



German troops protected their "pillboxes" with obstacles, to keep the Allies from approaching on land. This artist's rendering, part of the U.S. Navy's art gallery, depicts how one of those pillboxes appeared during the Normandy battles. Curators of the Navy's art gallery [describe it as follows](#):

German Pillbox in a Normandy Field, by Alexander P. Russo.

This is one of the many pillboxes scattered through the hills facing the beaches. The field in the foreground is spiked with posts to prevent glider landings. Such pillboxes were put to good use by Allied troops as hardened shelters for first aid dressing stations and communications set-ups.

The Germans weren't the only ones who built pillboxes to use as a defense against invasion. Britain had them, too.

In fact, within a few months after [Churchill told his countrymen](#) (and the world) that Brits would resist Hitler everywhere—"We shall fight them on the beaches, we shall fight in the streets, we shall never surrender"—he actually had to *do* something to back-up his words.

What did he do? He started the biggest military building program in the country's long history. The mission, [according to the BBC](#), was to make Britain's southwestern shore a gigantic fortress:

Hundreds of defenses, tank traps and gun batteries were thrown up frantically in just a few months along the coast of Britain.

Over 18,000 concrete pill boxes were constructed, together with hundreds of miles of defensive ditches, airfields, gun emplacements, air-raid shelters, tank-traps, and bombing decoys.

The South West's coastline changed beyond recognition in just a few months.

So ... what, exactly, were pillboxes—and—how did they get their unusual name?

The *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* says, [at page 883](#):

Pill-box. A small concrete fort: late 1917: Military colloquialism by June 1918. The resemblance of their shape to that of an oblong box for holding pills. For the genesis of pill-box see esp. Charles Edmonds, "A Subaltern's War." 1926.

Put differently, the structure itself looked like an oblong box, used in the late-19th/early-20th centuries, in which people stored their medicine.

If we check-out the reference to *A Subaltern's War*, we learn some more interesting things from the author who served in the First World War:

*This pill-box was the only piece of good cover in the whole battalion area. Imagine a small room ten feet square and six feet high with walls of thick rough concrete. There is only one opening, the door, over which a waterproof sheet is draped. (See *A Subaltern's War* at page 171.)*

Just like in Normandy, where the Germans built pillboxes to protect "[The Atlantic Wall](#)" against an expected Allied invasion, people in the UK built pillboxes to protect their country against an expected Nazi invasion.

In some places, [according to the BBC](#), those small concrete forts provided the only reasonable cover in vulnerable-to-attack areas:

Small concrete forts known as pill boxes were some of the most popular defenses built along the coast.

They were usually the only piece of good cover in an area vulnerable to attack.

They were basically a type of dug-out or bunker with look-outs and small slits for machine guns.

Each box was linked to the next by defensive ditches deep enough to stop a tank, or by natural features such as embankments, rivers and canals.

Although many WWII-era pillboxes have long-since deteriorated, some survive. In Britain, there is a conservation effort underway to save some of them so future generations can see, for themselves, how their country once planned to “fight them on the beaches.”

Credits:

Image online, courtesy Naval History & Heritage Command.

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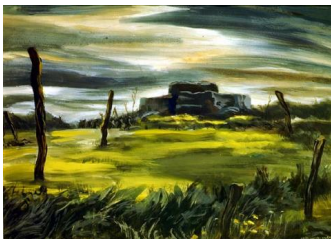
Atlantic Wall - German Conquests in WWII

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