



French Blockhouses in Indochina

Part 2: 1946-1954

CHAPTER VII: THE WAR OF POSTS

In Indochina, most of the forces (so-called territorial) were scattered in small units responsible for control of the countryside. The "War of the Posts" was one of the characteristics of the Indochinese conflict. Indeed, telling the story of the Indochina war by referring only to pitched battles would not give a fair idea of the reality of this war as it was experienced on the ground by most fighters.

In 1948, to fight against the guerrillas, General Boyer de la Tour installed a system of towers in Cochinchina, in central Annam. Most often they were brick structures topped with a four-sided tile roof. Some also looked like great watchtowers, resting on four metal (or wooden) feet, similar to derricks. High, generally from 4 to 6 meters (even 8 meters) and 3 to 4 meters wide, they had walls 30 to 40 cm thick, protected at the base by tree trunks or a small wall. It was entered with a ladder, through an opening two meters above the ground. Every night the little garrison pulled up the ladder. These observation towers were located generally in sight of each other, that is to say about a kilometer away, with every five kilometers a larger work. They were named by letters, numbers, and mile markers. In a tower, four or six men were watching, armed with rifles, grenades, and machine guns. From 1950, as the enemy had recoilless cannons of 75mm and bazookas, it was necessary to give up the construction of these towers. From now on, they would no longer be used along the roads as day-watch stations or as quarters for troops .

The construction of strong positions, capable of resisting an attack, was therefore essential. Marking throughout the peninsula the French military presence, posts differed in size, site, and materials. They were built based on local geography; to say that implies these constructions were very diverse.

The Posts

In a landscape of paddy fields often abandoned as a result of the war (for example, in the plain of Rushes), the post could be constituted (rarely) of a large house (to be fortified) and a large barn in boxes to house the families of the partisans (159).

The fort was usually constructed of bamboos lined with earth or in bags of earth or entirely of earth; in the latter case, the earth was very heavily packed, giving walls - at least fifty centimeters thick - very strong, including 12.7 balls. The frame was made of bamboo and the roof was made of bamboo leaves, which made the whole building very impervious. In Tonkin, the post was built on an eminence in the middle of the rice fields, or on pedestals trimmed in mountainous and wooded areas (160); in the latter place, the fort consisted entirely of trunks of trees and bamboos, or stones taken on the spot, supported by wood; in addition, "niches" were dug into the rock for the families of the deputies.

These fortifications were generally in the form of a square, a rectangle (80 x 60 meters for example) or a triangle, or even without geometric form. However, they all had common characters, that is, a brick or stone wall with concrete corner blockhouses armed with machine guns; about five or ten meters from the post was a circular ditch four meters wide (sometimes filled with water), bordered with several bamboo networks (called "Zerbas") in cross-braces, sharp, fire-cured, deeply buried in the soil with the tips facing outwards; finally, in front of this device, twenty or thirty meters away, a network of barbed wire, anti-personnel mines and illuminating traps. (161)

In Tonkin, in 1951, General de Lattre ordered the construction of a vast line of defense to isolate the "useful delta" - 21,000 km² and 8 million inhabitants - from the neighboring communist regions. This fortified belt was made by the Engineers, the Legion and thousands of Vietnamese coolies who poured 51 million cubic meters of cement (162). As of January 1, 1953, there were 917 posts in Tonkin, of which only 80 were modern ("Lattre's line"), 25 relatively new and 810 out of date to varying degrees. (163)

In May 1953, Private Jean-Aimé Diaz was sent to Sontay (Tonkin) in a fort located in the immediate vicinity of the Red River. It was a reinforced concrete blockhouse (built under the General de Lattre), with an armored door and steel shutters for the loopholes; earthen stairs descended to a depth of three meters in a room (serving as a kitchen and dormitory) equipped with a generator. With the exception of a mortar of 81 installed outside on a concrete slab with a parapet, the whole blockhouse was hardly visible, covered with soil at ground level with grass, extending over about one hectare without vegetation in "an infinite landscape" of abandoned rice fields; around the fort, some mines and barbed wire.

On each fort more or less tinkered, ruled a young leader, assisted by some Europeans and a troop more or less important Vietnamese allies (supporters). The head of post was sometimes an officer (second lieutenant or lieutenant), most often a non-commissioned officer (sergeant, sergeant-in-chief), or even a simple policeman. He commanded a small number of European military personnel who were used to supervise the groups of partisans: for example, in Tonkin, in 1948, the theoretical supervision rate was fixed at 5%; there were three NCOs and one troop for two hundred supporters (2%); in 1951, 3 Europeans for a hundred substitutes; finally, in 1953, in South-Annam (Djirang region), only one gendarme was responsible for about twenty natives. Europeans transferred to substitute units received little special training; they were given only some practical advice to facilitate their integration into the group: to call the substitute by his own name, not to offend the native by screams and public reprimands, to respect the families and children of men, and to watch the men's shoes because the Vietnamese had short, wide feet. In theory, recruitment was done on a voluntary basis, but in practice the military administration drew on the newcomers without worrying about the rest. Reports pointed out the mediocrity of these Europeans (carelessness, alcoholism and lack of courage) (166).

In the end, everything depended on the head of the post, who was in charge of almost everything: military actions, instruction, material life, rewards and sanctions. It was he who was drawing the line between the lawful and the unlawful, for all authority emanated from his person. He presided over the marriages and settled the separations. He attended the holidays. He also arbitrated conflicts, many, sometimes violent. He decided uniforms, even the insignia of his unit. He looked like a band leader without fear, without weakness or pity if he had to.

In 1951-1953, a Colonial Infantry lieutenant made two trips to an area on the border of Laos and Northern Annam (1,600 meters above sea level), "without any infrastructure besides the dirt tracks that linked the villages to each other ". He was "the only European with a hundred mountain partisans, whom he trusted." Here are some thoughts on his behavior: "To fulfill my mission and survive, it was necessary to abandon my European habits, to integrate into the environment in which they lived, to adopt partly the mores of my followers, that is to say , learn the basics of the language of the populations, consume the same thing as my supporters, sleep on the ground; such was the price to be paid to be admitted and to be considered as one of them by these simple people, but particularly welcoming. Often cut logistical bases (except the radio), isolated in nature, I had to live on the country in symbiosis with the partisans and the villagers; only a few drops will bring the essentials (sacks of rice and salt) (167) during the rainy season. My most delicate problem was the evacuation of the wounded, because at that time, in Indochina, there was no helicopter: they were evacuated by stretcher and sometimes by canoe. The delays were very long and the seriously wounded lost their lives before arriving at the hospital. The dead were usually buried on the spot. (168) In addition, 'the Viets were not welcome in this area; in general, this population did not like the Annamites, which made our job easier. "



1953

AS RED HUNTERS RETURN, officers and men at fort watch for trucks to roll up with the patrol's bag of six prisoners.







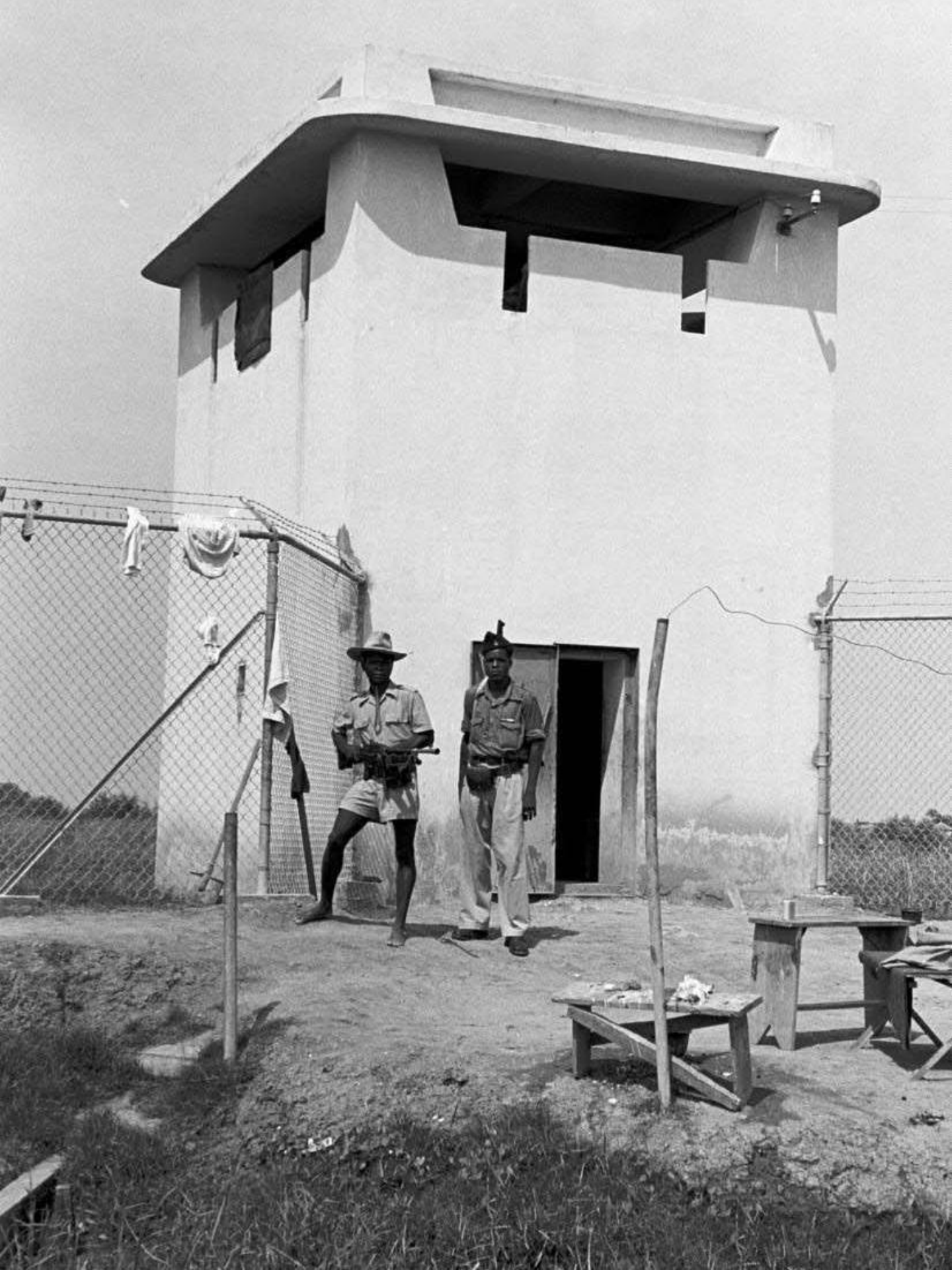


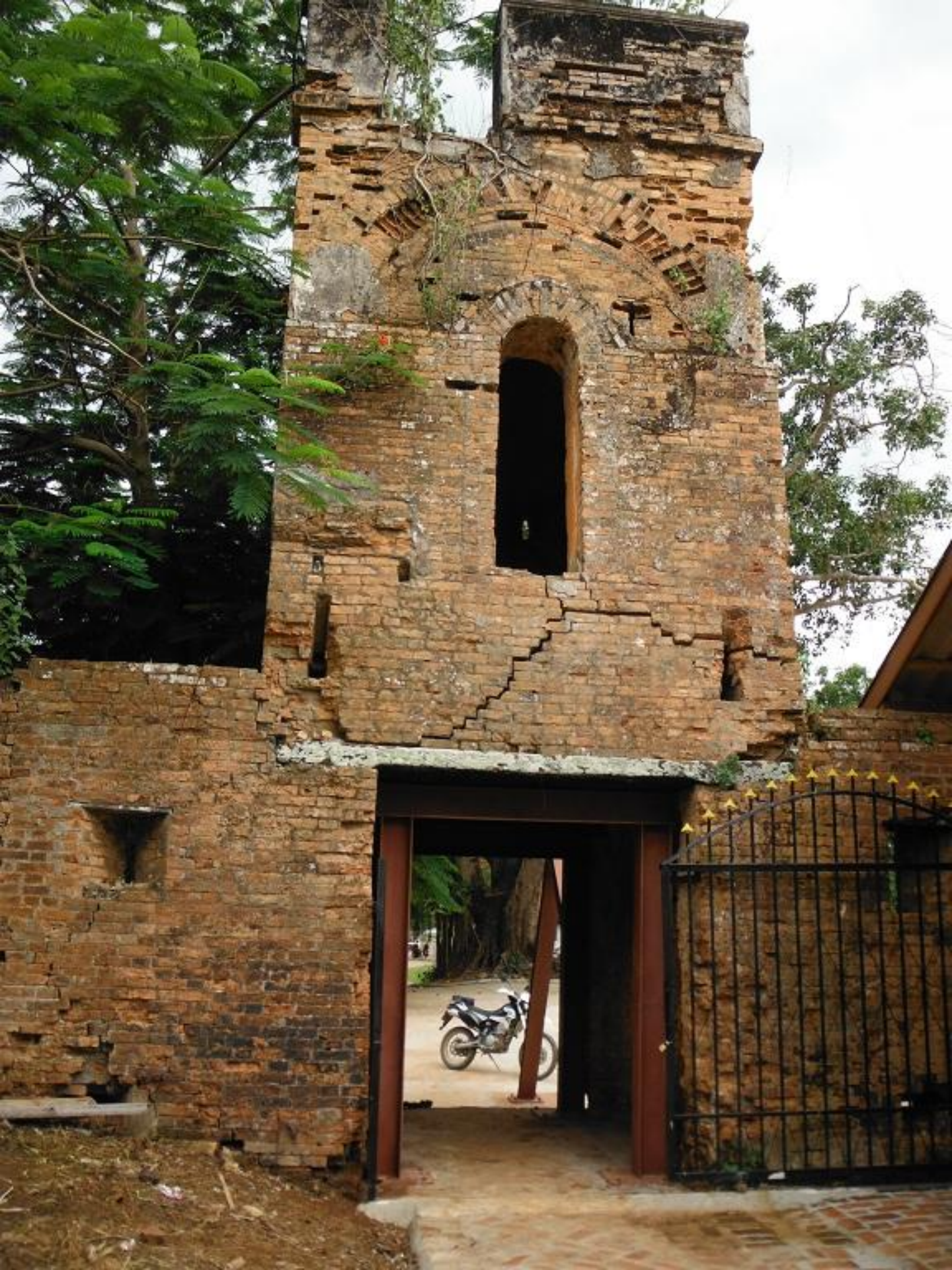


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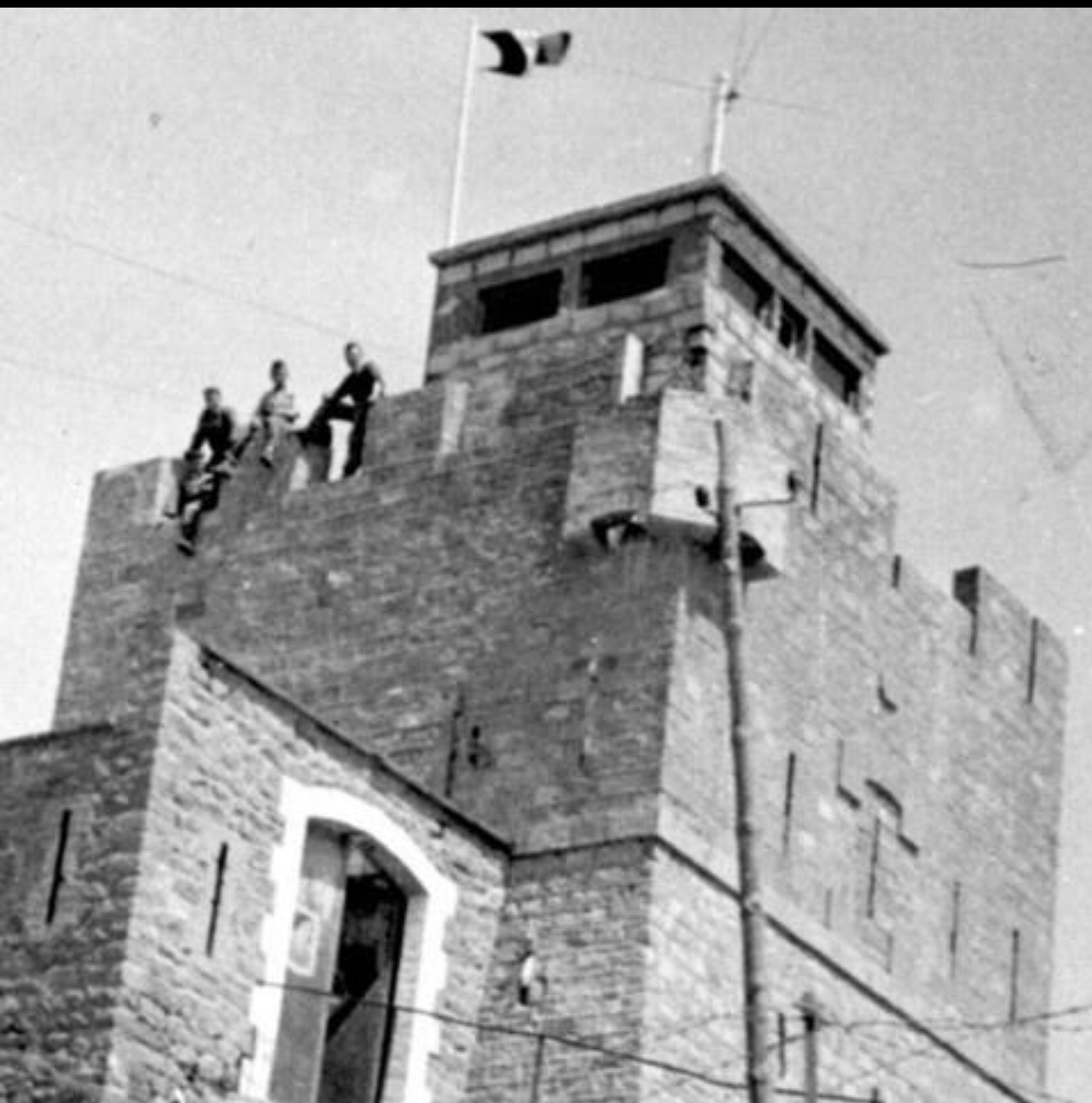
- CHRÉTIENTÉ
DU VIETNAM.
- LES CHAMS,
PEUPLE NOSTALGIQUE.

PRIX : 150 francs — 25 plastres
Numéro 32 - Août-Septembre 1954

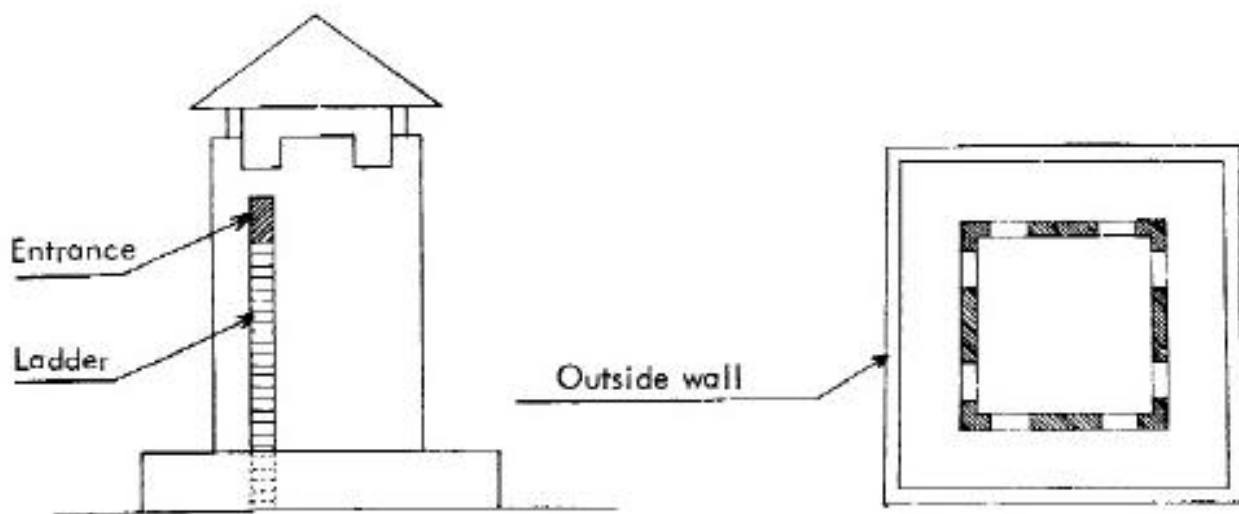








Watch towers 1948



Watch towers 1949-1950

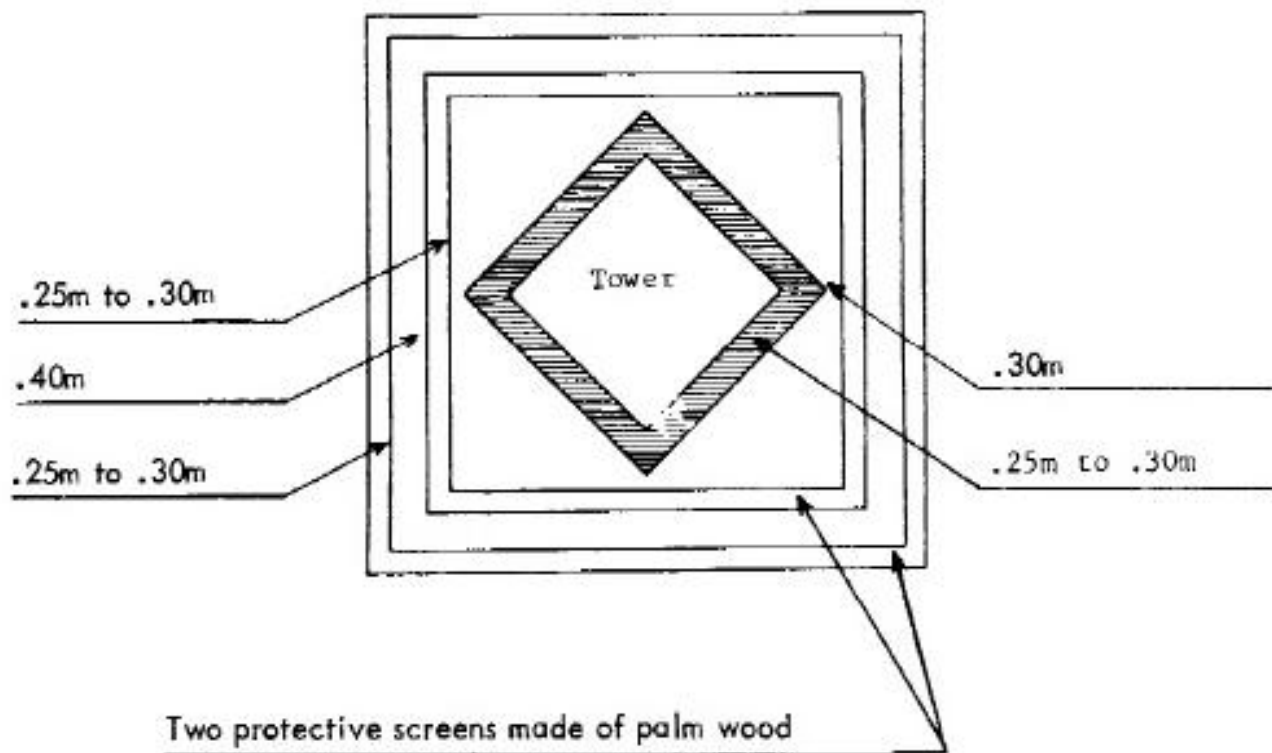


Fig.6—Watch towers, 1948-1950

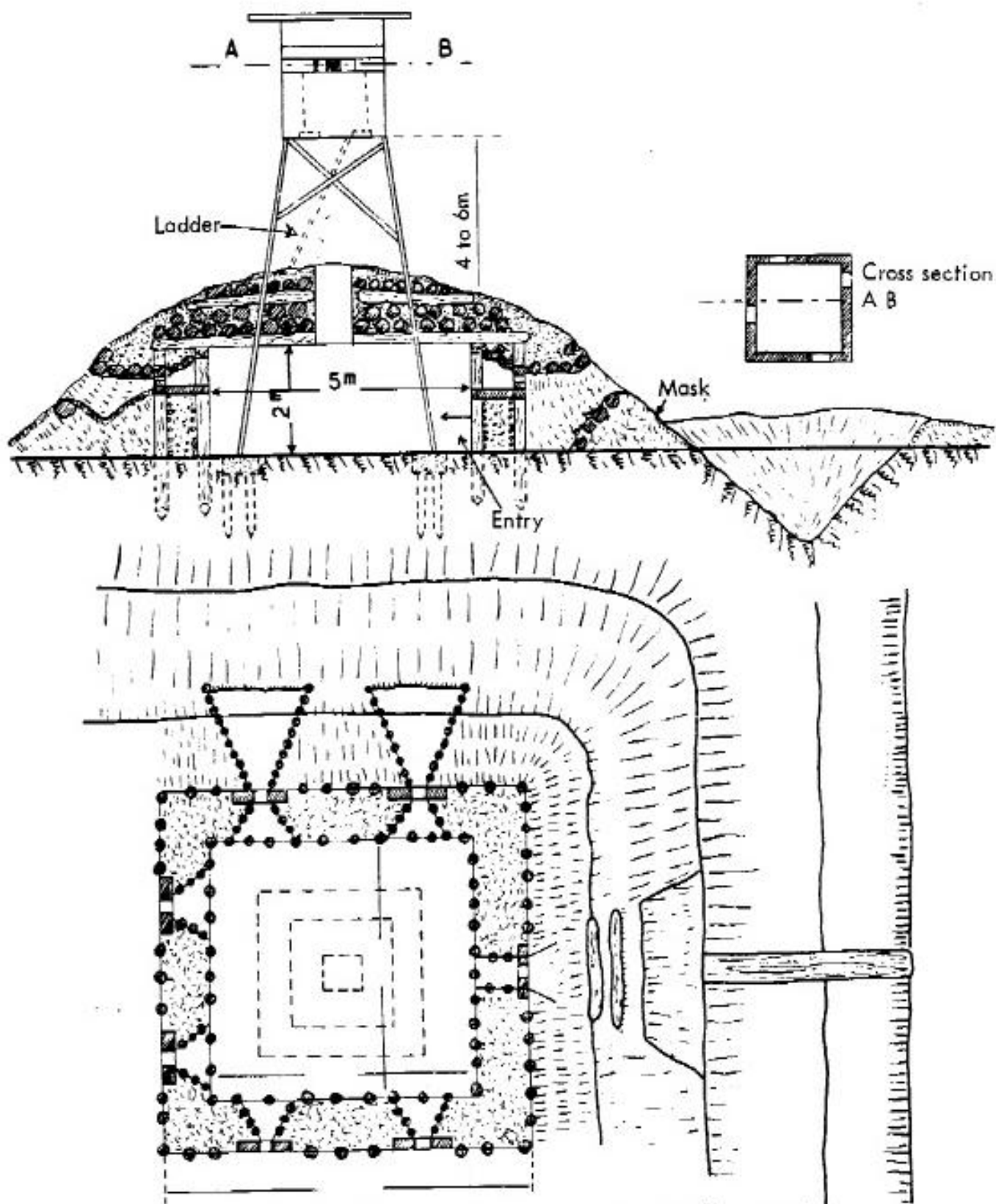
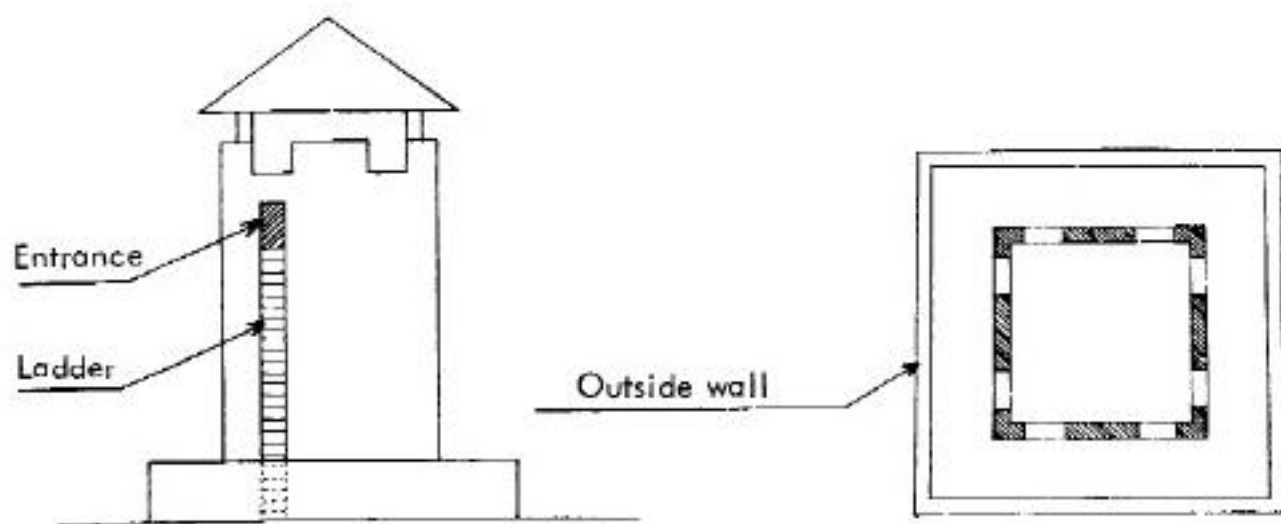


Fig.8—Tower with a metal observation post

Watch towers 1948



Watch towers 1949-1950

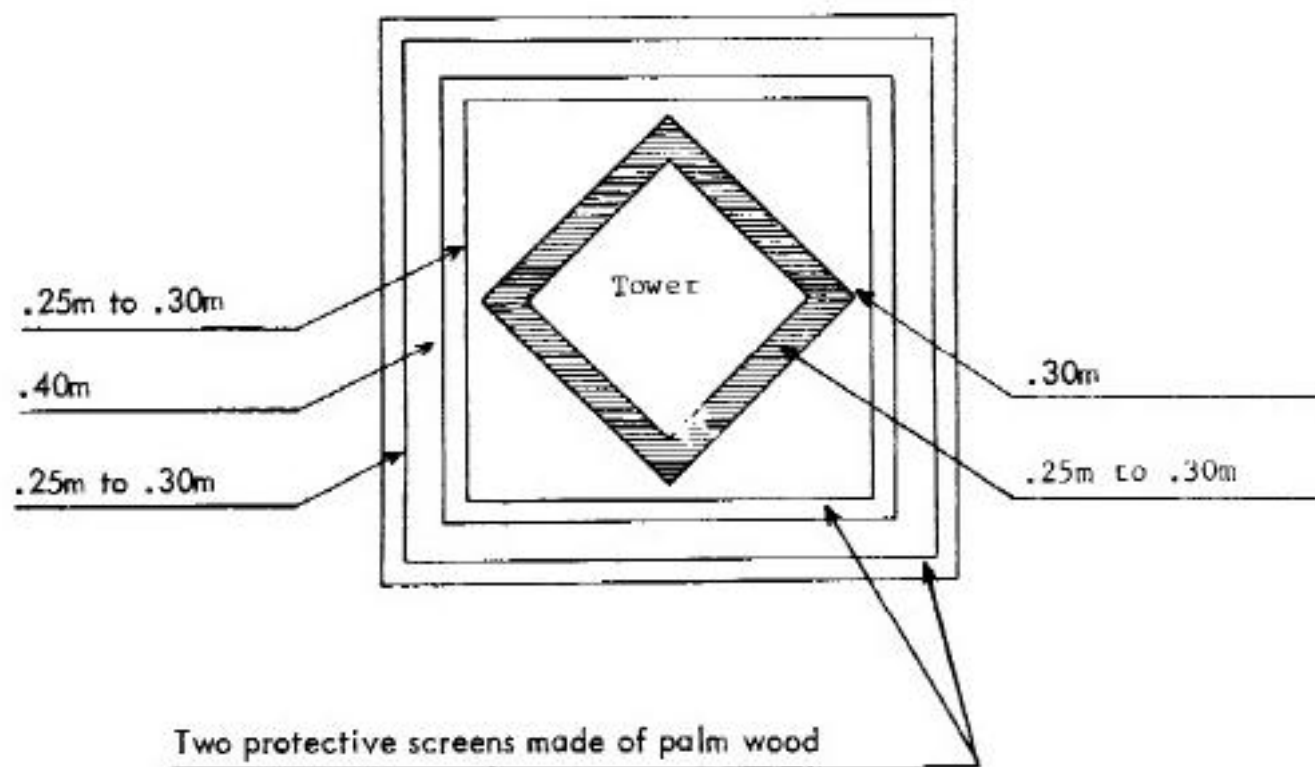


Fig.6—Watch towers, 1948-1950

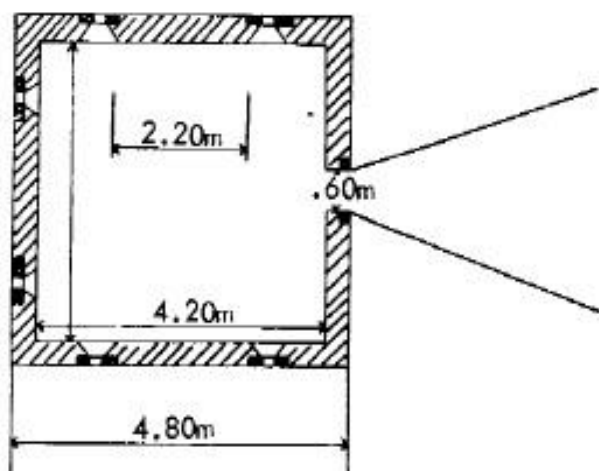
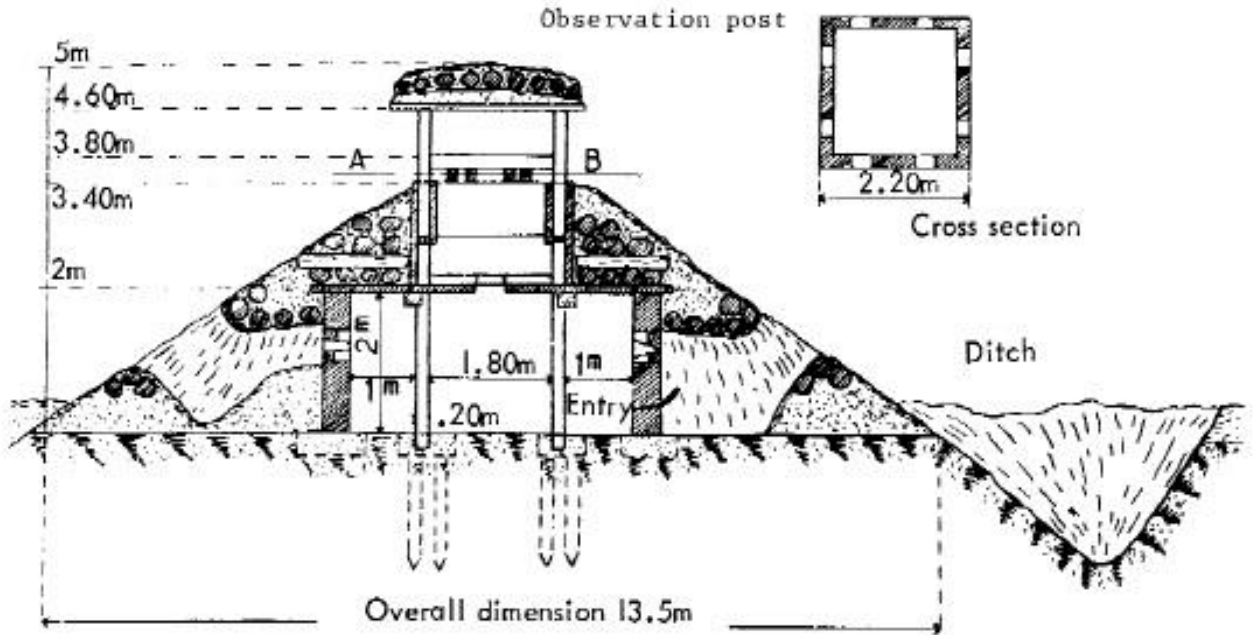
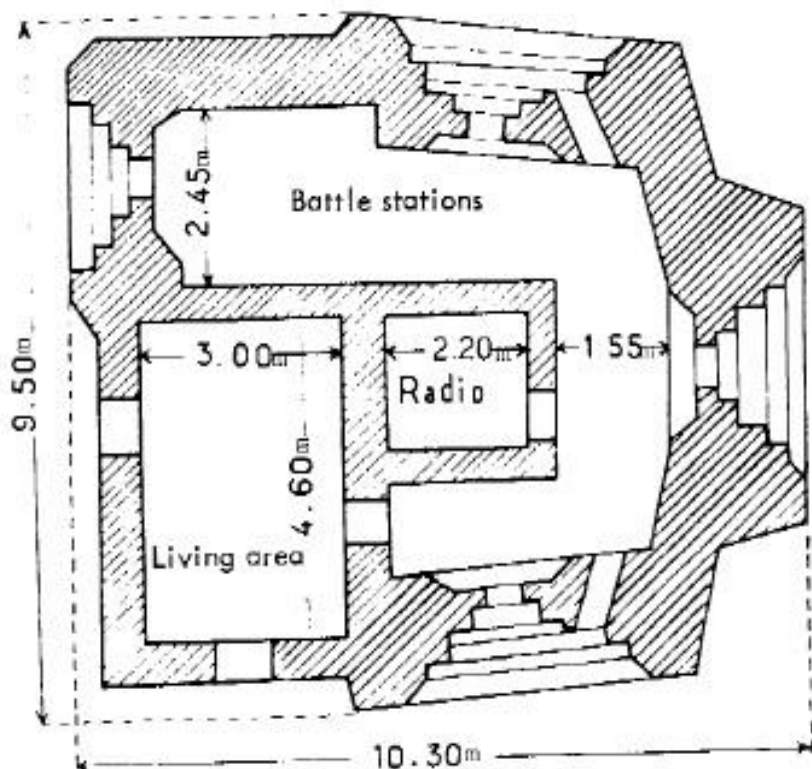


Fig. 7—Watch tower, "engineer type," South Vietnam

Pillbox (all-around-fire)



Pillbox adjacent to barracks

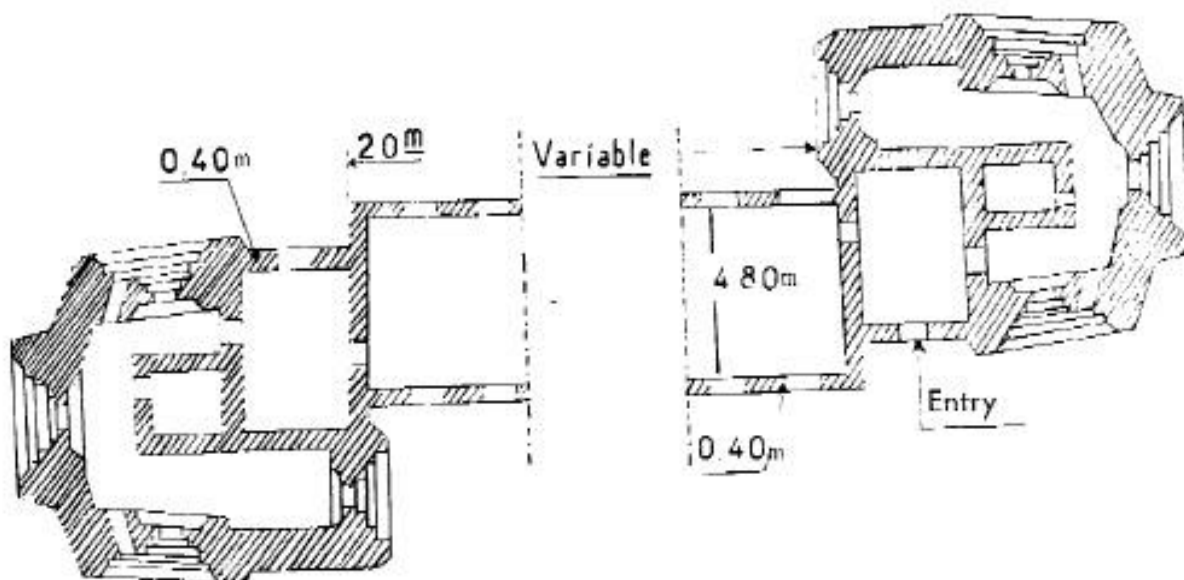
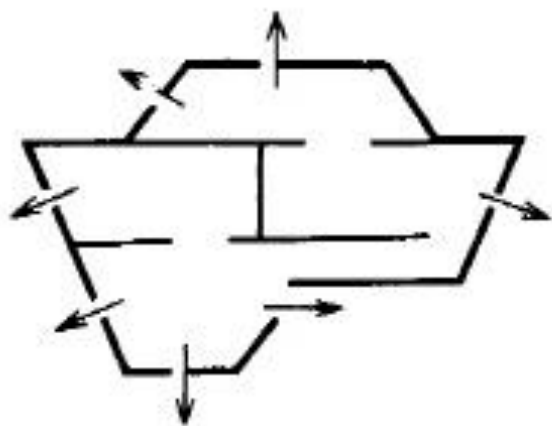
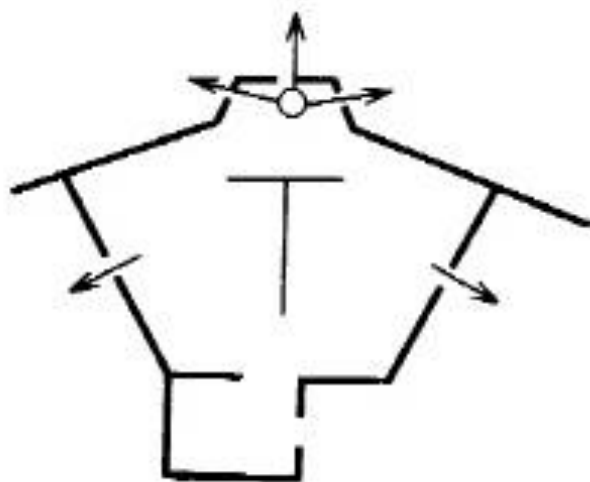


Fig. 15—Types of pillbox plans



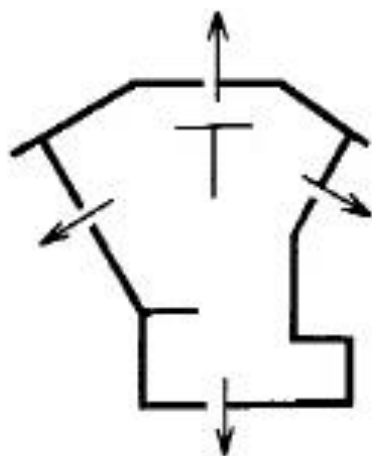
First half 1951

150m³ pillbox



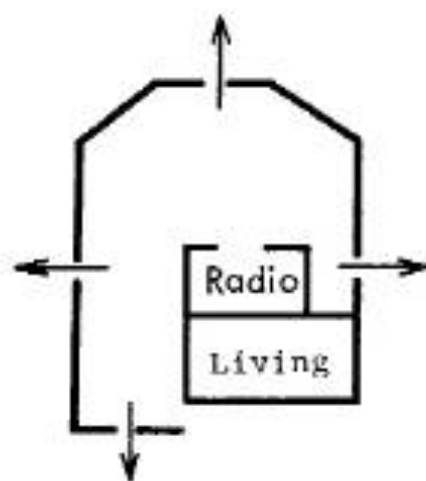
Second half 1951

135m³ pillbox



1952-1953

110m³ light pillbox



Beginning of 1954

130m³ pillbox

Fig.12—Types of pillboxes

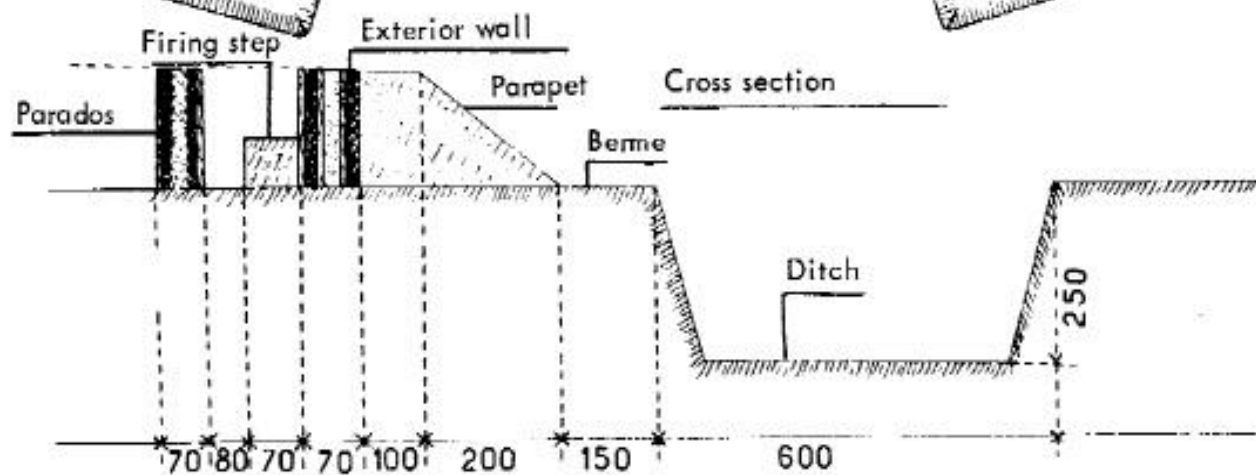
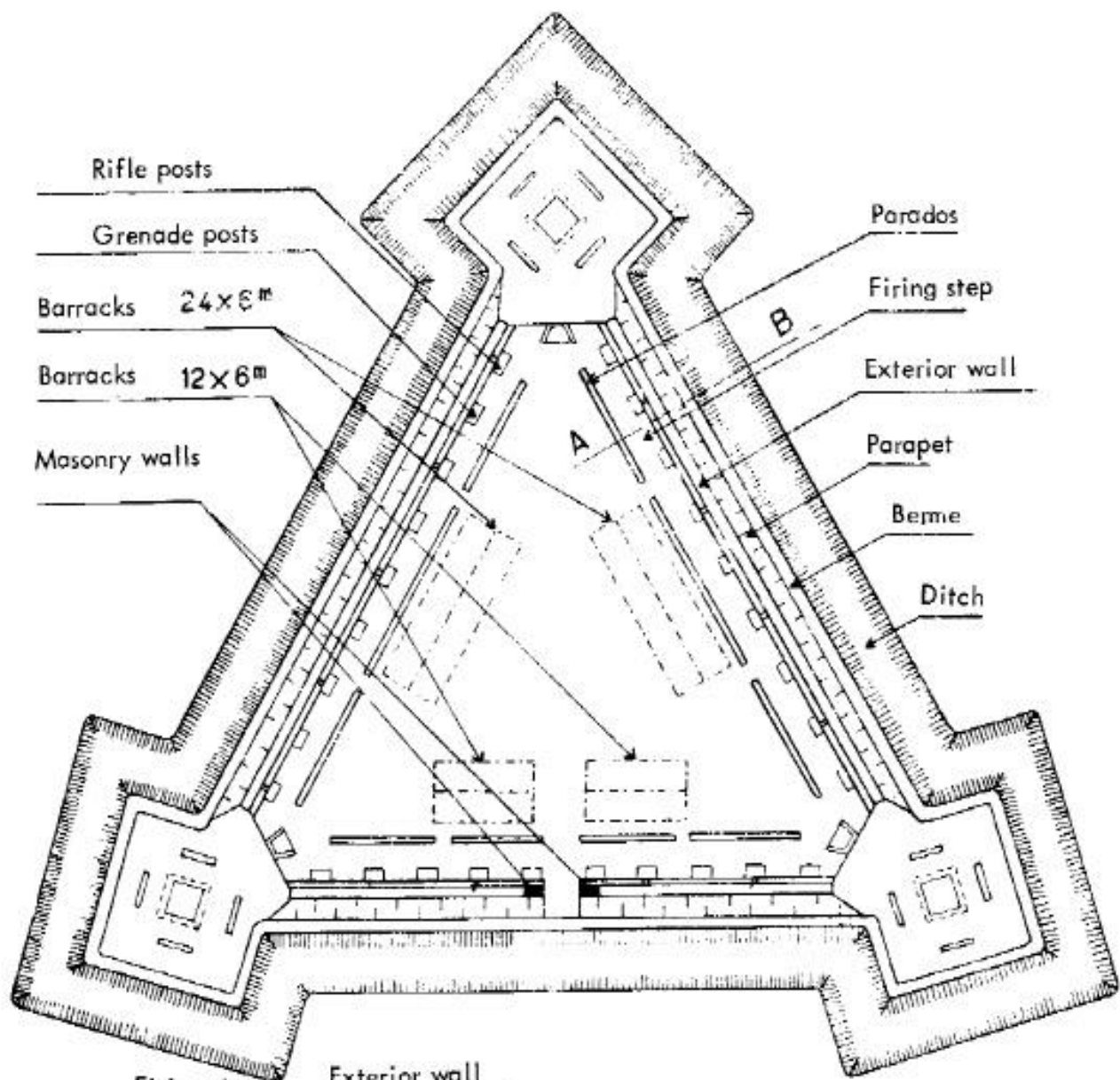
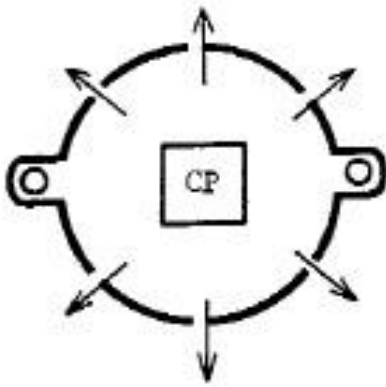
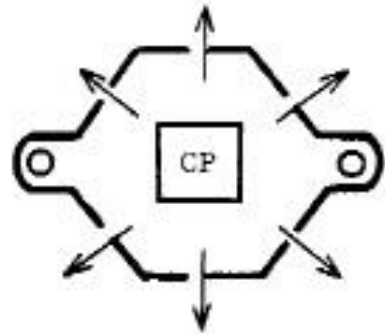


Fig. 9—Triangular military post for 60 men



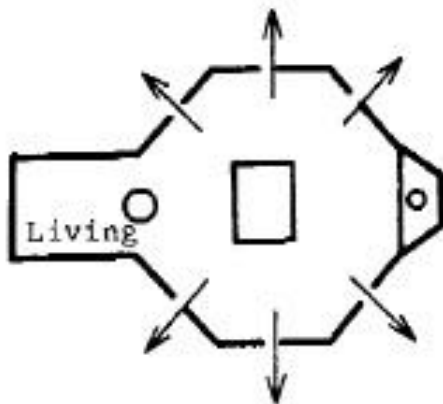
End of 1951

200/240m³ pillbox



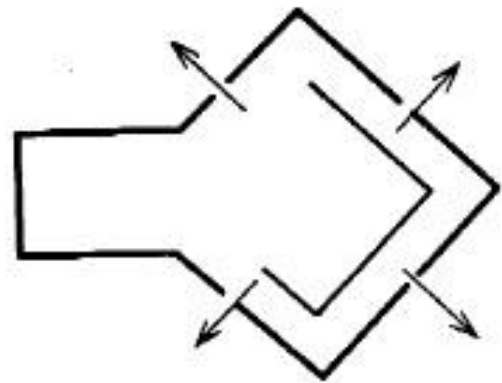
1952

225m³ pillbox



1953

225m³ pillbox



End of 1953-1954

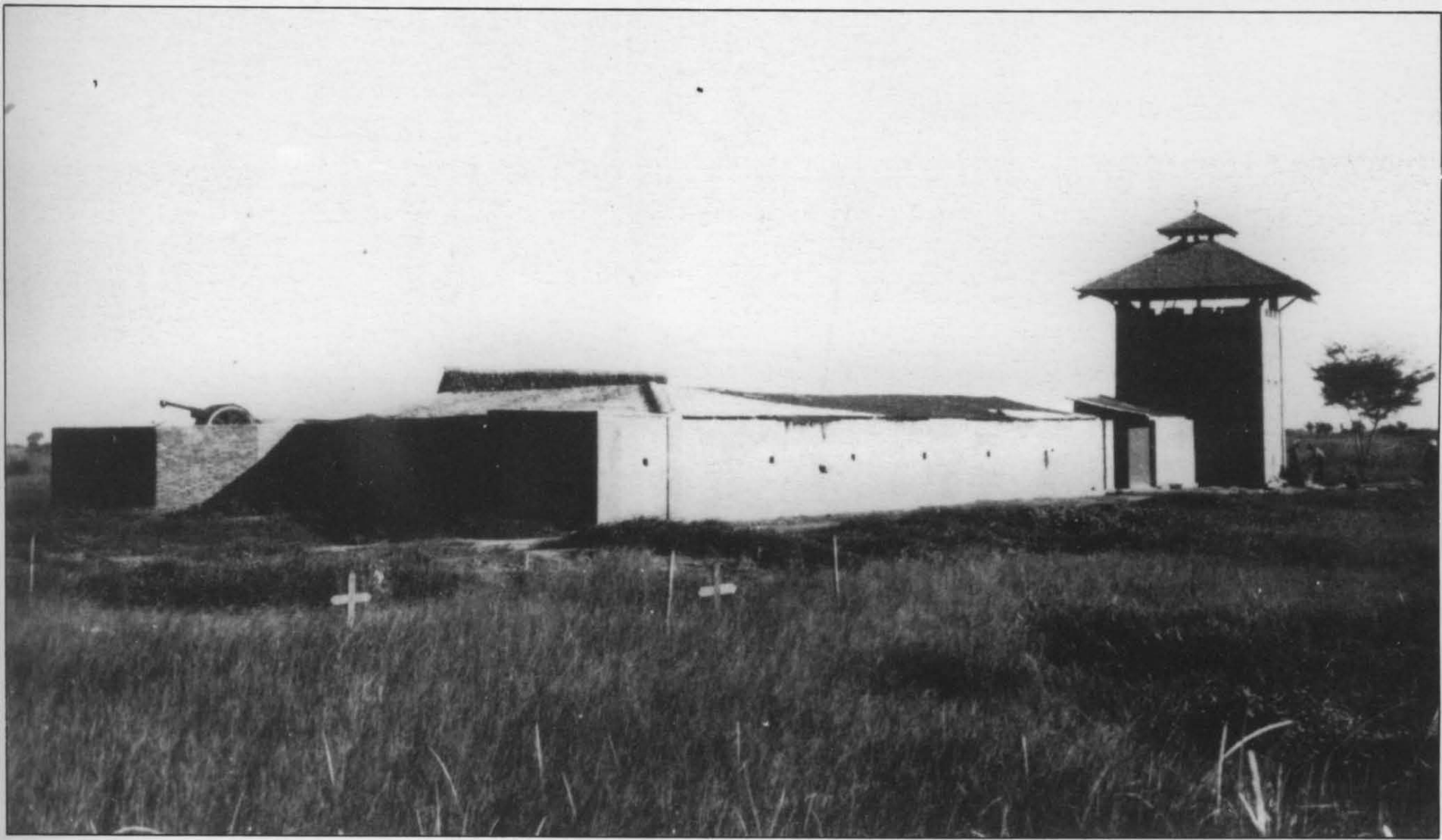
130m³ pillbox

Fig.13—Evolution of the pillbox









Fort at Dong Tan





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Tháp canh của quân đội Cao Đài kiểm soát đường ra vào Tây Ninh - năm 1950. Ảnh: Harrison Forman



VIVE L'AMITIE
FRANCO-VIETNAMIENNE

25. - HANOI. - Poste de Milice de C au-Gi y (avant)







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WATER TOWER
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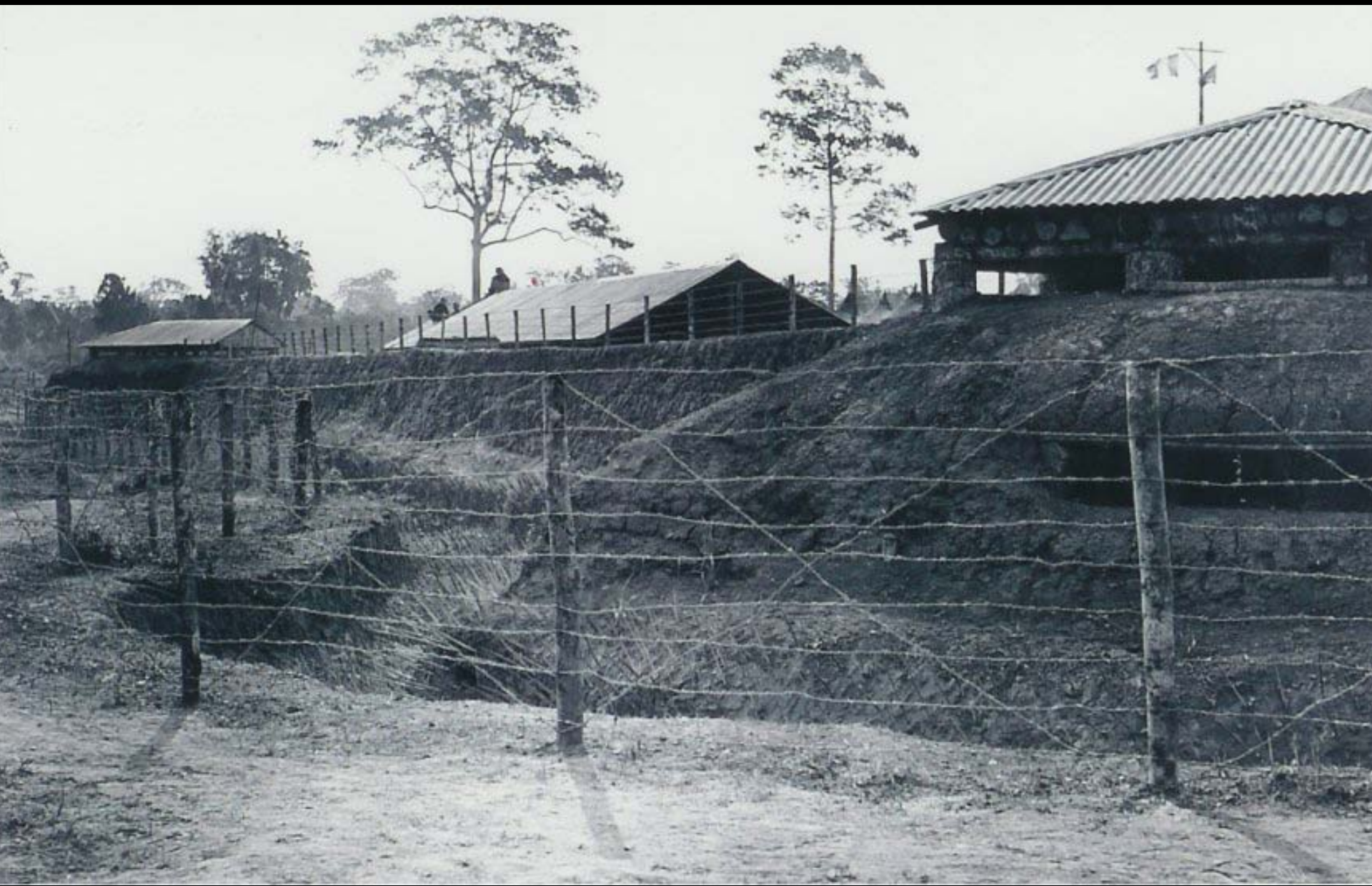










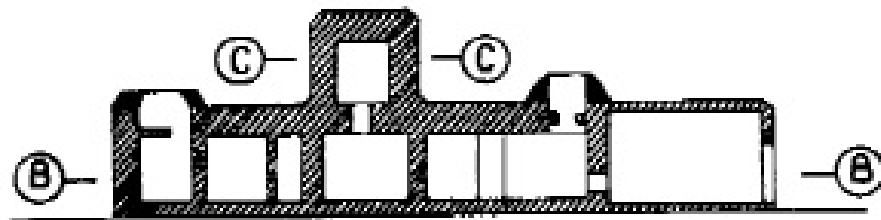




Village fort, Southern Vietnam

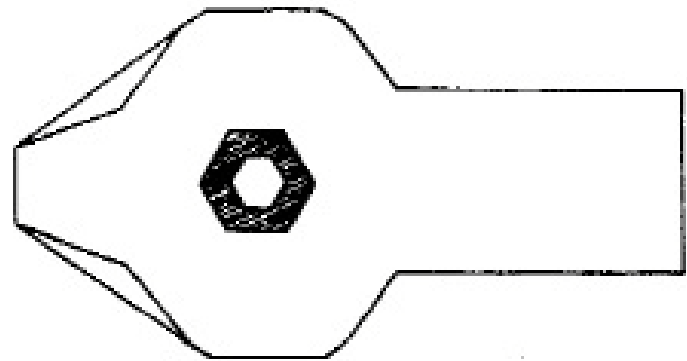
Cross section

(A) (A)



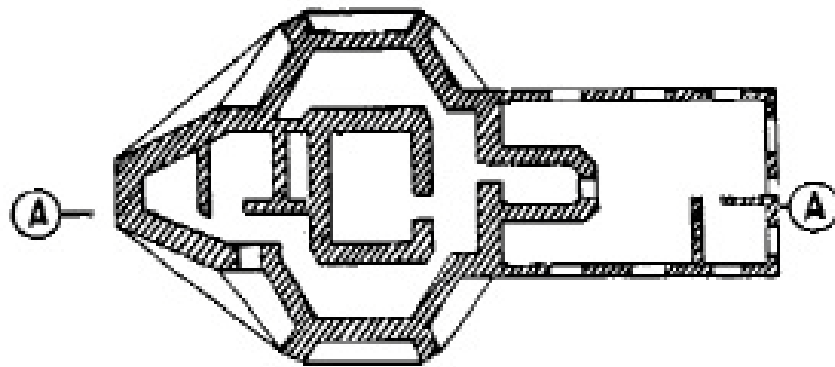
Cross section, top view

(C) (C)

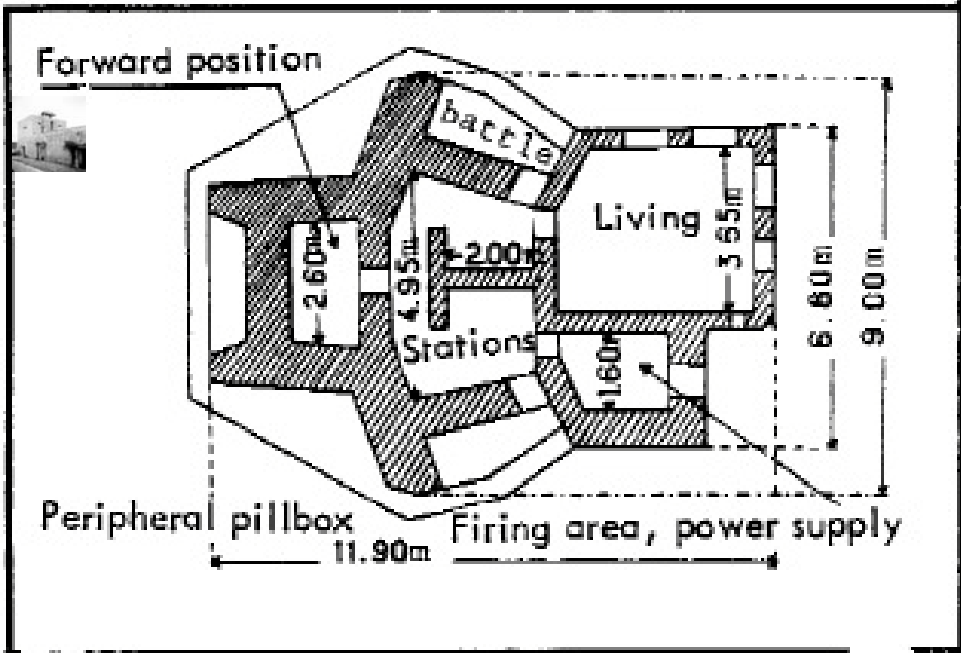


Cross section

(B) (B)



Forward position



Cube : 260 m³
 Face surface 135 m² 58
 Central pillbox 0 k 570 cm

Central pillbox 219 m³
 Living : 41 m³

Fig. 16—Double central pillbox and command post with a living area

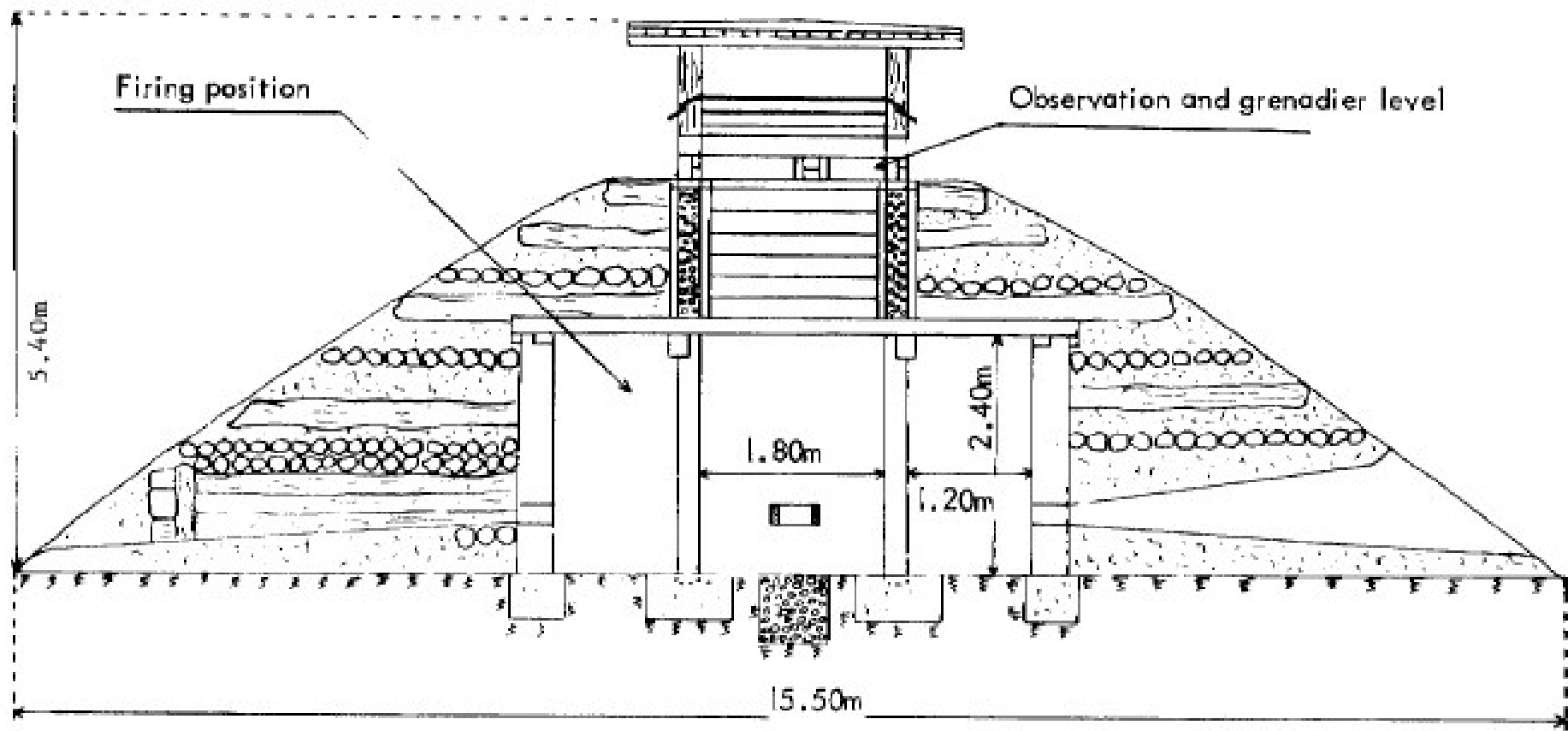


Fig.10—Diagram of a blockhouse









Handwritten graffiti on the tower's wall, including the word "MUONNAN" and other illegible markings.

MUONNAN

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