

# THE FÜHRER'S

Battered by the Luftwaffe in 1942, the city of Norwich was an unlikely target of opportunity two years later for Germany's V2 onslaught on Britain. **Steve Snelling** charts a wayward diversion in the world's first ballistic missile offensive.



**ABOVE**  
LAC Philip Dunthorne and an US airman hold a skylark injured by the V2 that came down at Welborne, 26 October 1944.  
(BOB COLLIS)

**T**here was no warning. No hint of the blow about to fall. Ken Wilson heard neither the initial explosion nor the 'rumbling in the sky' that followed as shockwaves struck the small village school, turning classrooms into blizzards of broken glass. In that fearful moment the calm of an autumn afternoon in rural Norfolk dissolved into pandemonium

as children ran screaming out of Rockland St Mary School.

Ken was one of 21 pupils hurt in the explosion. Struck in the head by a piece of flying debris as he was walking between classrooms, he was too stunned to feel any pain. "I hadn't got a clue what had happened," he later recalled. "All I remember is the glass cutting at you like shale and being led

out by a teacher." Minutes later, he and three other casualties were being helped into a car before being driven away to hospital. It was around 2pm on 4 October 1944 and they left behind a village in a state of shock.

Evidence of the blast, officially timed at 1.41pm, was widespread. As well as the school, the rectory, a house and a pub were all extensively damaged



LEFT

Norwich found itself in the firing line again in the autumn of 1944 when it became the only city outside of London to be deliberately targeted by a V2 offensive. (ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED)

# FOLLY



while several homes further away reported fallen tiles and shattered windows. At the Star Inn, shaken staff found something reported as an 'unexploded object' resembling a 'steel bottle' lying on a bedroom floor. Elsewhere, a fragment of debris had punched a hole the size of a fist through a warehouse window. The final casualty toll ran to 23 names.

Of those, only one, a man who had been leading horses across a field, was listed as seriously injured.

What the people of Rockland St Mary did not realise, but staff at Norfolk's Civil Defence Headquarters knew only too well, was they had become the latest unwitting victims of a new and, at that point, undisclosed >>

**RIGHT**

*The V2 was designed to propel a ton of explosive some 225 miles.*

*Once launched there was no defence.*

terror campaign being waged against the UK.

As early as 2.09pm, barely 15 minutes after the first report reached them, the terrible truth was realised and faithfully logged with the terse note: "Bigben [sic] confirmed." In fact, 'Big Ben' was the cover name for the Third Reich's latest and most technologically advanced weapon, the V2 rocket, and the column of smoke rising from a stinking black crater was evidence that another small Norfolk community had joined a growing and improbable list of places to feel the effects of the world's first-ever ballistic missile offensive in history.

**NORFOLK'S MISFORTUNE**

As baffling as it was to the citizens of Rockland St Mary, the rocket that came down on a farmer's meadow roughly 330ft (100m) behind the school was not entirely the haphazard episode it may have first appeared.

It was, in fact, the 15<sup>th</sup> V2 to fall on Norfolk in the space of nine days and the second of four directed at the county in a single day as part of a deliberate bombardment designed to rain terror on the streets of Norwich. The decision to target the cathedral city was an unfortunate by-product of the Allied armies' rapid advance into southern Holland in September 1944.

Operation Market Garden, the attempt to seize a bridgehead over the Rhine, had badly disrupted the



German V2 assault on London, which had been opened from the suburbs of The Hague only nine days before the first airborne drops took place. Fearing that the launch sites, together with their valuable rocket teams from Abteilung 485, were in danger of being cut off, SS Lt Gen Hans Kammler, the special commissioner for the V2 programme and driving force behind the new campaign of vengeance, ordered a swift withdrawal. First, to Overveen near Haarlem and then to Burgsteinfurt, northwest of Münster, some 40 miles inside Germany and, more crucially, outside the range of the British capital. London's temporary

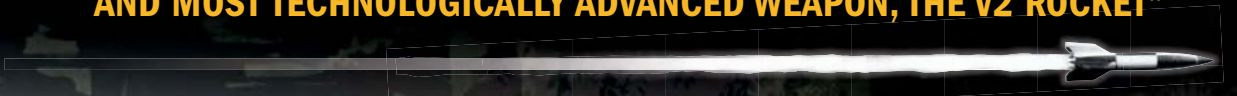
good fortune, however, was to prove Norfolk's misfortune.

The precipitate retreat of Abteilung 485's nine launching units left only one V2 force in Holland: Lehr und Versuchsatterie 444, originally formed as a training and experimental unit, had been ordered north to Walcheren on the Dutch coast two days after successfully firing a rocket at Paris from a site in Belgium and just hours before its sister battery's inaugural shot at London. From the small town of Serooskerke, the launch units of Batterie 444 directed six V2s against London over the course of three days between 16 and

**BELOW**

*Rockland St Mary School today. It was the scene of the worst episode of the V2 campaign against Norwich. More than 20 pupils and a teacher were injured when a V2 burst nearby on 4 October 1944.*

**"IN FACT, 'BIG BEN' WAS THE COVER NAME FOR THE THIRD REICH'S LATEST AND MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED WEAPON, THE V2 ROCKET"**



18 September before being ordered to move further north to Gaasterland in southwest Friesland, out of reach of Allied troops.

Moving under cover of darkness, the rocket teams made their way through Bergen op Zoom, Dordrecht and Zwolle to reach Heereveen where they transferred a shipment of rail-delivered V2s onto road transport trailers to continue their journey to Balk. There, on 23 September, residents were surprised to see the rocket convoy briefly parked outside the City Hall before heading south to the town of Kippenburg and a small forested area called Rijs, close to the Zuider Zee, which had been earmarked as a launch site for the resumption of the bombardment of the UK.

The surrounding area was soon swarming with German troops clearing trees, widening roads and creating a vast fake canopy from camouflage nets strung throughout the wood to conceal its transformation from rural sanctuary into an operational rocket base. By 25 September all was ready. The only question was where to aim the V2s. London was no longer a viable target, but a ruthlessly ambitious Kammler was determined to reignite a campaign that had so delighted his Führer. With a range of between 200 and 240 miles, the only British city within reach of Batterie 444's deadly rockets was Norwich, some 20 miles inland from the east coast.

**RIGHT**

*Janet Rush (nee Brown) with her brothers, Barry and Michael, and sister, Anne, were playing in a field when a V2 exploded close by in Bramerton.*

**RIGHT**

*German soldiers prepare a V2 for launch.*

Two years on from the grievous wounds inflicted by the so-called Baedeker Blitz, and with the war seemingly rushing towards a victorious conclusion, it appeared as if the city's ordeal was almost over. Little did its citizens know that an accident of geography had contrived to place Norwich in the firing line of an assault like no other.

**BELOW**

*The rubble of homes smashed by the V2 strike on Camberwell Road, London.*  
(NARA)

**WHISTLING SCREECH**

The second V2 offensive against Britain started at 7.05pm (UK time) on 25 September. The trees and bushes around the launch site having been sprayed with water to reduce

the risk of a fire, Batterie 444 directed its first rocket towards East Anglia. Leaving its tell-tale twisting contrail hanging above the wooded lanes of Murnserleane, the 46ft-long V2 with its warhead packed with a ton of high explosive streaked skyward accompanied by what one awestruck Dutch observer described as "a most frightful yelling, whistling screech, with a deep rumbling undertone". Its westward trajectory ended five minutes later in a deafening landfall more than 20 miles south of Norwich - and in the wrong county!

The rocket came down in open country on Castle Farm, Hoxne, in Suffolk, gouging a crater 30ft by 12ft (9.1m by 3.7m) and leaving a dozen nearby houses damaged by the >>





**ABOVE**

*Ruined flats in Limehouse, East London following the explosion of the last German V2 rocket to fall on London, 27 March 1945.*



**RIGHT**

*An Allied soldier examines a fox hole used by a V2 launch team operating out of a forest not dissimilar to that occupied by Batterie 444 at Rijs.*

**RIGHT**

*The craters and scorched trees caused by V2 misfires at a forest launch site in Holland are a vivid reminder of the hazards faced by the V2 units targeting the UK.*

blast, which was felt and heard 10 miles away. The plan to fire a second rocket the same evening was thwarted by a mechanical malfunction that resulted in the engine exhaust burning through the ignition cable on the launch platform. The misfire meant a delay of 24 hours before another V2 soared on its way.

Incredibly, its initial path was plotted by aircraft flying from Norfolk. One crew from the RAF's Oulton reported seeing "a single trail... rising on a 30° angle towards this country", while pilots of the USAAF's Thorpe Abbots-based 100<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group caught a fleeting glimpse of a "long,

solid trail of white smoke" starting at 18,000ft and quickly rising to 45,000ft. Minutes later, at 4.25pm, the rocket plunged into a field of stubble near the Broadland village of Ranworth, a little under 10 miles east of Norwich, where for the first time people heard the distinctive sound of the explosion followed by the sonic boom.

Yet again, the attack was ineffective. Though the force of the explosion sent a column of black smoke spiralling 2,000ft into the air, the only casualties were a farm worker suffering from shock, while a pub, church and vicarage sustained broken windows. But, if the damage was slight, the confusion was great.



**RIGHT**

A police sergeant stood inside the Crostwick V2 crater. The local constabulary was asked to investigate the disappearance of fragments thought to have been taken as souvenirs by US airmen. (COURTESY BOB GERRINGER)

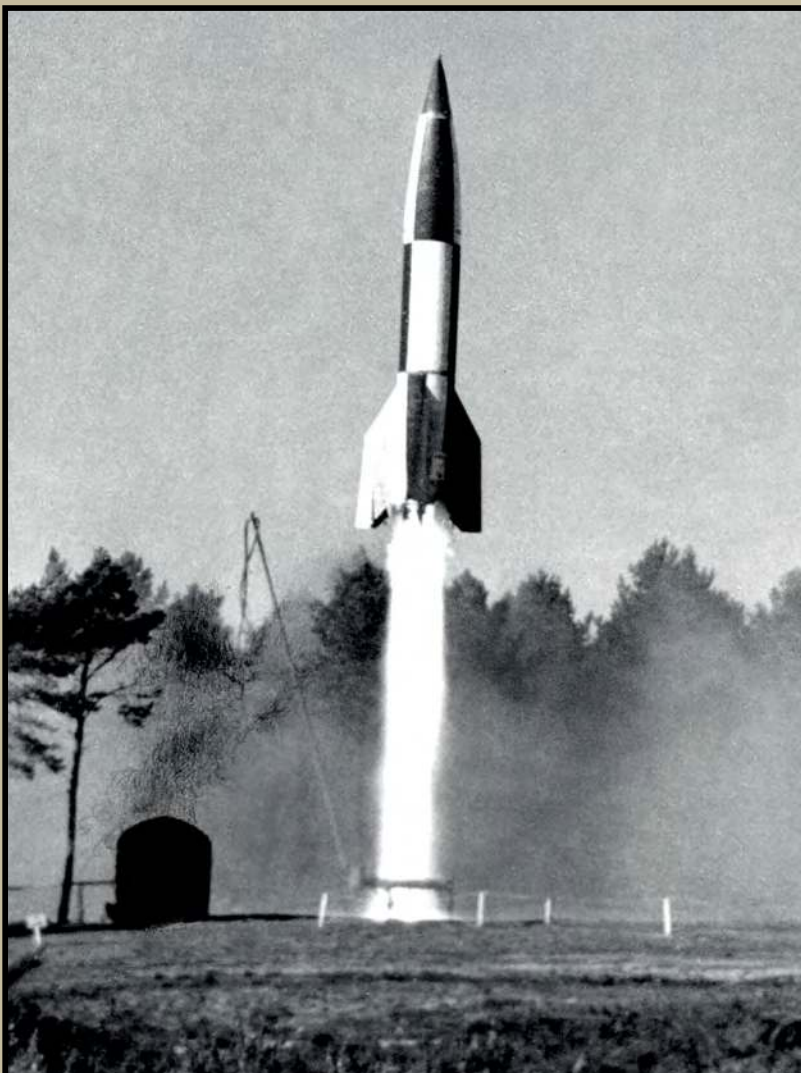
As an unintended consequence of the government's news blackout surrounding the rocket attacks on London, Norfolk's Civil Defence commanders were completely in the dark as far as the V2 bombardment was concerned. The Ranworth rocket was logged first as a 'crashed aircraft' and then a high-explosive bomb 'believed dropped by Allied aircraft' before a fire team added to the mystery by reporting the discovery of fragments, including what appeared to be a magneto rotor, bearing German markings. Civil Defence officials were still none the wiser the following day when another 'double explosion and column of smoke' was reported in woodland on Botany Farm, Horsford, a small village north of Norwich at around 10.55am. Miraculously, there were no reports of casualties or damage even though a party of men had been working only 300yds (274m) from the point of



**"WE WERE LUCKY," HE REMARKED. "THE ROCKET CAME DOWN IN A HOLLOW. IF IT HAD LANDED ON HIGHER GROUND, IT WOULD HAVE CAUSED EVEN MORE DAMAGE!"**

**RIGHT**

A V2 rocket at the moment of launch during post-war Allied tests, 10 October 1945.



impact. To the evident puzzlement of Civil Defence officials, they had neither seen nor heard 'anything until the explosion came'.

Such was the utter bewilderment that when Regional HQ responded to an initial non-committal report with an enquiry as to whether there was any more information regarding 'suspected Bigben [sic]', the reply was understandably tinged with more than a hint of sarcasm: 'No, [since] we are completely without guidance to enable us to determine what is or is not [a] Bigben.' Fortunately for the people of Norfolk the farcical response to the rocket offensive was matched only by the erratic nature of the bombardment, which ensured few in the primary target area had any inkling that they were actually under attack.

**'WE WERE LUCKY'**

The Horsford V2 was the first of three to hit Norfolk on 27 September. One of them landed in a sewage plant just a couple of miles outside the city – the blast, reportedly sounding like a crack of thunder, being heard in the County Council offices. Once more the total damage was small: just two pea stacks destroyed, a few buildings suffering minor damage, telephone cables brought down and a couple of people slightly injured.

However, three V2s falling within the space of seven hours, and all roughly within a >>



**ABOVE** At great risk, 17-year-old Dutch schoolgirl, Jos de Ligny, secretly photographed Batterie 444's deployment in northern Holland as they passed through Serooskerke. The pictures were passed to the British Air Ministry. (LIBERATION MUSEUM ZEELAND)

10-mile radius of Norwich, signalled a quickening of pace in the new offensive. Between 28 September and 5 October, Norfolk Civil Defence HQ logged no fewer than 17 rockets falling inside the county boundaries while two more plunged to earth in neighbouring Suffolk. A further five were reported as probable 'shorts', bursting in the sea just off the east coast of England.

The V2 assault reached a peak on 3 October when Batterie 444 marked the second anniversary of the first successful launch of an V2 rocket from its Peenemünde base by firing six towards Norwich. Of these, one came down at Bedingham, perilously close to the base hospital for Station 104, the Hardwick home of the USAAF's 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group, injuring four members of a single family – and another came nearer still to wreaking havoc on its intended target.

The V2 that exploded in Hellesdon, on the northern side of the Royal Norwich Golf Club, at 7.49pm

released shockwaves powerful enough to damage 400 homes in and around the city's boundaries. Bert Thrower, whose house in Hercules Road was closest to the point of impact, later recalled "being blown across the room" as all the windows shattered and the ceilings collapsed in a cloud of dust and soot. Remarkably, neither he nor anyone else was physically injured. "We were lucky," he remarked. "The rocket came down in a hollow. If it had landed on higher ground, it would have caused even more damage."

His good fortune was shared by many others as a scattering of farms and small villages continued to bear the brunt of a supersonic bombardment that left a rash of fields and marshes pockmarked while Norwich escaped largely untouched. Tommy Dungan was cycling home from work shortly before 5pm on 4 October when he spotted a lone Consolidated Liberator bomber descending towards the nearby Rackheath base of the US 8<sup>th</sup>

Air Force's 467<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. It was shooting red flares into the sky, indicating it was either damaged or had wounded on board. After pausing to watch it land amid a cacophony of sirens, he pedalled off and almost immediately felt a rush of air that reminded him of the swoosh from a flock of starlings flying overhead. For a fraction of a second, he saw a "purple greyish shape, like a huge dart... followed by a terrible explosion". Then another. "The next thing I knew I was in the drainage ditch beside the road with [my] bicycle on top of me."

In that same moment, ten-year-old Len Wilkinson barely had time to register "a terrific flash" before he was blown backwards, along with his mother and sister, through the doorway of their house, together with their furniture, fallen ceilings and broken glass from their windows. It felt as though the air had been sucked out of them and he later remarked: "I well remember it being several seconds



**RIGHT** A V2 loaded on a railway truck at Leese, Germany, captured before transport to a launch site.

**RIGHT** Wreckage from a V-weapon awaiting investigation at Rackheath air base. The V2 onslaught yielded a rich harvest of debris. (COURTESY ANDY WILKINSON)



before we could breathe again." Kathleen Woods, a civilian worker at the Rackheath base's Aero Club, was not so lucky. She suffered severe leg injuries which never fully recovered after she was thrown from her bike by the blast. She was the only person seriously hurt among eight casualties of the V2 that fell at Crostwick.

### SHOWERS WITH GLASS

Wayward though the barrage was, some areas seemed to endure more than their fair share of rocket strikes. The Crostwick V2, for example, was one of four that came down in a radius of a few miles of open country between Norwich and the RAF fighter station at Coltishall, while four more

**LEFT**

*A fragment of the Shotesham V2 unearthed near the crater site. (COURTESY BOB COLLIS)*

fell in the marshes around the small market town of Acle.

Nowhere, however, suffered worse than the cluster of villages lying in a seven-mile corridor to the south and southeast of the city. In the course of a sustained assault spanning 15 days, the inhabitants of Bramerton, Kirby Bedon, Rockland St Mary, Shotesham All Saints, Surlingham and Whitlingham recorded an astonishing seven explosions.

In one of the most terrifying incidents, pupils at Shotesham School found themselves caught in the blast of a V2 that exploded in marshy ground at Joy's Loke at 09.25am on 6 October. One child, Joy Leighton, recalled how their teacher was in the middle of reading *The Wind in the Willows*, when "all of a sudden there was an almighty crash and we all dived under our desks". Another pupil, John Anderson, called it the "most frightening bang" which left many showered with glass and others cowering in the corners of the classroom.

Among those children lined up in the school playground to be reunited with their anxious families was Robert Lane, an evacuee from London who, by an extraordinary mischance, had been sent to Norfolk to escape the rocket attacks. He returned to his temporary home to find it "badly messed up" and later that evening Robert found the 40ft wide crater "slowly filling with water" from the nearby beck.

**A SMOKEY SMELL**

"The whole area smelt the same as after a raid during the Blitz," he wrote, "a smoky smell." Incredibly, no one at the school was seriously hurt. But it had been a close call. As John Anderson remarked: "Had it fallen a little nearer or come down on firmer ground or a road it would have blown half the village away." As it was, though large pieces of rocket, some reportedly "half the size of a car", were spread across several fields, only one casualty was recorded with 42 houses

and the church as well as the school suffering minor damage.

Five days later, children playing in a meadow the other side of a small fir wood near Bramerton underwent their own rocket nightmare. One of them, Janet Rush (née Brown), then a girl of six, remembered: "I was with my two brothers, my little sister and my cousin, who had been evacuated from London, and all of a sudden we heard a noise we'd never heard before and my cousin screamed, 'Get down!' almost at the same time as we heard a terrific bang. "It was terrifying. There were bits of tree, metal and smoke flying through the air and we all laid there screaming. Next thing I remember is seeing my mother, with her apron on, running as fast as she could through the smoke towards us."

Nearer to the point of impact, brothers John and Denis Humphrey were blown 12 feet across their back yard. "It was one hell of an explosion," recalled John. "It just picked us up and threw us through the air." Dazed but otherwise unhurt, the boys were more fortunate than their landlady's daughter. "She was walking down the lane that ran past our house when she was caught in the blast," said John. "People said she came staggering back with virtually no clothes on and covered in a muddy, soot-like substance."

Though they did not know it then, the German rocket offensive against Norwich was drawing down. Over the course of the next two days, three more rockets fell on Norfolk - on marshes close to Haddiscoe, in a beet field at Rockland St Mary and, the last one, in open country near Ingworth. All were well wide of their intended mark. The assault on Norwich ended as it began: Utterly ineffectually. >>

**BELOW**

*V2 parts produced in the underground factory in Kohnstein mountain, Nordhausen, Thuringia. (PA ARCHIVE)*





# CHURCHILL ON V2 ATTACKS

## Effects so far “not significant”

**M**R. CHURCHILL, in the House of Commons today, stated that for the last few weeks the enemy has been using V2, the long-range rocket, against this country.

A number have landed at widely scattered points in this country, Mr. Churchill said, but in all casualties and damage so far have not been heavy.

No official statement about the attack had been issued hitherto, in order that information useful to the enemy should not be given.

The Government have been confirmed in this course by the fact that until two days ago the enemy made no mention of the weapon in communications, but last Wednesday they made an official announcement followed

the same quantity of high explosive as the flying bomb, but penetrated more deeply before exploding.

The rockets cause somewhat heavier damage in the immediate vicinity of the crater, but rather less extensive blast effect around.

The rockets fly through the stratosphere, going up to 60 or 70 miles, and outstrip sound. “No reliable public warning can in the present circumstances be given,” added the Premier.

There is, however, no need to exaggerate the danger. The scale and effects of the attack have not hitherto been significant.

“Some rockets have been fired at us from the island of Walcheren, which is now in our hands, and other areas from which rockets have or could at present be fired against this country will doubtless be overrun by our forces in due course.

“We cannot be certain that the enemy will not be able to increase the range of the rockets, either by reducing the

the Rijs launch site having at last been identified by aerial reconnaissance, Hawker Tempests from 274 Squadron RAF bombed and strafed the forest. But they were too late. The rocket men had completed their pull-out just an hour earlier, en route for The Hague and a resumption of the assault on London.

The 19-day campaign against Norwich had been an unmitigated failure which exposed the folly of trying to strike smaller urban targets given the rocket guidance systems then available. Of the 44 V2 rockets fired by Batterie 444 from Rijs – 43 of them at Norwich and one at Ipswich – none found their target, although, conversely, the grouping among the 28 rockets that fell on Norfolk was tighter than achieved during the assault on Greater London. All told, the bombardment inflicted damage on 800 properties and resulted in 51 casualties, but, thankfully, there were no fatalities.

In return, the rocket launch teams, hampered by logistical and technical shortcomings as well as the hazards of misfires, suffered losses of their own. The most notable being when a V2 malfunctioned shortly after lift-off and plunged back into the forest, the subsequent detonation destroying a 19<sup>th</sup> century temple built, somewhat

ironically, to celebrate the peace that followed the French Emperor Napoleon’s expulsion from Holland.

Such was the secrecy surrounding the largely ineffectual offensive many in Norfolk remained blissfully ignorant of being targeted until 10 November, when Churchill publicly acknowledged that a number of new “long range rockets” had landed at “widely scattered points in this country” – almost a month after the attacks on Norwich had ceased. The people of Norfolk, however, had not quite seen the last of the V2.

Twice more before the war’s end, stray rockets brought random damage and dislocation to their door as part of an increasingly forlorn and futile campaign. Nearly 75 years on, a scattering of water-filled craters and unnatural hollows, some of them sign-posted village landmarks, remain as tangible reminders of an unimaginable menace that manifestly and mercifully misfired. ☺

*Thanks to Tracy Dungan and Ed Straten of the [www.v2rocket.com](http://www.v2rocket.com) website, Andy Wilkinson of the [www.the467tharchive.org](http://www.the467tharchive.org) website, the Liberation Museum, Zeeland and East Anglian-based aviation historian Bob Collis for help with pictures and information.*

### ABOVE UNMITIGATED FAILURE

The Eastern Evening News gave the first official announcement of the V2 assault.

### BELOW

V2 damage to Wanstead Park Road, Cranbrook, Essex.

On 13 October, as efforts continued to gather up debris from the final V2 to hit the area, which landed at Manor Farm, Ingworth, orders reached Batterie 444 to switch its attention from East Anglia to the strategically-important port of Antwerp which had recently been liberated from Nazi occupation. Eight days later,

**“THE ASSAULT ON NORWICH ENDED AS IT BEGAN. UTTERLY INEFFECTUALLY”**

