

DIVER! DIVER ! DIVER ! HITLER'S V WEAPONS

The original date at which the 'V Weapons' attack would commence against the UK had originally been set for Hitler's birthday, 20 April 1944. This had proven to be impracticable, and so a new date had to be set. The order to start the campaign had been signed by the Fuhrer in May, and General Keitel, the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, issued the following instructions :-

'The Fuhrer has ordered that the long-range bombardment of England will begin in the middle of June. The exact date will be sent by Commander-in-Chief West Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring who will also control the bombardment with the help of LXV Army Corps and 3rd Air Fleet. The main target is London. The bombardment will open like a thunderclap by night.....combined with bombs (mostly incendiary from the bomber forces, and a sudden long-range artillery attack against towns within range (this meant coastal towns on the coast of Kent). It will continue with persistent harassing fire by night on London. When weather conditions make enemy air activity impossible, firing can also take place by day. This harassing fire, mingled with bombardments of varying length and intensity, will be calculated so that the supply of ammunition is always related to our capacity for production and transport. In addition, six hundred of these weapons will be regarded as a reserve of the High Command of the Armed Forces (the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht), to be fired only with its approval !' Thus it was, that on the night of 12/13 June 1944, Hitler's long-awaited 'V weapons' campaign began.



Obs E E Woodland on left and A M Wraight on the right on duty at their Dymchurch post. When not on duty they were a greengrocer and builder respectively.

The Royal Observer Corps

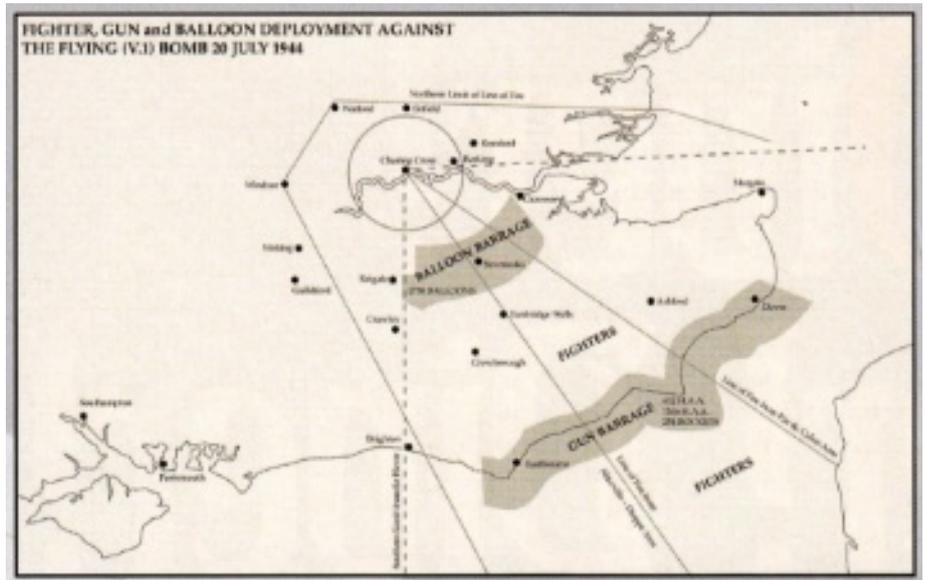
It was the ever vigilant members of the Royal Observer Corps who sighted the first of the V1 flying bombs to be fired at the UK that night of 12/13 June 1944, as historian Bob Ogley recalls : 'Local farmer Edwin Woods was on duty on the night of June 12-13 at Observer Post Mike 3, high on the Kent Downs at Lyminge. Just after 4 am he received a message from Maidstone ROC Centre telling him there was something happening near Boulogne. Mr Wood, through his binoculars, saw a 'fighter on fire' but it was just outside his sector. He gave a reading to Maidstone and handed over to his colleagues at Observer post Mike 2 at Dymchurch.

Mike 2, located at the top of a Martello tower on the seafront at Dymchurch, was manned by Mr E E Woodland and Mr A M Wraight. At 4.08 am they spotted the approach of an object spurting red flames from its rear end and making a noise like 'a Model-T-Ford going up a hill'. The first flying bomb to be released against England was rattling towards them and the two spotters on top of the tower instinctively knew that the new Battle of Britain had commenced. It was the moment that they had been anticipating for months. For the first time the code-word for the new weapon was sounded in alarm "Diver, Diver".

The men followed the strange object in the sky with their binoculars. When it had approached to within five miles of Mike 2, Mr Woodland seized the telephone and passed the warning to Maidstone ROC Centre. "Mike 2, Diver, Diver, Diver - on four, north-west one-o-one". The atmosphere in the underground bunker at ADGD's HQ at Bentley Priory was relaxed that early morning. Suddenly, one of the WAAF tellers sat up as if given an electric shock. She hesitated for a second, as though disbelieving what she had heard in her headphones.

Then she called “Diver, Diver” and the whole Operations Room was galvanised into a frenzy of activity. A dozen hands reached for telephones, the main table plotters suddenly forgot their fatigue and the controller watched in amazement as an extraordinary track progressed at great speed across the table towards London.

The missile continued on its course over the North Downs. Then, at about 04.18 hours, the air log propeller on the front of the V1 reached its pre-set value. The propeller was linked to a gearing system which counted the miles flown since the missile’s launch. At that moment, two igniters were fired which locked the rudder and elevators of the V1 into position and additionally drove two sets of spoilers down from the tail. The deployment of the spoilers disrupted the smooth airflow over the elevators and



immediately pitched the missile forward into a steep dive. This sudden change of direction caused a negative G force, which starved the pulse jet of fuel, and the throbbing of the engine suddenly stopped. In the moments of silence that followed, the bomb dived to the ground, impacting with a loud explosion at Swanscombe, near Gravesend.

Arthur Geering was the head of the Royal Observer Corps at Dymchurch, Kent, and was at his home, which faced out across the Romney Marshes towards the Kent coast, when his team at Mike 2 experienced the arrival of that first V1. “It was just after four o’clock on the morning of 13 June when my wife suddenly woke me up” he recalled. “She said she could hear an aircraft outside making an odd noise. I got out of bed straightaway and went to the window. I could see this aircraft in the half-light and immediately thought, Cor — he’s got an engine on fire, thinking that what I could see was an ordinary plane. I decided to ring my post, Mike Two, at Dymchurch”.

“Another post at Folkestone, D2, apparently also thought there was a crippled plane coming in, and the ROC Centre at Maidstone asked my post if they could see it. Our two chaps on duty, Archie Wright and Ernie Woodland, had a wonderful pair of American naval binoculars, and as soon as Archie got them trained on the aircraft, he immediately put out the code word ‘Diver’ !

‘At the Centre, one of the girls said to her Supervisor, Mike Two says they’ve got a Diver and he said, “For Christ’s sake, push it through, then”. She did, but Headquarters didn’t believe it to start with. They said that if a flying bomb had been launched from France, they would have known about it.

“Well, they soon knew about a few minutes later, when the first one fell near Gravesend. I saw a copy of the report to the Ministry of Home Security which said that it fell on a field growing young greens and lettuces just north of the A2 Rochester-Dartford road. They said it made a crater about twenty feet wide which looked like a saucer, and destroyed all the crops for about eighty yards all around. There was also a house nearby that was damaged by the blast, but no one inside was injured.

A Shattering Explosion

Cyril Oakley was living in Gravesend that first night of the V1 campaign : “When the sirens in North Kent made their familiar wailing noise in the early hours of June 13, 1944, I was already starved of sleep but somehow made the effort to put on my dressing gown and slippers and rush downstairs and into the garden. Overhead, a plane was in trouble, flames were shooting from the rear. It was obviously an enemy bomber which had fallen victim to our defences. I watched it plunge to earth and there was a shattering explosion as it hit the ground somewhere near Swanscombe”.

Mr R A Barham was asleep with his family in Ashford recalled "At around 4.30 am on June 13, 1944 our family was awakened by a strange menacing sound, once heard never forgotten, but difficult to describe — a sort of stuttering, rattling, deep-throated growl. A plume of fire stretched low across the sky and I told my somewhat disbelieving parents that it was probably a pilotless plane". Before there had been time to take stock of the situation at Gravesend, another Diver track had appeared, turned westward, and exploded just north of Cuckfield in Sussex. Two more quickly followed, with one dropping in Bethnal Green and the other close to Sevenoaks in Kent. In fact, a total of ten V1s were launched that night, but five crashed shortly after launching, and a sixth went missing, presumably falling into the Channel.

Alfred Mason was at home when he experienced the effects of the Bethnal Green flying bomb : "I was in bed and I heard the sirens going in the early hours. But I was one of those cheeky ones and I couldn't be bothered to get out of bed. It was a funny sound and at first I thought it was an airplane. Then it went quiet and the next thing I knew my bedroom walls blew in. I was buried under the rubble for hours before they finally got to me".

Hitler's Terror Campaign had started !

Other Notes

V1

The V1 was first used on 12/13 June 1944 to attack SE England, mainly London. The last V1 was dropped on 27 March 1945. In the campaign some 9251 V1s were fired. At the peak the launch rate was 100 per day. Many of the launch points were in northern France and the weapons were all pointed towards London. The small pilotless aircraft had a 850kg amatol warhead. The V1s were tracked by radar and the ROC. They flew at about 400mph at heights of 1000ft to 4000ft. The procedure used was called 'Diver'. The V1s were attacked by fighters, shot down by ack ack guns, and even balloons were used. 2515 weapons reached London. 6184 civilians were killed and 17,981 were injured. In the latter stages of the campaign some air launched V1s were used and targets further afield were attacked. The V1 could be heard approaching and only crashed to the ground when the engine cut out. The population heard the engine then the silence then the explosion. Warnings could be given of the approach of V1 but the precise target could not be predicted. There was a defence against the V1 and only a small proportion got through in the end. The V1 threat ended when the launch sites were overrun by the Allies in northern Europe.

V2

The V2 was an intercontinental rocket which travelled very fast and high. The campaign started on 8 September 1944 and ended on 27 March 1945. 1115 V2s were fired from launch sites in northern France at the UK mainly aimed on London. The V2 took only 5 minutes to fly from launch site to detonation point which was some 200 miles. The weapon was supersonic and generally could not be heard approaching. The warhead was 1000kg of amatol. 2754 civilians were killed and 6523 were injured. At the peak of the campaign some 20,000 houses were being damaged in the SE of England. There was no defence against the V2 and the ROC had no role in tracking the weapons. Only occasionally could the members of the ROC see the contrails being left by the V2s as they ascended into the higher parts of the sky. These were often reported. The V1 threat ended when the launch sites were overrun by the Allies in northern Europe.

(From 'Hitler's V Weapons – The Terror Campaign' published by Key Publishing Ltd 2019)

The book 'Attack Warning Red' by Derek Wood states :-

One form of enemy raid which the ROC could do little about was the V2 rocket. This weapon could not be destroyed by friendly fighters, could not be tracked satisfactorily by radar, and could only partially be plotted by the human eye of the ROC. It was not until August 1944 that the authorities, from Swedish and Polish-supplied hardware and information, could accurately assess the nature of the V2 menace.

It emerged as a 46 ft-long, 12.7-ton rocket with a warhead of 1,650lb. Propelled by liquid oxygen and alcohol, it could achieve a peak height of 50-60 miles and a range of more than 200 miles. After much deliberation the Vice-Chiefs of Staff unwisely considered the V2 menace had passed as the Allies pressed on across France and Belgium. The arrival of the first V2 at Chiswick on the evening of 8 September 1944, therefore came as something of a surprise. Between 8 September and 27 March 1945, no fewer than 1,054 V2s impacted on Britain, with a spread over London and 11 counties. Considerable damage was caused and there were 9,277 dead and injured as a result.

ROC posts were required to give a bearing and angle on rocket trails which could be seen rising from the Continent and also to inform centre of the approximate position of impact. In really good visibility posts reported rocket trails from incredible distances. Sightings from the Midlands were frequent, but the longest-range one was almost certainly on the night of 29 December 1944, when half a dozen posts south-east of Manchester reported a V2 which hit London, 200 miles away. Many posts and centres in the south were severely shaken by V2s and the first one to land on Chiswick was described by 17/D2, Acton, as "The biggest shaking we ever had".

Britain and Belgium are the only countries in history to be attacked by large numbers of aerial bombs or rockets which are virtually indiscriminate in where they landed. When they were coming and what target they were going to hit was not known. The V1 could be heard coming the V2 could not. Fortunately the threat only lasted 9 months. Although later use of cruise missiles in Iraq and other countries was relatively large scale, these missiles were very site specific and not random like the V1 and 2.