

The Fortress of Fenestrelle

Introduction

The valley was silent. It was barely after dawn. Wisps of early-morning mist swirled down the wooded slopes, spilling onto the road to be thrust aside by the passage of a car. For a few seconds, its headlights brought into sharp focus the massive ruins by the roadside. Too small to be a castle, too big to be a dwelling, seemingly old, but not *ancient*, they stimulate a certain curiosity in those who pass. But do many travellers ever give more than just a passing thought to those great stone blocks and arches? Undoubtedly most people *see* them, they are too big to miss, but, discounting those who already know, how many travellers ever wonder what they were or what purpose they served?

Perhaps those with the spirit of observation that distinguishes the *discerning* traveller from the casual passer-by might even endeavour to find out. Fortunately, an ever-increasing number of visitors to the upper Chisone Valley begin to smile with anticipation when this landmark comes into view. Their destination is now close to hand and expectation mounts.

Certainly, those without previous knowledge can be easily forgiven their lack of curiosity. After all, there is no signpost, no indication, nothing which might stimulate their interest. Little to tell them that this curious conglomeration of immense stone walls and imposing arches was once the Carlo Alberto Redoubt, the former guardian and portal of the King's

High Road to France, through which all travelers had to pass, crossing two separate drawbridges in single file, the great stone tunnel between them reverberating to their passage like the echoes of none-too-distant but dangerous past.

But even this formidable gateway was only a *redoubt* - a relatively small, fortified position, named after the King who had commissioned its construction, more than 100 years after the start of work on its eminent grand-sire in March of 1728. Passage along the main valley road to and from France was jealously guarded by this appendage of the prodigious defensive masterpiece which was Vittorio Amedeo's gift to posterity - the *Fortress of Fenestrelle*, giant among giants and sublimely supreme example of a mountain fortress. From the tortured and ravaged ruins of the *Carlo Alberto Redoubt*, the main Fortress sweeps skywards. Less than a third of its extent visible is from below, majestically embracing the mountainside, as it soars upwards in a breathtaking series of titanic steps, batteries and bastions to the Delle Valli Fort, capped by the Elmo Redoubt, some three kilometres distant, at the summit of Mount Pinai.

Conceived by the eclectic genius of Antonio and Ignazio Bertola not merely as a barrier, but essentially as a symbol of resolute Savoyan determination in a time when borders were considered to be inviolable, its cost was justified by the need to defend the newly-established

Kingdom of Sardinia from its mighty gallic neighbour following the conclusion, largely in favour of France, of the Wars of the Spanish Succession. With the signing in 1713 of what became known as the great Treaty of Utrecht, Vittorio Amedeo, Duke of Savoy gained not only the former Dauphinate territory on his side of the Alps, but more importantly, what had been denied to his forefathers – a King's crown, becoming the King of Sicily. A mere five years later, Sicily was exchanged for Sardinia, which became the name of the Kingdom from 1718.

But as related by the Bard himself, "Uneasy lies the head that bears the Crown" and Vittorio Amedeo had few illusions. Treaties had come and gone. National borders often changed as a consequence. Having achieved his lifelong ambition, Vittorio Amedeo was not intending to see it swept away. This strategic valley was inadequately guarded by a patched up fort which he himself had conquered in 1708, the former "Fort de Fenestrelle" also known as *Fort Mutin* which his cousin Louis XIV had commissioned. A better fortress was needed. Antonio Bertola, the King's First Engineer was summoned. He had no doubts about what was required, but his vision was far in excess of what the King had ever imagined. A gigantic fortress would bar the entire left side of the valley. It beggared the imagination, and would have beggared the Kingdom into the bargain. His plan was shelved but not forgotten. His son, Ignazio, undoubtedly one of the greatest military Engineers of his time, continued to work on it, refining and improving his father's design,

ultimately obtaining the King's authorization to call for tenders in 1727.

The next 122 years saw the construction of one of the most epic edifices ever built. It remained operational up until 1947.

It may be hard to believe, considering its dimensions, but even this immense giant was vulnerable! Not against the assault techniques it had been built to resist, but against what might best be described as human superficiality. The decades which followed its decommissioning in 1947 saw this priceless heritage relentlessly besieged and over-run by Nature's all-pervasive green tentacles and continuously ransacked by hordes of predators and vandals as it lay defenceless, tormented and to all intents and purposes, abandoned by the very authorities under whose charge it ostensibly lay.

Partisan activity at the end of the Second World War and the subsequent widening of the state highway left the Carlo Alberto Redoubt half-demolished, offering little clue to its mighty ancestry. It was sold off to a private buyer. To be truthful, very few people cared about the fortress any more. Abandoned to its destiny, it was just a relic of former authority, despised and plundered by many of the local people.

For those who might have glanced up along the slopes of Mount Pinai, the solution to the enigma of the little fort at the roadside was there to be found, albeit buried by the dense vegetation which had won back most of that which had been painstakingly constructed by simple men with skills greater than those of their descendants. Perhaps only those with a knowledgeable and attentive eye could

have traced out the sleeping beauty that the San Carlo Project Association have brought back to life with many years of selfless endeavour, transforming this near-forgotten instrument of war into an ambassador of peace, delighting the thousands of visitors who come to marvel at its intricacies and immerse themselves in its history. Today it is recognized as is one of the cardinal points around which, for one reason or an other, a significant number of Piedmontese, and indeed European, geopolitical and historical events were directly or indirectly to rotate.

The 'Great Wall of Piedmont', an immense and invulnerable construction, built to withstand every possible kind of attack known to the greatest military strategists of the 18th Century, the greatest defensive structure ever built in Europe, the immense casemates towering above great defensive trenches, strategically oriented gun ports, unbreachable walls, logistically-superb covered staircases and impeccably constructed buildings to name but a few, seemed relentlessly and inexorably condemned to oblivion. Ignazio Bertola's sublimely vast architectural masterpiece, built by the sweat of generations of nameless craftsmen and humble labourers, found itself disdainfully ignored as trivial by an unworthy class of politicians who scarcely knew where to find it on a map, becoming an embarrassing and unwanted orphan practically overnight in the political miasma which followed the end of the Second World War. The last King lost his kingdom in the 1948 referendum which made Italy a Republic. Everything associated with the House of Savoy became despised and denigrated.

Notwithstanding its illustrious past, the fate of the Fortress was to become an enormous open-air treasure chest from then onwards, a place where literally anyone could have whatever they could take away. It became the favourite *help yourself* site for the many emulators of Attila, both public and private, who methodically ransacked and plundered one of the most important monuments in Europe.

Most of the immense larch beams, tons of meticulously measured roofing stones, dozens of hand-crafted iron grilles disappeared. Things easily carried - doors, window fittings, floorboards and handrails were the first to go. The rest needed more time, manpower or equipment but would disappear just the same. Entire roofs were stripped down, dismantled and whisked off unseen, great flagstones walked by night. Even frescoed walls were stripped out to become integral parts of modern villas and army barracks, bearing unfortunate witness to the long term degradation of a structure which the 19th Century writer Edmondo De Amicis described as being "a cyclopean barrier sufficient to stop a million rebels". These words were an ironic paraphrase to those of Louis XIV, who had assured Vittorio Amedeo around the year 1700 that his newly-built Fort de Fenestrelle was not anti-Savoy, but merely to keep the mutinous Valdese Protestants in check (hence its nickname of *Fort Mutin*).

245 years after Louis XIV's diplomatic untruth, the terms of the "peace treaty" imposed on Italy by the Allies at the end of the Second World War were the main reasons which forced this peculiarly unjust destiny, unworthy of any monument, let

alone one such as this, on the Fortress. France, and General De Gaulle in particular, was adamant that all defensive works situated within 25 kilometres of the Italian-French border must be rendered unuseable.

Despite its inadequacy in terms of modern warfare for any sort of realistic defence except against small arms, but no doubt myopically on account of its very history of being constructed to resist the French, the Fortress of Fenestrelle, being within this arbitrary 25 kilometre limit, had the dubious privilege of being one of the first to be reduced to a shell by the Italian Alpine Corps before being abandoned to its destiny.

With typical gallic arrogance, De Gaulle also demanded the return of what are still known in France as the *vallées cédées*, (i.e. the upper Chisone and Susa Valleys which the Treaty of Utrecht had assigned to Piedmont) but thankfully, this was rejected by Great Britain and the United States. However, the Allies acceded to his demand that the border established in 1713 be changed to relocate the territory of Mount Chaberton and its great mountaintop fortress within the French border. Where once the border ran in a straight line from the Montginevre Pass to the summit of the Sueur Point, some eight kilometres away, directly overlooking the Clarée Valley, it now runs from just north of Claviere behind the Chaberton to the Rocca del Lago and along the ridge formed by the Grand Hoche and the Charra Point before returning to its original line at the Sueur Point, having relocated some 12 square kilometres of former Italian territory in

France to satisfy De Gaulle's opportunism and desire for petty revenge.

Years passed. Where once mention was made of the 'Fortress of Fenestrelle', people talked about 'the ruins of the fortress'. But thankfully, mentalities were also changing. People began to gain a greater appreciation of their own history. Attempts were made to halt the degradation, and in 1984, the Italian Ministry of Culture allocated funding which allowed the initial attempts at recovery.

At that time, preference was given to dedicating the available resources to the Church and to the Governor's Palace, buildings situated on the suggestive parade ground of Fort San Carlo, by refurbishing their roofs. However, when funds ran out, work also came to a halt, providing the disparagers with their revenge. This state of inertia reigned until 1990, the year in which the Pro Loco (the local association) of Fenestrelle, took steps to prevent further damage to the monument, and proposed the inclusion of the fortress in a project of historical and cultural renaissance for the mountain community.

From that year on, a small number of volunteers, coordinated from within the non-profit organization called *the Fortress of Fenestrelle San Carlo Project Association*, dedicated themselves, their physical strength and best endeavours, to the difficult task of recovering some of the fortress's former glory, with the objective of transforming it from a place of war and suffering to a seat of peace and culture.

After many years of hard work, this worthy objective is closer to hand. Even as the restoration progressed, this great Savoyan fortress has hosted thousands of visitors and theatrical presentations have been instrumental in making the San Carlo Parade Ground one of the five main cultural centers of Piedmont.

A number of public bodies, not merely a few private sponsors, have responded magnificently to requests for funding: the Region (Piedmont), the Province (Turin), the Mountain Community and various local authorities have entered the field, cooperating between themselves and with the volunteers of the San Carlo Project Association, gradually becoming part of and expanding the recovery plan.

Making dangerous pathways safe, refurbishing buildings, removing vegetation and rubble, clearing away the trees and undergrowth which were slowly destroying buildings and pathways, organizing and publicizing visits to the fortress: these have been and continue to be the main initiatives which have marked the time at "Le Fenestrelle". Little by little, as the invading trees and undergrowth were gradually removed, the travelers who passed through the Chisone Valley discovered that the small fort at the roadside was merely a tiny part of the gigantic Piedmontese fortress. Visitors told their friends, generating more visitors. Gradually, the word spread, and continues to do so, attracting more than 50,000 visitors annually.

The post-war economics of the Chisone valley were largely based around the supply of parts for the FIAT car industry, a

limited amount of tourism, precarious agriculture and some forestry. Most young people left home to find work. Currently, the car industry is in a state of crisis, and it could scarcely be said that the other industries are enjoying good health. One of the objectives of the Fortress of Fenestrelle Project is to become a pole around which alternative hypotheses for re-launching the mountain areas might gravitate.

Tourism and Culture go hand in hand. An impetus for a re-launch of the Western Alpine area has come from the choice of Sestrieres as the site of the 2006 Winter Olympics. The Susa and Chisone valleys are benefitting from this, as is the Fortress itself, with funds being made available for a number of major restoration projects such as re-roofing the Main (Royal) Entrance and re-roofing the military quarters, all scheduled for completion by December 2005. Making Fenestrelle well known puts it into a network of other prized areas within the zone, such as the Pra Catinat holiday centre, the Orsiera-Rocciavré Park, the Troncea Valley and the Mentoulles Priory, offering alternative job opportunities for the children of the valley.

With respect for the environment and for its historic roots, the ancient fortress now offers an unforeseen prospect for development, being a cultural setting as well as a multi-faceted precious treasure chest of opportunities. The Officer's Pavilion now hosts a museum of the 3rd Alpine Regiment as well as a private collection of military uniforms. Its first floor will soon be made available for exploitation following an extensive internal restoration and the installation of

new windows. The Governor's Palace has seen two significant innovations: the former apartments of the Governor are being equipped as a 50-bed Hostel, while a gift of a splendid museum-quality collection of about 300 animals and birds from all continents has been installed on the first floor. The collection is being catalogued by experts and provides a near-unique opportunity to see such creatures at close range. The Church is soon to receive a stone-flagged floor similar to the one it originally possessed while the internal area of the Main Entrance will be recovered and restored for use following the installation of the new roof.

In April 2004, the ancient fortress once again echoed to the sounds of marching feet and the shouts of command while military sabres scintillated in the spring sunshine – a rare event indeed in the Parade Ground of Fenestrelle. In the presence of their 89th Commanding Officer, Colonel Giovanni Caverni, the 1st Regiment of the Nizza Cavalry held their Oath-taking Ceremony, and the subsequent Investiture of John Elkan, grandson of Giovanni Agnelli, as an “Honourary Dragoon” of the Regiment.

The history of this magnificent Regiment goes back even further than that of the Fortress itself – it was formed in far-off 1690 to fight against Catinat.

This is the Fortress of Fenestrelle today: the chapters you are about to read are testimony to the reasons behind this immense dream, a dream that you, thanks to your interest and support, are transforming into reality.

Copyright 2004 Ashleigh Hogg