



ZEPPELINS

Everyone has heard of the Blitz in the Second World War, but not so many know that the UK also suffered aerial bombardment in World War I. A big threat to civilians was bombing raids from the German Zeppelin airships. Zeppelins were huge constructions – 500 feet long and filled with hydrogen. (Later models were 645 feet long and reached speeds of 60 – 70mph. In comparison, a modern day Jumbo jet 747 is 231 feet long) They were mainly used for pleasure flights before the war but the German military soon saw wartime possibilities.

Bombing raids started over the UK in 1915. The trend was to come in over the East Coast and then down to London or up to the Midlands. The first towns to receive an attack were Great Yarmouth and Kings Lynn. The raids proved to have a devastating effect on the public's morale.

A local man, Sidney Matravers, was just 16 and doing his naval training on HMS Ganges at Shotley Barracks (a shore-based Naval Training College near Ipswich) when on April 16th 1916 Ipswich was bombed. At the time there were no trenches or air raid defences and total reliance had to be placed on the accuracy of guns in the harbour.

Sidney Matravers recalled that six bombs were dropped that night, one of which fell through the safety net under the mast and hit the concrete. He had a lucky escape when a splinter came through the wooden hut and embedded itself in the pillow of the boy next to him.

The boys were never allowed to undress at night except for their shoes. When the warning went, the shoes went on, a dark blanket grabbed and they were marched towards Ipswich and told to lie down in the field, frequently on soaking grass. After the raid they would be marched back and rewarded with half a tin of salmon for breakfast.

On the night of 13th/14th October 1915 five Zeppelins set off to make a combined raid on London, coming in from the east over the Norfolk coast. Only one (L15) arrived over London, causing much damage around the Strand. (The raid hence became known as the 'Theatreland Raid'.) Zeppelin L16 dropped its bombs on Hertford in the mistaken assumption that it was London. Zeppelins L13 and L14 swept round west and east respectively in a pincer-like movement to attack London from SW and SE.

Zeppelin L13, commanded by Heinrich Mathy, came round wide by Watford, Uxbridge and Staines until it reached Guildford. He dropped 12 bombs in the St. Catherines area, killing one swan and 17 chickens, mistaking Shalford for the Hampton Waterworks on the

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Thames. L13 then came round below Redhill, passing close by Newchapel, Felcourt, Dormans Station and the Training Colony at Lingfield where everyone rushed out to see the spectacle. (After this event managers at the Colony agreed to insure the buildings immediately against attacks.)

L14, piloted by Commander Aloys Böcker, came in a straight line from Thetford to Hythe, altering course at Winchelsea, and returning northwards towards London. He then bombed Tunbridge Wells, thinking it was Croydon. Proceeding to Croydon which he reached at 11.20pm, thinking it was Battersea and Clapham he dropped 18 bombs, causing much damage and killing 9 people.

The two airships nearly collided with each other at Tandridge, with L14 heading west of Oxted towards Croydon and L13 heading towards Woolwich. This was seen by observers at a military camp at Tandridge Court Estate and also by civilian eyewitnesses at Limpsfield and Caterham. Half an hour later they again nearly collided at Bromley

New laws required that everyone put up blinds to the windows which were to be kept drawn at night at the risk of a fine of up to £100 or six months' imprisonment. There were many breaches of the lighting regulations which the local papers published weekly. At the July 1916 Oxted Petty Sessions, Mrs Nora Johnson of Camden Road, Lingfield, was summoned for failing to shade or screen a window so that not more than a dull subdued light was visible. She was fined £1.

In January 1917 Miss Norah Burton, a lady chauffeur, of the Red Cottage, Station Road, Dormansland was summoned for not drawing the blinds of her bedroom window at night. She wrote that she drew up the blind and got into bed leaving a candle burning by her bedside which she blew out in bed. Fined £1.

Defences against air attack gradually improved, with a network of observer posts established and sightings telephoned to a central command point. Some searchlights were installed (including some on open-top trams). In towns air-raid warnings involved policemen on bicycles blowing whistles and displaying placards.

On the night of 23rd September 1916, 11 airships flew in for another attack on London, which must have proved an awesome sight for people on the ground. Three airships came in over the east coast of Kent (L31, L32, L33).

A local man, Len Griffiths, speaking in 2000, told of the night of 23rd September 1916 when Zeppelin L31 approached London from the south, passing Tunbridge Wells and Oxted (Oxted police reported a Zeppelin going north just after midnight), before dropping bombs on Purley, Kenley and Mitcham. 41 bombs were then dropped over Streatham, Brixton and Kennington before it headed for home, jettisoning the remaining bombs at Lea Bridge and killing 22 people. An observer at the RN Depot, Crystal Palace noted several flashes and three star shells afar from the airship as it began to drop its bombs.

On the same night Zeppelin L32, also coming in from the south, dropped bombs on Sevenoaks and Swanley. It was seen over Tunbridge Wells at 12.15 am, followed by

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Dartford at 1am, dropping several more bombs before it turned for home. The airship was then attacked by aircraft 10 minutes later and crashed to the ground at Snail's Hall Farm Great Burstead, south of Billericay with the loss of all 22 crew on board. The East Grinstead Observer recorded that a "flaming Zeppelin" brought down in Essex could be distinctly seen from East Grinstead and several places in the neighbourhood (a distance of some 40 miles away). It was seen as a great ball of flame.

Two weeks later, on 1st October, the East Grinstead Observer recorded the sight of another Zeppelin being brought down which "provided a fine spectacle for those in East Grinstead who remained up long enough to witness it. It was exactly 4 minutes to midnight when a great ball of red was observed in the northern sky...slowly it began to descend and as it fell the flames burst out and illumined the whole sky for many miles around..... it sunk below the horizon in a second or two later, apparently as it struck earth an intense white light was thrown upwards making the heavens seem like day. It was a most marvellous and awe inspiring sight."

In Croydon the sight was met by cheering crowds who saw it as retribution for the bombing they had suffered the previous year.

This was most certainly the L31 airship once again, part of a squadron of 11 airships, which was piloted by Commander Heinrich Mathy, one of the most famous German airship commanders, and which was shot down by aircraft over Potters Bar (again a distance of about 40 miles away). Commander Mathy and his crew of 19 were all killed, many of the crew jumping to avoid being burned to death.

The raids became such a worry that early in 1917 Crowhurst Parish Council proposed taking out insurance for the church against air raids.

There were 11 home defence squadrons in the Royal Flying Corps based around London. Pilots and anti-aircraft gunners had become more proficient in bringing the airships down and the last German airship raid on Great Britain was 5th August 1918. British defences were becoming more successful and Zeppelins were being brought down faster than they could be replaced. The airships were having to fly at much higher altitudes to avoid British planes (16,000 to 20,000 feet), to the detriment of the German crews who experienced airsickness and intense cold at this height; they also suffered severe losses due to strong winds.

In February 1917 Germany brought into force the 'Gotha' aeroplane. These were three-seater bi-planes – 38ft long with a wingspan of 72 feet. They were armed with three machine guns and two 50kg (110lbs) and six 12.5kg (27½lbs) bombs. They flew at between 12,000 and 17,000 feet.

On 13th June 1917 – 22 Gothas were detached for a daylight raid on London. 20 planes flew up the River Crouch in Essex to East Ham and the Royal Albert Docks then flew east to Stepney, Limehouse and Poplar. They dropped 126 bombs (4 tons), killing 162 civilians and went back the way they came. Although they didn't actually fly over our area there must have been an air-raid alert as that day the headmaster of Lingfield school, who was a

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special constable, was called out on point duty opposite the school at 3.20pm for 'air raid action'.

Better defences from the Royal Flying Corps with their Sopwith Camels forced the Gothas to fly above 17,000 feet and abandon daylight raids. On October 1st 1917 the headmaster was once again called out on point duty in the afternoon but this time there was a night raid when 18 planes dropped bombs on various places in Kent. A 112 lb bomb was also dropped on Hyde Park, the shock waves killing all the fish in the Serpentine.

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Sources:

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