

Birth of Rocket Weaponry

by Terry Sutton

Those living in Dover in 1944 will remember the massive explosions that emanated from across the Channel, which shook the ground and houses. The explosions were from huge bombs dropped on Pas de Calais by the Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force.

The aim was two-fold: to disrupt rail and road communications prior to the June 6 D-Day landings and more importantly to wreck Hitler's "Secret Weapon" sites that military intelligence had heard were under construction there. They were the V-1 and V-2 (Vergeltungswaffe eins - zwei, German for retaliation, reprisal or vengeance weapon) launching sites and the various assembly areas.

The V-1 officially named the Fieseler Fi 103 was, during the war, commonly known as the Doodlebug or Buzz Bomb. The V-2 rocket was the first ballistic missile and first manmade object to achieve sub-orbital spaceflight.

Thousands of bombs showered down at Helfaut-Wizernes, five kilometres from St Omer. It was here that Russian prisoners of war were being forced to construct the gigantic La Coupole where rockets, arriving by train from Germany, were assembled and primed to hit London.

The massive underground complex, carved out of a chalk hill, is well worth a visit with visitors issued with a free audio guide.

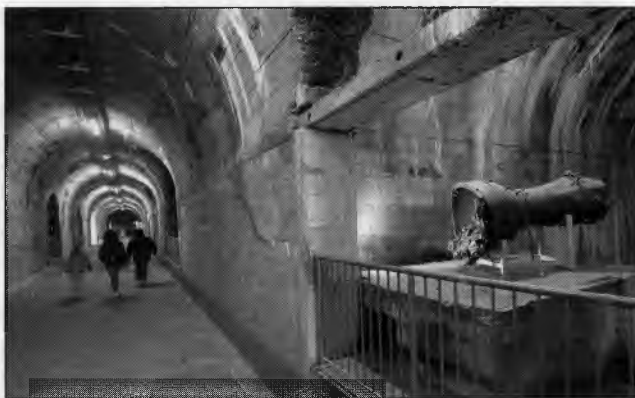
Although it has been open for several years the regional council has recently invested heavily and extended the centre to make it an excellent tourist attraction.

Currently, until the end of September, there is an exhibition about British, American, Free French, and Polish pilots and aircrews. Shot down they were killed, captured, or had escaped with the help of French civilians to return to England to fight again.

There is a horrifying exhibition depicting how the Nazis decided to kill off the Jews, homosexuals, gypsies and many others in the gas chambers of concentration camps.

More than a thousand Jews in the Calais region, including an eight-year-old girl, rounded up by the occupying German force were deported (most of them to Auschwitz) and gassed.

The underground tunnels and galleries, designed by the Germans but dug out by Russians and other Todt Organisation slave



Underground at La Coupole

La Coupole Dome



workers on 12-hour shifts, go on for nearly seven kilometres (over four miles) under a massive thick concrete protective dome.

In 1938, Fritz Todt a German engineer and senior Nazi figure united government firms, private companies and the Reich Labour Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst) to found Organisation Todt (OT), a Nazi construction and engineering group. During the years of the Third Reich OT enslaved over 1.5 million men and boys from countries occupied by Nazi Germany. They were responsible for construction of the West Wall, later renamed the Siegfried Line, built as a defence for the Reich territory. On 17th March 1940, appointed as Reich Minister for Armaments and Munitions (Reichsminister für Bewaffnung und Munition) he oversaw the work of Organisation Todt in the occupied west. He died in a plane crash on 8th February 1942.

M. Yves Le Maner, the managing director of La Coupole, told me some of the extensive tunnelling system was blown up and blocked by British Royal Engineers, on the orders of Winston Churchill,

after the war. "I feared the tunnels might be used by another enemy when there was the threat of the Cold War breaking out" he once said.

In September 1944, as the Allies advanced along the coast towards St Omer 500 of the Soviet slave workers were transported by train to Germany where they were massacred.

Ironically, despite all the work at La Coupole it never fired any rockets at England because of the advancing Allies. Those fired at this country came from mobile sites.

However, La Coupole does not dwell just in the past. M. Le Maner, an historian, points out that the rocket technology has resulted in putting men on the moon and the creation of satellites and improved communications allowing for the use of mobile phones and car satellite navigation.

VI flying bomb sites once studded the Nord-Pas de Calais but most have now disappeared. One complex remains, in a forest, not far from La Coupole where the launching platform is lined-up to hit central London. The site, with its many bomb holes, is now a protected historic war monument.



Doodle Bug at La Coupole