

THE 'IJSELLINIE' - Post WW-II Line

THE 'IJSELLINIE'

A line of defense from the 'Cold War'. Driving along the beautiful winding dike between the villages 'Olst' and 'Deventer' the attention suddenly is drawn to a real tank-cannon. This is even weird as unexpected. The upper part (cupola) of a Sherman tank, complete with cannon, so to see on a concrete basis or pillbox. The barrel is pointing threatening to the north-east. It seems to be maintained well, proper military-green, not rusty but well forseen with a firm lock so no-one can enter. First question that comes up is: 'What is that thing doing overthere' ?? Some small signs indicate what it is all about. This is a part of the 'IJssellinie' , a defense line from the time of the Cold-War. But, looking around in the landscape, one might immediately ask himself, what there is to be defended overthere, just on the east side of the river 'IJssel'. You should expect it on the other side of the river. Following the signs of the route, we come to a pillbox hidden in the woods. When you follow the signs even further, the whole IJssellinie history will be made clear with textures and pictures. It's a highly recommended when you are there once to visit and walk around. Mostly the sight of a pillbox or 'Bunker' as they are called in The Netherlands is associated with war, and particularly World War II. But these defense works are built after WW-II and have nothing to do with this period.

THE POLITICAL REASON

The joy about the end of World War II was already tempered fast over the whole world, by the uprising fear that maybe the battle was not over yet. The treaty between more or less democratic countries with the communist Russia to overcome fascism and national socialism was looked upon in the western countries with suspicion. This was caused among other things because the agreements that were made between the allied countries after the war were interpreted strongly in diverse ways. Already in 1943 during a conference in Teheran the political spheres of influence were decided. Agreed upon was that the countries in Middle- and Southeast of Europe would be democratised and made free of fascism. Russia however labelled a large part of it's democratic oriented opponents as fascistic.

In 1946 the trouble began. Russia did not want to leave Persia (Iran). Together with the British they were there to avoid that Germans could reach the sources of energy. Only after threat of America through the Security Council to interfere, the Russians left the area.

Churchill who had made appointments with Stalin in Jalta in 1945 about the to be divided spheres of influence in Central-Europe suggested that only an imaginary 'Iron Curtain' (straight through the middle of Europe) could stop the Russians. This was the first time this term was used and he spoke of it in the United States.

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In 1947 new tensions came up. Communistic guerilla's were active in Greece. They could go there easily because Bulgaria, Albania and Yugoslavia were in the spheres of influence of Russia. Though this was against the agreements. The British supported the Greek but they had not been able to manage yet the consequences of the war themselves and could not handle this anymore. The US took over this problem.

The American president Truman proclaimed that his country should be ready to support all free nations who were resisting against attempts of surpression by minorities or foreign pressure: the 'Trumandoctrine' .

These developments and involved tensions between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies - where there was no peace, but neither war - were generally called the 'Cold War'.

Summer 1947 the American minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Marshall stated that America would like to help the European countries, if they could manage to combine their economic needs and efforts to a common plan. This way the common organ OEEC (Organisation for European-Economic Cooperation) came up of sixteen European countries that got help, which was called the 'Marshall-Plan'. This also was the beginning of the existence of a bloc in Europe.

In 1948 a communistic coupe d'état took place in Tsjecho-Slovakia after during free elections only a small part of the votes were in favour of the communists. A country that was seen as a Model-Democracy was suddenly drawn behind the Iron Curtain on a very bloody way.

Because of the feeling of threat nations came together and this way the 'West-European-Union' came into being. An alliance of France, Great-Britain, and the BeNeLux countries. In that period you were able to make reservations on boats that - if the Russians might come - bring you to safer areas.

During the attempts to come to a new German united state after Worldwar-II the Soviet Union showed a rigid but not unwilling attitude. They kept occupied the later East-Germany. In 1946 the Americans and the British also combined their Berlin territories and in 1947 also the French part was combined. In 1948 Russia set a hold tot is development and started the blockade of Berlin. Because on one hand the Allies did not want to use violence, but on the other hand did not want to capitulate, they started an air-lift to Berlin. After ten months the blockade appeared to be failed and the Russians discontinued the blockade in exchange for a new conference about the German matter, which however did not result.

April 1949 the Northern Atlantic Pact came to exist to protect Western Europe against any possible Soviet aggression. First states were Canada, the US, Great-Britain, France, Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Iceland and Portugal. By article five of this treaty an attack to one of them would be considered as an attack to all.. Not only half a year later the NATO (Northern Atlantic Treaty Organisation) was founded. The American monopoly on atomic weapons was

greatfully used as an excuse to let conventional reinforcements behind, this to great pain in the neck of the Americans.

DEFENSE PLANS IN NATO CONNECTION

NATO plans foresaw at first only in very modest measures for a defenseline along the river 'Rijn' between Switzerland and the Northsea. If the enemy might come, this enemy might be held by delaying combats in Germany behind this natural obstacle. The Netherlands wanted to add the 'IJssel' river to this defenseline, after all by maintaining the Rijn as defenseline, a large part of Dutch area would be given up. In the overpopulated 'Randstad' one could not have a proper defense either. Three divisions of troops on stand-by were considered necessary for an effective defense along the IJssel river. Only problem was that The Netherlands did not have one available ... The only army we had was active in Netherlands-India and the NATO partners stated that The Netherlands did very less to build an effective rebuilding of an army. Under pressure that NATO partners did disdainful about this small country - and don't forget the bad financial situation - but also the need of having a proper defense suddenly the solution was found, in correspondence with the tradition of our country: A land flooded as a defense line !

THE WATER DEFENSELINE

A disconnection was planned by means of barrages (dams) in the 'Lower Rijn' and the river 'Waal' so all this water would float to the IJssel river. This river would overflow and an area of at least five kilometers width would be under water. It would be so deep that one could not walk through it, but also it would not be possible to go through it with ships. Important point was that it would take less cost and less personnel and material than one division. The cost of such an inundation system (letting land overflow by water) was calculated on 80 million guilders by that time. Plans were hatched most secretly. The minister gave permission and because of the secret the government was not informed (!) The plan was therefore called 'Emergencybridges Pontoon-plan' and worked out by the Technical Highschool in Delft and the official water organisation called 'Rijkswaterstaat' . The building started in 1949 without any contract and without any specifications (hardly thinkable at present). Existing defense pillboxes near Nijmegen and Arnhem were not prepared or modified... In the mean time to guarantee a fast overflow, it appeared that a third dam would be necessary.

THE 'IJSELLINIE' AT OLST

Though the locations at Arnhem and Nijmegen also take part of the defenseline, we only focus on this third one, location Olst. On the eastern shore of the IJssel there were some higher positioned terrains so it was obvious that defense installations to protect the 'waterline' should be built in that direction. Most of these permanent defense objects were built east of the IJssel river, along the railway Zwolle-Deventer. Also on west-side defense objects arose, as a coordinationpoint for anti-aircraft artillery.

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THE DAM

The essence of the IJsselline was the dam. It became a floating dam, because shipping had to continue in peace-time. In floating water it is almost impossible to create a closed system. So it became an open construction which could be placed in position with winches. It could be sunk, and closed with hatches, also known as caissons. The Olst caisson was 86 meters long, 30 meters large and 8 meters high. 30 meters was necessary to resist the waterpressure. Once the dam was placed they would sink some ships behind it to help keeping the pressure stand. By means of a dredger all was covered with a thick layer of sand to avoid damage by bombers. The dam was specialised as pillar-dam with partitions, to avoid the water to float 'indike'. The water should be able to float inland regulated. A water work of art was born ! An inlet diagonal through the dike. By means of a 4,30 meters high segment-valve the water could float inland this way.

This inletwork was partly restored by means of European subsidy, it's the only part remainde, but not to be used anymore.

Once the water would be let in, it would create an all destroying stream, everything would float away. Inundation basins were made to avoid this, and the water could be regulated this way to let's say for example 50 cm high, otherwise it would be possible to use boats. Ingenious precautions were taken to be able to remove the watermasses afterwards back to the 'IJsselmeer' (lake)

THE DEFENSE

Certainly the dam would be an object to attack from out of the East. The target had to be protected and they had learned that it could be done better by a lot of small defenseworks than one big one. So a ring of in total 67 pillboxes was built, small and hard to eliminate. In the area it looks as if there are a lot of small dikes, but appearance cheats... The height of these small dikes is actually the normal height of the landscape. Much sand was needed and the defense forces bought the sand from the farmers, Streets remained, sand was dug away and this way they looked like dikes, also this way a regulation system came to exist to regulate the water. This way there was a defense against air and also ground attacks.

AGAINST AIR ATTACKS

On a distance of 1 kilometer around the dams pillboxes were built for anti aircraft artillery. This was the BOFOR 40mm and Quad-machineguns. These were positioned on the pillboxes and not in it, so it was possible to move them fast if necessary. The accent of this air-defense was pointing to the North, because the enemy planes would come from that direction. Not from the South, because near the place 'Deventer' there was heavy air-defense. In those days they flew on points of recognition and following the line churchtower of Wijhe, churchtower of Olst one would exactly come to the dams. So it was discussed those days to remove the churchtower of Wijhe, but it never came so far. The pillboxes for anti air artillery were manned by the Air Artillery Unit and that Command-pillbox was situated on the West-side of the river, situated in a building which looked like an ordinary barn next to a

farm. But inside it was the commandpost, and the roof is fake. It could be opened and than the air artillery was able to take planes under fire.

AGAINST GROUND TARGETS

On the On the east-side we find the Command-bunker of the infantry. It was an area where infanterists could maintain very well. But also reinforcements were used by means of a pillboxes equipped with a cannon. Those guns were given by the Americans, old Sherman tanks of which only the cupola and gun were used to build in the concrete, stripped before of all still usable parts. Only the cannon was important. This way a mix existed of air- and ground defense because different kinds of pillboxes were positioned between eachother. Armamenys were an excellent supplement of eachother, because the quad-machineguns also were very capable for ground targets as well. Specially for infantry victims a hospital pillbox was built with a capacity of 36 wounded , complete with surgery-room and all !

FUNCTION OF THE LINE

In 1962 inhabitants of cities along the IJssel river complained about stench, bad smell inconvenience, the toilets could not be flushed properly, and the farmers complained about too wet estates. Nobody knew what was going on, and the civil authorities had no explanation what so ever. Believe it or not, the casue was... the Cuba crisis ! International tensions rose so high, that readiness of troops was raised and 'telegram N' was issued.measures were taken that the water level in the IJsselmeer (IJssel-lake) was rising with all consequences this brought with it. If the next step had tob e taken, about 400.000 people would have to be evacuated immediately with leaving all goods, houses and animals behind ! Cattle, cows and sheep would have drowned instantly ! Next to the Cuba-crisis this measure was also taken and inundancy (overflowing) prepared while Hungary was taken by the Russians in 1956 and during the building of the 'Berlin-Wall' in 1961.

THE END OF THE 'IJSELLINIE'

When in 1955 Germany entered the NATO a possibility came into being of the concept of 'Forward Defense'. The defense lines could be moved eastwards to the rivers Elbe and Weser. Though it took some time still before all was setup and arranged and dicided that the IJsellinie was not neccessary anymore. This decision was taken in 1964. Many of the 'artworks' have been demolished ever since.

SECRET

Little photographs were taken once there was an exercise, all happened in the deepest secrecy! In those years you were not even allowed to stop on the dikes, and forget about making pictures of eventual spotted military equipment or soldiers at all. It happened that at night soldiers thought to see 'the enemy' while it appeared to be... cows. Nobody in the neighbourhood really knew what was happening around the estate 'De Haere'. Construction companies worked all separate from eachother, no plans were put on paper at all. Some youth knew by that time, by speaking secretly to an individual soldier that there was 'something like a hospital' but no-one knew

exactly what was going on, a completely unthinkable situation in our time now. Some majors of the villages knew about some evacuation plans, but no-one knew about the inundancy, the water constructions in this forbidden area ! Civil authorities didn't know. Regiment magazine shows you some images taken in the Command-pillbox, which an organisation of volunteers is trying to get completely in the original state, which seems to be going on very well. Carpenters, electricians, hobbyists, and even ex-military men work hard in their free-time. Population even still now bring parts and goods from that time to complete everything as possible. Also the hospital pillbox is restored now and can be seen inside. Recently a new discovered pill-box complex was started renovation, amongst others shelters for the soldiers. Thanks to these volunteers thousands of people have been lead around by the foundation 'De Ijssellinie' and they have been able to hear about the exiting history of this enormous complex, and many thousands still will hear about it. When interested you can visit www.ijssellinie.nl , the story is in five different languages.

Kees Otten & Wim Das

Special thanks to Mr. Timo Riesewijk, retired Officer and Guide. Mr. Riesewijk provided all information, and made it possible to publish this article.

