

# 'Anzio Annie' in Action

As the Allied troops of the VI Corps stormed up the beaches at Anzio and Nettuno, south of Rome, in January 1944 their commanders supposed that between them and the city of Rome there were few German troops to oppose them. The bulk of the German forces were farther to the south manning the strong Gustav Line of defensive positions that included the mountain fortress of Cassino. It was the very strength of the Gustav Line that had led to the Anzio amphibious operation that was intended to turn the line by landing in its rear to open the road to Rome, but the whole landing operations were conducted on so tight a manpower and logistic shoestring that Major General John Lucas commanding the subsequent beach-head, deemed it prudent to build up his supplies and strength (especially in armour and heavy artillery) before he ventured forwards into the Alban Hills, despite the fact that ground and air reconnaissance found virtually no opposition.

By the time Lucas deemed it possible to advance, his adversary Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring had raked together existing forces and formed new units to make the 14th Army to obliterate the beach-head. When the Allies advanced they were countered by strong German forces that included some Panzer units and fresh troops from the north of Italy. They also encountered the German railway guns.

The railway guns involved were two 28-cm K 5 (E)s that had originally been sent to Italy for shipment to Tunisia, that campaign ending before they could be shipped. The guns had since

spent their time in the Milan area and were sent south to the Anzio area via Rome at the end of January 1944. Once in position only one gun could be kept in action at any one time for, although a near-perfect firing point for a railway gun was found, it could accommodate only one gun at a time. This position was not far from Albano on the main Rome to Nettuno railway line at a point where the track entered a tunnel. The K 5 (E) could be kept under cover in the tunnel, being pushed out to fire and immediately pulled back in again once the round had been released. Although the track in and out of the tunnel was a double one at the site it was deemed safer to operate only one gun at a time with the other gun kept in another tunnel farther to the north.

## Constant shelling

For four months the two guns between them made the lives of the Allied soldiers in the Anzio beach-head as difficult as possible. A constant drizzle of 28-cm (11-in) shells was scattered all over the confines of the beach areas and the country inland in conjunction with a constant bombardment from lighter artillery units and the continuous threat of Luftwaffe attacks. The Allied air force did what they could to find and destroy the K 5 (E) firing site but the area was well camouflaged and the gun was always kept inside the tunnel when Allied aircraft approached. In time the fire from the K 5 (E) became so regular that the Allied troops named the guns 'Anzio Annie' and the name has stuck to this day, despite the fact that two guns

were involved. They wrought considerable damage between them, and remained in action until the Allies broke through the Gustav Line to the south.

With the fall of Cassino to Polish forces, the Gustav Line was broken and the Allies stormed north to relieve the Anzio beach-head. This they did by moving rapidly north not along the coastal route but inland to the extent that they cut off the railway lines that provided the two K 5 (E)s with their escape route. The guns were thus captured almost intact and ready to move out. One gun was damaged by its crew before capture but the other was found almost complete and this example was subsequently shipped to the United States for examination and test firing. The major components of the other gun were also shipped to the USA, and when the examination programme was completed bits of both guns were put together to form the exhibit that is now on public show at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. Now named 'Leopold' for some reason, this K 5 (E) is the only example of its kind that can be seen in the West, not only of a K 5 (E) but also of a large railway gun; a weapon that has now been assigned to history, for no form of railway artillery is in use anywhere today.

*'Anzio Annie', a 28-cm K 5 (E), after capture in 1944; this is the gun that is now to be seen at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland, USA. With her partner, this gun wrought considerable damage upon the Anzio beach-head.*

