



Hitler's Rocket Soldiers: Firing the V-2s Against England

Murray Barber

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In the final, desperate months of World War Two, at a time when the German war machine was considered by the Allies to be an almost spent force, Adolf Hitler unleashed a new weapon against England and western Europe that fell from the silence of the Earth's upper atmosphere and the edge of space. It was a weapon that struck fear into the hearts and minds of wartime civilians; it came without warning and defense was impossible. This was an unseen threat that fell at supersonic speeds, leveling suburban streets to dust in seconds, terrorizing the residents of London and Antwerp – this was the V2 Rocket. The V2 – 'Vergeltungswaffen Zwei' (Vengeance Weapon 2), designed by the rocket scientist and engineer, Wernher von Braun, and his colleagues at the secret Nazi research center at Peenemünde, was the most sophisticated weapon developed in Europe during the war. Following the end of hostilities, von Braun and many in his team transferred their allegiance to the United States and subsequently went on to design the mighty Saturn V that took the Americans to the moon. The experiences of von Braun's rocket team are well documented, but somewhat surprisingly, some aspects of the V2 story remain largely uncovered. This is especially true from the German perspective and more specifically, the view of the men who formed the firing teams for this formidable weapon that embraced supersonic technology. From September 1944 to early 1945, V2 launch teams fired more than 3,000 rockets, each with a high-explosive one-ton warhead, at targets in England, France, Belgium, Holland and even within Germany itself. Many rockets were fired from mobile launch sites in The Hague and from concealed wooded areas hidden from Allied aircraft, using fleets of modern, purpose-built transporters and trailers with sophisticated ancillary and support vehicles. For the first time, this book tells the story of the V2 through the eyes and experiences of the men who not only fired the missiles at targets such as London, Norwich, Antwerp and Paris, but also of some of the military scientists and technicians involved in its development. The authors have spent many years tracking down and interviewing the few surviving veterans of these little-known and secretive units and have unearthed new and rare information from firsthand accounts. These are the unique recollections of the 'Rocket Soldiers' who have spoken candidly to the authors about their wartime duties. The accounts show that, mostly, they were not stereotypical and ideologically indoctrinated 'Aryan warriors', but very ordinary soldiers and technicians living through extraordinary times, handling the most sophisticated weapon ever developed in pre-nuclear Europe. The book also describes the development of German rocketry following the end of the First World War and the technology embodied within the V2. The veterans tell of their first encounters with the awesome new rocket and how, having survived the devastating RAF raid on Peenemünde, training was dispersed to test sites in Poland. They recall the move to forward firing positions, gun battles with the Resistance and the start of the rocket offensive. In truth, the more battle-experienced veterans knew that the V2 was a waste of valuable human and matériel resources – a last-ditch hope to save a desperate regime. Conversely, the book illustrates how inexperienced troops drafted directly to the V2 units from basic training, vainly hoped and believed that the fortunes of war would turn in Germany's favor. The veterans tell of their desperate experiences when the inevitable defeat came, as they were rushed to the east to defend Berlin where so many Rocket Soldiers lost their lives. Yet while some V2 troops ended the war with tears of regret for a robbed youth, others shed tears of frustration, knowing that they would never live through such extraordinary times again. Hitler's Rocket Soldiers forms an important new contribution to our understanding of the German w...

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