

Retaliation! - Germany's Vengeance Weapons ("Vergeltungswaffe")

V-1 Rocket - "Doodlebug"

The V-1 (known to the Germans as a FZG-76 as it was designed by the Fiesler company) was an unmanned, un-guided, flying bomb. It was of simple design but was capable of causing massive damage and loss of life. The V-1 was a liquid fuelled, pulse-jet drone aircraft that could carry a 2,000 lb warhead to southern England. The problem of unmanned navigation was overcome by simply pointing it in the correct direction, setting a gyrocompass to keep it level and putting just enough fuel in it to get it to its target. The Germans called it their "Vergeltungswaffe" or "retaliation weapon". It was so called to give the impression that it was the beginning of a series of terror weapons that would be developed. The V-1 rockets were referred to by various different names ranging from "Buzz bombs", "Bumble bombs", "Robot bombs" and most commonly "Doodlebugs". The Germans liked to refer to them as "hell hounds" and "fire dragons".

A Series of fixed launching sites were constructed in France, Holland, Denmark and Germany to allow the Germans to shower V-1s on any part of southern England. Initially AA Guns were placed in the cities, namely London to shoot down any doodlebugs that were approaching but the AA guns were quickly moved to the South Coast to intercept the rockets. The British quickly became expert at spotting and shooting them down with only some 25% of the V-1s hitting their target. They established defensive zones, first were the fighters (Mosquitoes, Spitfires and Typhoons) over the English channel, then came a zone of heavy AA guns equipped with the first radar proximity fuses, then a zone of light AA guns and rocket projectors and finally barrage balloons. The effects of this strategy can clearly be seen in the period between June and September 1944 when, of the 6725 launched, 3463 were destroyed by the AA guns, fighters or balloons.



PICTURE: A V-1 Rocket in action.

Civilians did, to a certain extent, get used to the V-1 menace. They considered if the engine of the V-1 was still heard they were fairly safe. It was only if it cut out overhead and began to dive that it was wise to take shelter. On the 7th September 1944, Duncan Sandys, the Minister of Supply, announced that the V-1 menace was over and unwisely declared that the V-2 rocket would not amount to much.



Click the V-1 Rocket to listen to its terrifying drone. Imagine hearing this sound overhead!

V-2 Rockets

The secret V-2 was not really a secret to the allies who had been endeavouring to hamper development of this weapon but were unable to halt production indefinitely. As the allied armies advanced on the crumbling third Reich, Chiswick, West London, was awoken by a violent explosion. This was on Friday 8th September 1944 and was the first V-2 Rocket to land on British soil killing 3 people and injuring 17.

The V-2 Rocket was seen by many as a last desperate attempt by Hitler to crush Britain. The V-2 had a range of 186 miles (300 km) and its warhead consisted of 2,200 lb of high explosive. It was 47' (14.3 m) in length and spanned 10' (3 m) and was much more expensive to produce than the V-1. It was highly inaccurate and it was impossible to intercept after launch. It climbed to a height of 60 miles and descended in unguided ballistic flight with the velocity of up to 2500 mph - an incredible speed! Indeed this was 3-4 times the speed of sound as the double boom of its arrival indicated. The double boom was then followed by a strange whooshing sound. This sound was created when the plunging missile pushed its way through the denser air it met as it approached the ground. If it landed in a built up area it was a massively destructive weapon. V-2's often arrived with no warning as there was no way of sounding air raid sirens in time or hearing the engine unlike the distinctive noise of the V-1's engine.

The V-2 Rockets were developed in Peenemunde, Germany as early as 1943 but production was set back after the RAF heavily bombed the V-2 factories and research establishments in August 1943. This was a severe blow to Germany and saved not only London from massive destruction but the allied armies landing in Normandy in June 1944. However between 8th September 1944 and 27th March 1945, 1054 rockets were launched on Britain with 500 directed at London.



PICTURE: V-2 Rocket ready for launching



V-1 and V-2 Statistics

At war's end, 10,611 V-1s and 1054 V-2s hit Britain killing 8,588 and wounding 46,838, which was only a fraction of the casualties inflicted by Germany's conventional air attacks. The Germans simply did not have enough V weapons and even if they did they weren't as accurate as they should have been. Hitler was obsessed with pointing the V weapons at London instead of at the massive armies that were advancing on the Reich. It was a last ditch attempt by Hitler to crush the British Spirit.

The main purpose of the V Weapons was to terrorise the British civilian population so that the war against Germany would not continue. This failed completely with the weapons not being used until Germany had effectively lost the war.



PICTURE: The price of victory?



10,611 V-1 Hits



1,054 V-2 Hits



8,588 Killed



46,838 Wounded

