

THE WIRE OF DEATH

Down by the Swiss border, an experimental electric fence, strong enough to kill any person or animal that touched it, had been constructed in early 1915 to isolate thirteen Alsatian villages from Switzerland. It was decided to use a similar fence on a much larger scale to seal off the Belgian-Dutch border. Work began in April 1915 and, using hired local workers, Landsturm troops (third-class infantry) and Russian POWs, the fence was completed in August 1915.

Large stakes were driven in the soil on the route that was layed out. The pine stakes were equipped with porcelain insulators to hold the wires. The fence usually contained five or six wires, spaced evenly at 30 centimetres, fixed at the Belgian side of the stake. Higher up two more wires were placed to supply the electricity (the 'Speiseleitung', as the Germans called this feeder wire). Smooth wire of three to five millimetres diameter was used, but supplies were insufficient so often barbed wire was used instead. One and a half up to three metres along either side of the fence another barbed wire fence was placed. These were lower, not electrified, serving as a protection for people and animals.



The electric fence along the Belgian-Dutch border, consisted of three lines of wires which were intended to stop all disturbing border activities that might severely harm the military operations and authority of the occupier.

It stretched almost 200 miles from Vaals, near the German border, to the Schelde River, north of Antwerp, more or less following the border, completely on Belgian soil. The main fence was six to ten feet high with five to ten copper wires carrying 2,000 to 6,000 volts, more than enough to kill anyone touching one of the live wires.

A series of huts housed the generators and the current could be cut off in sections for maintenance or to retrieve dead bodies. Usually, two outer barbed wire fences, one on either side, would stop stray animals or humans from coming in contact with the electrified fence, though there were sections with only the live fence and nothing to keep people from brushing against it.

At regular intervals, guard posts were built and the perimeter was regularly patrolled. The German soldiers were given orders to shoot to kill and some escapees were shot even though they had made it to Dutch territory.

As the Netherlands were neutral during the First World War, the Belgian-Dutch border was a space suspended between war and peace. However, the German army faced many difficulties trying to avoid border crossings. The occupiers could not tolerate that one million Belgian civilians fled to the Netherlands to escape the atrocities of war since fugitives might be spies, smugglers or even potential workers in the allied war industry.



The German army could not seal the borderline completely. Many people succeeded in crossing the kilometre-long borders: amongst them were volunteers for the Belgian army, spies, clandestine mail-deliverers, resistance fighters, smugglers and refugees. The wire of death would close the borderline hermetically. One should know that from the start of the war on, the occupying Germans had tried to close the borders with The Netherlands by placing barriers on the main roads and having soldiers patrolling. All this demanded the deployment of a considerable number of soldiers. The wire of death fence would reduce this number drastically.

Farmers often had land or meadows on the other side of the wire fence, sometimes only a few hundreds of metres from their farm. The construction of the wire fence forced them to make a detour of sometimes a few kilometres to pass the gate that allowed them to enter their own land. Sometimes they did not even get the permission to do so. Labourers who worked in The Netherlands did not get a permit to cross the border on a daily basis. They were made to choose between staying in Belgium without an income, or working and also residing in The Netherlands. Then they were allowed to return to their native country once or twice a month. Children could no longer attend their school if that happened to be on the other side of the fence; so they simply had to choose a school elsewhere or drop school altogether.



In the foreground soldiers of a Dutch border patrol. On the other side of the fence a German soldier. In between them a body lying under the deadly wire. To remove bodies the current had to be switched off.

More than 30,000 Belgian war volunteers succeeded in going to the Netherlands, Great Britain and France to join the Belgian army at the Yser frontline. The allied intelligence services, based in the Netherlands, had more than 6,000 agents at their disposal in occupied Belgium. Some agents passed many secret messages to Holland on a weekly basis.

As the German post service administration censored all written correspondence, secret organizations such as *Le Mot du Soldat* (The Word of the Soldier) had organized clandestine postal networks. Hundreds of thousands of letters for and from the soldiers at the frontline crossed the border, following the same route as the war volunteers. Many German soldiers deserted. Belgians, Dutchmen and Germans smuggled because basic foodstuff was insufficiently available in Belgium. All these activities inspired the Germans to build an electric fence at the Belgian-Dutch border in April-May 1915.

The name 'Wire of Death' is an English rendition of one of its popular Dutch names *Dodendraad* which can be translated as either "Death wire" or "Wire of the dead". As the war continued and more and more victims fell to the electric fence it became known as simply *De Draad* meaning "The Wire". To the German authorities it was officially known as the *Grenzhochspannungshindernis* ("High Voltage Frontier Barrier"). Parallels have been made between the 'Death Wire' and the later Iron Curtain.

It was their strategy to cut off the population and detain them inside their own country thus paralyzing the Belgians and gaining control and influence over all actions carried out in occupied territories, especially near the border. On the other hand, the Netherlands benefited from the fence as it was an indirect help against all kinds of illegal intrusions that could harm the neutrality of the country.

A young Belgian boy, electrocuted by the fence.

Many of the young Belgians who died here, were on their way to the Belgian army, that kept on fighting during the whole war in the south-western part of the country. These boys lived in the part of Belgium that was occupied by the Germans.

Because crossing the frontline was not possible, they first had to go (neutral) Holland. From there they wanted to take a ship to England and then another ship to France from where they could travel back to free Belgium.





After a failed attempt to escape his occupied country, a Belgian civilian lies dead in the electrified barbed wire fence that lined the border.

Four-year-old Peter Wuijts lived in Bergeijk in The Netherlands. The family home was near to border pole 187, he lived merely thirty metres from the wire of death fence. He died a gruesome death trying to crawl under the wire when playing. "The father, who witnessed the accident, wanted to lift the child from the wire. Some bystanders stopped him from doing so. They wound rubber around a stick and managed to get the child

off the wire. Its arm was burnt through, making the tiny hand fall on the ground." In Belgium the brothers 'Seijen were the youngest victims. Carolus, aged 13, and Marcel, 10, died in the night of November 4th, 1917, near to Driehoeven in Kalmthout.

The worst incident took place on the night of August 25th, 1917 near the castle of Hoogstraten. German border guards came across some Belgian refugees, four of whom were shot. The casualties were Max Skölle (a German soldier, aged 56), the 16-year-old Charles Farcy from Molenbeek, his brother Henry and the 37-year-old Antoon Van Den Broeck from Antwerp.

The Electric Fence also destroyed cultural relations between Holland and Belgium. Before the war a large part of southern Holland was aimed at the Belgian towns of Liege and Visé. Most of these Hollanders spoke French (being the language in this part of Belgium). Four years and an Electric Fence later they had become used going to the Dutch town of Maastricht instead. The old customs never returned. Nowadays they don't even speak French anymore.

The number of casualties varies from a few dozen up to five thousand or more. Probably both numbers are doubtful. To give a reliable estimation one has to define clearly which casualties are included. Only the victims that were electrified or also the ones who were shot near to the fence? Should we start counting from the beginning of the war or from the construction of the wire of death? Professor Vanneste counted some 850 casualties from the construction onward. Probably there were still more, yet few data are kept: Belgium was occupied territory, the border area was forbidden, the press was censored. Hardly any German reports of border patrol are preserved.

Half of the casualties were Belgian, a quarter was German. The others are Dutch (10%), escaped Russian prisoners of war (10%), French (4%) and a few other nationalities. Three quarters of the casualties died from electrocution, 20% from exchange of fire in the vicinity of the fence. Of the remaining 5% the actual cause of death is unknown. Some three hundred casualties fell in Limburg. This Flemish province has the longest border distance, almost half of the 332 kilometres. Antwerp has more than two hundred casualties; one hundred and seventy died in the province of East-Flanders; thirty in West-Flanders. Of eighty victims it is unclear where they were killed. Over the whole period the wire of death made 2,4 casualties per kilometre. This number was highest in Antwerp (2,74) and East-Flanders (2,67), lowest in Limburg (2,1).

Along the borderline with Baarle-Nassau forty-four casualties are registered. Four of these got killed before the construction of the wire, so are not included in these statistics. The remaining forty casualties make up for 5% of the global number, which somehow reflects the length of the fence in this region (4,7% of 332 km). Overall there are 2,4 victims per kilometre, near to the border with Baarle-Nassau this number is 2,58. Amongst the casualties are sixteen Belgians (40%), thirteen Germans (33%), five Dutch (12%), two French (5%), two English (5%) and two Russians (5%). This is quite similar to the overall numbers, though there are minor differences. There are less Belgian (-10%) and Russian (-5%) victims; more Germans (+8%), English (+4%), Dutch (+2%) and French (+1%) were killed. Available sources often contradict each other on the cause of death. Probably twenty five people were electrocuted and fourteen shot (nine by German soldiers, three by Belgian border guides, two by Dutch border guards). In one case the cause of death is unclear.

The Electric Fence, with a 2,000-volt tension, was flanked at both sides by a second but not electrified fence, along the whole border from Knokke to Aix-la-Chapelle. The distance between the fences varied from 1.5 to 2 or more metres. However, the fence was adjusted to the landscape and site-specific needs and challenges: under certain circumstances, it might have had four or five electrified wires; in another situation it might have been eight or more. Back then, there were no electric power stations yet; electricity was so new it was practically unknown to the population. Power came from factories or small generators near the border (Aix-la-Chapelle, Kaulille, Lommel, Merksem, Kapellen, Zelzate).

It was built in straight lines, sometimes cutting towns in two, bisecting farms and gardens, crossing canals, even crossing over the tops of houses. As it was being built, locals would come to marvel at it, many not believing that the electricity running through it could actually kill. Danger signs were posted, but only when reports started coming in of people and animals actually dying on the fence, did the public understand the danger. It became known as the "border of death", the "devil's wire" or the "wire of death". Estimates of 2,000 to 3,000 electrocution deaths have been attributed to the wire of death.

The fence was guarded day and night, mostly by *Landsturm* guardsmen or patrols. Nobody could access the technical installations in the *Grenz- or Todesstreifen* (border or death zone), a zone of several hundred metres lining the Belgian side of the fence. On the eastern side of the fence (Scheldt/Aix-la-Chapelle) the Germans had built *Schalhäuser* (connection cabins) in intervals of 500 metres to several kilometres, where they had also installed electric devices to manage the power.

On the western side (Scheldt/Knokke), these devices had mostly been stationed in confiscated houses. The fence had been built near the borderline, always on Belgian territory; when the borderline ran along a particularly wavy route, the Germans left a kind of "no man's land" between the border and the fence, which often encompassed whole villages. In other places, the fence would run through the centre of a village, for example in Koewacht and Overslag.

For strategic as well as practical purposes, the occupier inserted gates in the fence, which functioned either as *Militärdurchlässe* (gates for military purposes) or *Zivildurchlässe* (gates for civilians).

After receiving authorization from the *Kommandantur*, a civilian could go to Holland under exceptional circumstances, for example to visit an ill parent or to attend a funeral. In all other cases, however, it was absolutely forbidden to cross the border.

At various places one could pass through gates: *Zivildurchlässe* were meant for civilians, *Militärdurchlässe* for the military. Along the border there were seventy-five of them: fifty were reserved for soldiers, nine for civilians, sixteen for mixed traffic. The heavily guarded gates were situated on the main roads or railways. They made it possible to enter the 'no man's land' between the wire of death and the borderline. If one managed to obtain a *Passierschein* from the local commander, which was quite rare, one could travel to the Netherlands.

Pass-Zentrale Antwerpen
 N. 3331
 Antwerpen, den 1. Februar 1915.

Passierschein

für Hans Vincent Marie Janssen
 aus Antwerpen
 staatsangehörig nach Belgien
 geboren 15. Juli 1861
 zur Reise von Antwerpen nach Holland zum Besuch

mit Freibriefe etc. zu beliebiger Stelle. (Nagel)
 Zweck: Wegnahme Familienangehöriger

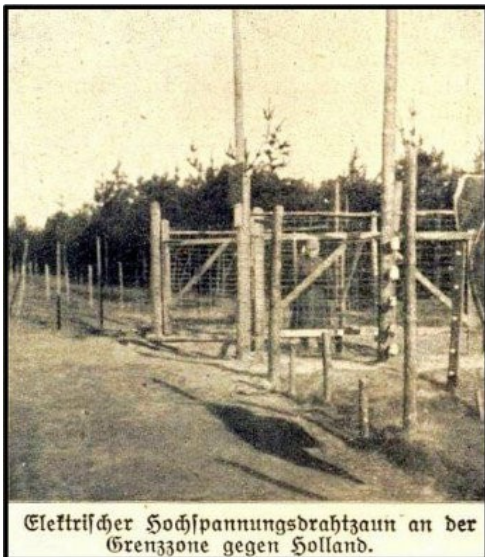
Gültig: bis zum 26. 6. 1915

PASS-ZENTRALE ANTWERPEN
 A. B.

Erhobene Gebühr: 1.00

VERMERK: Sobald das Operations- oder Etappengebiet einer Deutschen Armee berührt wird hängt die Genehmigung zur Fortsetzung der Reise lediglich von dem Ermessen der dortigen militärischen Dienststellen ab.
 Briefe und Zeitungen dürfen nicht mitgenommen werden.
 Ausweispapiere der Heimatbehörde mit Photographie müssen stets mitgeführt werden.

On January 26th 1915 the occupying force decided to stop granting a *Passierschein* to any Belgian males aged sixteen to forty-five to keep them from joining the Belgian army. For strategic-military reasons the



Germans did not want to block all roads to The Netherlands. One might never know how the relations between the Netherlands and Germany or between Belgium and the Netherlands would evolve during the war.

To continue their activities, many of those in the Belgian resistance developed strategies to cross over. Probably the most commonly used method was bribery of the German guards or patrols near the border. There were also more active techniques to confront the fence and the guards, and some people indeed succeeded by sneaking over, under or between the wires.



Gadgets were developed to defeat the electric fence. This wooden frame, which separated the wires and through which an agent might carefully climb, however, there were also many victims: more than 1,000 persons have been listed so far as having died at the fence, whether by electrocution or by having been shot by the guards. After the armistice, the fence was immediately demolished by the locals, leaving no traces of the deadly wires.



The high voltage border obstacle on the Belgian Dutch border of 1915-1918 from the Dutch side.

As mentioned previously, construction began in the spring of 1915 and consisted of over 200 km (125 miles) of 2,000-volt wire with a height ranging from 1.5 to about 3m (5 to about 10ft) spanning the length of the Dutch-Belgian border from Aix-la-Chapelle to the River Scheldt. Within 100–500m (110–550yd) of the wire, anyone who was not able to officially explain their presence was summarily executed.

The number of victims is estimated to range between 2,000 and 3,000 people. Local newspapers in the Southern Netherlands carried almost daily reports about people who were 'lightninged to death'. However, many also succeeded in overcoming the fence, often by employing dangerous or creative methods, ranging from the use of very large ladders and tunnels to pole vaulting and binding porcelain plates onto shoes in an attempt to insulate oneself.

The wire also separated families and friends as the Dutch–Belgian border where Dutch and Flemings (Dutch-speaking Belgians), despite living in different states, often inter-married or otherwise socialized with each other. Funeral processions used to walk to the fence and halt there, to give relatives and friends on the other side the opportunity to pray and say farewell.

The (neutral) Dutch government on several occasions protested the wire and its existence caused public outrage in the Netherlands. The great number of fatalities not only resulted in a sharp increase in Anti-German sentiment (in a country which had up until then been mostly hostile to Britain due to the Second

Boer War) but also made smuggling goods in the border area much more dangerous and therefore more lucrative for local criminals.

While it deterred many from crossing, as well as large groups of Belgian males of military age, it was not impenetrable. Determined spies and smugglers developed methods of crossing the electric barrier. Some used rubber-lined barrels and window panes, which they would (carefully) insert between the wires and crawl through; some dug under the wires or short-circuited them, some used wooden ladders. Sometimes, contraband or documents could just be thrown over to the other side. The Germans countered by burying live wires and raising the height of the fence and installing searchlights.

They also instituted a registration plan, whereby Belgian males aged 17 to 55 were required to register and appear monthly to monitor how many were still crossing into the Netherlands. The fence was costly to erect and maintain but it certainly slowed traffic between the Dutch-Belgian frontier. The fence did not completely follow the border and did not cross rivers. The Germans also allowed locals to pass through for church services, on market days and during harvest. In October 1918, the Germans opened the border to allow refugees from France and Belgium through rather than clog up German lines of communication in Belgium. Ironically, at the end of the war the Kaiser crossed the border from Belgium into the neutral Netherlands to take refuge there.

Immediately after the signing of the armistice in November 1918 the power plants around the wire were shut down and locals on both sides of the border soon destroyed the much-hated fence. Today all that remains of the original wire are some warning signs; however in some areas certain stretches have been reconstructed such as near Hamont-Achel, Zondereigen, Molenbeerseland between Achtmaal and Nieuwmoer in nature reserve "De Maatjes" by observation post "De Klot".

Belgium did not yet have power stations, only a few companies had the equipment to generate electricity to supply in their own needs. The region of the Voer and the south of Limburg relied on the transformer kiosk of Reutershag (between Vaals and Aachen), that had a feeder cable to Belgium. The region between Kanne and Maaseik relied on the same power station, as well as on the equipment of the gunpowder factory in Kaulille and the sawmill of the Emsens family in Lommel-Stevensvennen. The Germans made use of the same plants in the north of Limburg to supply the regions of Maaseik to Lozen and further to Lommel-Stevensvennen. The electricity in the region Lommel-Stevensvennen to Minderhout was supplied by Kaulille, Lommel-Stevensvennen and a transformer kiosk in Kapellen. For the western region of the Schelde, sources are less clear. It seems some smaller companies near to the border with Zeeuws-Vlaanderen supplied electricity: an electrical substation in Zelzate, a factory in Moerbeke, etc.



A German military map of a part of the Belgian-Dutch border (near the Belgian villages of Achel and Neerpelt). The map shows the Electric Fence and also where the current came from. Different *Kraftwerke* (power stations) along the line supplied the 2000 Volts.

After the Armistice, the Belgian authorities claimed the wire of death fence as spoils of war, but it had already disappeared at many places. In Weelde-Statie (Ravels) the fence was pulled down a few days before the end of the war. The materials were used by farmers to fence off their meadows. In some cases it took more time. Farmer Jan Van Loooveren from Meer wanted to visit his parents on 12th November 1918, the day



after the armistice. They inhabited a small farm in the 'Beemden' in Wuustwezel. Assuming the Germans had cut off the power, Jan wanted to crawl through the wires in Gestel (Meer). He took the wire with both hands and so became the very last victim of the wire of death fence!

A picture showing farmers fields crossed by the route of the wire.



Pictures of the wire, as was (without current!)

