

BUNKERMUSEUM

Austrian defences against the former Yugoslavia

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Illustrations by the Author



Creation of the post-war army

In 1945, the allies occupied Austria as part of a defeated Germany. Yugoslav troops rushed to secure a part of Carinthia which was populated by Slovenians, but they were soon forced to retreat behind the pre-war borders. British, American and Russian troops remained in occupation until 1955, when the Austrian State Treaty was signed, allowing Austria to become an independent nation once more. The Russians agreed to sign this Treaty only under the condition that Austria would remain neutral. However, despite its neutrality, Austria soon created a reasonably strong army and since it lay within the Western area of interest, the NATO countries were happy to see it as a buffer force against the Warsaw pact.

The *Bundesheer*, as the new army was called, never faced a real threat, but some opportunities, other than military exercises, did arise for it to demonstrate its capabilities. These were firstly, the border protection operations during the Hungarian uprising of 1956, secondly, the Prague Spring suppression in 1968 and thirdly, the Slovenian war of independence in 1991.



In the 1960's, fortifications became a very important part of border protection on this frontier, stemming partly from a linguistic problem. The Austrian State Treaty of 1955 prohibited Austria from possessing missiles, but in the German translation, it was unclear if this related only to

long range missiles or also to short range anti-tank rockets. To avoid any diplomatic incidents, the Austrian leadership decided to play it safe, and instead of forming highly mobile anti-tank units armed with short-range rockets, set out to construct a network of permanent positions in which a tank cupola with an anti-tank gun was the main armament. Such bunkers were being built up until 1986 and remained operational until 2002, even though by the early to mid-90s it was perfectly clear that, after the fall of the Berlin wall, neither newly-established Slovenia on Austria's southern border, Hungary on the eastern border nor the Czech Republic on the northern border would represent any threat whatsoever to Austria.

It is located on Rihov vrh, a hill of 1067m overlooking the pass from the north and controlling the descending road. The first thing to be built, in 1963, was a bunker with a steel cupola armed with a 12.7mm Browning M2 HMG and protected by concrete trenches and an underground crew shelter. This was supposed to be an anti-aircraft position but it appears that its psychological effect was far more important than its actual combat value.



Bunker with steel cupola armed with a heavy Browning M2 machinegun - the oldest part of the Wurzenpass fortifications.



This communication trench leads toward the steel cupola with a heavy Browning M2 machinegun supposedly defending the fort against aircraft or helicopter attack.

The location of the Bunkermuseum, the former Block Line at Wurzenpass/Korensko sedlo, just 3 km east of the point where Italy, Austria, and Slovenia meet.

The border between the Austrian province of Carinthia and of present-day Slovenia follows a mountain ridge called the Karavanke. On the former-Yugoslavian side, on the eve of WWII between 1939 and 1941, the border crossings were fortified. The individual strongholds of the Rupnik line were more or less token positions, but the Austrians, on the other hand, began fortifying these mountain passes in the 1960s. The probable invasion routes of the Warsaw pact forces would have followed more favourable terrain along the rivers Danube, Drava and Tagliamento (Val Canale), so the likely reasons for these defensive works were probably ideological differences with socialist Yugoslavia, and a fear that exploiting concern for the Slovenian minority in Austria might spark a conflict.

One of the many fortified positions which acted as a defence on the border of the former Yugoslavia, now Slovenia, is that on the Wurzenpass or Korensko sedlo. It was called Block Unit Wurzen/73 (Sperrkompanie Wurzen/73). It differed from other fortified sites in that the bunkers on Wurzenpass/Korensko sedlo were connected by trenches and covered galleries, thus forming a unified fortified complex.

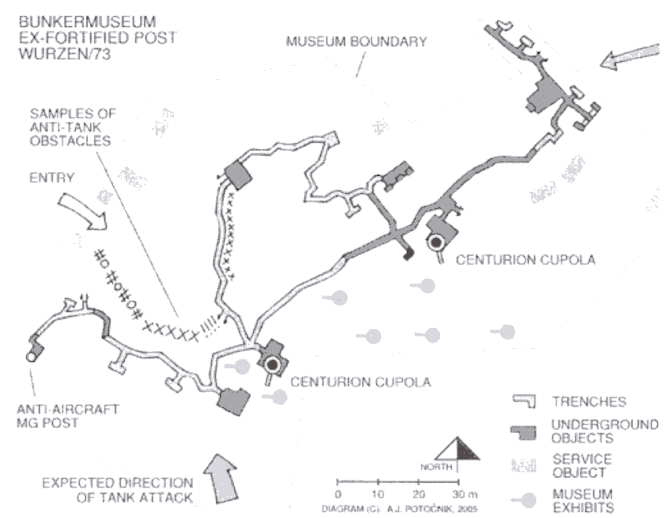


Diagram of the former fort, presently the Bunkermuseum at Wurzenpass/Korensko sedlo

Begun in 1963, it was completed in 1965 when two barbette type positions for Russian-made 76mm antitank guns were added. To guide their fire, a fortified observation post was constructed at the top of the rise. Two guns remained here until 1998.



Centurion tank turret and removeable shed

In 1986 the main feature of the present fort was built; two bunkers with British-made Centurion tank turrets, armed with 105-mm anti-tank guns and camouflaged with two fake weatherboard cabins. The system of removing this disguise was simple - six soldiers would lift them off and place them beside the cupolas. In the main direction they were aimed, though, two guns could be made operational by simply opening the garage-type door at the front of each hut or cabin (*see also Casemate 71 p14. Ed*).

By 1997 when the permanent crew was pulled out of the fort, the positions extended over the top of the rise where there were open concrete posts to resist a possible infantry attack coming down the ridge from nearby Kamnati vrh. From 1997 onwards, only a maintenance crew remained in the fort, and in 1999 the option of decommissioning all the border fortifications was discussed for the first time. The decommissioning process itself began in 2002, and while other posts were duly dismantled and their cupolas mostly sent to iron smelters, the Wurzenpass/Korensko sedlo Block Line was preserved by its conversion into a museum where armaments, mostly tank cupolas brought from other decommissioned positions, could be displayed.

One-man band

The founder of the *Bunkermuseum* is mag. Andreas Scherer of Villach (Beljak) in Carinthia, Austria. As a young lieutenant in 1987, he commanded this post and its crew of 250 men until 1993. He states "We were preparing ourselves for the conflict that fortunately never happened. The history of meetings of our three nations in this area is rather troublesome, so I'm very pleased that better times seem to be ahead now, and that the legacy of fortifications such as this one on Wurzenpass, of Vallo Alpino in Italy and of the Rupnik Line in Slovenia now connects us instead of separating us."

During his tour of duty at Wurzenpass, Andreas Scherer became attached to the place, so when in 1999 he heard of plans to abandon it and demolish the fortifications, he decided to try to acquire it and establish it as a museum. Despite his being a military person, and therefore an insider, and despite receiving support from a great many colleagues for his idea, he found the task extremely

difficult. Some merely found the idea of a museum to be bizarre, but the main difficulty was that no one had ever before converted a still-active military site into a museum. There was, therefore, no set procedure and nobody knew just what exactly needed to be done. It took Andreas Scherer four years and more than forty applications to be approved by different military departments and offices before he was allowed to proceed with his plan. He invested almost all of his savings in the conversion of a military site into one suitable for visitors, and despite all the problems encountered, he managed to finish the work in time to make the opening of the museum a part of the festivities marking the 50th anniversary of the new Austrian army, the *Bundesheer*.



The founder and manager of the Bunkermuseum, mag. Andreas Scherer

Part of the price he had to pay was the break-up of his marriage. In 1999, when he announced to his wife that he was considering purchasing the fortifications, she threatened to divorce him. She kept her word - and the irony was that he was called to the divorce court on the very same day that he signed the contract with the army - on 18 November 2002. Soon afterwards the divorce was finalised. Andreas Scherer believes that the fort was just the last straw, and that the taxing military life in general was to blame. Nevertheless, he finds consolation in the fact that their daughter shares his enthusiasm for the preservation of the fort. Despite her young age she has been of enormous assistance to him in preparing the site and readying it for visitors. While he is aware that her long-term support may depend on factors outside the control of either of them, he is heartened by her interest. The biggest threat to the development of the museum is the amount and intensity of complaints from local hunters. Considering the fact that the bunkers are located just off the main regional highway, these complaints would seem unlikely to be valid, yet such is the strength of the hunting lobby that the very future of the museum depends on resolving this issue.

(It is very pleasing to be able to publish Alex's two reports recounting the success of individuals in saving fortifications against the odds. It also illustrates the difficulties and commitment involved and the vital need for a sustainable afteruse. Ed.)◆