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Wallonia in the Wars

Uncover a wealth of wartime history in southern Belgium

Napoleonic Wars

First World War

Second World War

© WBT- Didier Brancart / RM Smith / Gregory Mathelot

Welcome

UNCOVER A WEALTH OF WARTIME HISTORY IN SOUTHERN BELGIUM

In an unlikely collision of geography and geopolitics, Wallonia found itself in the firing line of western Europe's three most significant conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries.

It was in Wallonia in 1815 that Napoleon finally met his Waterloo, undone by an alliance of Britain and Prussia. A century later, Wallonia was the "foreign field" on the western front where the first and last British soldiers fell during the First World War. It was in Wallonia in May 1940 that Hitler and his high command drew up the Armistice documents that would rubber-stamp the defeat of France. And in the bleak winter of 1944/45, the Führer chose to launch one final, foolhardy counter-attack, in Wallonia's densely wooded Ardennes, which temporarily took the Allies by surprise but ended in abject defeat.

Visiting Wallonia today, at first sight it's hard to believe that this picturesque, easy-going region of green hills and rolling farmland witnessed such turbulence. But look closer and you'll find countless reminders of conflict dotted across the landscape: monuments and museums; battle-scarred tanks in village squares; crumbling concrete fortresses slowly succumbing to nature; impeccably maintained military cemeteries offering a respectful tribute to the fallen. There can be few parts of the world so densely studded with the relics of war.

The Meuse Valley near Dinant, so peaceful today, witnessed bitter fighting in May 1940 when German forces surged through the Ardennes © RM Smith

HEROISM AT HOUGOUMONT

Memorial just outside the barn at Hougoumont Farm, flashpoint for fighting at Waterloo © E. Furnire

On the battlefield at Waterloo, some of the most frenzied fighting took place at **Hougoumont Farm**. Here, guards on Wellington's right flank halted the first French assault and held on against the odds for the rest of the day, despite heavy shelling and repeated infantry and cavalry attacks. Napoleon committed as many as 14,000 of his troops in a vain attempt to capture the farm.

In the ten years leading up to the battle's bicentenary in 2015, the farm was extensively restored. A multimedia presentation recreates this crucial part of the battle.

The Lion's Mound, constructed on the battlefield in 1820 © Chippy Wood

Waterloo: Napoleon's end

ROAM THE BATTLEFIELD WHERE WELLINGTON AND BRITAIN'S PRUSSIAN ALLIES OVERCAME THE GREAT CORSICAN GENERAL

The village that gave its name to one of London's busiest railway stations and ABBA's Eurovision Song Contest smash lies just inside Wallonia, about ten miles south of Brussels. Several months before the climactic showdown between Wellington and Napoleon in 1815, Britain's "Iron Duke" had identified a ridge of high ground just south of Waterloo village as the ideal position from which to defend Brussels and the Low Countries. Wellington was so relaxed about his preparations that he even found time to attend a ball in Brussels just days before the battle that would prove so pivotal.

As the European heavyweights converged on the fateful site in southern Belgium on 17 June, Napoleon's 70,000-strong army held a small numerical advantage, but Wellington knew he wasn't alone. Also resisting Napoleon's power-grab was a Prussian force of 48,000 led by Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher. The Prussians were in the vicinity, but were temporarily licking their wounds after being soundly defeated at **Ligny** on 16 June. What turned out to be Napoleon's last victory is commemorated at a museum in that town.

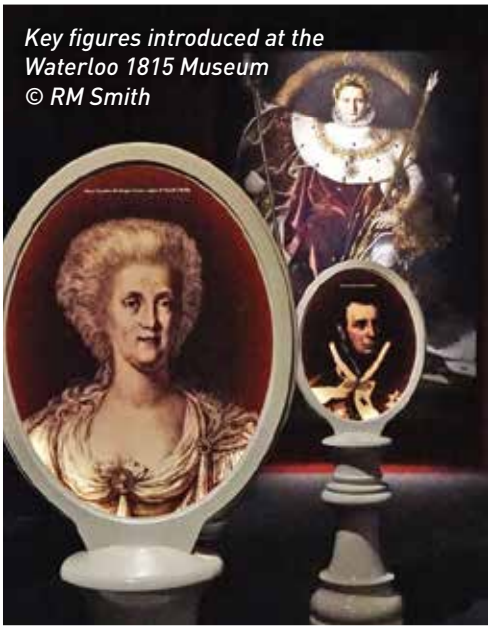
Napoleon could have pressed home his advantage, but preferred to rest his exhausted troops – a decision that allowed Blücher's men time to regroup. Although the Prussians turned up at Waterloo only late in the day, they provided Wellington with the reinforcements he urgently needed when the outcome was still in the balance. Years later, Wellington admitted that "it was the nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life."

The intensity of the fighting and bloodshed at Waterloo was unprecedented in modern history. In just nine hours, up to 50,000 men were either killed or wounded. Years later, human remains could still be found on the battlefield.

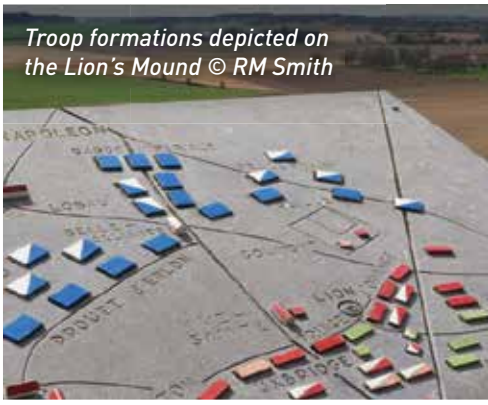
Marking such a milestone in European history, Waterloo is Wallonia's major historical site. Climb the 226 steps of the iconic Lion's Mound for a panoramic view of the battlefield. Back at ground level, the **Waterloo 1815 Museum**, extensively modernised for the bicentenary celebrations, brings the battle to life in sound and vision, and a 3D cinema immerses the viewer in the thick of the carnage.

LAST LEG

Another venue to visit is the **Wellington Museum** down the road in Waterloo village. Wellington requisitioned an inn on the main street as his battle headquarters, and the building's warren of rooms contain a large collection of battle artefacts, including – bizarrely – the wooden leg specially made for the Earl of Uxbridge, one of Wellington's cavalry commanders, whose shattered right leg had to be amputated after he was struck by cannon fire late in the day.



Key figures introduced at the Waterloo 1815 Museum © RM Smith



Troop formations depicted on the Lion's Mound © RM Smith

Ligny 1815 Museum © Michel Jacques

Wallonia's rings of defiance

VISIT THE FORTIFICATIONS CONSTRUCTED TO FOIL GERMANY'S MILITARY PLANS FOR WESTWARD EXPANSION

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 shifted the balance of power in Europe in favour of the new nation-state of Germany, soon to forge ahead as the continent's industrial powerhouse. In Britain, France and Belgium, alarm bells rang.

Belgium was never going to be a player at the top table of Europe, but it lay directly in the path of any future westward expansion by Germany. Recognising this threat, by the turn of the century a series of fortresses had been constructed around both Liège and Namur, with the intention of preventing a future Franco-German war being fought on Belgian soil.

The plan failed. Within 24 hours of declaring war on France in August 1914, the Kaiser ordered his troops to march across the Belgian border in a move that Germany knew would bring Britain into the war because Belgium's neutrality had been violated.

THE LIÈGE FORTS

The Germans' first objective was to neutralise Wallonia's largest town, **Liège**. Its ring of 12 forts was considered impregnable – however, these structures had a fundamental flaw: their outer skins were made of unreinforced concrete that was unable to withstand the Germans' powerful new weapon, the howitzer nicknamed "Big Bertha".

The showpiece redoubt was **Fort de Loncin**, some four miles west of the centre of Liège. This bastion withstood a three-day bombardment from 12 August 1914 but, when one of its gunpowder magazines was struck by a monstrous 850kg shell, it exploded violently and a large part of the fort's structure collapsed in apocalyptic fashion. More than half of the 550-strong garrison were killed instantly or buried alive in the wreckage.

LIVING MUSEUM

The bodies recovered from the rubble of Fort de Loncin are now buried in a crypt; however, more than 100 were never found. The entire site is now a military cemetery as well as a living museum. Much of the damaged masonry and gun emplacements have been left exactly as they were in August 1914. One 40-tonne gun lies on its back, having been tossed into the air like a pancake. Massive gun turrets lean at crazy angles. Even today, with grass and flowers softening the scene, the extent of the devastation is chilling.

More than a century after the assault, Fort de Loncin still triggers extremes of emotion. Among its many artistic tributes to the victims is the *flamme du souvenir*, a sculpture depicting the figure of a male torso thrusting a torch into daylight from beneath the earth.

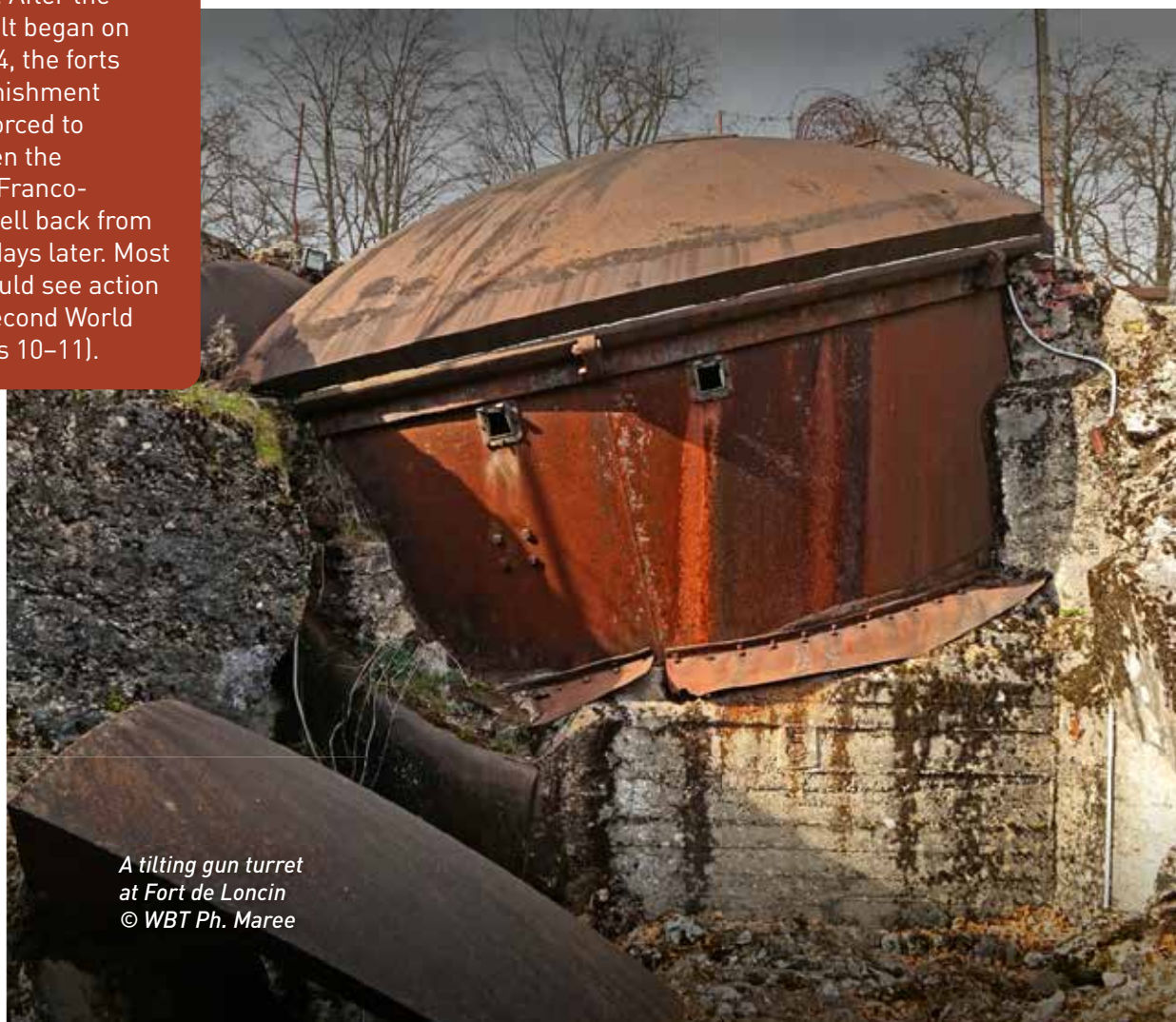
Fort de Loncin, now both a living museum and a war grave © Simon Kench

The moving flamme du souvenir *at Fort de Loncin © WBT Fr. Mazy*

THE NAMUR FORTS

Fort de St-Héribert, built in the 19th century to protect Namur

Namur, smaller than Liège, was protected by nine forts on either side of the Meuse. They were well armed (with German-made artillery) but they, too, were made of unreinforced concrete instead of traditional masonry, and the outcome was inevitable. After the German assault began on 20 August 1914, the forts took heavy punishment before being forced to surrender when the overwhelmed Franco-Belgian force fell back from Namur three days later. Most of the forts would see action again in the Second World War (see pages 10–11).



A tilting gun turret at Fort de Loncin © WBT Ph. Maree

Mons – the beginning and the end

DISCOVER THE SITES WHERE FIRST WORLD WAR BATTLES WERE FOUGHT, AND WHERE SOLDIERS ARE BURIED AND COMMEMORATED

After the surrender of Liège and Namur, the Germans surged across Belgium. Their 2nd and 3rd Armies were held up by the French 5th Army at the River Sambre near Charleroi, but after a two-day battle the path to the west was clear, and their infantry were marching on again. Meanwhile, a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of about 100,000 was pouring into Belgium, and on 21 August 1914 the British and German armies came within range of each other near the mining town of Mons.

By the grisly standards of the First World War, the ensuing battle was a small affair. Yet Mons has a special resonance because, by a remarkable coincidence, it was where the British suffered both their first casualty on the western front and, more than four years later, their last. There's no better illustration of the blood-soaked futility of trench warfare than the fact that hostilities on the front ended almost exactly where they started.

Seventeen-year-old Private John Parr, a member of a bicycle reconnaissance team, is believed to have been the first Briton to fall, on 21 August. Two days later, the battle of Mons began. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the BEF held the line for 48 hours but, with the French army falling back to the south, they became dangerously exposed and were forced to join the retreat.

Some of the fiercest fighting took place at Nimy railway bridge on the outskirts of Mons. The first Victoria Crosses of the conflict were awarded to two British machine-gunners, Private Frank Godley and Lieutenant Maurice Dease, who covered the retreat until they were too badly wounded to continue. Godley was captured but Dease died of his wounds and was awarded his medal posthumously.

The grave of Private John Parr, the first known British casualty on the Western Front © Gregory Mathelot

Gunner Lieutenant Maurice Dease, one of the recipients of the first Victoria Crosses of the war

German graves at St Symphorien Military Cemetery, where Allied soldiers also lie © RM Smith

Extensive displays of uniforms and weapons at Mons Memorial Museum © Serge Brison

A plaque on the rusting bridge commemorates their heroism.

The retreat into France continued for four months – as far as the outskirts of Paris itself – before the Allies successfully counter-attacked at the battle of the Marne in early September.

The last British soldier to die on the western front was Private George Ellison, who was on patrol near Mons when he was felled by a German sniper – a mere one and a half hours before the Armistice came into effect at 11am on 11 November 1918. He and John Parr are buried close together at **St Symphorien**, perhaps the most beautiful of all military cemeteries and one of the few that contains the graves of British, Commonwealth and German soldiers, most of whom died at Mons.

The town's harrowing history (in both World Wars) is vividly illustrated at the **Mons Memorial Museum**, where a large collection of wartime relics is enhanced by immersive audio and video. Sounds of exploding shells and marching boots assail visitors from all angles.

HONOURING THE MISSING AT PLUGSTREET

Ploegsteert Wood – or "Plug Street", as British Tommies knew it – at the north-west tip of Wallonia is one of several points along the 500-mile front line where peace and brotherhood broke out in no man's land on Christmas Day 1914.

Hostilities couldn't be delayed for long, though. Indeed, Ploegsteert witnessed some of the most violent confrontations anywhere in Belgium, reflected by the plethora of memorials, museums and war graves in the area. Some of the sites bear English place names, including two notable cemeteries – **Hyde Park Corner** and **Strand** – close to each other on land gifted to the UK by Belgium.

MAYHEM AT MESSINES RIDGE

The most explosive moment of the First World War occurred near Ploegsteert in the summer of 1917. The Germans had long occupied the higher ground of Messines Ridge, which gave them a bird's eye view of the Allies' manoeuvres. Unable to make headway above ground, the British went underground, deploying teams of engineers and ex-miners who spent two years laying 450 tonnes of high explosives beneath the German lines.

Early in the morning of 7 June, 19 fuses were triggered simultaneously. The explosion was cataclysmic, re-shaping the surrounding landscape and killing more than 1,000 German soldiers. The sonic boom was felt 130 miles away in Lloyd George's office at 10 Downing Street. Allied troops promptly captured the ridge but failed to make further headway as the Germans fell back and reorganised. All that painstaking work, all that explosive power, won an Allied advance of just two miles.

This is all vividly presented at the futuristic **Plugstreet 14-18 Experience**, in a glass pyramid built out in the fields. An absorbing film explores the background to the war, a curious chapter of events about which historians still argue. There's an impressive 3D map of the western front, and a recreation of civilian life in Belgium during the grim years of German occupation. The Plugstreet 14-18 Experience is an ambitious attempt to explain how the so-called civilised world collectively caused the slaughter of ten million soldiers and civilians.

MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING

Memorial to the Missing © MT Wallonie picarde-Antenne Mouscron

The graceful circular **Memorial to the Missing**, surrounded by white marble columns and guarded by two majestic stone lions, is dedicated to the Allied troops who lost their lives along the Ploegsteert Wood section of the front but whose bodies have never been recovered. More than 11,000 names are carved on the walls.

UNDERGROUND EXPERIENCE

Hitler meets paratroopers involved in the capture of Fort Eben-Emael

Maintained by the Belgian Army, **Fort Eben-Emael** should not be missed. Its museum contains some of the defenders' personal effects, one of the attacking German gliders, and a photograph showing Adolf Hitler awarding the Iron Cross to some of the infiltrators. It's said that the glider assault plan was hatched by the Führer himself.

The vast complex of Fort Eben-Emael, comprising over 3 miles of tunnels © RM Smith

Revamped forts that failed to stop history repeating

EXPLORE THE SECOND-GENERATION STRONGHOLDS DESIGNED TO WITHSTAND A GERMAN INVASION DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

During the 1930s, France sought to protect itself from any future German invasion by constructing the formidable Maginot Line along the shared border. When the time came, though, the Germans simply bypassed the French fortifications and surged across the lightly defended Ardennes into neutral Belgium and Holland instead, the fine weather of May 1940 making the invader's task easier. Once again it was left to Liège to establish Belgium's first line of resistance.

UNDERGROUND COMPLEX

Stung by the Fort de Loncin disaster in 1914 (see pages 6–7), Belgium upgraded many of its defensive forts in the 1930s, as well as building four new ones. The largest of the second generation forts was **Eben-Emael**, guarding the waterways of the Meuse River and the Albert Canal. Built into a rock face 50 metres below ground, this vast triangular complex encompassed over 3 miles of tunnels and could house 1,200 men.

Once again, Fort Eben-Emael was considered to be impregnable – but was breached by a master stroke of military planning. At first light on 10 May, some 80 German paratroopers flew in on gliders and quickly disarmed the air defence machine guns. Most of the observation and artillery cupolas were neutralised by a new type of high explosive – the hollow charge used here for the first time. It could penetrate up to ten inches of steel and fifteen inches of concrete. Within 15 minutes, the Belgian guns were silenced. The garrison eventually surrendered after 31 hours, leaving the path clear for a full-scale German assault into Belgium.

There was more prolonged resistance at the fort of **Tancrémont**, which was severely damaged when the German artillery opened fire on 12 May. Remarkably, the garrison of 500 men resisted for 17 days, shoring up the breaches with heavy equipment and bags of cement. The fort commander surrendered only when he'd received written confirmation that Belgium had signed an Armistice the day before.

Namur's ring of forts had also been redesigned in preparation for war, among them **Fort de St-Héribert**, which had installed new, longer-range guns and improved ventilation, sanitation and communications. Once again, though, its Achilles heel was unreinforced concrete. On 18 May, St-Héribert came under heavy bombardment. One by one, the gun turrets were knocked out – but not before the defenders had fired all but 10 of their 7,500 shells. The fort surrendered soon afterwards, having lost only one of its defenders. After the war, St-Héribert was smothered by vegetation and almost forgotten until a new landowner set out to restore it. It's a difficult and even dangerous task, but volunteers are gradually unearthing one of the symbolic sites of Belgian resistance against the Nazis. Sections of the fort can be safely visited by the public on certain days.

Personal effects of the men who defended Fort Eben-Emael © RM Smith

About 80 German paratroopers flew in on gliders and landed on top of the fortress

Belgium 'blitzkrieged'

TRACE THE RAPID ADVANCE OF GERMAN PANZER DIVISIONS THROUGH WALLONIA – AND THE BRAVE RESISTANCE THAT FACED THEM

The lightning German assault in the summer of 1940 was a classic pincer movement spearheaded by battle-hardened Panzer tank divisions, supported by relentless bombardment from the air. In less than a week, the Germans penetrated deep into Holland, Belgium and north-east France. The objective was to punch a hole between the French and British armies before they could co-ordinate their defensive line.

In the north, the Dutch army was hopelessly overpowered; its navy fled to England, and fighting ceased after five days. In a surprise assault through the Ardennes, General Heinz Guderian's Panzers made rapid progress along the narrow, winding roads, reaching the Meuse in two days and defeating the French at the battle of Sedan. From there, the German tanks and infantry continued largely unimpeded. It's said that when the crews ran out of fuel they simply stopped at the nearest pump, filled up without paying and pressed on. In eight days, Guderian had reached the English Channel.

BELATED FRENCH RESISTANCE

The breakneck speed of the German advance wrong-footed the Allies, who'd expected the main battleground to be in the marshy Dyle Valley in central Wallonia. As well as the forts around Liège and Namur, scores of bunkers, fields of rails and a chain of heavy steel fences known as Cointet-elements formed a second line of defence.

Although almost every Belgian fort was quickly incapacitated or surrendered, it wasn't all plain sailing for the Germans. On 12 May, two days after the invasion began, the French Cavalry Corps confronted two divisions of Panzers at the **battle of Hannut** – at the time, the biggest tank battle in history, with nearly 1,100 armoured vehicles in the field. The French line held for the first day but on 13 May the Panzers, aided by screeching Stuka dive-bombers, made their three-to-two tank advantage count.

The French were forced to retreat, reforming 20 miles to the south-west to defend the vulnerable **Gembloux Gap**. This plain between the rivers Meuse and Dyle was ideal terrain for the incoming tank force. The battle that followed was a moral victory for the French, who inflicted heavier losses and forced the Germans back, but events elsewhere undermined their efforts. When news came through that another German battle group had crossed the Meuse, the French were forced to abandon the Gembloux Gap to attend to the latest emergency in the south.

Events unfolded at bewildering speed. Another decorated tank commander, Erwin Rommel, reached the Meuse near Dinant despite heavy fire from the west bank. The defenders had destroyed the bridges, but Rommel's men sequestered a cable ferry, constructed floating pontoons and used rubber

Photos, documents and medals at the Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940 © RM Smith

MUSÉE DU SOUVENIR MAI 1940

A photo of a German pontoon bridge at Haut-de-Wastia's museum

Haut-de-Wastia today is a sleepy, rural backwater, but the largely forgotten battle fought here is vividly recreated at the **Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940** in the old village school, packed with mementoes. Volunteers have designed a large model of the battle zone, and the collection includes life-size tableaux, films, weapons, uniforms and one of the Germans' dinghies used to cross the Meuse River.

Tanks of the German 4th Panzer Division at the battle of Gembloux © KF

dinghies to cross the river. The invaders were held up around the village of Haut-le-Wastia, which saw three days of fierce fighting – sometimes hand-to-hand – but it wasn't enough to prevent a decisive German breakthrough by the evening of 15 May.

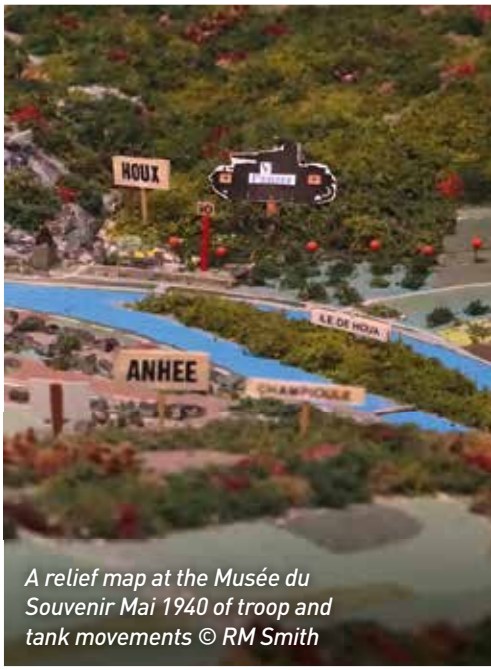
French prime minister Paul Reynaud telephoned Winston Churchill (newly installed in Downing Street) to report that his remaining forces were unable to defend the most direct route to Paris, and that the war might be lost in a few days unless the RAF joined the battle immediately. Churchill preferred to save his Spitfires for the Battle of Britain that would inevitably follow, and France's fate – as well as Belgium's – was sealed.

MUSEUMS AND MEMORIES

At the **Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940** in Haut-de-Wastia, guides lead visitors to the surrounding high ground from where they can enjoy spectacular views of the winding Meuse and some of the key crossing points where the battle was won and lost.

Three other museums commemorate this early phase of the war in Wallonia. The **Musée du Corps de Cavalerie Français** at Jandrain focuses on the battle of Hannut, when the technically superior French tanks and armoured vehicles managed to slow the 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions, buying time for the French 1st Army to organise a defensive position to the west. It was the largely unchallenged Luftwaffe, not the Panzers, that determined the outcome at Hannut.

At Cortil-Noirmont, near Chastre, the **Musée de la 1ère Armée Française** underlines the importance of the battle of Gembloux and, lest we forget, the desperate living conditions of the people of Belgium during the German occupation.



A relief map at the Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940 of troop and tank movements © RM Smith

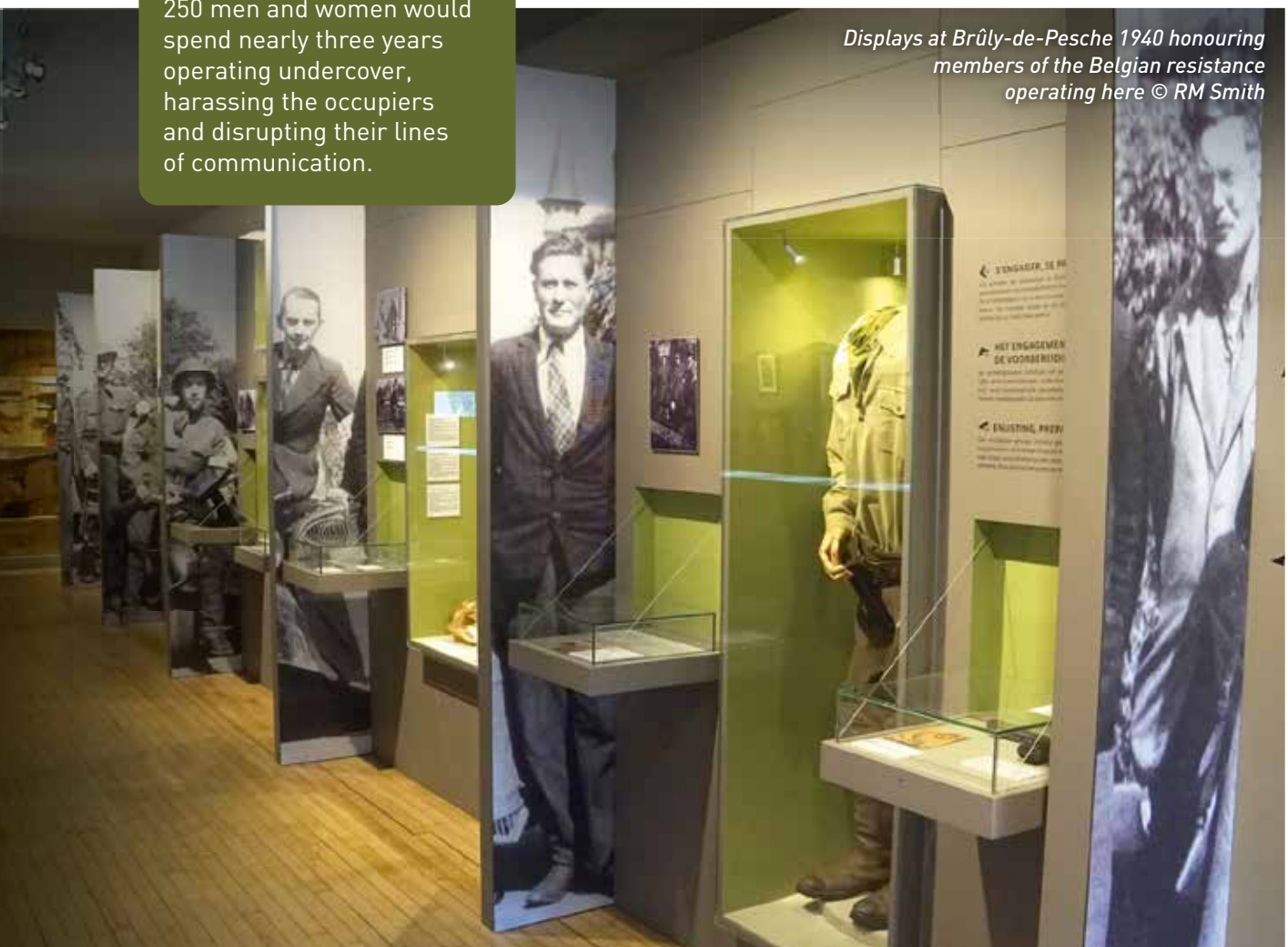
The two major tank battles are also commemorated at the **Musée du Souvenir 40-45** in Malèves, a private collection of memorabilia that includes one of the few remaining Cointet defence gates.

BRÛLY-DE-PESCHE 1940

Sabotage equipment used by the resistance © M.Lanckmans

Two of Hitler's chalets at Brûly-de-Pesche, now rebuilt, house exhibitions exploring this significant wartime episode and paying homage to the courage of the Belgian resistance movement, which became especially active in the nearby forest. In all, about 250 men and women would spend nearly three years operating undercover, harassing the occupiers and disrupting their lines of communication.

The bunkers built at Brûly-de-Pesche for Hitler's visit in June 1940 still stand © RM Smith



Displays at Brûly-de-Pesche 1940 honouring members of the Belgian resistance operating here © RM Smith

Hitler's hideout in Wallonia

DELVE INTO THE CONCRETE BUNKERS WHERE THE GERMAN FÜHRER PREPARED TO RECEIVE NEWS OF FRANCE'S CAPITULATION

It's well known that Adolf Hitler spent the last few months of his life holed up in an underground bunker in Berlin. Less well known, though, are the two concrete bunkers built above ground for the Führer and his high command in a remote forest in southern Wallonia.

BORDER POST

In late May 1940, France was heading for catastrophic defeat. Hitler wanted to administer the coup de grâce in person, basing himself as close to the French border as possible to direct the final stage of the campaign. The rural hamlet of **Brûly-de-Pesche**, near Chimay, was identified as a secure temporary headquarters and, ahead of the Führer's visit, 27,000 local inhabitants were evicted without a word of explanation.

Before Hitler's arrival on 6 June, around 300 civilian engineers from the Todt Organisation built two bunkers and three chalets. In the village school and church, the documents were prepared that laid out the draconian peace terms for France, exacting revenge for the humiliation heaped on Germany after the First World War.

On 21 June, Hitler crossed the border to finalise the Armistice agreement in the same railway carriage where the 1918 Armistice had been signed. France formally capitulated the following day; surviving film shows Hitler slapping his thigh in celebration when the news came through.

Before they left Brûly-de-Pesche, the Germans dismantled all of the buildings apart from the bunkers (which are still intact), then allowed the villagers to return home.

France was now effectively out of the war, and Britain – despite the near-miracle of Dunkirk – was on its knees.

The village church, in which peace terms for France were translated © RM Smith

Hitler's HQ "Wolfsschlucht" in Brûly-de-Pesche © Matthias Kla

Hitler (left) with Göring outside a chalet at Brûly-de-Pesche

Germany's last gamble in the west

FOLLOW THE BLOODY GERMAN ASSAULT THROUGH THE ARDENNES, AND THE RETREAT THAT FOLLOWED THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

By mid-December 1944, it seemed only a matter of time before the Allies advanced across the Rhine into Germany to end the war in Europe. With the Luftwaffe a spent force, the Allies enjoyed unchallenged air supremacy. Resting up in the Netherlands, Field Marshal Montgomery, commander of the British forces, reassured his troops on 15 December: "The enemy… cannot stage major offensive operations."

Monty was wrong. Holed up in his Berlin bunker, Hitler's health and mental condition had declined sharply – he was relying on drugs to keep going – but he refused to accept the inevitable. So he ordered one last tank and infantry attack in an attempt to capture the key port of Antwerp and split the Allied armies.

On 16 December, the Germans launched a ferocious assault through the Ardennes, and quickly opened an extensive salient, or bulge, separating US General George Patton's force from Montgomery's. The battle of the Bulge, as the Americans named it, was the Second World War's bloodiest encounter on the western front, fought over seven weeks in desperately harsh conditions.

In the Ardennes, US forces were initially outnumbered by 28 divisions to four. The German 6th Panzer Army broke through but, despite pummelling the defenders during a week-long siege, failed to take the strategic town of **Bastogne**.

The deeper German forces advanced into Wallonia, the more their supply lines became stretched. Armored divisions from Patton's 3rd Army pushed up from the south and Montgomery's troops hurried in from the north; even so, it took the Allies more than a week to halt the German advance, six miles short of the Meuse. Patton's 3rd Army finally relieved Bastogne on Boxing Day and, as the skies cleared and the Allies resumed their aerial bombardment, the German tank force suffered heavy losses.

Fighting continued well into January 1945 as one village after another was liberated. By the end of the month, the Germans had been pushed back to where they started, losing hundreds of tanks in the process – many of them simply abandoned when their fuel supplies ran out, forcing their crews to trek back to Germany on foot across the snow-covered hills.

The number of casualties on both sides is astonishing. An estimated 90,000 German troops were killed, wounded, reported missing or captured. American losses numbered about 75,000. Hitler's reckless gamble had delayed the Allied offensive, but Germany's defeat in western Europe was assured.

"Dragon's teeth" – tank obstacles installed by the Germans – that faced Allied forces along the German border © RM Smith

69 tons King Tiger from 1st Panzer SS led by Peiper in La Gleize © Chippy Wood

MARDASSON MEMORIAL

The "Screaming Eagle" honouring the US 101st Airborne Division near the Mardasson Memorial © RM Smith

Belgium acknowledged its debt to its liberators with the creation of the magnificent **Mardasson Memorial** on a hillside outside Bastogne. The interior walls of the open-air monument tell the story of the Battle, while the exterior columns, arranged in a circle, name each of the American units that took part.

Displays at Bastogne War Museum exploring conditions during the Battle of the Bulge © WBT-JP Remy

THE BRITISH-BELGIAN LINKS

51st Highland Division Memorial, La Roche-en-Ardenne © KF

There's a strong British flavour to **La Roche-en-Ardenne**. Proudly overlooking the town sits the first British Achilles tank destroyer to arrive after liberation, and nearby there's a granite monument dedicated to the 51st Highlanders. The town's **Museum of the Battle of the Ardennes** displays helmets, uniforms and numerous other objects donated by veterans of the Highlanders, the 53rd Welsh division and other British units.

A German army's decoding machine on display at the Museum in La Roche © Chippy Wood

Sergeant Kenneth Sykes (left) of the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards, 5th Guards Armoured Division at Pont de Jambes (Namur) on Christmas Day 1944 © After the Battle

The Museum of the Battle of the Ardennes in La Roche-en-Ardenne features displays of British uniforms and equipment © Chippy Wood

The British role at the Bulge

LEARN HOW BRITISH TROOPS FOUGHT ALONGSIDE US FORCES IN THE BITTER STRUGGLE TO PUSH THROUGH THE ARDENNES IN 1944

The battle of the Bulge is rightly regarded as a triumph of American firepower, battle-craft and heroism, but the British and Commonwealth contingent played an important part, too.

Shortly before Christmas 1944, 55,000 troops took up positions to defend the northern flank. The British sector stretched across Wallonia's most difficult terrain: high ground, marshy in parts, punctuated by densely wooded ridges and plunging river valleys.

From early spring to late autumn the Ardennes is the scenic jewel of Wallonia. Winters are often harsh, though, and the months of December 1944 and January 1945 were especially bitter. Fog, snow and sub-zero temperatures presented an enormous challenge to the troops on both sides. Untold numbers of men simply died of the cold.

One of the most evocative battle memorials is a plaque set into the wall of a shop in the now-bustling tourist haunt of **La Roche-en-Ardenne**, in a valley on a curve of a river. In this unlikely spot, outriders from the American 84th Infantry Division and the Black Watch Regiment of the 51st Highland Division memorably linked up on 11 January 1945 to close the bulge once and for all. From that moment, the outcome of the war in western Europe was never in doubt.

The largest British and Commonwealth cemetery in eastern Wallonia is a beautiful flower-filled enclosure at **Hotton**, south of Liège, where 666 soldiers are buried. Many of the gravestones are carved with tributes both personal – "In our home is a vacant spot that can never be filled" – and universal: "Here lies one who died so that freedom may live."

Hotton War Cemetery © Chippy Wood

Find out more

READ FURTHER MATERIAL PRODUCED BY WALLONIA BELGIUM TOURISM ABOUT THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF BOTH WORLD WARS ON THE REGION, FROM THE FIRST GERMAN ASSAULT IN 1914 TO JOYOUS LIBERATION IN 1945

MAY 1940

The German offensive into Wallonia in May 1940 is widely commemorated throughout the region. This booklet on the epic battle, with details of the museums, memorials, military cemeteries and other places of interest connected with the clash, guides the growing band of "memorial tourists" to the key sites of the conflict.

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

The epic battle that signalled the catastrophic defeat of Germany on the western front is brought to life in this booklet, with details of the museums, memorials, military cemeteries and other places of interest.

MAP

This illustrated guide to the Ardennes offensive of December 1944 includes every key location: memorials, military cemeteries and a wealth of museums covering every aspect of the battle of the Bulge, from the British, American and German perspectives.

LIÈGE FORTS

This booklet tells the extraordinary story of the two generations of forts ringing Liège, designed as Belgium's first line of defence before both World Wars.

All of these publications can be ordered or downloaded from **visitwallonia.be/memorial**