THAT WE MIGHT BE FREE

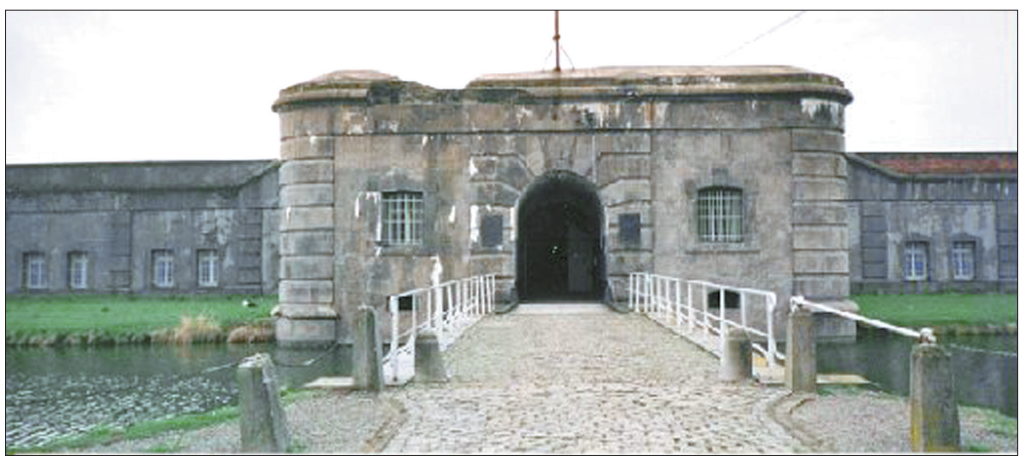
PART 2

I had been asked once by a protesting teenager over History homework, "why do I have to learn about dead people and stuff that happened years ago?" As a parent I responded, "so that it never happens again and you know how it started so you will be wiser if you see the signs."

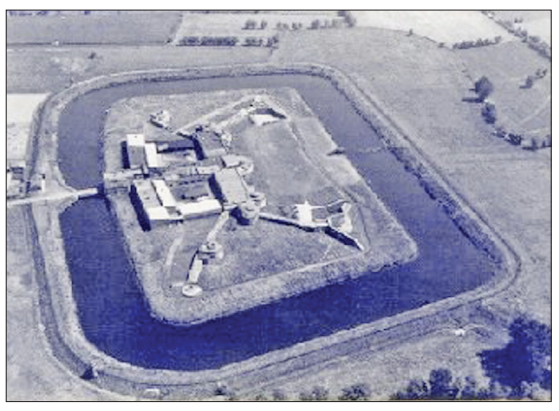
Before I walked through the barb-wired gates with their threatening black and white stripes, I tried to brace my emotions, still my imagination and put into perspective that this was one concentration camp out of 3500 or more to be found in the final crush of the German occupation. The day was blustery with dark puffy rain clouds gathering in conspiracy, just waiting for the unsuspecting soul without an umbrella. Or maybe it was that way to lend solemn atmosphere to a tour of mourning, sympathy and humbleness.

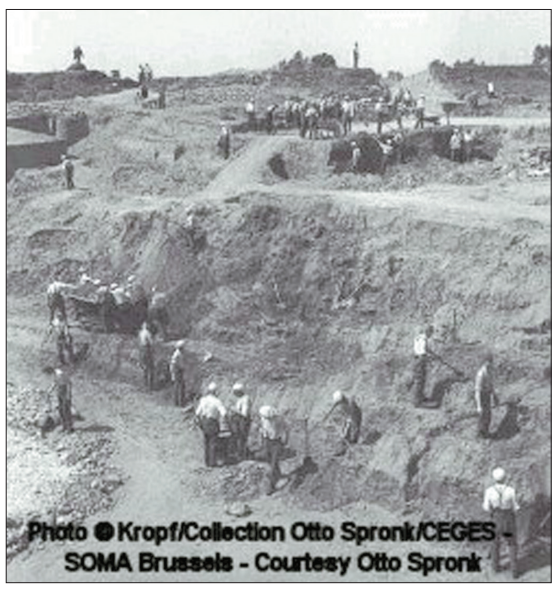
Once again my thoughts turned to the unbelievable hardships I had seen on film, I tried to open my mind to learning and remember that sometimes in film a bit of excess is used to get a point across. Little did I know as I walked towards the impenetrable fortress, that I was retracing the last footsteps of nearly 4,000 innocent people. Schindler's List, Holocaust and The Devil's Arithmetic gave me insight. Back in 1972, I saw real footage of the camp findings in my Civics class. As a teen, it did not affect me to the fullest because it happened on the other side of the world. For the same reason, sitting on my sofa watching the television did not allow the true feelings of despair, hopelessness, finality and prejudices to creep into my comfortable surroundings.

Before entering the fortress, I crossed over a wooden bridge that crossed a deep moat of water.



High fences surrounded the outer perimeter of the moat. The tangled mess of wire that protected the top of the fence was old and rusty but still contained the impassable barbs and blades from 50 years before. There was a great stillness as a chilled wind freely swept over the water. Several geese swam peacefully along the banks. Had they been there 50 years earlier, their serenity would not have been seen or enjoyed. Their freedom would have been envied or admired, maybe even pitied for where they swam was created by innocent sweat, blood and human lives.

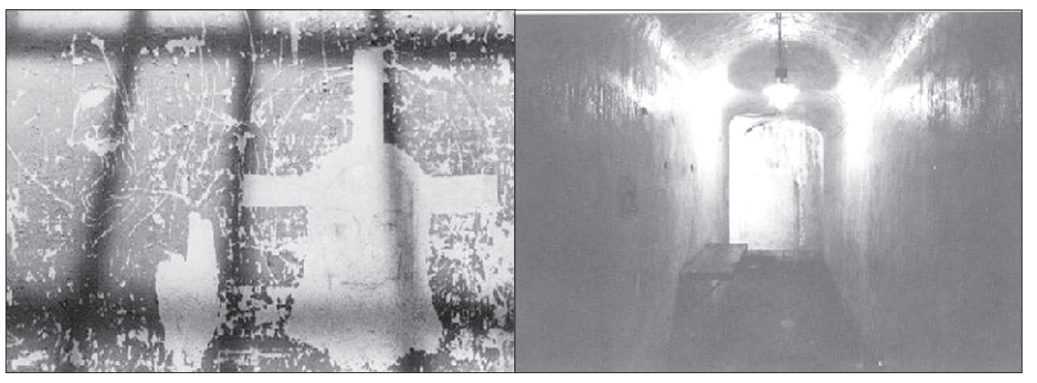




The impact of the work came into understanding when later I saw a display with what the fortress looked like in 1914 before WW1. The entire compound was located underground with minimal exposure to the view from overhead. What I would see was the work of the souls who had been prisoners here. Nearly 250,000 cubic meters of dirt had been manually removed with handpicks, shovels and little wooden roll carts. The dirt removed from the structure was then used to build the outer walls of the moat.

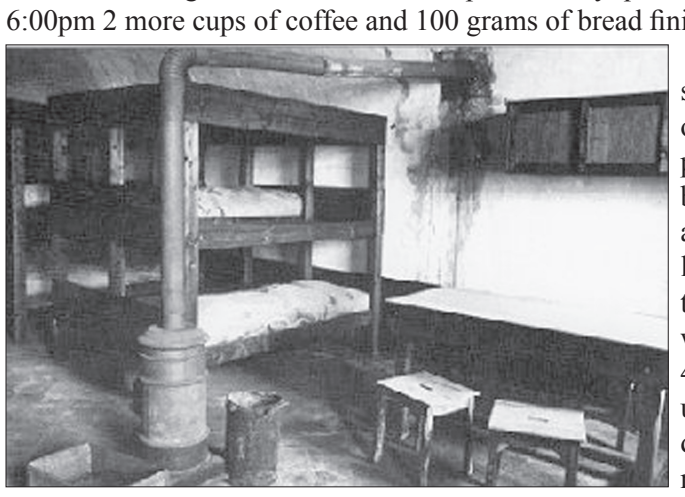
Entering the compound itself, the still coldness of quiet air caused me to shiver. Was it the reality inside this reinforced concrete hell or the quiet souls of the executed brushing past so that I would never forget? My footsteps echoed on the cobblestone corridor, the single light bulbs overhead only added to the depressive atmosphere.

The walls were lined on both sides with stout wooden doors about five foot high. Other "rooms" contained more of the same little chambers. Through the little openings in the doors one could see narrow cubicles barely wide enough to outstretch the arms. These were the solitary confinement chambers, a small place for last contemplation before being taken to the "Bunker". Many words, names and last pleads of faith were etched into the walls with whatever could be found to make a mark.

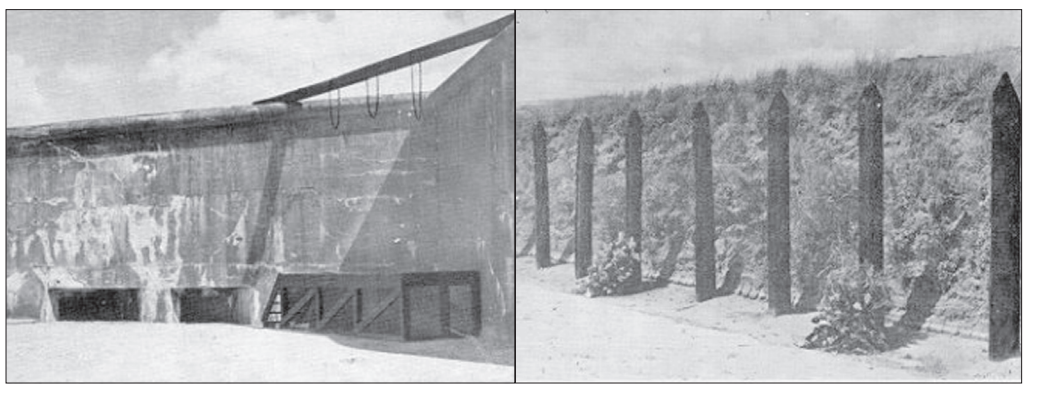


The "Bunker" was the interrogation chamber. Located through a narrow hall with twists and turns it opened into a small chamber with hooks and pulleys still hanging from the ceiling. Political prisoners, women and men had hung from these while coals were put to their feet, cigarettes were pushed into their flesh and without warning they were carelessly dropped on their backs onto a triangular wedge with a sharpened edge. In the words of one survivor of this torture, "they showed great ingenuity in devising tortures. The more degrading the better, but it was they who were degraded not their victims. It is easy to make a person scream but few of us talked."

Another device of torture was to fill a canvas backpack with heavy stone bricks. I figured the weight of this "sack" to be about 65 pounds. The "punished" had to wear this from the time he got up at 4a.m. until he went to bed at 8p.m. His day of manual labor was intensified by the extra weight. The meager meal that was fed to all prisoners did nothing to sustain him. The day began at 5:30am with 2 cups of roasted acorn coffee and 125 grams of bread. At 3:30pm a watery quart/liter of soup was eaten and at 6:00pm 2 more cups of coffee and 100 grams of bread finished the day.



In the quarters where they slept, nearly 47 other prisoners shared one chamber pot, one little stove to warm by and no conversation was allowed. They were not allowed to sit down their last two hours before 8:00pm when the lights went out. At 4:00am they woke up from uneasy sleep, ran to the corridor to wash in the long sinks, ran to get their breakfast and then ran back to fold their straw mattresses, all assisted by the warden with a stick to make sure they didn't slow down. For those of Jewish decent, a construction called the "hutment" was created on an exterior wall. The floors were dirt and the walls were thin wood covered by black tarpaper. The same treatment was given here without the benefit of mattresses or interior warmth.



Outside the fortress, a corner had been allotted for the executions. I felt tears trying fiercely to escape and my throat was so tight. The firing posts had beautiful bouquets of flowers at their feet. The gallows platform was covered with other bouquets where those who never forgot came to pay their respects. On this very ground where I walked nearly 164 prisoners had been shot, defending their freedom or comrades who were still free. Others died innocently because the Germans could not find the real person they were looking for and someone had to pay. Sometimes the exchange rate of one took 10 deaths in his place. Twenty-one other prisoners had been hung. At least 108 other prisoners had been executed in other places. At least 98 had died from torture, starvation, assault and drowning.

A special shrine was constructed after the Liberation in 1944 to house urns filled with ashes from many of the concentration camps discovered. Bullets found at the execution posts, ribbons from memorials and remnants of religious beliefs found in the ashes are here.

Before leaving this place of hell and torment, one must pass through a large room with memorial plaques on the walls of all that had been executed here. To look at the names, to think of families associated with these names and to think on the life of the one bearing the name caused such pain in me. I experienced anger over something that happened before I was born. I felt immense Compassion and sympathy for human lives. Hatred for an idea that almost succeeded welled up in me.

The long corridor exiting the fort was made of marble, shaped like an S and on this wall were the names of every person who had passed through this concentration camp. Nearly 4000 people who believed in their freedom, who died for their freedom or died so that others could carry on the fight for freedom was given space. For many, this was

not the stopping place. About 2330 people rode the enclosed train cars to other concentration camps in Germany. I could only have hoped after seeing this first-hand, that their fate elsewhere had a happier ending and they survived.

I walked out of this hellhole with my freedom and rights still intact. Many soldiers and civilians from many different lands and countries gave their lives and went to great risk to ensure others would have freedom. I know I will never forget...

(the quotes were taken from authentic audio recounts of survivors at Fort Breendonk) 1 picture is © Kropf/Collection Otto Spronk/CEGES - SOMA Brussels Courtesy Otto Spronk. *Visit also: http://www.breendonk.be and http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/cc.html*

NOTICE

The Veteran's Administration is partnering with the Pawnee Indian Health Center to enroll all Native American and non-Indian Veterans for health care benefits the third Thursday of every month from 10:30 am to 1:00pm. Veterans will be able to get questions answered about their benefits without traveling to Tulsa, Muskogee or Oklahoma City. The Pawnee Service Unit is located on the Pawnee Nation Tribal Reserve, 1201 Heritage Circle, in Pawnee, Oklahoma 74058, for more information call (918) 762-6724.