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The Tre Cime and the Great War

Military Vie Ferrate and War Walks in the Drei Zinnen



An Austrian 80mm field gun supporting the frontline north of the Toblinger Knoten.

The Tre Cime or Drei Zinnen massif north of Cortina is a popular rock climbing, mountain walking and *vie ferrate* (*Klettersteige*) area. Remnants of First World War military engineering are widespread. Those involved in the conflict are commemorated in chapels near the CAI Auronzo and Drei Zinnen (Locatelli) huts. Some military installations have been re-instated as walks, scrambles and *vie ferrate*.

On 23 May 1915 the Italian government, induced by Franco-British territorial promises, abandoned neutrality and declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, already embroiled in campaigns against Russia and Serbia. The Austrians' strategic objective against Italy was to hold the border and prevent the loss of South Tyrol, Trieste and parts of what are now Slovenia and Croatia. With very few regular troops available, the defence of the Dolomites was left mainly to reserve depot troops and volunteer militia, including members of local shooting associations (*Schiessstände*). The pre-war national border, now the Bozen-Belluno Province boundary, ran along the ridge east and westward from the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen peaks.

In the weeks before the war, the Italians occupied positions on the border ridge from Croda d'Arghena to the Paternsattel, Gamsjoch and Büllejoch. While last efforts to negotiate non-intervention were still taking place, the Austrians stationed a few hundred *Landschützen* (yeomanry) in the Drei Zinnen hut and at points on the Schwabenalpenkopf-Innichriedel Knoten ridge north of the Zinnen plateau (Langenalp). News of Italy's declaration of war did not reach the Italian troops until the following day when shots from Austrian field guns hit the Paternsattel and destroyed an Italian barracks. In retaliation, the Italians bombarded the Drei Zinnen hut, which burned down.

Offensive activity in the early days of the conflict, from May to July 1915, comprised sorties by small groups of Austrians who assaulted three points: the Paternsattel, the Croda d'Arghena ridge west of the Drei Zinnen and the Paterno/Paternkofel summit. In the first two cases, despite having gained their objectives, they were forced to withdraw for lack of support. Italian defenders on the Paternkofel summit beat off a rock-climbing patrol assault. Attempts to scale the steep scree and snow-filled northern gullies between the Zinnen summits were easily repulsed. In August, the Italians made a mass attack and captured the ruins of the Drei Zinnen hut and Sextenstein summit, creating a salient that came within 300m of the Austrian positions on the flanks of the Torre di Toblin/Toblinger Knoten. Subsequently, the Sextenstein summit changed hands briefly several times but despite the various attempts to recapture it, the Italians held the position until the end of October 1917.

The winters of 1915-16 and particularly 1916-17 were extreme and apart from underground excavations and maintenance of positions, military action and defence work were confined to four-month periods between June and October when snow had melted enough to permit mobility. An exception was the attempted recapture of the Sextenstein in April 1916, using a snow tunnel to approach the Italian position. Avalanches and blizzards cost many lives and regularly disrupted supplies. During the mountain campaign, avalanches, hypothermia and frostbite are estimated to have killed 10,000 Austrian and Italian troops. Aerial ropeways were built to sustain supply lines, particularly for those positions frequently isolated by deep snow.

In the course of the war, both sides occupied key summits on both ridges

as defence lines and observation posts for artillery spotting. The Italians installed searchlights on the summit of the Cima Grande/Grosse Zinne and Paternkofel. The Austrians did similar things on various summits along the Schwabenkopf-Innichriedel ridge, notably on the summit of the Toblinger Knoten tower.

The Dolomites front was a 'side show' to the main fighting between Italy and Austria-Hungary, which was concentrated eastward, along the Isonzo valley where the Italians wasted many lives in numerous futile large-scale offensives. In the last week of October 1917, following a surprise attack at Caporetto on what is now the Slovenian border, the Italian armies collapsed and retreated headlong for more than 150km to the banks of the River Piave north of Venice. The rout, vividly described in Ernest Hemingway's novel *Farewell to Arms*, left the Italian situation in the eastern Dolomites untenable. Positions were abandoned and troops and civilians flooded down the valleys towards Venice. The last Italians left the Tre Cime/Drei Zinnen area on 5 November 1917, a year before the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the armistice. It was during the hasty retreat southward down these valleys that Erwin Rommel established his reputation by capturing large numbers of prisoners.

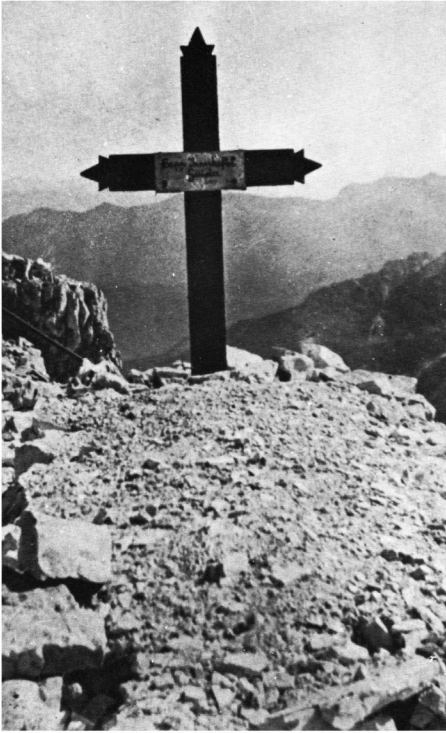
A curious and touching footnote to these sad events is that among the Austrian troops in the Zinnen sector was a 16-year-old girl, Viktoria Savs. Posing as a boy, she joined the Austrian forces with her father and served as a mule driver and messenger from June 1915 to 1916. She was then in the firing line until January 1917, when she lost a leg below the knee from rock fall caused by a shell explosion as she climbed to an exposed position to deliver a message. Her extraordinary story was the subject of a recent biography by Frank Gerbert, *Die Kriege der Viktoria Savs: von der Frontsoldatin 1917 zu Hitlers Gehilfin*.

Access to the Italian positions was from Misurina and Auronzo. The Austrians were supported from Innichen (San Cándido), Sexten (Sestó) and Höhlensteintal (Val di landro) south of Toblach (Dobbiaco). Since most of the action was in German-speaking South Tyrol, I have used traditional German place names in the following account of some key localities and events from the conflict. Routes described in Cicerone's *Via Ferratas of the Italian Dolomites*, Vol 1, (Italian names) are cross-referenced by the guidebook route numbers (MISUR2-5). The tourist map 'Dolomiten Front' (Kompass, 1:50,000) shows the front lines in the eastern Dolomites sector from 1915 until 1917. The Tabacco 1:25,000 topographical map (Dolomiti di Sesto/Sextener Dolomiten, Sheet 010) is useful for navigation and place names.

Paternsattel/Forcella di Lavaredo

The Patternsattel pass (2454m) between the Kleine Zinne and Passaportenkopf, on the walk from the Rifugio Auronzo to the Drei Zinnen hut was a key section of the Italian line. Apart from a few hours on 26 May 1915, it was in Italian hands throughout.

There are remains of Italian trenches, artillery emplacements and the



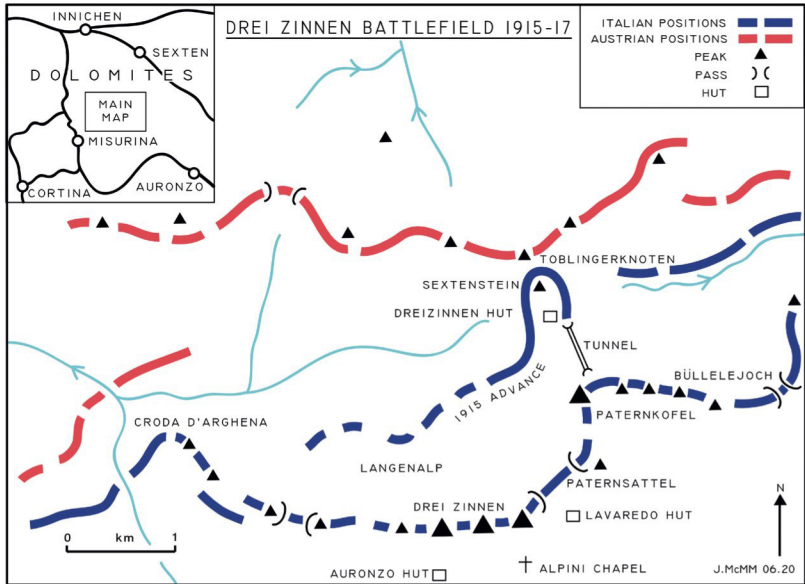
Temporary grave of Austrian guide Sepp Innerkofler, dug by Italian garrison on the summit of the Paternkofel. The body was exhumed after the Italian withdrawal and reburied at Sexten/Sesto church. Innerkofler's sacrifice was memorialised in this portrait by Tyrolean artist Franz Defregger (1835-1921).

sites of barracks on the south flank of the pass near the modern Rifugio Lavaredo and the lower slopes of the Passaportenkopf at the start of via ferrata (MISUR 5). This was the access point for the supply tunnel route to the Sextenstein positions and was completed in October 1917 only weeks before abandonment of the Italian positions.

Paternkofel Summit

For several days in the first week of the war in late May 1915, Sepp Innerkofler, the famous guide and warden of the Drei Zinnen hut, led rock-climbing patrols up the north side of the Paternkofel (2744m) to the unoccupied summit, from which to provide artillery observation and fire support for the attack on the Paternsattel. Each night the patrol returned to the Austrian lines. Bad weather on 27 May made ascent of the north side of the Paternkofel impractical. The Italians took advantage and used the easier south flank to occupy the summit.

An impractical decision was made to try to re-capture the Paternkofel summit by a rock-climbing assault. The attack began in darkness on 4 July and culminated in Innerkofler attempting to take the summit alone after climbing a chimney and throwing hand grenades, several of which failed to detonate. He was shot or hit by stones thrown by the defenders and fell backward. His body became entangled in the rocks and was later recovered



Simplified map showing Italian and Austrian positions in the Zinnen sector between August 1915 and October 1917.

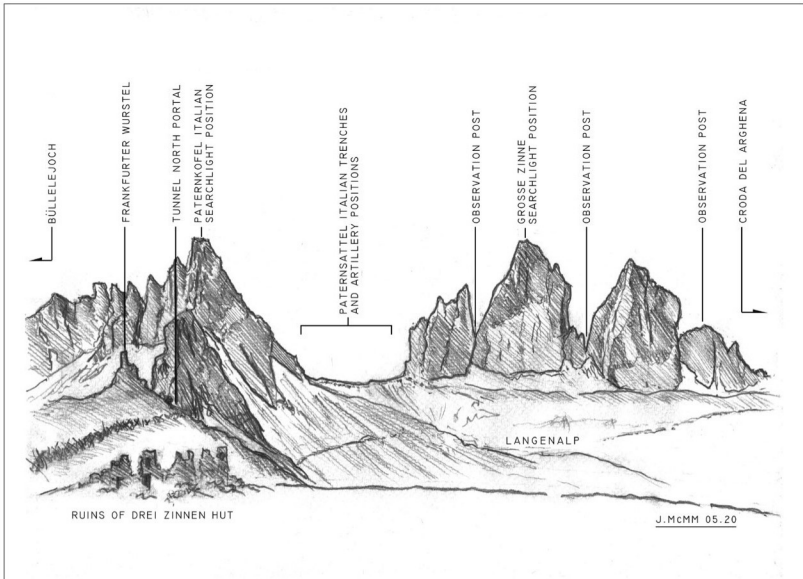
by the Italians and buried on the summit in a grave marked by a wooden cross and plaque made from flattened tin cans with the words 'Sepp Innerkofler, Guida'. His body was subsequently exhumed and buried in Sexten, his home village. There has been controversy about whether Innerkofler was killed by the Alpini summit garrison or covering fire from an Austrian machine gun.

The Paternkofel summit area was subsequently much modified by blasting and became the site of a permanent artillery observation post with shelters and strong points on ledges and a large searchlight mounted on tracks. The route of Innerkofler's patrol assault is still identifiable (MISUR4-5) and a ledge where the party paused is marked by a cross.

Paternkofel Tunnel

In September 1916, the Italian command authorised construction of a 400m tunnel as a secure access route safe from enemy fire and avalanche risk from the Paternsattel to the exposed forward positions in the Sextenstein salient. It was also to provide loopholes for infantry and artillery and act as an assembly and sally port for renewed attacks on the Austrian lines. The original exit, now the start of the underground via ferrata (Sentiero De Luca-Innerkofler, MISUR 4) named after the leaders of the 1915 defenders and attackers, is near the Frankfurter Würstel pinnacle south of the Drei Zinnen hut.

To the south the upper tunnel portal gives access to a traverse of the east face of the Paternkofel to the Gamsscharte (Forcella del Camoscio) where it crosses the Innerkofler assault route. From the col a cable protected section



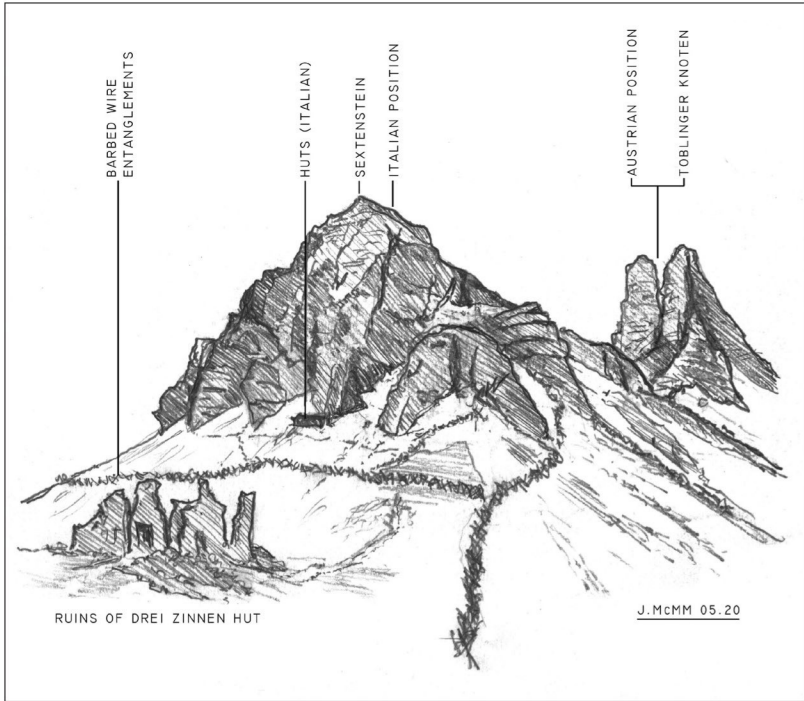
A sketch view south from the ruins of the Drei Zinnen hut at the foot of the Sextenstein north flank towards the Italian Paternsattel positions in 1917. John Moore's sketches are drawn from contemporary photographs in the style of military sketch-artist Richard Heuberger.

leads east along the Italian front line (MISUR5) over the Bödenknoten to the Büllelejoch. Beyond the modern south exit, the tunnel was destroyed by the Italians in October 1917. Ironically, it had been completed only weeks before the Italians abandoned their positions.

From the Gamsjoch a scramble leads to the summit up the Italian access route. Southward, the trail follows the Italian supply line partly in tunnels, across the Passaportenscharte col and emerges on the Paternsattel near some support trenches.

Sextenstein/Sasso di Sesto

Italian troops took Sextenstein (2539m) and the ruins of the Drei Zinnen hut in August 1915 in their only mass attack, following a preliminary bombardment. This was in preparation for an attempted breakthrough northward to the Puster valley. The rounded Sextenstein summit became the tip of a salient extending more than a kilometre north of the main Italian positions. The front lines here were less than 300m apart. The summit position, heavily sandbagged and protected with barbed wire, is easily accessible by footpath. It was overlooked and threatened from Austrian posts on the summit of the Toblinger Knoten a few hundred metres to the north. From summer 1915 to autumn 1917 a warren of tunnels and caverns was excavated for stores and accommodation of the garrison. Although not of great strategic importance, the Sextenstein had a view of access routes to Austrian ridge



Sketch view northward from the ruins of the Drei Zinnen hut towards the Sextenstein and the Italian forward post and Toblinger Knoten tower with its Austrian observation position, 1917.

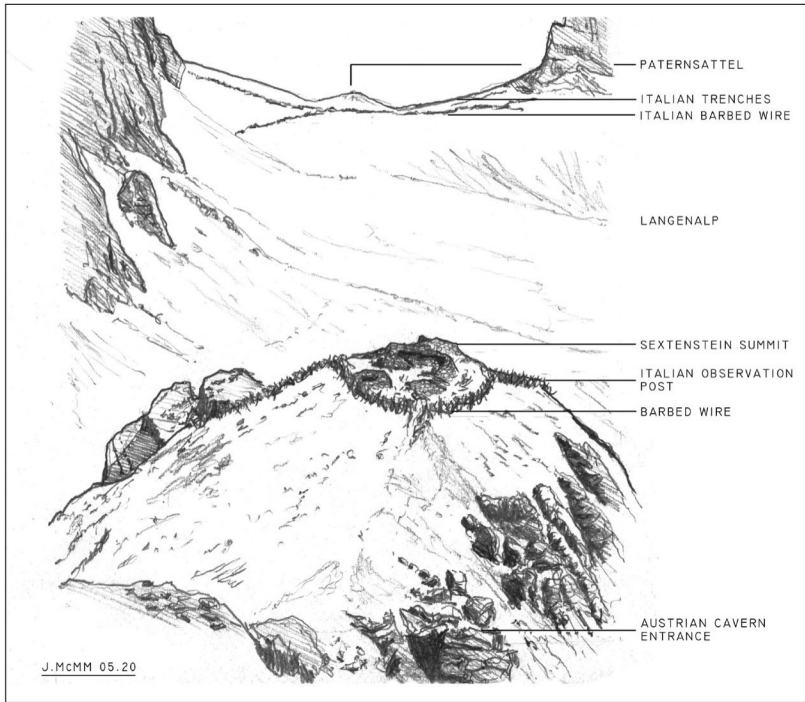
positions and was a useful artillery observation post and potential jumping-off point for future attacks.

Despite several attempts to re-capture it, including the snow tunnel assault in spring 1916 and a night attack along the ridge, the Austrians took the summit post. They were unable to mop up defenders in the tunnels and caverns beneath and were eventually forced to withdraw yet again for lack of support. Another attempt made shortly afterwards with the objective of blowing up the Italian positions failed when the explosives did not detonate. The Italians retained the hill until their withdrawal.

From the summit there are excellent views of the the Zinnen plateau (Langenalp) battlefield: beware of unexploded munitions scattered about the hillsides. The tunnels and caverns, some of which were excavated in relatively soft shale and limestone, are unstable and dangerous.

Toblinger Knoten

The Toblinger Knoten (2617m) is a 300m rock tower in the centre of the Austrian defence line. It dominates the rounded summit of the Sextenstein (2539m) to which it is linked by a smooth whaleback ridge a few hundred

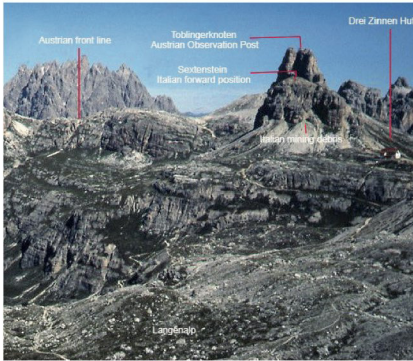


Sketch of Italian forward observation post on the Sextenstein summit from the Toblinger Knoten (from 1916 telephoto). Underground tunnels and caverns were accessed from the Italian position. The Austrian April 1916 snow tunnel ran along the crest to beyond the Italian wire.

metres long. After Austrian withdrawal in August 1915 from the Drei Zinnen hut and Frankfurter Würstel area, and the Sextenstein summit, the Toblinger Knoten became a key point in the Austrian line.

Initially, positions were established on shoulders of the towers and numerous caverns and galleries excavated. After an exploratory night ascent of the normal climbing route, visible in daytime from Italian positions, by Field Padre Hosp in November 1916, it was decided to occupy the summit. This was done by constructing platform and ladder access up the steep north chimney, sheltered from enemy observation and fire. The risk of lightning strikes on such an exposed summit led to installation of a copper cable earth and subsequently a Faraday cage to protect the garrison during electric storms.

Observation posts and firing positions were built on the summits and caverns with loopholes excavated. The initial work was carried out at night wearing white sheet camouflage in full view of the Italians on the Büllelejoch who could hear the hammering and repeatedly swept the summit with searchlights. The sappers' only protection was to stand absolutely still against a snow background. When completed, the Austrian positions were



Left: View from the Paternsattel northward towards the Drei Zinnen hut and Sextenstein and Toblinger Knoten front line positions from August 1915 to October 1917.

Right: Viktoria Savs, who fought for the Austrian-Hungarian army on the Drei Zinnen frontline disguised as a man. Having lost a leg during the fighting, her true identity was discovered. Born in Merano, which was ceded to Italy after the war, she subsequently lived in Hall, Salzburg and Belgrade.



inaccessible but the Italian posts on the Sextenstein summit beneath were within easy rifle and machine gun range.

The snow tunnel and other attempts to recapture the Sextenstein were launched from points flanking the Toblinger Knoten. In late 1916, following detonation of large Italian mines beneath their positions elsewhere in the Dolomites, the Austrians became concerned that a mining project might be underway from the Sextenstein to beneath the Toblinger Knoten. Countermining proposals were made but fighting in the area ended before excavation could begin.

There are two via ferrata access routes to the Toblinger Knoten summit. The gunfire-sheltered military access up the north chimney has been restored with cables and steel ladders (MISUR2). Some of the original platforms and wooden ladders are still in place. Feldkurat Hosp's November 1916 night route on the south side (MISUR3) has also been re-instated with some protection and is now generally used for descent.

Wildgrabenjoch-Innichriedelknoten Ridge

The Wildgrabenjoch-Innichriedel ridge, with the Toblinger Knoten a few hundred metres north of the Drei Zinnen hut at its centre, was the main Austrian defence line. The ridge retains numerous defence works including observation posts, trenches and caverns together with artillery, machine gun and searchlight positions. Permanently manned posts were established on summits and passes. In addition to sandbags, wire mesh crates filled

with stones and rock fragments were widely used to consolidate trenches on unstable scree slopes. In places, barrack huts were secured with rock bolts and cables. Supplies came by pack train up valleys from the north, supplemented from the second year of the war by ropeways. Foundations of barracks, headquarters and medical facilities can still be seen, sheltered under north-facing rock bluffs.

The ridge is an excellent walk with impressive views across no man's land towards the Zinnen north faces and Italian lines.

Other Localities

Besides mountain locations, the Monte Piana military cemetery next to the Toblach-Cortina road (SS51) a few kilometres south of Toblach and the 1880s Austrian 'blockhouse fort' (Landro Sperre), whose guns and mortars were removed for use at the front, are both interesting. There is an excellent open-air museum with preserved trenches on the summit plateau of Monte Piana.

Events in the Drei Zinnen area illustrate aspects of the First World War in the eastern Alps, including the curious and inexplicable high-command obsession that advance in valleys could only progress after capture of the heights. Consequently, Italian attempts to reach Pustertal did not include any significant attempt to break through down the main valleys or along the road to Sexten over the Kreuzbergsattel pass, some of which were almost undefended in the first days of the war.

The Italian Austro-Hungarian conflict cost many lives. Other than acquisition of Friuli, Trieste, the Trentino and German-speaking South Tyrol to the Brenner pass, Italy achieved relatively little from a war declared mainly for mercenary reasons, and one that had disastrous political consequences.

Restoration and maintenance of vie ferrate and walks in this area is due in great part to the Friends of the Dolomites Association (Verein der Dolomitenfreunde). I am grateful for the enthusiasm of Italian and South Tyrolean friends for local history and also the following sources. My thanks go to Jim Harvey for his help and endless patience and help in preparing my drawings for publication.

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