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« The Bank »

The German Base at Mûrs-Érigné

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The German Base « the Bank » at Mûrs-Érigné (Anjou - FR)

By G. Tomezzoli¹

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Abstract

In general, history, structure and life in the German military bases in France during the period of the Occupation are not well known because of the past military secrecy and the present lack of surviving witnesses and relevant documentation. However, in the case of the German base at Mûrs Erigné much information is now available through the researches of Mr. Suquet and my ascertainment on the terrain of the preservation state of its vestiges following the memory duty proposed by Mr. Suquet.

Keywords

2nd World War, German base, Bank, Dubinière, Erigné, Suquet, Atlantic Wall

Introduction

It was the invitation of Mr. Guy Suquet in his book (Suquet, 2009): “The reader is invited to accomplish a memory duty by going to ascertain on the terrain, up to when they subsist, the material proofs, that exist today not only at Erigné, but also on the Normand and Atlantic Coasts in France and in Europe, of this bloody episode of our history in order to provide witness” that pushed me to visit Mûrs Erigné near Angers (FR). In walking in Mûrs Erigné, nothing suggests that on the present Domaine de La Dubinière during the 2nd World War existed an important German military base, which, together with others, discomfited the life of this small French municipality. In general, history, structure and life in the German bases in France during the period of the Occupation are not well known because of the past military secrecy and the actual lack of surviving witnesses and relevant documentation. However, in the case of the German base at Mûrs Erigné much information is now available through the researches of Mr. Suquet and my ascertainment on the terrain of the preservation state of its vestiges following said memory duty proposed by Mr. Suquet .

History of the German base « the Bank »

The Domaine de La Dubinière, actual venue of the Séminaire des Missions Ouvrières Jean-Léon Le Prevost, was acquired in 1937 by the still existing French Crédit Industriel et Commercial (C.I.C.), a bank establishment founded on 1859. On the Domaine, near the castle de La Dubinière, the C.I.C. opened a yard for the construction of a big five floors building having two floors aboveground and three

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floors underground. The building had a cross shape centered on the lift conduits. A concrete layer of 1.25 meters of thickness separated the aboveground floors from the underground floors. For hosting the substances of the clients as well as the archives of the C.I.C, the building was provided with eight safe rooms in the aboveground floors and with other twenty-four in the underground floors. Part of the first underground floor hosted the heating system and its fuel tanks (Suquet, 2009).

The bank activity in the building began in 1939 with the arrival of C.I.C. employees from Paris and the recruitment of employees from the Angers area. The bank activity for managing the substances of the clients continued also after the arrival of the German *Wehrmacht* on 1940 up to the end of 1942 when titles and values of the clients were conditioned in sealed jute sacks and transferred to the central venue of the C.I.C. The gold stock was evacuated at the beginning of 1943 by night trains, which were charged also by inhabitants of Mûrs Erigné called for help (Suquet, 2009).

The Germans took possession of the Domaine and the C.I.C. building at the end of 1942 for organizing a military base. The population of Mûrs Erigné indicated indifferently as “la Banque”, i.e. the Bank, as the C.I.C. building as the Domaine, consequently the German base was known as the “Bank”. The Bank comprised an important set of buildings: the C.I.C. building, the castle de La Doubinière with its dependences, three or four other buildings built by the Germans for hosting rooms for eighty beds, instruction rooms, kitchens and cantinas, an infirmary, a maintenance store, offices and garages. A great pool, nowadays filled by ground, assured a reserve of water in case of fire as well as a swimming pool. At the arrival of Admiral Schirlitz, the two aboveground floors of the C.I.C. building were restructured for hosting instruction rooms, lodging rooms and offices of one or the two of the *Feldkommandantur 588* and *Kreiskommandantur 599* (Suquet, 2009).

The Bank was protected on three sides by high walls surmounted by rolls of barbed wires. The passages in the walls were surveilled continuatively by armored sentinels. Some machine gun casemates were located at the north and the south of the Bank so as to take in enfilade the roads towards Angers, Nantes, Cholet, Brissac et St. Melanie. A 20 mm double gun was placed on the terrace roof of the C.I.C. building so as to ensure an anti-aircraft defense. Its actions caused several reprisal allied air attacks (Suquet, 2009).

At the moment of evacuating the Bank in August 1944, the Germans dynamited the C.I.C. building in the attempt of destroying it. The explosions damaged the lift conduits on the length of six meters and created an empty space of about ten meters of length and six meter of bright in the underground floors, but the 1.25 meter thick concrete layer contained the explosion and avoided the destruction of the two aboveground floors (Suquet, 2009).

After the end of the war the C.I.C building and the Domaine were acquired by the agriculture cooperative Agriloire, which sold them to the Congregation des Frères de Saint-Vincent de Paul, named “fathers of the Bank”, that organized their Séminaire des Missions Ouvrières (Suquet, 2009).

Vestiges of the Bank

My visit of the site of the Bank (**Figures 1-2**), was organized thanks to father Gérard Fouquet of the Congregation, and took place on 23 August 2011. It permitted the visit of the aboveground and the underground floors of the C.I.C building. The aboveground floors preserve the security doors and the original safe rooms used now for library and the activities of the Congregation. A passage in the 1.25 m thick concrete layer allows descending in the first underground floor (**Figure 3**). The original heating system and its fuel tanks disappeared substituted by a modern gas heating system (**Figure 4**). A large opening in the first underground floor, caused by the explosions, allows having a vision of the other two underground floors devastated by the explosions.

A wood stair, robust, but fragile in the appearance, (**Figure 5**) allows the descent to the second floor and, walking on the debris, it is possible to reach the third underground floor (**Figures 6-17**).

Many questions concerning the C.I.C building have received reply by a Mr. Suquet's personal communication (Suquet, 2011). Mr. Suquet attests that the lots of metal scrap in the third underground floor were produced by the explosion which caused a violent fire lasting three days; the explosion also destroyed the water pumps which caused the water to invade the three underground floors up to the 1.25 meters layer for a period of ten years. Important stocks of ammunitions not reached by the explosions and in perfect state of preservation and therefore in a very dangerous state were evacuated by the French Civil Protection Service. The beds date actually of the period of the war and were probably used by the German soldiers. The kitchen furniture are probably of German construction (**Figures 13-14**). The German soldiers have well appreciated the mineral water Perrier according to the great number of bottles dating of the period of the war that survived the explosions, the fire and the inundation of the underground floors (**Figure 16**).

The preservation state of the Bank is rather good. The two aboveground floors of the C.I.C. building are currently in use for the activities of the Congregation, although the renovation of the roof caused the disappearing of the place of the anti-aircraft gun. The garages, the barracks and the dependences of the castle (**Figures 18-20, 22**) due to their rather large dimensions are still, although partially, in use. The water tower (**Figure 20**) is still used by the municipality of Erigné. The castle of La Dubinière (**Figure 21**) is a private property and not accessible to the public, however, many bullet holes on the façade witness past combats.

The relatively small dimensions and the structure of the Bank indicate that it was not intended for hosting an operative German military unit. Because of its distance from the Atlantic coasts, probably the Bank was not involved in the construction and the defense the Atlantic Wall (Dupont, 1994), (Chazette et al., 1995), (Duquesne 1976). Because no headquarter was hosted at the Bank, probably it was not involved in the direction of military operations. Therefore, it is possible to suppose that the Bank was involved in activities like military administration, logistics, depot of materials, storage and maintenance of vehicles and for the military control of Mûrs Erigné. The German military units on duty and their actual activities at the Bank remain for the moment largely unknown.



Figure 1. The Bank and the Domaine de La Dubinière (47° 24' 4,3" ; 0° 31' 36.6" W):
 (1) main entrance; (2) C.I.C. building; (3) pool - nowadays filled by ground; (4) water tower; (5) garages; (6) castle of La Dubinière - lodgments of German officers; (7) - (9) barracks – lodgements of soldiers, infirmary and different services; (8) place of a demolished barrack; (10) dependences of the castle; (11) Saint Vincent road; (12) Louis Rabineau road; (13) placement of a 20 mm antiaircraft double gun; (14) machine gun casemate; (15) machine gun casemate; (16) machine gun casemate; (17) machine gun casemate; (18) antitank obstacle - [Flash Earth]

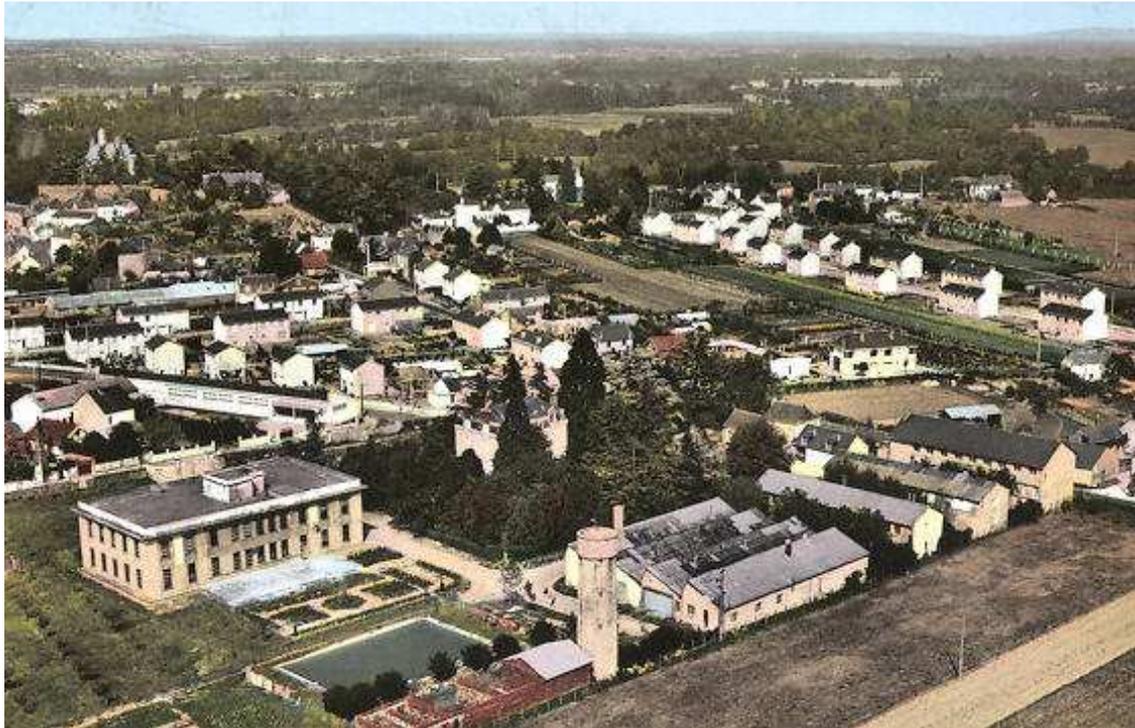


Figure 2. The Bank - after war image; on the left: C.I.C. building with place of the antiaircraft gun on the roof, pool and water tower; in the middle: castle of La Dubinière partially masked by trees; on the right: garages and the three barracks for hosting soldiers and different services – visible, between the first and the last barrack, is the demolished barrack



Figure 3. C.I.C. building: a) descent stair through the 1.25 m thick concrete layer to the first underground floor; b) opening in the first underground floor and vision of the second and third devastated underground floors



Figure 4. C.I.C. building: first underground floor - rooms of the heating system and fuel tanks on the left side the modern gas heating system



a)



b)

Figure 5. C.I.C. building: a) second and third devastated underground floors, on the left wood stairs; b) first underground floor, father Fouquet during the descent to the third underground floor



Figure 6. C.I.C. building: devastated second underground floor and vision to the third underground floor



a)

b)

Figure 7. C.I.C. building: a) devastated second and third underground floors; b) father Fouquet in the deep of the third underground floor



a)

b)

Figure 8. C.I.C. building: a), b) damages in the second underground floor seen from the third underground floor



a)

b)

Figure 9. C.I.C. building: a), b) safe rooms in the third underground floor



a)



b)

Figure 10. C.I.C. building: a) damages in the third underground floor; b) damages to the second and first underground floors seen from the third underground floor



Figure 11. C.I.C. building: damages in the third underground floor



a)



b)

Figure 12. C.I.C. building: a) corridor in the third underground floor; b) vision of the ceiling of the second underground floor curved by the pressure developed by the explosion



a)



b)

Figure 13. C.I.C. building: a) rests of beds of the German soldiers; b) kitchen furniture of probable German origin



Figure 14. C.I.C. building: kitchen furniture of probable German origin

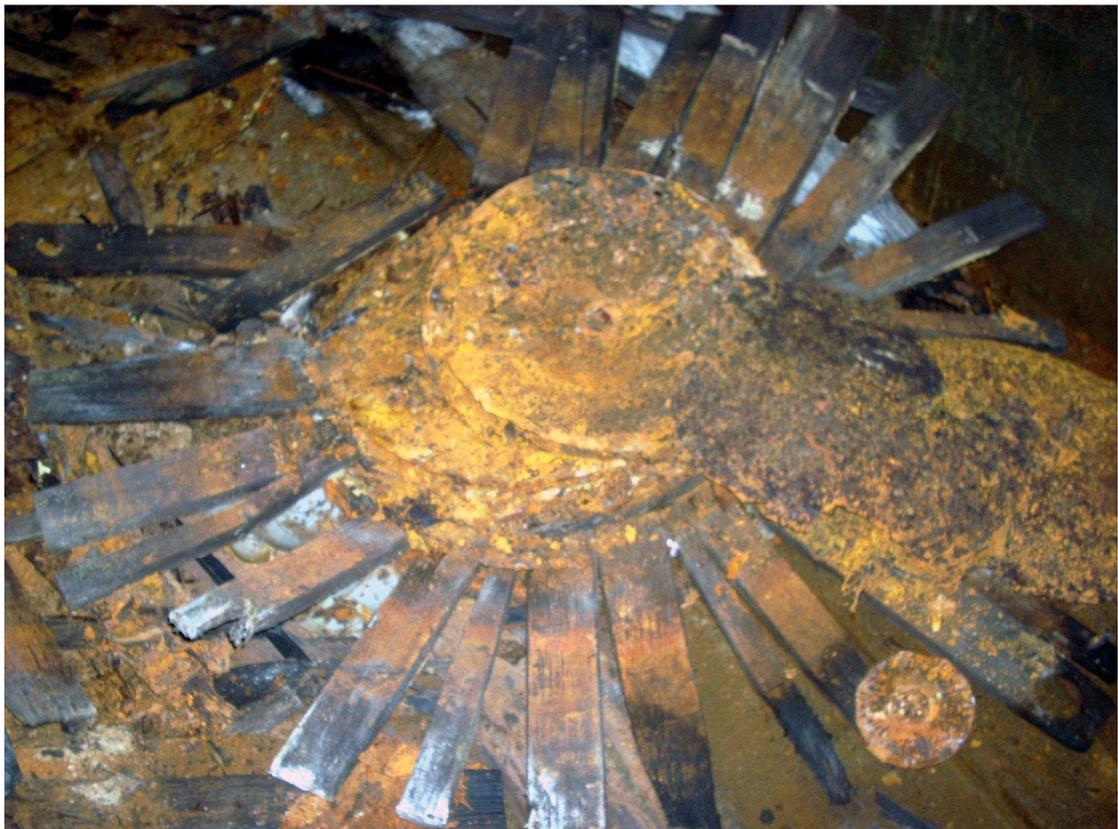


Figure 15. Rests of a pulley for rolling cables of the lift



Figure 16. Bottles of mineral water Perrier survived to the explosions and the fire in the third underground floor



Figure 17. C.I.C. building: a) German ammunition box; b) German ammunition box with ammunition band



Figure 18. Garages



Figure 19. Barrack for lodging German soldiers



a)

b)

Figure 20. a) interior of the soldier barracks; b) water tower



Figure 21. Castle of La Dubinière - lodgement of the German officers of the Bank



Figure 22. Castle dependences - the great doors on the facade suggest a possible vehicle garage or repair store utilization of a portion of the dependences

Conclusion

Concerning the Bank at Mûrs Érigné, I think to have accomplished the memory duty proposed by Mr. Suquet. But, evidently, many other material proofs of the period of the war exist at Érigné and on the French coasts defended by the Atlantic wall that still wait for similar memory duties.

Acknowledgment

The death of Mr. Suquet in May 2013 has not permitted me to ask him directly the permission of using in this article the information in his book (Suquet 2009), which are crucial for reconstructing the history of the Bank. But I am grateful to Mrs. Marie-Therese Suquet that has given me said permission.

Note This article represents the English, revised version of the corresponding already published German article (Tomezzoli, 2015).

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Archive G. Tomezzoli: Figures 1-5, 17-22.

Archive M. Letertre: Figures 6-16.



La bataille de Ponts-de-Cé en 1793 (E. Bonnemère, les guerres de Vendée, 1884)