

Germany's Vengeance Weapons



The V-1 flying bomb or Buzz bomb was regarded as a vengeance weapon, deployed one week after the allied landings in Europe for a campaign of terror bombing on London. It was developed during 1939 at a German army research centre in Peenemunde, located on the small Baltic Sea island of Usedom.

The simple pulsejet engine used low grade petroleum, mixed with air entering through intake shutters. A simple car spark plug provided the ignition which instantly closed the intake shutters, providing forward speed through reward thrust.



The engine ignited at around 50 times a second and produced a pulsing sound, and it became known as the Buzz Bomb. It could perhaps be considered as an early version, of today's cruise missile.

Due to its limited range thousands of these V-1 missiles were launched into England fired from launch facilities along the French, and Dutch coast lines.

From the outset, this futuristic unmanned weapon presented British air defences with a new set of problems. The altitude and air speed of the V-1 was more than the rate of traverse the standard air defence gun the QF 3.7-inch mobile gun, could achieve

The static version of the gun did traverse more quickly, so temporary platforms were constructed to allow for its redeployment as the V-1 threat unfolded and evolved.

This modification together with the development of Proximity fuses and predictive targeting, Radar and fire control systems did improve the strike rates but still they got through.



When the V-1 attacks started in June 1944, the Hawker Tempest was the only aircraft capable of attaining the low-altitude speeds required to counter its threat, and less than 30 Tempests were in service at the time. With improvements to flying techniques, the Tempests were capable of intercepting V-1's. With a high level of skill, pilots could under-lap wing tips in order to disrupt air flow sufficiently to override the V-1's gyroscope and cause an uncontrolled dive. Approximately 16 of the V-1's were destroyed in this way, so another method was also needed.



Barrage Balloons were seen as another line of defence; approximately 2000 were deployed in the hope that V-1's would be destroyed when they struck the balloons anchoring cables. As a counter measure the wing leading edges of the V-1's were fitted with cable cutters, overall fewer than 300 V-1's are known to have been destroyed by barrage balloons.

To fine tune and adjust the guidance systems of the V-1's, the Germans needed to know the exact locations of the impact sites. They therefore needed information from their secret agents in London, regarding the impact sites and locations. However, unknown to the Germans, all German agents had been turned and were acting as double agents.

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The V-2 attacks began after Hitler's declaration in late August 1944 that attacks would start as soon as possible, two rockets were launched on the 7th September but failed shortly after launch. The following day Paris was targeted with a single rocket, causing damage near Porte d'Italie. On that same day two rockets were launched on London with one landing in Chiswick, killing an elderly lady, young child and soldier home on leave, the other struck in Epping without any loss to life.



Early attempts by the government to conceal the truth about these weapons, had blamed explosions on defective gas pipes. Given the sightings and rumours circulating at the time, the public soon began calling them flying 'Gas Pipes'. The Germans confirmed the V-2 attacks in early November, and Winston Churchill was forced to announce to parliament on the 10th November that the country had been under attack, 'over the last few weeks'.

More than 2,700 civilians were killed in the London V-2 attacks with over 6,500 injuries, which equated to approximately 2 people killed per V-2 rocket launch. However, this really understates the effect of the V-2 attacks as many lives had been lost in individual explosions, but a large number of the rockets had veered off course and exploded harmlessly. The psychological effect of the V-2 was far greater as it travelled faster than the speed of sound, gave no warning before impact, and had no effective defences against it.



British intelligence had again falsified reports via their 'Double Agent's' implying rockets were overshooting London targets, by more than 10 Miles. This tactic worked well, with over half the V-2s aimed at London landing outside the London Civil Defence Region.

The SS General, Hans Kammler who had overseen the construction of concentration camps had a reputation of brutality, and he promoted the use of slave labour in the rocket programme. It is widely believed more people died in the manufacture of V-2 rockets, than it killed as a weapon. The sheer cost of the programme was immense, over 3200 were launched costing approximately £2.8 Million each in today's terms (2019). With war entering its final phase the Nazis saw these weapons as a last ditch attempt of changing the military outcome, and in the process give hope to their supporters while punishing their enemies. The rocket programme required a large amount of technical, physical and material resources to achieve, each launch required over 30tons of potatoes to be distilled to create the fuel alcohol at a time of increasing food shortages.

At the end of the war, the Axis powers began a race to retrieve as many V-2 rockets, staff and parts of this new technology. Train loads of captured items were shipped off to the United States, along with over 1500 members of the design and technical teams. Wernher von Braun and Walter Dornberger were in American hands, along others who had surrendered to the US military to avoid being captured by the Soviets or being shot by the Nazis to prevent their capture.

The V-2 is considered to have had no effect on the outcome of WW2, but the technology did lead to the development and stock piling of ballistic missiles of the cold war period.

In later life Von Braun whilst director at the NASA - Marshall Space Centre in Alabama went on to develop the Saturn IB and Saturn V space vehicles, as well as the Saturn I rocket used in the Apollo 8 moon orbit of 1969.



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