

THE V WEAPONS CAMPAIGN AGAINST BRITAIN, 1944-1945.



"The Angel of Death is abroad in the land, only you can't always hear the flutter of its wings"-Winston Churchill, 15 January 1945

On the night of 12/13 June 1944, exactly one week after the D-Day landings in Normandy, the first V1s were launched against Britain. Their arrival was not unexpected. Throughout 1943 and early 1944, as air raids on their cities intensified, Dr Goebbels had promised the German people "miracle weapons" to avenge the destruction wrought by Allied bombers.

This retribution now came in the shape of what Goebbels called "Vergeltungswaffe Eins", (Revenge Weapon Number One), the British Government designated as a flying bomb, and which Londoners initially nicknamed a "Bob Hope" because when one approached you bobbed down and hoped that it would continue to fly over.

They soon however became more generally known as "Doodlebugs" or "buzz bombs", and continued to fall on Britain until the final weeks of the war, the last one exploding harmlessly in open country near Sittingbourne in Kent on 29 March 1945. Others had been less harmless and over 6000 British civilians died as a result of V1 attacks between June 1944 and March 1945. In all 9,251 V1s were launched against Britain, of which 4,261 were destroyed by the Royal Air Force, the Army's Anti-Aircraft Command, the Royal Navy and the balloon barrage.

After encountering his first V1 on 16 June 1944 Air Raid Warden John Eaves of Banstead in Surrey summed up many people's reactions when he wrote: "This is something we definitely hadn't bargained for... I don't mind admitting that for a moment my knees shook and I was scared stiff. ... PS I have forgotten all about our invasion of France." And on 14 June 1944 diarist James Lees-Milne pessimistically noted that, with the event of the V1, "no one in authority expected the war to be over for a very long time."

The quiet euphoria of D Day had now given way to a feeling of grim determination to withstand this latest manifestation of Nazi terror from the air. For as Queen Elizabeth wrote to her mother-in-law Queen Mary, "There is something very inhuman about death-dealing missiles being launched in such an indiscriminate manner." Many at first however considered the V1s to be mere pinpricks compared to the nightly bombings of the 1940-1941 "Blitz"; Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie wrote a month after the attacks began, "I am completely unmoved by these buzz-bombs. I was more scared by the early raids at the beginning of the war."

In his diary entry for Sunday 18 June 1944 Lees-Milne wrote, "On getting out of the bus in Beaufort Street I heard and saw my first rocket (sic). It was rushing overhead at great speed northwards. Half an hour ago while writing this, I heard another, and saw one out of my west window, like a dagger with

a flaming beacon at its tail. Then the engine cut off, and I watched it dive over the "World's End" (public house). In a second the windows rattled, and a thin plume of smoke rose to the sky. There was a faint, distant sound of wailing."

Rhetorically he asked, "For sheer damnable devilry what could be worse than this awful instrument? "Less than three months later, at 6.43pm on Friday 8 September 1944, he got his reply when the first V2 rocket landed on Staveley Road in the London suburb of Chiswick killing 3 people and seriously injuring another 17. These were the first of 2,754 British civilians to be killed by the 1,115 V2 rockets launched against Britain.

In his diary on 12 September 1944 Lees-Milne noted," At about 6am I with thousands of others in London was woken up by a prolonged rumble which at first I mistook for thunder. The explosion was followed by a second. Both, I learnt later were caused by V2 rockets which other people have heard before... They have greater penetrative but less lateral destructive power than the V1s. They are very exciting and not frightening at all for when you hear them you know you are all right."

He was to revise that opinion a few months later when he wrote on 5 January 1945, "The V2 has become far more alarming than the V1, quite contrary to what I thought at first, because it gives no warning sound. One finds oneself waiting for it, and jump out of one's skin at the slightest bang or unexpected noise like a car backfire or even a door slam."

In order to deny the Germans information as to the accuracy of their new weapon, the Home Office officially stated that these detonations were exploding gas mains. It was not until 10 November 1944, after over 100 V2s had landed on London, that Churchill announced to the House of Commons that the country was being subjected to attack by long-range rockets.

It continued to be under rocket attack until 27 March 1945 when the last V2 was launched against Britain. It landed at Orpington in Kent, killing housewife Mrs Ivy Millichamp, the last of 60,595 British civilians who died as a result of enemy action during the Second World War.

Considerable damage, both human and material, was done by the V weapons from June 1944 to March 1945. One of the worst "incidents" occurred on Sunday 18 June 1944 when the Guards Chapel at Wellington Barracks received a direct hit by a V1 during morning service. 119 people were killed, 102 were seriously injured and a further 39 received minor injuries.

A survivor recalled, " One moment I was singing the "Te Deum" and the next I lay in dust and blackness, aware of one thing only-that I had to go on breathing... my eyes rested with horror on a bloodstained body... of a young soldier whose eyes stared unseeingly at the sky."

Twelve days later on 30 June 1944 during the busy lunch hour a V1 exploded near the BBC's External Services headquarters at Bush House on the Aldwych. "It was as though a foggy November evening had materialised at the

throw of a switch,” a BBC employee recalled, “Through the dust and smoke the casement of the bomb lay burning at the corner of Kingsway: three victims lay unmoving at the top of the steps only thirty yards from where we had crouched and huddled and figures were scattered all over the road.”

In a nearby first aid post the supervisor saw the body of a young woman with whom she worked, “(She) was naked and dead, stripped and killed by the blast. Another I knew came into the building helped by a friend- blood spurting from her wrist and a deep gash in one eye...From approximately 2.15 pm to 5.15 pm we were treating casualties.”

The final death toll was 46, but 399 people had been seriously wounded while another 200 had sustained superficial injuries. Two equally serious “incidents” both took place exactly four weeks later on 28 July 1944 when the shopping centre of Kensington High Street was hit at lunchtime resulting in a death toll of 45 with a further 170 injured. Just a few hours earlier at 9.41am Lewisham street market had been the scene of a V1 attack that demolished 20 shops, damaged 30 more and killed 51 people and injured 313.

A 22 year old member of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force was at Lewisham shopping with her mother when the V1 arrived overhead “like a huge black whale’s head coming through the white cloud almost at roof top level... I shouted, ‘Get down, Mum!’ and tried to push her to the ground...I saw it fall on Marks and Spencer and explode... we were thrown into the air and blown about like bits of paper or leaves and there was dust and screams all round and then dreadful silence and we were lying on the ground with our heads towards the scene of the explosion... I noticed Mum’s white summer coat covered in blood and she was moaning.... we could only lie there and wait for help.”

The V2s brought similar devastation and suffering among Londoners who had already endured so much since September 1939. On the morning of Saturday 25 November 1944 at 12.25 pm a V2 rocket landed on Woolworth’s store in New Cross Road at Deptford. At the time of impact the store was crowded with schoolchildren waiting for their meagre sweet ration and housewives queuing to buy rare saucepans, and the casualties were therefore very high: 160 killed, 77 seriously and 122 slightly injured. In all, Deptford was to suffer nine V2s, far less than other localities, but five of these caused “major incidents” resulting in a death toll of 297 with a further 328 seriously injured; more than other London borough.

At 11.10am on Thursday 8 March 1945 a V2 crashed on Smithfield Market in the Farringdon Road close to the City of London, the capital’s commercial centre. Among the 110 dead and 366 injured were many women and children who had gone to the market that morning hoping to get one of a consignment of rabbits in order to supplement their meat ration. The nearest hospital St Bartholomew’s - “Barts”- was inundated with casualties, and four surgical teams had to work at full stretch, with only short breaks, for twenty-four hours to cope with the wounded.

And on 27 March with Allied victory clearly in sight, one of the last V2s was to cause the second largest number of deaths during the whole campaign. At 7.21am that Tuesday morning a rocket made a direct hit on a block of five-storey flats at Hughes Mansions in Vallance Road, Stepney creating a crater 30 feet by 10 feet. Rescue work, which involved five large cranes continued until ten o'clock that night and involved hundreds of Civil Defence workers from all over east London.

One recalled locating an elderly woman trapped in her bed among the rubble: " I managed to pull her, in her blankets, clear of the bed, but could not manage to get her over the debris. By this time help arrived in the form of one of our crew... whose hobby was weight-lifting. Saying 'Let me have her', he picked her up by the shoulders and with myself at the feet we got her out of the rubble where a stretcher was waiting. She would not be shifted until she had taken my hand and said 'Thank you, son. God bless you!' "

She was one of the lucky ones. 134 residents of Hughes Mansions were killed and 49 seriously injured that morning, just three days after Field Marshal Montgomery's 21st Army Group had crossed the Rhine.

Even in the midst of all this sudden death and destruction Londoners retained their sense of humour. A Cockney housewife, after having been dug out of her rocket-blasted house, was asked the whereabouts of her husband. "He's in the Army at the front. The rotten coward!" was her prompt and tart reply.

Conventional bombing during the "Blitz" of September 1940 to May 1941 and subsequent air raids had killed over 40,000 British civilians, while 1 in 5 of their homes were destroyed or damaged as a result of enemy action. The V weapons campaign added further to this sum of human misery. 107,000 houses were totally destroyed, and over 1,500,000 were damaged and needed repairs. In human terms the V weapons caused the deaths of 8,938 British civilians (6,184 by V1s and 2,754 by V2s) while 24,504 more were seriously injured, (17,981 by V1s and 6,523 by V2s). In addition 2,917 British servicemen were killed by V weapons and 1,939 seriously injured.

Of the V weapons offensive Churchill wrote in his memoirs: "This new form of attack imposed on the people of London a burden perhaps even heavier than the air raids of 1940 and 1941. Suspense and strain were more prolonged. Dawn brought no relief and cloud no comfort. The man going home in the evening never knew what he would find; his wife, alone all day or with the children, could not be certain of his safe return. The blind, impersonal nature of the missile made the individual on the ground feel helpless. There was little that he could do, no human enemy that he could see shot down."

Despite official fears the onslaught of the V weapons did not break the morale of the people of London and Southern England, neither did it seriously impede the liberation of Europe by the Allied armies. As Churchill rightly told the House of Commons on August 3 1944, "If the Germans imagine that the

continuance of this present attack, which has cost them very dear in every branch of production, will have the slightest effect upon the course of the war or upon the resolve of the nation or upon the morale of the men, women and children under fire they will only be making another of those psychological blunders for which they have so long been celebrated... There is no question of diverting our strength from the extreme prosecution of the war, or of allowing this particular infliction to weaken in any way our energetic support of our Allies.”

Nonetheless all Londoners will have agreed with social worker Vere Hodgson when she wrote in her diary at the beginning of April 1945:
“No bombs... ain't it lovely?”



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