Operation "BIG BEN"

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Most British people have heard of the V2 Rocket – Hitler's ultimate secret weapon during World War II. The very first of these, code-named "Big Ben", landed in the Croydon area of London on September 8th 1944 and was followed by over one thousand more. They caused great terror and many casualties, landing indiscriminately and without warning. But few people realise that 1,610 of these devices were aimed at Antwerp in Belgium, once the Allied Forces had liberated that country

Antwerp was the port where all the supplies and armaments were being landed and warehoused for use by the Services as they advanced into Germany. By targeting them, the enemy hoped to disrupt the advance of the Allies. In addition it was the intention of General Von Runstedt when he attacked in the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes, to continue on to Antwerp and split the advancing armies.

Meanwhile SHAEF HQ at Versailles had already made plans to install mobile RADAR units; known as Type 9, in Belgium to assist in tracking the launch sites of the V2's destined for Britain. Thus when the first rocket landed at Liege on September 14th, 1944 and Intelligence advised that the German Command was intending to target Belgian ports, they installed 8 of these mobile units inland from Antwerp. Subsequently they set up a headquarters at Malines (or Mechelen in Flemish) to handle the information received and pass it on to Fighter stations in the vicinity. This eventually became 33 Wing, 2nd Tactical Air Force.

At that time I was working as a Filterer Officer in the 11 Group Filter Room at Fighter Command HQ, Stanmore where we handled and interpreted the RADAR information and early warning systems for Britain. It was during one of my periods on duty that the first V2 landed on the London area. We had been warned of some new form of air attack and I happened to be the person who received the code word "Big Ben" from one of our RADAR stations. Immediately, I had to stand on a chair and shout out "Big Ben" three times. The reaction was incredible, all hell was let loose. After several more of these attacks, we became used to them and things slipped back into the usual routine.

I was married at the end of September 1944 and after a few days honeymoon, I returned to duty. Almost immediately I, together with eleven other WAAF officers, were called aside and told to prepare for special training for an overseas posting. We were to be sent to Belgium to work on rocket detection there. We had already signed the Official Secrets Act on joining the Filter Room and therefore I was forbidden to explain to my new husband why I was being sent overseas. Normally no married WAAF was chosen and he could not understand why I had to go. Naturally he was very shocked. It was many years later before I was able to tell him what I had been

doing.

The next few weeks passed in feverish activity, learning about our new duties, packing our kit and having special inoculations. It transpired that we had been selected for our mathematical ability and speedy reactions. We were being sent to 33 Wing, Malines, for plotting and interpreting the rocket trajectories.

We arrived on a chilly mid-November day in this old Flemish-speaking town with its mixture of Spanish and Flemish buildings, its old butter market and its principal industry of quality furniture making. Our headquarters were in the Banque Nationale in Louisastraad and our Mess in a building opposite, still bearing the name "Soldatenheim" where German soldiers had been quartered. It was an eerie feeling, being in a building so recently vacated by our enemies. Since there was insufficient accommodation for all of us to sleep there, some were billeted at houses in the town. I was sent to the home of Ignace Kennis, a well-known local artist.

He was an old man, tall and lugubrious, almost sinister. He always wore a black all-enveloping cape and a wide brimmed black hat. His features were sharp and he looked underfed, as were many others in the town. He was known to search in the rubbish bins of the military to find extra food, as did many other respectable citizens. No one had tasted real coffee for many months and they were using ground acorns as a substitute. His wife was a mousy little woman who only spoke Flemish so my French was no good for communication. My bedroom was dark, heavily curtained and I slept in a large carved double bed with a feather mattress and immense woven covers. The walls were covered in religious paintings, crosses and tapestries. I saw little of my hosts.

Returning from duty at midnight, I had to cross the butter market with its cobbles and my heavy shoes made a loud reverberating noise as I walked. There were no civilians about as there was a curfew after sundown. Initially I was very apprehensive since we were told there were still a few Germans snipers hidden in the town.

In the Officers' Mess our food was mostly tinned or dried as we were forbidden to eat fresh vegetables or fruit since human excreta was being used as fertiliser. In the early days we were even forbidden to drink tap water as it may have been poisoned by the vacating German troops. Canned beef, tinned cabbage and powdered potatoes were not exactly "haute cuisine".

However, the excitement of the work we were doing made up for a lot. The days were divided into four watches with two of us on each, working together with two WAAF sergeants. As the sightings from the RADAR units came in, we plotted the information and had to calculate and extrapolate the trajectory of the rocket's path back to its launching sight. Speed was of the essence. We had to do it in less than five minutes. The mark 4 rockets were launched from mobile launch pads, two at a time. From the moment of launch, it took only ten minutes before the launch vehicles were ready to move off to another location. This allowed us up to 5 minutes to work out the estimated launch site and have it analysed. We didn't have the luxury of calculators, let alone computers -- only pencils and paper and slide rules. The information was

passed on to the Mosquito aircraft. They were equipped with torpedo type bombs and patrolled in sections constantly over the likely launch areas in NE Holland. Given the possible location, they were able to target and destroy the launchers.

Not all the RADAR information or our calculations were completely accurate but the operation was a great success. By the end of the following March most of the launching vehicles had been destroyed and there were no replacements. Hitler's forces had many more warheads available but no more vehicles to launch them.

December 1944 was one of the heaviest months for launches. We now know the Rocket units were working in conjunction with the Rundstedt offensive. The weather was appalling over Christmas and the New Year and all our aircraft were grounded. His offensive in the Battle of the Bulge was very nearly successful. At the time we did not realise the gravity of the situation nor the threat to our unit. If Rundstedt had succeeded in overcoming the Allied Forces in the Ardennes, our unit at Malines would have been captured on his way to Antwerp.

Early in February on a rare day off, a Belgian friend took me in his timber lorry to the company's sawmills near the town of Bouillon. We travelled through the forest of the Ardennes. The heavy snows of the winter were melting and shattered bodies of the American and British troops were being uncovered in the melting snow. The losses were enormous. The broken remnants of tanks littered the forest floor. The intensity of the battle was revealed and I suddenly realised how close we had come to disaster.

The early months of the New Year saw a regular reduction in launches. By April the threat had finished and in early May we awoke to the news that peace had been declared. I recall that day vividly. I had been on duty all night -- no incidents, no excitement. As I left the Operations Room and crossed the road to the Mess, looking forward to breakfast, a small car stopped. An English voice called out to me. I then noticed on the side of the car, written in chalk, the words "Ex-POWs. Inside were two very excited RAF Pilots. They were delirious with happiness.

"You are the first English woman we have seen since 1940!"

They told me that a few nights before, all the guards at their POW camp, near Hanover, had disappeared. They had managed to get hold of one of the SS troop cars and they made their way from Germany through Holland to Belgium without being caught.

I took them into the Mess where they had the best breakfast we could provide and it was then we learned that the war was over. It was May 8th. My Commanding Officer told me to stay with them as he felt they could well be "bomb happy!" Although I had been on duty all night, the last thing on my mind was sleep.

I asked them what they would like to do and they replied they wanted to go back to Rotterdam where their Wellington had crashed and find the nurses who had helped them and they would like to take them some food. The Mess cook produced tins of corned beef; packets of biscuits and some jam and we set off in the direction of

Rotterdam on their mission of mercy.

On the way, every village we passed through was celebrating. In Holland the farm wagons were parading through the streets, piled high with branches of gorse and broom – the orange colours a tribute to their Royal House. Finally we reached the River Rhine but there our luck ran out. The river was mined and there were many snipers in the city on the other bank. We learned this from an old ferryman who was able to take his small boat over to deliver supplies from nearby farms. We told him why we were there and he said he would deliver the food for us if we had an address. The two pilots produced a notebook and gave the name of the nurses and their hospital. I often wonder whether they ever received the food!

By the time we returned to Malines, it was early evening and everyone in the Mess had made plans to go into Brussels to celebrate. I was feeling drowsy so I asked the Medical Officer for a sleeping tablets which I took and went to go to bed. Then suddenly I realised what a special day it was and how stupid it would be to miss the celebrations! So I washed, changed my uniform and piled into the German car with the two pilots. Just before we set off, the MO said "You'd better take this!" and he handed me a Benzedrine.

We spent the night in riotous celebrations in Brussels. All the population feted us and kissed us and handed us flowers. In the early hours of the morning when everyone else was feeling tired, the Benzedrine clicked in and I could have gone on until dawn – my first and last experience of an "upper"!

The following weeks saw the gradual dismantling of 33 Wing, 2nd TAF. There were Victory Parades, celebratory dinners with the Town Major (an Army officer brought in to get the town working again) and with the Town Mayor. Some personnel were sent home, others allotted new jobs. As I spoke French, I was sent for a couple of weeks to the concentration camp at Breendonck, south of Brussels. The Senior RAF Officer in the area issued an order that all personnel should visit the camp to see its horrors and hear the stories of what the Nazis had perpetrated there. My job was to show them round and interpret their questions to the Belgian officer now in charge. It was then being used as a prison for those Belgians who had collaborated with the Germans, mostly young men who had joined the S.S. My experience in that terrible place remains permanently in my memory but that is another story.

Finally, I was posted back to Britain and joined my bemused husband, ten months after marrying him. It was a further six months before I was demobilised and for him even longer. But it was a time I would never forget.