An old relic on display at APG

Leopold a railroad gun that was used by the Nazis

By Karl Lasher
Aegis staff

The Nazis employed many brutal killers in their doomed campaign to conquer Europe, many of whom are now dead or behind bars for crimes against humanity.

But Leopold was subject to a different fate, and now stands on permanent display at Aberdeen Proving Ground, the "Home of Ordnance," ordnance both friend and foe.

Leopold was not a soldier but one of 28 K5E railroad guns built by the Nazis to blast through France's Maginot Line. After the Nazis simply bypassed the state-of-the-art series of underground bunkers that made up the line designed to fortify the French border, they ultimately used most of the K5Es to pound Kent County, England, Leningrad and other Allied targets.

The tale of the clandestine Nazi guns is now being told, however, by Richard J. O'Rourke, a Fort Washington resident, who recently published a book documenting the railroad-mounted guns that eluded Allied fire power for five months at Anzio.

The 227-page book, entitled "Anzio Annie: She was no Lady," depicts the invasion of Anzio and the history of the K5E and other big guns developed by the Nazis during the war. O'Rourke said his is the first book dedicated to the Anzio guns, dubbed "The Anzio Express" and "Anzio Annie" by Allied troops, and that is why he wrote it.

"I first saw the gun in 1977, and I took a couple of books out of the library and started reading about the Italian campaign, but after about four years of research I realized there was no book" about the guns themselves, O'Rourke said in a telephone interview from his home. He originally saw the gun dubbed Leopold after visiting APG to see several German tanks, a visit inspired by a chance meeting with a former German tank commander in Newark, N.J.

O'Rourke, who worked as a research analyst until he was laid off from his Wall Street job, spent the next 14 years researching and writing his book. His research took him to numerous military installations and federal sites across the country and to Europe twice to interview four former German soldiers who manned the K5Es.

"I became obsessed with the book. I've given the last 14 years of my life to it and moved from Florida to the [Washington, D.C.] area to be near an area of research," said O'Rourke, who promotes his book by day and works in a pizza restaurant at night. Since publishing the book himself, he's sold about 500 copies to war history buffs and veterans groups, including members of the Anzio Beachhead Veterans of World War II.
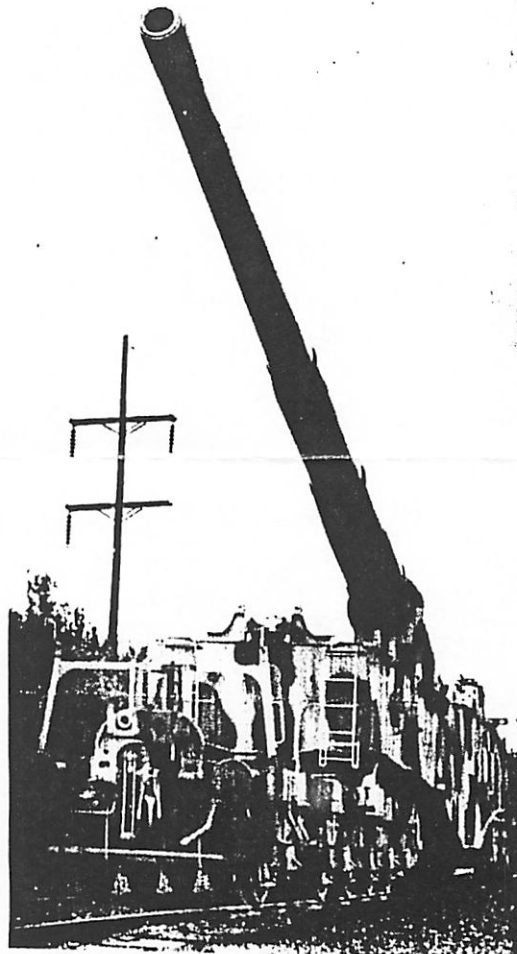
"The shells had 12 ridges that made a horrible howling sound as they flew through the air; it was a real Edgar Allen Poe-mental weapon," O'Rourke said.

"Some of the guys still have nightmares about it," he said of the Anzio veterans who landed at Anzio after a similar invasion at Salerno, Italy, in September 1943.

To stop the Allied advance, the Nazis brought in Leopold and Robert and hid them in a railroad tunnel six miles southeast of Rome and near Castel Gandolfo and the Pope's summer home (both guns were originally paired with K5Es named Margaret and Dorothy at other sites in the European theater, but the barrels on both Margaret and Dorothy were worn out by over-use), according to William F. Atwater, director and curator of the Army Ordnance Museum.

Leopold and Robert were brought out of their lair often to torment the Allies at Anzio. The barrel of each K5E was 70 feet, 4 inches long and the gun weighed about 94 metric tons, according to O'Rourke.

Each gun rested on a carriage with 24 wheels and each carriage weighed about 68 metric tons. The guns were transported across land on rail because the steel rails could handle the weight.

Atwater said the guns could be modified to fire a rocket propelled shell almost double its normal range. O'Rourke's book includes an account from a German soldier who took part in an attempt to fire a rocket-propelled shell at London from Leopold, which was stationed near Pas de Calais on the French coast.

"I was unaware of this shell being so experimental," said former 1st Sgt. Albert Sauerbier, interviewed in Europe by O'Rourke. "After my gun was readied I suddenly noticed that an unusual number of officials took cover by clearing the gun area by a considerable distance, much more than was normal. Suddenly, I realized that I was in danger, and that this new shell might not work as hoped, posing a risk to all of the gun crew," Sauerbier said.

The former Nazi gunner said the gun was launched and the shell exploded halfway up the muzzle, blowing the barrel open like a banana peel and scattering debris for miles.

"There was always a lot of myth surrounding the German engineering; because of the Tiger tanks people thought nothing could go wrong," O'Rourke said. "But they had a lot of weapons that were second to the Allies, but a lot that were superior, too."

Because the guns were kept hidden in the railroad tunnel, the Allies couldn't destroy them with air power or by sea, and the big guns continued to keep the Allies at bay in Anzio until May of that year, when the invaders finally burst through the beachhead and made their way north after building up their supplies and troops.

While subjected to bombardment day in and day out for five months, the Allied troops gave the Nazi guns their own nicknames, including "The Anzio Express."

After their breakout, the Allies captured the guns and Leopold was shipped to APG, where Army officials studied its long-range secrets. After inspiring the American T72E1 "Atomic Cannon," a 280mm, 83-ton gun designed to fire atomic ordnance, Leopold was refurbished and put on display.

Anyone interested in O'Rourke's book can send $17.95, plus $2 shipping and handling and 5 percent sales tax for Maryland residents, to O'Rourke Services Co. at P.O. Box 44928, Fort Washington, Md. 20744. The book is also available at the Ordnance Museum at APG.

Leopold, one of two German guns *also known as the Anzio Express and Anzio Annie, on display at APG.*

Karl Lasher/The Aegis

Thanks for your book order.

Happy Holidays

Richard J. O'Rourke