The Atlantic Wall in North Brittany (Bretagne Nord), France

By

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The Atlantic Wall was a series of fortifications built by the German Army, Navy, and Air Force during World War II to prevent the Allies from landing in continental Europe. Today, these structures serve as evidence and markers of coastal changes during the 60 years since the end of the war. Well-known cases of coastal degradation have been documented along the Normandy coastlines between Le Tréport and Cherbourg (Chazette et al. 1995; Desquennes and Ronne 2004). Importantly, some erosion might have been triggered by massive war damage in 1944 and enhanced by intensive tourist activities before and after World War II, including tourism at the Allied landing sites since 1945.

Figure 1. Overview map showing North Brittany and details of the Plage du Val-André.

The writer inspected numerous German fortifications in North Brittany (Bretagne Nord) between Cancale and Brest (Figures 1, 2). No evidence of major coastal erosion was found anywhere, but for two minor exceptions (Plage des Vallées and Plage de Sable d'Or Les Pins). Along the coastline from Cancale to Brest, there were two major defense points at Saint-Malo/Dinan and Brest. The former was the supply harbor for the occupied Channel Islands, while the latter was a major, heavily protected navy base (Figure 3A, B). In addition, there was a 203-mm gun battery near Paimpol, and some strong defenses around Lannion airport (Figure 1). The rest of the Atlantic Wall in Bretagne was made of smaller structures. Most fortifications and bunkers were located on rocky promontories overlooking beaches, harbors, and potential landing sites. A good example is the Plage du Val-André shown in Figure 2.

The Plage du Val-André is a 1.7 km long beach (Chanson 2004) protected by three strongholds at Les Murs-Blancs, Rue des Bignons, and Pointe de Pléneuf (Château-Tanguy) (Figure 2). At Les Murs-Blancs, there was a machine gun bunker and a larger gun bunker, which today are beneath a house at the top of Pointe de Murs Blancs. The bunkers covered the Plage du

Figure 2. Detailed map of Plage du Val-André fortifications.

Figure 3A. Fortifications around Brest designed and operated by the German Navy. Fort and Phare de Kermorvan, Le Conquet on 19 April 2004 - Note the 105 mm gun German bunker well camouflaged beneath the fort and rocky cliff.
Figure 3B. Pointe du Petit Minou on 14 April 2004 showing the 105 mm German gun bunker above the Phare and Fort du Petit Minou at the entrance of the Goulet de Brest.

Figure 4. Pointe des Murs-Blancs, Plage du Val-André looking northeast at the Val-André beach from the bunker at high tide on 18 April 2004, with the Pointe de Pléneuf in background (top left).

Val-André from the rocky promontory (Figure 4). At Rue des Bignons, there was a bunker for guns at the top of the dune overlooking the beach. The bunker is today inside the concrete promenade. On the hill above Rue des Bignons, there was also a personnel bunker behind the main battery connected to it by a trench, and a few additional bunkers for observation and communication. At Pointe de Pléneuf, there were several bunkers: three for guns on the hill slope covering the Plage du Val-André; an observation bunker at the top overlooking both Plage du Val-André and Plage des Vallées and equipped with a 22-cm thick steel turret (Figures 5, 6); and several trenches and smaller bunkers on the promontory.

In addition to these three strong points, anti-tank gates blocked all access streets to the beach (Portes Maginot). In addition, there were a few more small bunkers including a camouflaged one for a 50-mm gun besides the stairs of Chapelle du Val-André. Further, numerous mines and obstacles covered the beach, as illustrated by period photographs.

Three batteries of four 155-mm guns each covered the Plage du Val-André. These were located at La Croix des Landes, Le Souchay, and Les Petites Landes. The batteries were about 3 km inland and protected all the beaches from Plage du Port-Morvan to Plage de Sables d’Or les Pins, including Plage du Val-André. They covered in particular the 7.3 km-long beaches between Pointe de Pléneuf and Erquy (Figure 7). For completeness, the smaller beach of Port-Morvan was blocked by an anti-tank wall and machine gun site (Figure 8).

At Val-André, all the fortifications were built in late 1943 and 1944 by the German army under the supervision of General Erwin Rommel, who inspected these works at least once. The
Figure 7. View of Plage de Saint-Pabu, Plage de la Ville Berneuf, Plage du Nantois and Plage des Vallées from a machine gun bunker protecting Plage de Saint-Pabu on 18 April 2004 around mid ebb tide with strong westerly winds, and looking west-southwest with Pointe de Pléneuf (with the trees) and Verdelet Island in the background.

German army deserted the Plage du Val-André and surrounding fortifications on 4-5 August 1944 with the rapid advance of the American army.

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REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL READING


INTERNET LINKS

Photographs of Atlantic Wall Structures
http://www.uq.edu.au/~c2hchans/photo.html#Atlantic_wall

The Atlantic wall between Plouha and Plestin les Grèves (Côtes d’Armor)
http://perso.wanadoo.fr/passion.histoire/mur.htm

The Atlantic Wall
http://www.atlantikwall.net/

Figure 3. German anti-tank wall at Plage du Port-Morvan on 1 May 2004 around mid ebb tide. (A) View from the access road. A machine gun site was located at the top of the wall on the right. (B) View from the beach.
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