

SILENT RAID

The Untold Story

by David Méchin

ON 19 OCTOBER 1917, 11 German Navy Zeppelins left their bases for a bombing raid on England. On their way, they encountered severe weather conditions, dropped their ordnance blind and turned for home. Only six of them returned to their bases intact. One was wrecked while landing on German territory and four others were shot down or captured by French forces. The French press trumpeted this as a 'colossal failure', the British press congratulated the French forces who avenged civilian casualties ... But was this victory the consequence of pure chance?

THE ZEPPELIN IN DECLINE

During WWI, the airship struck the public imagination. The Germans regarded them as a symbol of their air power, while the British feared their bombing raids which would kill innocent civilians, giving them the nickname of 'Baby Killers'.

Despite their impressive appearance, the Zeppelins had very little military effect and caused more damage to the morale of civilian populations than they actually did to military objectives. Moreover, they were found to be very vulnerable to anti-aircraft guns and fighter aircraft, forcing their crews to fly at high altitude and at night to protect them.

By the end of 1917, the German General Staff well appreciated the vulnerabilities of the airships and General Ludendorff even wished to dismantle them for the precious aluminium of their frames. Admiral Scheer, commander of the German Navy, argued that they still remained unrivalled for long reconnaissance flights and that the raids on British territory were still of value as they forced the British to maintain their defence effort and continue to divert significant resources, men and weaponry, from the front. The Kaiser himself ordered reduced Zeppelin production but wished to continue the raids on England, less frequently and only at night. This narrative examines one of these raids.

A RAID WHICH BEGAN BADLY

In the early morning of 19 October 1917, the Führer der Luftschiffe (Commander of Airships), Peter Strasser, sent a telephone message to his forces ordering them to attack the English Midlands and its industrial centres of Sheffield,

Manchester and Liverpool. Eleven Zeppelins were involved in the raid: L41, L44, L46, L47, L50 and L55 took off from Ahlhorn (west of Bremen) at noon, at which time L45 and L54 left Tondern (on the current Danish border) and L53 left Nordholz (north of Bremerhaven), while L49 and L52 took off from Wittmund (near Wilhelmshaven) about an hour later.

The airborne armada was on its way over the North Sea at 17.51 when a message was received from Ahlhorn, advising of particularly favourable weather conditions over the centre of England. But the crews, flying at about 4800 metres, found the reality very different. A wind, increasing in strength, blew from the north and rapidly reduced the temperature. The Zeppelin fleet was fragmented when it reached the British coast at dusk.

For three of them, the raid was relatively trouble free. L54 and L46 were most affected by the wind and crossed the British coast over Norfolk. The former arrived at 20.55, completely lost, and, after dropping bombs at an unspecified city (missing the target), fled homeward, pursued by an RNAS BE2c, which it eluded thanks to its altitude and then returned to its Tondern base at 09.40 on 20 October. L46 eventually reached England at 23.20, dropped bombs without success, and returned to Ahlhorn, flying over Holland en-route. L47, a little less affected by wind, reached the West Norfolk coast but completely missed the industrial cities of the Midlands. Dropping bombs without much success (no significant damage), it crossed the North Sea, reached Ostend by 00.41 and then followed the Dutch coast to regain its Ahlhorn base at 12.40 on 20 October.

Another, L41, commanded by Hauptmann K. Manger, followed a little more dangerous route. Reaching England over Lincolnshire, this airship flew the deepest toward the centre of England. Thinking he was above the city of Manchester, when he was actually over Birmingham, Manger dropped his bombs, damaging a motor factory. Continuing his flight, he left England over Dover and crossed the French coast near Dunkerque, where the airship was threatened by AA guns. Gaining altitude, he turned round, managed to identify his position and then headed over German occupied Belgium to return to base after a flight of 26 hours and 39 minutes.

Below: a profile of Zeppelin L49, with a SPAD to the same scale in order to convey an understanding of the vast size of such airships. Like others at the time, L49 had its sides and lower surfaces painted black in order to reduce the possibility of its being spotted from below.

