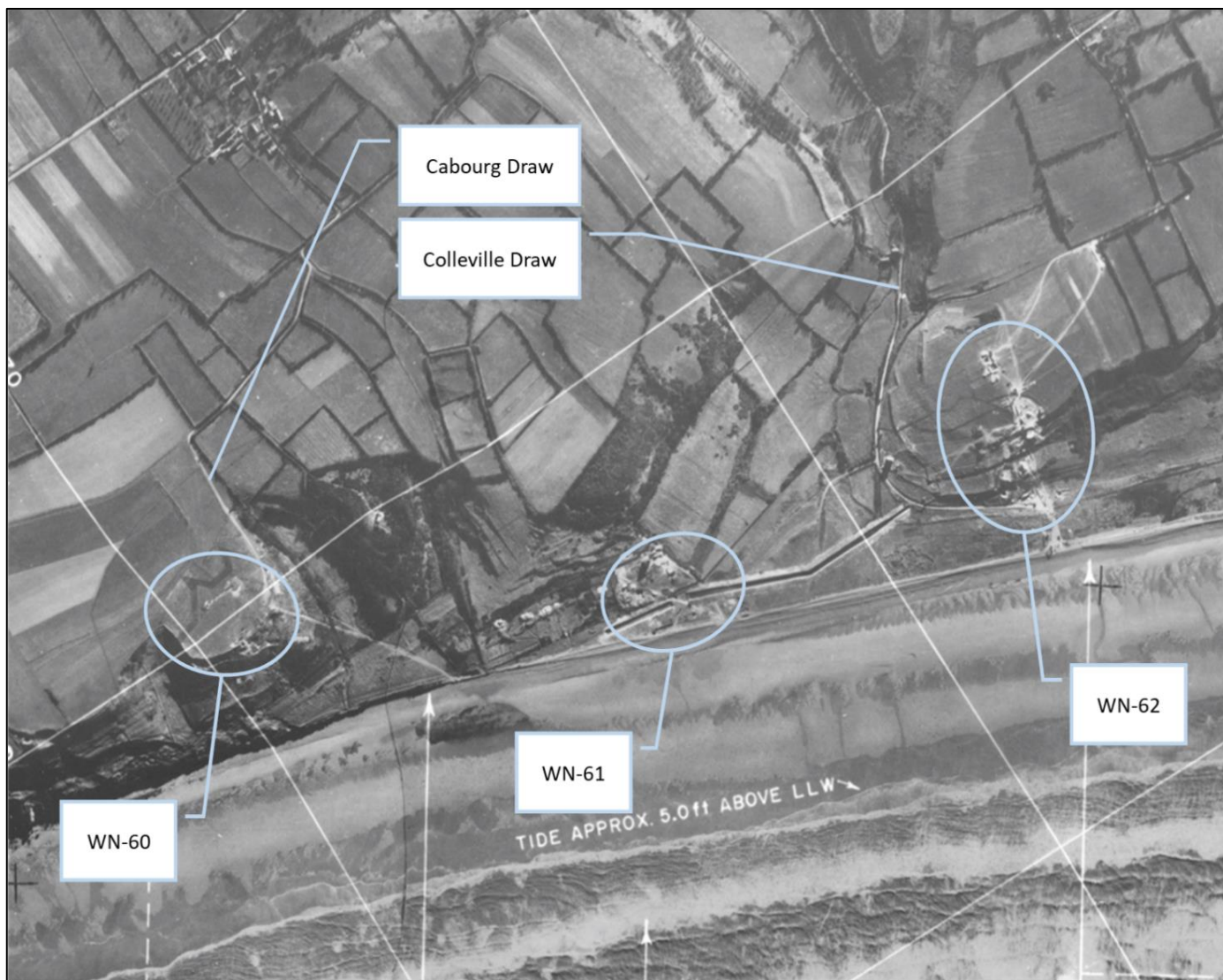


The Regelbau H667 casemate at WN-65 was used as a beach control point after D-Day. [SC-190266A]

WN-64 was located east of the E-1 Le Ruquet draw on the high ground above the beach and manned by elements of 3/726, whose command post was at WN-63 at Colleville-sur-Mer. It had one captured Soviet 7.62cm Infanteriekanonehaubitze 290(r) Infantry Howitzer, two 8.14cm Granatenwerfer 278(f) Mortars in Vf58c Tobruks, two Feldmässing shelters and one Regelbau R612 casemate (under construction).

WN-63 was a three-roomed bunker at Colleville-sur-Mer along the road leading north to OMAHA Beach. On D-Day, it was the headquarters of Leutnant Edmund Bauch's 3/726.

WN-62 was located near the beach west of the E-3 Colleville draw and manned by elements of 3/726. It had a 7.5cm Pak anti-tank gun, two captured Belgium 7.5cm Feldkanone 235(b), one of which was in a Regelbau R669 casement, a 5cm KwK L/42 in a field position and an 8cm Granatenwerfer mortar in a Vf69 bunker. There was a second Regelbau R669 casement and a Regelbau R667 casemate under construction, two Vf61a bunkers, a machine gun anti-aircraft ringstand, two SK bunkers, one Vf2d bunker, and an observation bunker. The bunkers were connected by an extensive trench system and were protected by barbed wire and minefields.



An aerial photograph of the Cabourg and Colleville draws showing WN-60, WN-61, WN-62 and the anti-tank ditch. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

The soldiers at WN-62 on D-Day included Oberleutnant Bernhard Frerking, the Gunnery Control Officer directing the fire of the four 10.5cm FH18 guns of Feld-Batterie 1 Artillerie-Regiment 352 [1/352] located north of Houtteville. Another was Gefreiter Heinrich Severloh, also of 1/352, who manned an MG-42 machine gun on D-Day, and 18-year-old Gefreiter Franz Gockel of 1/726 who manned a capture Polish MG-1908 water-cooled machine gun on D-Day.

WN-61 was located directly behind the beach east of the E-3 Colleville draw and manned by elements of 3/726. It had one 8.8cm Pak 43/41 in a Regelbau R667 casemate, one 5cm KwK L/60 Pak anti-tank gun in a Nr1694 open ringstand, a captured French R35 3.7cm KwK 144(f) tank turret mounted on top of a Panzer Tobruk, one 5cm Granatenwerfer 201(b) mortar, two Vf58c machine gun Tobruks, a third machine gun Tobruk, a Vf221/3 bunker, a Wellblech bunker, and one Feldmässing shelter. In front of WN-61 were two tanks half full of water, and the site was protected by barbed wire, minefields and trenches.

WN-60 was located on the high ground east of the F-1 Cabourg draw and manned by elements of 3/726. It had two 7.5cm Feldkanone 235(b), a turret from a captured French APX R with a 3.7cm KwK 144(f) and co-axle mounted MG311(f) on a Tank turret Tobruk, two 5cm Fest-Granatenwerfer 210(f) mortars in Vf61a mortar Tobruks, two Vf59a machine gun Tobruks, a Vf59a Mortar Tobruk, an Observation bunker, and a Wasser bunker. There was an extensive trench system, barbed wire defences and minefields.

Look Forward

In Part Seventeen of D-Day, 6 June 1944 – The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I look at the actions of Company A 116 IR and Company C 2 Ranger on D-Day near Vierville-sur-Mer.

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