

Genius of V2 who put Americans on the Moon first; Wernher von Braun; VE-Day commemoration

Michael Evans, Defence Correspondent. **The Times** [London (UK)] 02 May 1995: 1.

Abstract (summary)

Wernher von Braun, inventor of the V2 rocket that caused such devastation in Britain in 1944, was about to transfer his loyalties from Hitler to the Americans so that he could continue with his obsession to explore the universe.

The brilliant scientist loaded his team into lorries, along with his rocket secrets, and headed for the American lines. On May 2, with his brother Magnus, von Braun surrendered to the 44th Infantry Division of the US Army. He was finally smuggled out of Germany by the Americans as part of a secret mission codenamed Operation Paperclip.

The Americans, like the British and Russians, had been scouring Germany for the rocket scientists as the war came to an end. Under the terms of the Yalta Agreement of 1945, the German region in which some V2 production factories, including Nordhausen, were sited, was to be placed under Russian control. To pre-empt the Russian take-over of such a valuable asset, the Americans set up Operation Paperclip, run by Colonel Holger Toftoy, to seize as much of the German equipment as possible. From Germany it was removed to Antwerp and then by ship to New Orleans.

Full Text

THE American soldiers who accepted the surrender of a young German scientist on May 2, 1945, could have had no inkling that their prisoner would become the key figure behind the United States mission to the Moon.

Wernher von Braun, inventor of the V2 rocket that caused such devastation in Britain in 1944, was about to transfer his loyalties from Hitler to the Americans so that he could continue with his obsession to explore the universe.

The man who became a legend in the space business offered himself as a human trophy of war to the Americans because he did not want to hand over his immense knowledge of pioneering rocket engineering technology to the Russians.

Von Braun, who died of cancer in 1977, was 33 and technical director of the liquid fuel rocket and guided missile centre at Peenemunde when German resistance collapsed and victory for the Allies approached.

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An article in Nature magazine earlier this year disclosed that he was a senior SS officer who used to order executions. He and his staff supported the use of concentration camp inmates for forced labour on the V2 production lines. On one occasion, at Nordhausen, it was reported that after completing an inspection of the factory, he declared there had been sabotage. Twelve men were said to have been hanged.

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The US Army occupied Nordhausen on April 10, 1945. The first convoy left on May 22 and the last on May 31, the day before Soviet forces arrived.

Von Braun said of his decision to go over to the Americans: "We knew we had something of tremendous potential at Peenemunde. We had put together something that was far more than a weapon of war. It was the beginning of something that could really carry people to the stars."

British scientists were also eager to talk to him and in August 1945 he was flown to London, where he spent two weeks. He and some other German rocket scientists were billeted at an Army camp near Wimbledon, southwest London, where they were picked up daily and driven by an air force intelligence officer to the Ministry of Supply.

Von Braun said: "I must admit I thought the British might be unfriendly to me. But I found I was wrong the first day I spent at the ministry."

The Russians, too, acquired German specialists and V2 equipment and, like the Americans, began their space research programme by developing work that had been started in Nazi Germany.

In autumn 1945, von Braun and about 120 of his engineers signed contracts for six months of consultancy work with the US Army and set up at Fort Bliss in Texas, where he was project director of guided missile development.

Von Braun became an American citizen. His work led to the construction of the Jupiter, America's first intercontinental ballistic missile and launch vehicle for the first US satellite, Explorer, and finally to the giant rocket Saturn 5, which on July 16, 1969, launched Apollo 11, which landed the first a man on the Moon. On January 20, 1959, President Eisenhower, bestowed on von Braun the Distinguished Federal Service Medal.

Von Braun never had any difficulty in switching loyalties from the Nazi regime to his country's enemy. His sole purpose in life was to develop his rockets to send to the moon and other planets.

He said: "I was solely interested in the exploration of space and the German Army could provide the means. The moral dilemma of a scientist who makes rockets doesn't exist. You might as well say a man who makes airplanes has a dilemma. It is basically a means of transportation but you can stick a bomb in the nose and drop it on someone's head. A rocket isn't any different."

However, he admitted he was fully aware that his V2 rockets would be used against Britain. After the war he said that when the first V2 hit London he remembered thinking: "It's a success but it has landed on the wrong planet."