

THE HOBBSIAN LINE

by Justin Fox

Illustrated by Stephen Hobbs

'How's your cunt, soldier?' I ask.

'Shut up about it, alright!' snaps Stephen. 'I told you, it was a typo.' Long pause, much wheezing. 'It's sore.'

'Shrapnel wound?'

'Ja, you could call it that.' Stephen is back in character. We're standing in the long grass at the base of a hill with the prospect of a difficult climb.

'We gotta get that Jap bunker. Frontal attack. You know that, don't you?'

'It's suicide, Justin, I mean sir.'

'Listen, soldier, we're going straight up this hill. D'you hear me?'

'Can't do that, sir.'

'There ain't no way to outflank it.'

'What about my men, my wound.'

'Your cunt? The time to worry about a soldier is when he stops bitchin'. God damn it, Hobbs, get your fat arse into gear and attack!'

'But sir –'

'That's a direct order! I've waited all my life for this. I've eaten untold bucket loads of shit to have this opportunity and I don't intend to give it up now.'

We set off up the slope, zigzagging at a crouching run. The sea is behind us, far below. Machine-gun rounds rip through the long grass, rat-a-tat-tat. One of the men has bought it and goes down screaming. We press on into the hail of lead.

A buck-toothed Nip appears on a rise. Hobbs raises his rifle, aims, fires. The rice chomper goes down with a loud 'Aieeee!'

Closer now, the bunker's slit is an evil eye spitting flame. Hobbs unclips a grenade from his chest, pulls out the pin. 'Chew on this pineapple, slant eyes!' he shouts as it arcs through the air. There's a muffled harrumph. A direct hit. Shoulder to shoulder we sprint towards the smoking machine-gun nest...

*

Stephen Hobbs and I sat in my Cape Town flat staring at a stretch of water once frequented by U-boats. Stephen was talking about his childhood fascination with war.

'When my family emigrated to the UK in 1978, I got to spend proper time with my dad's father, who served in the Royal Navy during the war. Grandpa Eric used to tell us loads of stories about battles and whatnot, but what most captured my imagination was the pen-and-ink tattoo on his arm, obviously produced after a fair amount of rum. It was a dragon: the blotchiest, most horrible looking thing, done with pen ink and a needle. I loved it.



'My dad was born in '45. He basically grew up on a bomb site in Beckenham and he regaled us with what it was like in London as a child. By the time he was 10 it was still a rubble site in many parts. He used to re-enact war games with his chums in that blighted urban environment.

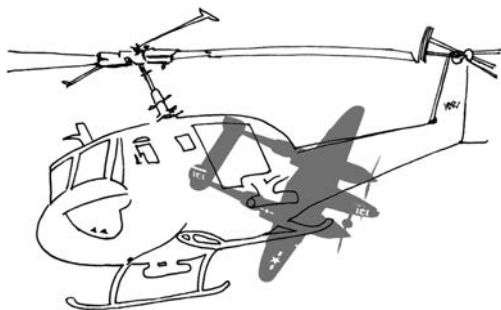
'Our family had three Christmases in England before returning to South Africa. We would go down to Worthing where Grandpa Eric built us a full-on medieval castle out of Masonite. He painted it, lots

of detail, accompanied by plastic Action Man Jeeps mounted with rocket launchers. The projectiles were white with red tips and my brother and I used them to attack the fort. We were given GI Joes in camo pants with leather flying jackets. I thought we'd gone to heaven. It was mental. We were six years old.

'The next war phase was model building. By the time I was eight I was building Airfix Spitfires and Stukas. I made a B52, a Lockheed Lightning, a Hawker Harrier jump jet. I hung them from my ceiling and choreographed the dogfights.

'We stayed in greater Croydon in a townhouse complex with six families living around one courtyard. My mates had dug up the pebbled planters near the entrance to the flats. They'd found clay underneath to create bunkers and dugouts and used the pebbles to fashion machine-gun nests.

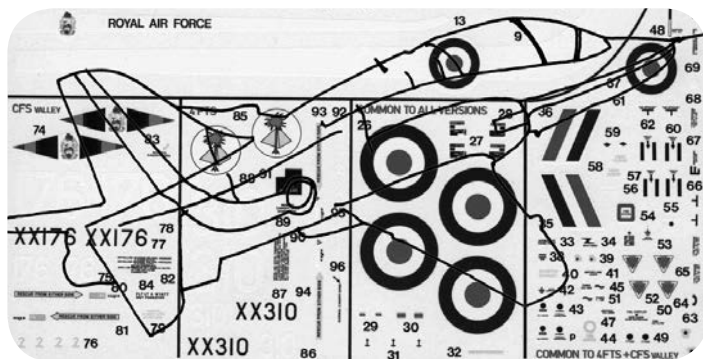
They would then put explosives inside our vehicles and aeroplanes and blow the crap out of them. Which I couldn't comprehend, as we'd spent so much time building the models. But it was incredibly exciting.

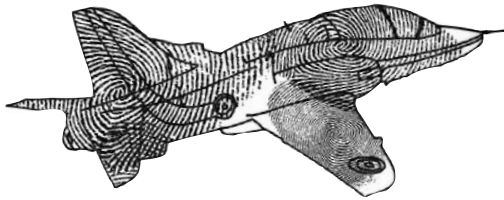


'The last memory from that period is of a French boy who was visiting and I was assigned to entertain him. Our parents thought he could spend some arty time with young Stephen. So I let the boy come and build models with me. I gave him a Red Arrow to work on. The little fuck-head got glue on his fingers, and the glue went all over the plane. Fingerprints! The model went from red to pink. He couldn't even apply the transfer markers to the wings. Clueless. He cocked it up so badly I remember thinking my arsehole was going to explode. This freak was moering my stuff *and I couldn't say anything.*'

'There you have, in a nutshell, Britain's relationship with France for the last thousand years,' I said.

'Completely, bru. It's funny, model building is still an important part of my art. Making as a thinking process rather than the object being the outcome. As a little boy, it was so important: a thing we could do for hours and hours. Still is.'





‘Because those models were part of a much bigger whole,’ I suggested. ‘A battle, a war, an entire cosmology.’

‘Exactly. That little Frog dickhead had no respect. He didn’t see that I was serious

and non-talkative, that my hands were cautious: why couldn’t he take my lead?’

‘Well, the French cocked things up in the first instance. Rolled over and let Hitler march up the Champs-Élysées.’

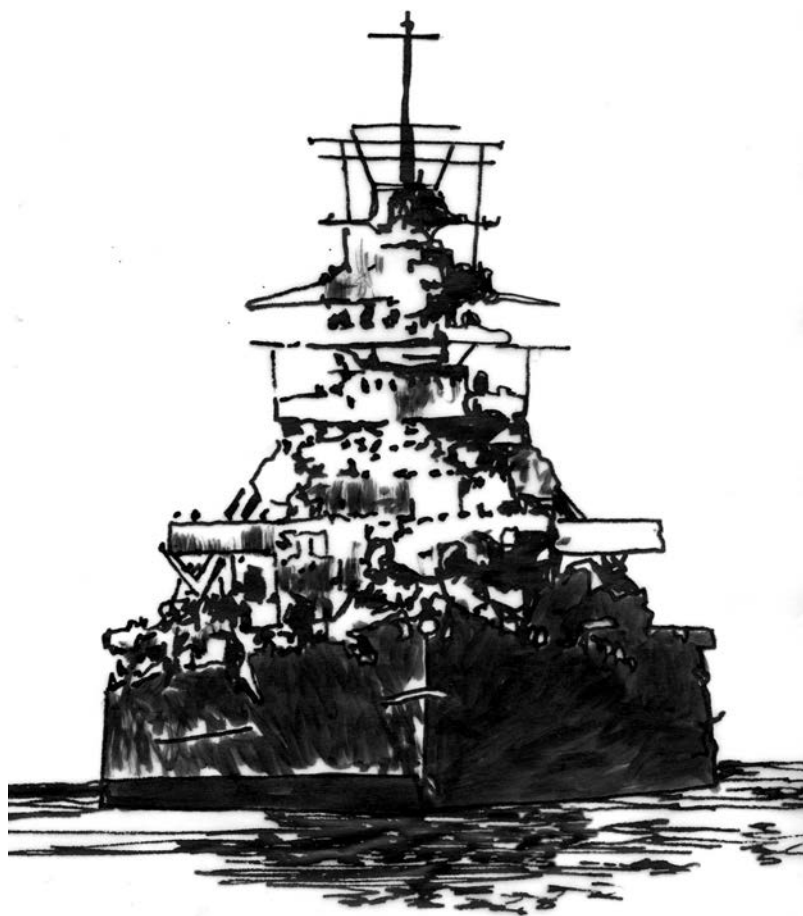
‘I have another vivid memory from that period. My father is an artist and when he saw how interested I was in model making, he introduced me to balsa wood. Dad built, within about an hour, a Sopwith Camel out of balsa. I nearly had a heart attack. I was so impressed by how he manipulated the material.’

I’d also had a childhood infected with World War II and chatted to Stephen about my own experiences. My father and four uncles had fought up north in Egypt and Italy; Uncle Uys had been captured by the Hun and spent two years as a PoW before escaping through the Apennines to Allied lines. Dad drove a Sherman tank up the length of Italy chasing Krauts. How could I not be fascinated by the war?

My bedroom was an arsenal complete with toy Tommy gun, Colt .45 and a Luger lifted from a German prisoner while I was helping out the Reds in Stalingrad. For hard-to-crack bunkers, like those along the banks of the Liesbeek River, I’d acquired hand grenades and a bazooka made from one of my father’s cardboard mailing tubes, which was effective with tennis balls at close range.

I used to collect comic books of soldier derring-do. The Pocket Library magazines gave a landscape and a context to my war imaginings: *Ace in the Hole*, *Hun Bait*, *Jungle Patrol*, *Killer at Large*. Through them, I could accurately re-enact a dogfight between Spitfire and Messerschmitt Me109, or be on the bridge of *HMS Hood* just before taking a direct hit from *Bismarck*. I got to know the lingo too: how to ‘catch Jerry with his pants down’, ‘Achtung Schweinehund!’, ‘That’s one yellow bastard who won’t be





making it back to base', 'Banzai, charge!' etc.

Like Stephen, I spent much of my childhood gluing pieces of plastic together with polystyrene cement, then carefully painting the models and applying decals relating to the theatre of war in which they'd be fighting. For me, this was usually North Africa, so desert markings and camouflage were *de rigueur* in my bedroom. I had a squadron of Allied and Axis fighter planes, a range of bombers and a lovely Consolidated Catalina flying boat with depth charges mounted under its wings. I even built a Sherman tank, a miniature of the one Dad traversed Italy in.

Like Stephen, I could recite the names of every important battle, aircraft or warship. So could most of my friends. We were still fighting the war, every day after school. The skirmishes took place throughout the house, garden and down at the river. One day my father brought home a plaster-of-paris landscape the size of a table which became a North African battlefield complete with armies of soldiers, minefields, bunkers, machine-gun nests and aircraft on bombing runs strung with nylon thread from the ceiling.

'Did you watch war movies as a kid?' asked Stephen.

'Course I did.'

'*Guns of Navarone, Bridge over the River Kwai* –'

'How about *The Dam Busters, A Bridge Too Far, The Desert Rats* –'

'*Where Eagles Dare, The Battle of Britain, Cockleshell Heroes.*'

'Always James Mason as Rommel, no matter what.'

'Even if it wasn't a war movie.' Lout titter.

'Jeez, they were good.'

For us, the war had never ended.

*

Flash forward to the trenches of downtown Joburg in the early 1990s. Stephen Hobbs is 21 and he's just got a job as curator of the Market Theatre Gallery. Stephen recalls: 'I used to drive to work every day and have this odd experience of coming down Jeppe Street in my little yellow Citi Golf and being amazed by the fact that pedestrians wouldn't get out of my way. So I used to put my foot down to see how quickly they'd jump. They were mostly workers coming into town from Soweto and there was the sense of

the city grid being destabilised by the new, legitimised African presence. They seemed to be saying: “Now you will wait for me to cross the road.”

‘Those incidents became coupled with another Joburg experience. I used to spend hours walking the city and became fascinated by reflections in the facades of glass buildings. This resulted in the dematerialisation and disruption of the Brutalism of the concrete forms, thereby breaking up the grid. I looked at the loose movement of pedestrians and the mirage effect of the buildings’ reflections and built up a sort of language for myself of how evil, ugly, dark, decaying central Joburg projected in its fabric a sense of its own collapse. I started photographing and filming pedestrians – demonstrating their lack of respect for the symmetry of the city. I photographed glass-building reflections which created beautiful light patterns, a kind of camouflage, and gave them titles like “Citizens of the Mirage City”.

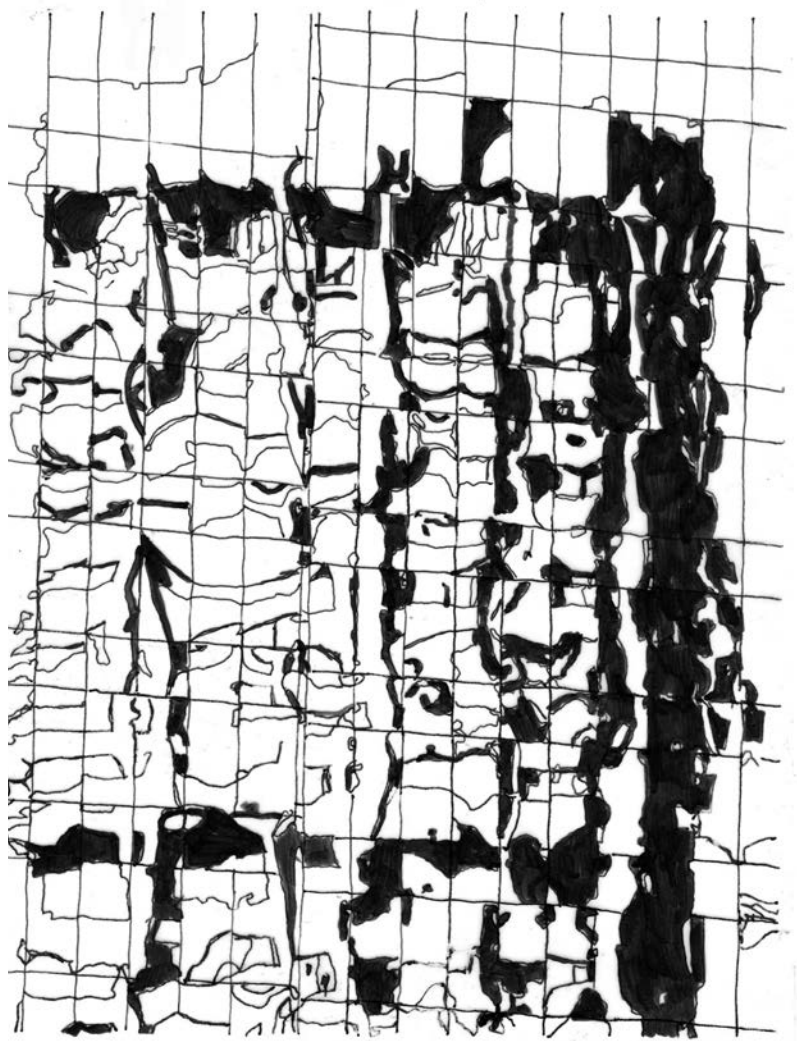
‘My work tried to show that Joburg was no longer discernable or detectable as a physical form because our projections of fear onto it almost dismantled it. The city had become a hostile mirage. Mine was an organic process of understanding dystopian conditions in urban environments. Joburg is such a great example of a brilliantly designed, Modernist city... but so poorly imagined in terms of its African future.

‘Our forefathers planned for a white future in militaristic terms. There’s the urban myth about the Soweto highway being engineered to take tanks. The planning of townships is very much radial and line of sight, so that when the police or army wanted to get in, they had effective points of surveillance. It can be argued that townships were designed with a militaristic logic. I began thinking more deeply along these lines, especially around the politics of separation. I examined power relations through the prism of architecture and urban planning.’

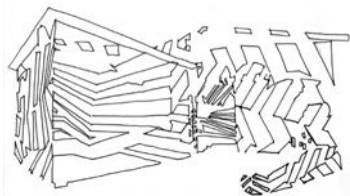
‘So how does your interest in camouflage and dazzle paint fit in?’ I asked.

‘About 10 years ago I started looking at the history of camouflage. Simply put, it’s the relationship between the pattern and the field. I read loads of books on disruptive pattern material. Then I did a project in which I painted a Pretoria building in the typical dazzle camouflage used by World War I battleships.

‘I became interested in the design possibilities that this kind of work

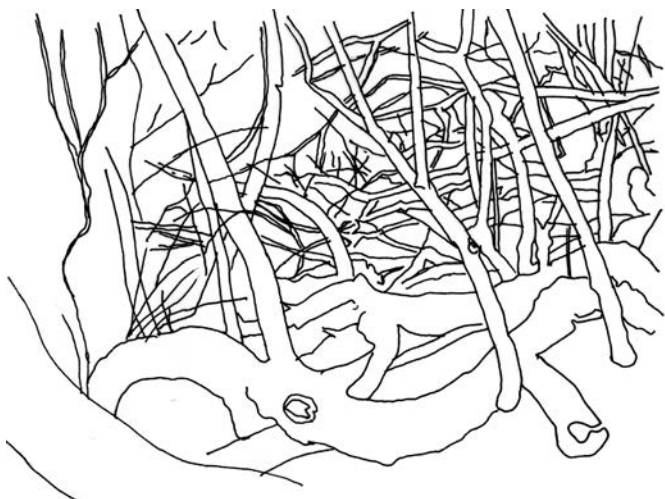
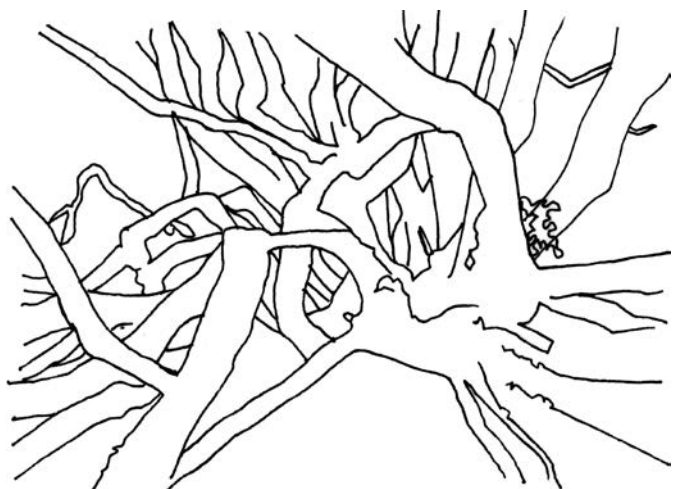


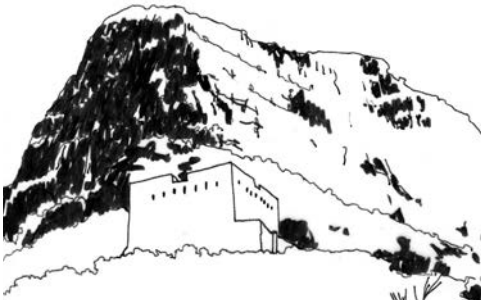
opened up. It spilled over into printmaking with David Krut in which I made sugar-lift plates of the grid of Joburg: black squares on white paper where the optical illusion produces an imaginary grey dot at their intersection. This was a minimalistic representation of those pedestrians who I used to try to run down back in the 90s. I tried to find minimalistic graphic ways of representing an urban spacial condition of peripheral vision, tactical moves in the city, enemy fire along sight lines. That idea kept growing and I ended up working on a huge dazzle design for the main Maboneng building in Joburg.



“Then one day David tells me I must “go to Cape Town and check out the David Krut Montebello space and *do something* there.” So I flew down to the Mother City and immediately vomited in my mouth four or five times. The Cape, Newlands, dull suburbia, dripping oak trees, what the fuck?! I couldn’t make head or tail of it. Spacially, this place is antithetical to my comfort zone, the city. But in chatting to locals I started to get a sense of the environment, the forest, Jan van Riebeeck’s hedge, the blockhouse, old defensive lines. History was everywhere, and could be plotted vertically or laterally across this terrain. Now this was actually quite interesting. So I stopped vomiting.

‘I visited the old zoo and decommissioned lion’s den. It’s basically a bunker. The back is like an armoury, the front should have cannons, and there’s even a moat and a parapet. I began to see the forest as a pattern-making space. In fact, the entire leafy suburban environment was territorial in nature. Middle class, exclusive, hidden. There are lots of points of comparison in terms of social and planning tactics, stretching right back to Van Riebeeck’s time





when the Liesbeek River and wild-almond hedge were used as defences to stop the raiding Khoisan. This idea extends outward to the militaristic logic of Cape Town itself. It's a strategic point on an important sea lane, defended by Dutch and English over the centuries.

If Montebello is the centre, then our ideas ripple out, taking in the wild-almond hedge, the blockhouse on the slopes of Devil's Peak and ultimately the coastline protected by centuries of defensive positions.

'For my Cape Town exhibition, I needed to simplify these notions and decided to reduce them down to "camouflage": the leaves and the light. I wanted to produce works that were responsive to the site by generating patterns and pictures from the forest, playing off ideas of defence and obfuscation in this hidden, sub-suburban enclave that is the Montebello Design Centre.'

*

Stephen and I had begun chatting over email about war and camouflage. David Krut suggested he fly down to Cape Town once again and spend a few days with me looking at 'war stuff'. I worked out a three-day itinerary that took in some of the best military sites. Stephen had a particular interest in bunkers, which I tried to accommodate. In 2002 he'd attended an artists' residency in Normandy and was taken to the Atlantic Wall where he saw the D-Day beaches for the first time. It was a revelation. He documented the defences, marvelling at their design and how the Germans had managed to build more than 3000 bunkers in such a short space of time.

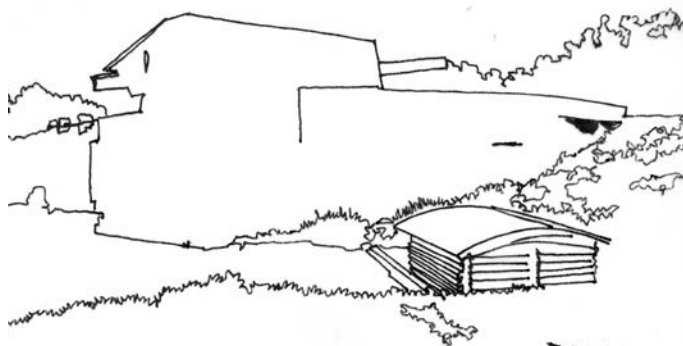
After Normandy, he had many opportunities to pursue his interest and visited bunkers in Norway, the south of France and Senegal. 'Goré Island was amazing,' he enthused. 'Old fortresses, tunnels, layers of French, Spanish, German, English bunker-type architecture. Even a door of no return! I love seeing how defenders mould stone or concrete in an organic

way to replicate nature, which is really taking the idea of camouflage to its ultimate conclusion. The defences become beautiful sculptural forms. Not a single shot was fired in South Africa during the war, but we still went to enormous trouble building massive bunker systems and hidden gun emplacements. It's amazing, just like a mini Atlantic Wall right here on our doorstep.'

The first stop on our tour was the Simon's Town Naval History Museum where we met up with Warrant Officer Croome. He was a bearded, no-nonsense NCO of the old school with a passion for military hardware. He took us around the museum and showed us some of his files about artillery pieces and bunkers that had Stephen salivating. Croome presided over an astonishing naval archive. He explained that he felt a personal responsibility to restore the decaying sites.

We then went to inspect the various big guns around the town. Half way up a hillside track, Croome pulled off at the camouflaged bunker system of Middle North Battery. Here was a 9-inch rifled-muzzle-loading piece, one of the guns he lovingly maintained. It looked like a large circus cannon that could fire a man.

'This baby was designed in 1865 as a broadside gun for ironclad ships and harbour defences,' said Croome. 'A total of 190 were made. This one was



mounted in Halifax Nova Scotia until 1878. It was moved here in 1896. Come look inside the barrel.'

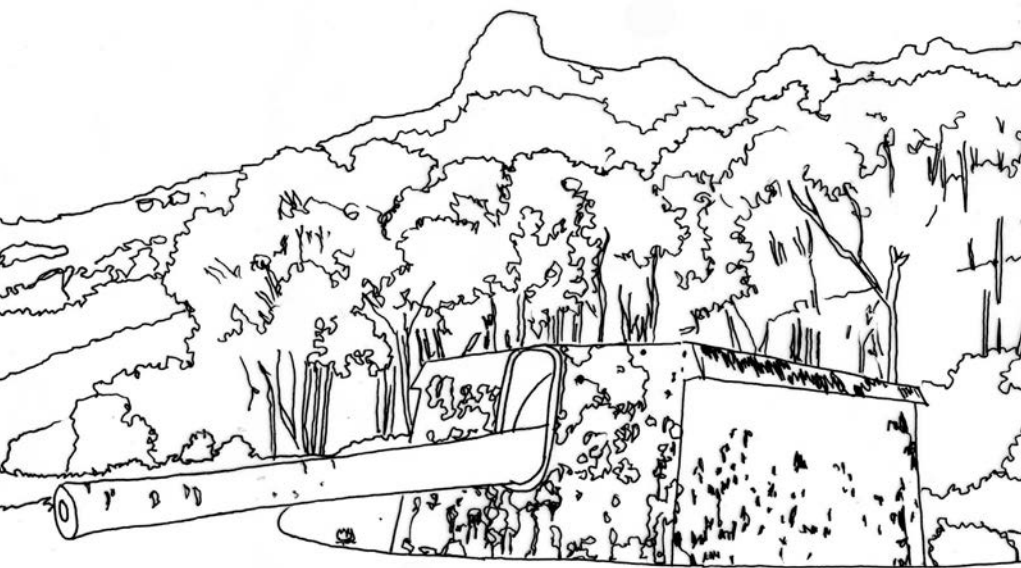
Stephen and I climbed onto the parapet and peered down the barrel with its deep rifled grooves.

'It had amazing shells with six rectangular protrusions that engaged with the barrel grooves to impart spin and stabilise the shell during flight,' said the warrant officer as he stroked the muzzle.

Croome got to fire the 9-inch a few times each year on ceremonial occasions. He said that many of the brass components had been replaced with wooden elements as metal thieves were slowly stripping the old guns of Cape Town.

'Bet you this guy was a model maker like us as a kid,' whispered Stephen. 'It's the same shit going on in his head. This is such a boys' world.'

Croome cut in: 'I come here every weekend and work on the guns, digging out the bunkers that have caved in, repainting the camouflage. Sometimes



my daughter helps me. No-one else really cares. It's such an important part of our history.'

We took a drive up the hill to the three 9-inch guns of Scala Battery, the main defensive position for False Bay during the war. Huge barrels pointing out over the dark blue sheet of Atlantic made a powerful impression. Croome directed our gaze to the military elements in the landscape. A radar building, watchtowers and lookout points built into the rock and perfectly disguised. There were bunkers, guns and relief concrete castings painted in camouflage patterns from different periods. All the while, Stephen bounced about like a child on a sugar high. I was doing much the same.

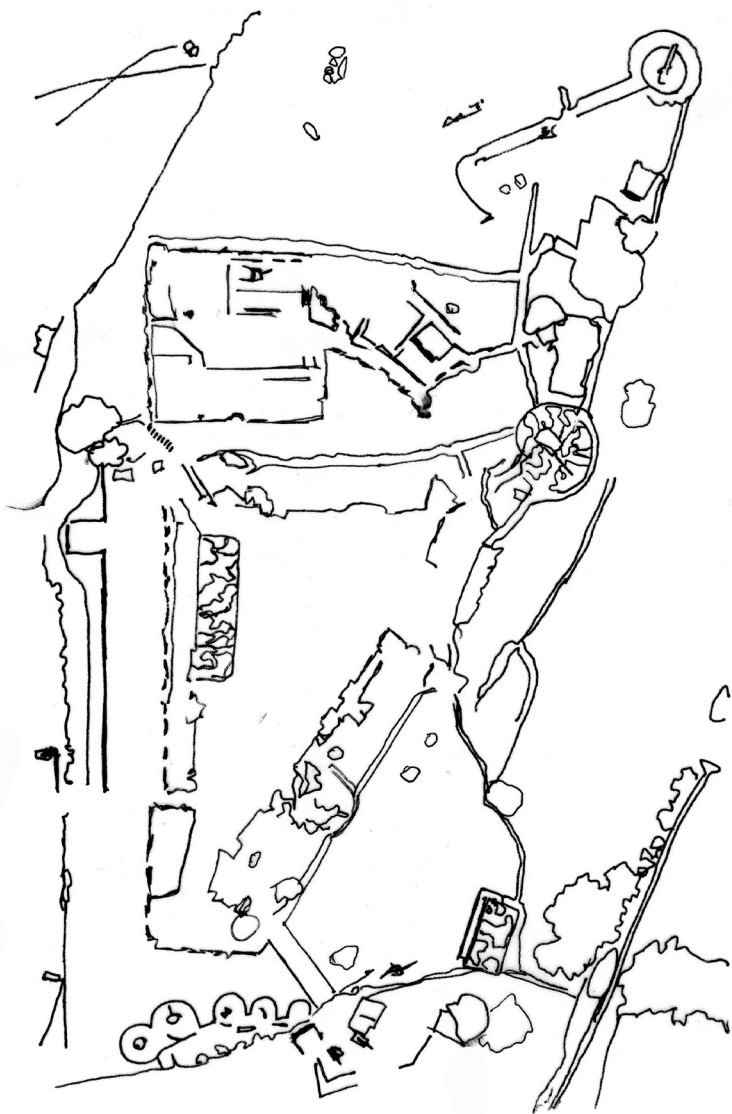
The next morning was set aside for Fort Wynyard, a coastal battery located on one of the city's last remaining calccrete dunes beside the V&A Waterfront. Kevin Ashton of the Cape Garrison Artillery showed us around the bunker complex. He explained that during the early 19th century, the British strengthened the defences of Table Bay with a number of gun emplacements. The fort was constructed either alongside or on top of an 18th-century VOC battery called *Kyk in de Pot* (Look in the Pot). The name refers to the fact that the battery overlooked a whaling station which housed huge blubber pots. Fort Wynyard continued to be used well into the 20th century. It was active during World War I and II, and today it is both a military museum and home to the Cape Garrison Artillery.

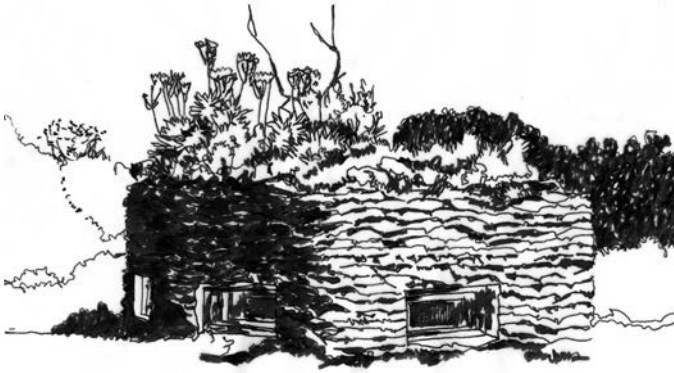
Kevin spoke about the threat of expanded Waterfront development, the lack of respect for the past, especially pre-1994 military heritage. Even the sightlines of the big guns were under threat from high rises. He took us underground to see the loading bays and conveyor hoists, almost like a dumbwaiter, to get the shells to the surface.

Centrepiece of the complex was a white disappearing gun. These artillery pieces were invented in the 1860s and could rotate backwards and down into a pit protected by a parapet. This lowered the gun from view while it was being reloaded. The battery was thus much harder to spot from the sea, making it a difficult target for attacking ships.

Stephen knocked the barrel with his knuckles, 'Fibreglass,' he said and giggled.

'We had to replace the 26-ton original as it was damaging the wooden mount,' said Kevin.





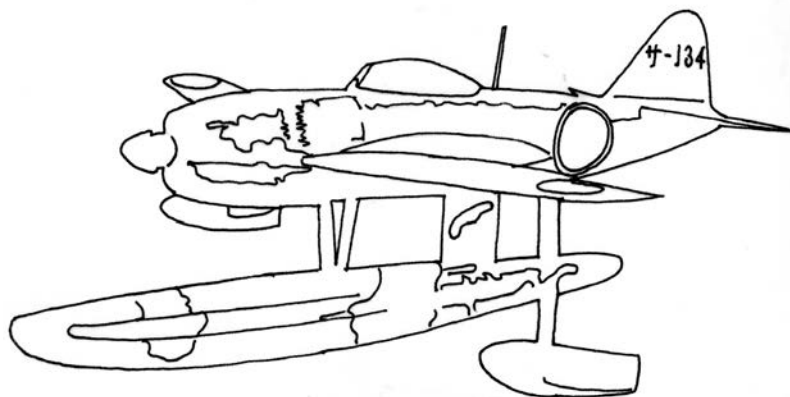
‘Perfect,’ said Stephen. ‘I so dig that it’s a fake.’

Kevin looked puzzled. I sauntered off to view the anti-aircraft guns.

Back in the car Stephen said, ‘Fort Wynyard is such a lekker counterpoint to Simon’s Town. It’s urban and dominated by the Cape Town Stadium, which sits like a flying saucer that’s landed in the backyard and all the guns are pointing the wrong way. It’s neat, restored and done up, where Simon’s Town is more decrepit and raw.’

Our last day was devoted to the defences of Robben Island. Historian Richard Whiteing was our man on site. The ferry moored in Murray’s Bay Harbour on a bright, windless morning. A bearded Richard met us on the quay with a minibus that whisked us across the island to De Waal Battery. ‘Look at that exquisite thing!’ exclaimed Stephen as we passed a pillbox. ‘Concrete-sandbag casting for walls and an indigenous garden on top as a camouflaged roof. Just brilliant.’

As we drove, Richard gave us the lowdown on his guns. When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the island became a static battleship. It was the nucleus of the peninsula’s coastal defence system and had a 9-inch gun battery installed. Each of the Cape’s three big batteries (Simon’s Town, Llandudno and Robben Island) had three guns and were



connected via a telemetry network to track ships around the Cape. Their principal mission was to defend Cape Town from attack. Each gun could fire a 170 kilogramme shell nearly 30 kilometres, enough range to keep any German battleship at bay.

A big gun battery needs ancillary positions, such as observation posts, a power station, plotting rooms and magazines. Most of these were nearly 10 metres below ground. In addition, the island's perimeter had to be fortified with machine-gun posts, searchlight stations and barbed wire barriers. In March 1942 it was decided to prepare the island against attack from Japanese landing craft. So began the construction of pillboxes and rifle posts at strategic points.

All the while, German U-boats were cruising off Cape Town wreaking havoc on local shipping. On the night of 5 October 1942, the commander of U-172 stopped within hailing distance of Robben Island, studied the harbour installations and, before submerging again, allowed his crew to come up, one by one, to enjoy the sight of a city unconcerned with wartime blackouts.

We pulled up at the guns, each one painted in the camouflage of a different period. The third gun had been restored to working order and an Armscor representative was on hand to show us how shells were loaded,

how to traverse the turret, raise the barrel and (almost) fire. Then he led us underground to see the magazine and hoists.

'I dig this bunker stuff,' said Stephen. 'All these doors and staircases that go deep into the island.'

'A Japanese invasion was not too far-fetched in 1942,' said Richard. 'In fact, a Japanese submarine came snooping off Durban and sent a float plane to scout the defences. It was the only time an enemy aircraft penetrated South African air space.'

We strolled through the veld around the guns, coming upon machine-gun nests, coils of barbed wire and the remains of trenches hidden among the daisies. We were both behaving like kids with cries of 'rat-tat-tat', 'take cover, bru' and 'Banzai!' It was Guadalcanal all over again. I think Richard was pleased to see us back on the ferry.

*

The last item on our itinerary was a long shot. I'd heard that there were remains of World War II surveillance posts on Signal Hill, but I didn't know where. Stephen and I pored over Google Earth printouts and decided to investigate a couple of square grey smudges on the northern slopes above Sea Point.

It was late afternoon by the time we started the ascent. Stephen had mentioned in an email that he'd recently undergone a laparotomy in which doctors had disentangled his intestines. He'd written that he had a 40-centimetre 'cunt' from rib cage to groin. Stephen later explained this was a typo: he'd meant 'cut'. I wasn't buying it.

Both of us love Terence Malik's *The Thin Red Line* and – given the long grass, the hill and the pillbox up ahead – our ascent quickly morphed into a re-enactment. I became Nick Nolte, Stephen was John Cusack. Early in the climb, Stephen stopped to photograph a succulent. 'Oh Jeez, I'm starting to look pointedly at nature and Melanesian choirs are ringing in my ears. Can you hear them, bru?'

'Just climb, soldier. And I'm not your bru.'

'That's what this whole thing is about: nature and war,' he muttered. 'It all fits into place. I see it now. The military, urbanist argument for the way

space is an includer and excluder, the whiteness of the place, old money versus new money. Newlands and Cape Town have been fraught with this stuff for centuries.' It was the shrapnel; he was probably hallucinating.

I tried to console him: 'Shut up and climb, you pretentious malingering shit!'

We moved up the left flank of a kloof. The grass was tall, there was very little cover. Stephen was wheezing, holding his stomach. We were connecting on shared imagery, on childhood, on our war service back on Guadalcanal. Of course Stephen had his wound, which slowed our progress, but without his intellectual explosives, we couldn't take the bunker. I respected his condition, but we had a mission to complete.

A last mad dash up the slope brought us to the concrete emplacement. A couple more grenades and it was all over. We looked around at the bunkers we'd just taken. They weren't particularly dramatic, just low-key surveillance posts and a machine-gun nest. And therein lay their power. The ordinariness was their allure. Nothing had been restored or poncified into a museum exhibit. These structures were still pregnant with the expectation of invasion, of a U-boat on the horizon, of a flight of dive-bombers swooping towards Cape Town docks. I looked at Stephen. He had an enormous grin. 'Now *this* is the shit, bru,' he said. I nodded.

Just then a flight of Zeros streaked out of the setting sun and the anti-aircraft guns of Fort Wynyard barked a response. We jumped into the bunker, Hobbs fed a belt into the Browning. I cocked and opened fire.



