

HISTORY CORRECTED

The Loss of the German Naval Airship L 62 on May 10, 1918

By

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All published accounts of aerial operations in World War I, including the British official history, "The War in the Air", state that the German naval airship L 62 was destroyed in action with a British flying boat on May 10, 1918. German Navy records relating to this engagement were never investigated. Classified "secret" while in the hands of the Reich, it was only after their capture at the end of World War II that it became possible to obtain the German version of this episode. It now appears certain that on the morning of May 10, 1918, the L 62 was destroyed in an operational accident, while late that afternoon a British flying boat fought an unsuccessful action with the German naval airship L 56.

In the last year of the war the German Navy was straining every nerve in the U-boat war against merchant shipping, and all activities of the High seas Fleet were subservient to the goal of getting the submarines to sea, and covering their return through the German Bight. In an attempt to bar their passage, the British sowed thousands of mines in German waters, requiring intensive efforts by minesweepers of the High Seas Fleet to keep certain channels open to the north and west. The primary mission for the German Navy's Zeppelins in the spring of 1918 was to fly patrols to seaward of the minesweepers, to protect them against surprise by British surface forces.

On the morning of May 10, 1918, Fregattenkapitan Strasser, the Leader of Airships, dispatched two Zeppelins to fly daylight patrols at the northern and western edges of the German Bight. From the 2-hangar base at Wittmundhaven near the Dutch border the L 56, under Kapitanleutenant Zaeschmar, ascended at 7:30 A. M. (Central European Standard Time). The L 62 followed at 8:50 A. M. from the big headquarters base at Nordholz near Cuxhaven--a Navy ship with a Navy crew, commanded by an Army officer, Hauptmann Manger, who had been "on loan" to the sea service since the spring of 1915. Both Zeppelins were of the latest design, with 1,977,360 cubic feet of hydrogen in their streamlined hulls, 644 feet, 8 inches long and 78 feet, 5 inches in diameter. Both were designed to outclimb British planes, making their daylight patrols at altitudes above 13,000 feet, and flying even higher in night bombing raids on England. The L 62 had touched 21,700 feet in her last attack on England on the night of April 12-13, 1918. The L 62, commissioned on January 21, 1918 had five of the new over-dimensioned and super-compressed 260 h.p. Maybach MB IVa "altitude motors," giving her a speed of 60 miles per hour at 19,700 feet. The L 56, commissioned on September 28, 1917, could only make 45 miles per hour at this altitude with the older Maybach HSLu engines of 240 h.p.

Immediately on taking off from Nordholz the L 62 was seen to rise to 3300 feet, establishing a "pressure height" below which she could operate thereafter without discharging any of the inflammable hydrogen gas through the automatic valves. At 9:25 the L 62 was heard signalling to the Commander-in-Chief of the High Seas fleet, "takeoff, course for Dogger Bank North lightship". Forty minutes later, at 10:05

a.m., she flew over some German patrol craft about ten miles north-west of Heligoland at an altitude of only a thousand feet, and disappeared into a towering cumulus cloud. Almost immediately there was a heavy explosion inside the cloud, and the shattered wreck of the airship, blasted in two, fell blazing into the sea. The trawler "Bergedorf" was directly under the cloud, and the wreckage plunged into the water a bare 100 feet from her, while fragments landed on her deck. Five bodies were recovered, but no survivors were found of the crew of 20. Strasser, in his review of the information available, was unable to determine the cause of the L 62's destruction. Since she was flying well under the "pressure height" she had established after taking off at Nordholz, there was no question of an escape of hydrogen. Strasser believed that an electrical charge in the thundercloud had caused an explosion of either fuel or bombs. General opinion today among surviving naval airship personnel is that one of the bomb fuses--three-foot tubes inserted in the tail of the missiles after leaving the German Bight--had been sabotaged to explode when the bomb was armed.

The British Admiralty radio station in Whitehall had heard the airships' signals off Heligoland, and after a message at 1:08 p.m. indicated that one of them was headed west, the naval air station at Killingholme on the Humber was ordered to intercept her. At 1:20 p.m. (Central European Standard Time) the F.2a flying boat N.4291 took off, with Captain T. C. Pattison, R.A.F., as first pilot, Captain A. H. Munday, R.A.F., as second pilot, a radio man and an engineer on board. At 4:30 p.m. when they were about 50 miles north-north-west of Borkum Riff lightship, they saw a Zeppelin on the port beam, about a mile away. The "boat" was at 6,000 feet and the airship at an estimated 8,000. The Zeppelin at once dropped bombs and ballast and started to climb. Munday reported:

"I went to the forward cockpit and tested the gun and tried the mounting, and found everything worked satisfactorily. The engineer rating immediately proceeded to the rear gun cockpit and tested both port and starboard guns. At this time our machine was at a height of 6,000 feet. The hostile craft had evidently seen us first, and was endeavouring to get directly over us in order to attack us with bombs. When at a height of 8,000 feet and the Zeppelin had climbed to a height of 9,000 feet I opened the attack and fired about 125 rounds of explosive ammunition. The engineer rating also opened fire and fired about the same number of rounds. The Zeppelin was about 500 yards distant. All our fire appeared to hit the craft, and little spurts of flame, our explosive bullets, appeared all over the envelope. I noticed much that appeared to be water ballast, and many articles being thrown overboard and the nose of the hostile craft went up a few degrees from the horizontal. This was apparently soon checked by the occupants, as the craft was righted and commenced to climb as much as possible. I had a gun stoppage and spent many minutes clearing it, being obliged to take the breech of the gun to pieces.

"The Zeppelin continued to climb and gain on us slightly and again endeavouring to get directly over our machine. The enemy succeeded and dropped five or six bombs. The engineer rating reported to the first pilot (Captain Pattison) that seven hostile destroyers were circling around beneath us. We were now at a height of 11,000 feet and the Zeppelin's height was approximately 12,500 feet. I opened fire again and fired another 130 rounds of explosive and tracer bullets. I noticed the propeller of the Zeppelin's port engine almost stop and the craft suddenly steered hard to port. I concluded that the port engine had been hit by our gunfire as well as other parts of the craft, as the envelope and gondolas seemed

a background for all the flashes of the explosive and tracer bullets. There was much more outpouring of ballast and articles and considerable smoke. I concluded that we had finished the Zeppelin and informed Captain Pattison that we had bagged it. But the craft again headed for Holstein in a crabwise fashion emitting much smoke.

"I had other gun stoppages and one bad jam. One of the explosive bullets exploded in the gun and flashed into my face and onto my hand but outside of a few scratches I received no injury. Our port engine commenced to give some trouble and the engineer investigated. He reported that an oil feed pipe had broken and that it would not be long before it would break in two. As soon as I had my gun cleared of the trouble caused by the exploding of the explosive bullet I signaled to Captain Pattison that I was ready to re-attack and looked for the enemy craft. I saw it still proceeding due east in a crab-wise fashion. It was losing height and emitting smoke which was of a black variety, though parts of it were pure white. The hostile destroyers underneath opened fire on us and, owing to engine trouble, lack of petrol for our return journey and being only about 60 miles off Heligoland we gave up the attack at 5:35, having been attacking for one hour and five minutes."

So they were not able to "bag" their Zeppelin after all. Shortly after beginning the return journey the oil pipe broke. The flying boat had to land on the water, but the engineer, Sergeant H. R. Stubbington, repaired the break with tape and they took off again before the German destroyers arrived. The F.2a returned safely to Killingholme at 8:50 p.m.

The commander of the L 56--for it was she that the flying boat had attacked--submitted an Action Report which shows that the Zeppelin was not damaged, despite Munday's definite belief to the contrary. It also proves that the Britishers had greatly underestimated the airship's altitude, and were well out of range all the time they were firing at her. This was his report:

"At 4:50 p.m. L 56, according to R.S.A. bearings at 4:15 p.m. plus dead reckoning, was in 081 δ (90 miles north-west of Terschelling) at 4700 meters (15,400 feet) altitude and steering on a south course, when an enemy flying boat was sighted to the west at 2500 meters (8200 feet). Distance about 12,000 meters (7½ miles).

"The plane was put astern and ship climbed to an average altitude of 6600 meters (21,700 feet). The enemy at first approached fast and climbed rapidly, while ascending in circles. The altitude he attained was estimated at 5,000 meters (16,400 feet) judging from relative positions. The distance was estimated at 3,000 meters (10,000 feet).

"The enemy pursued the ship till 5:40 p.m. and then disappeared from sight. His speed decreased with altitude; for a considerable time - 30 minutes - he remained on the same bearing and could not gain on the ship. As far as could be made out, he was half-stalled at an angle of 10-15 degrees. Our speed estimated at 20 m/sec. (45 m.p.h.) with 4 degree up angle.

"Whether the plane was firing could not be observed, as he had the sun behind him. As the plane gained altitude, the bombs and 3 tanks of fuel had to be dropped as ballast. With the signals of 5:05 and 5:35

wireless bearings were requested, so as to advise the seaplane station at Borkum of our position. The east course steered led with the North wind towards Borkum. The enemy followed as far as 015-034 d (60 miles north of Terschelling).

"The plane was not fired at from the ship as the distance was too great. As he offered a good target for a long time and at his ceiling was not manoeuvring evasively, he could have been fired on effectively with a 2 cm. cannon. It is also probable that smoke and tracer ammunition of larger caliber, in combination with bombs timed to explode under the ship, could force a plane to turn away, as he could not accept gunfire damage to his machine at a great distance from his base.

"From the observation that the speed of the plane was not greater than that of the airship at its ceiling, it might be anticipated that a ship with 260 h.p. engines (the MB IVa) could outrun its pursuer. The engines of the L 56 ran well at flank speed even with an up angle of up to 12 degrees. While climbing the port compression girder at Ring 70 bent, angling towards the stern.

"Description of the flying boat: It was a flying boat with lateral floats and a long, narrow body projecting forward, carrying a machine gun abaft the main planes. One propeller. The English recognition marks were very distinctly recognizable. Color of fuselage and floats was dark."

The Killingholme boat's attack did cause the L 56 to break off her patrol prematurely at 6:20 p.m. for lack of fuel and ballast, and she landed at Wittmundhaven at 8:15 p.m. One of the few ships lucky enough to survive the war, she was destroyed by her own crew at Wittmundhaven on June 23, 1919, two days after the German dreadnoughts were scuttled at Scapa Flow. British Intelligence, aware of the L 62's loss on the same date as Pattison and Munday's action with the L 56, incorrectly credited them with the L 62's destruction. But since the Air Ministry refused an award to the late Captain Munday for his part in the action against the L 56, there may have been a suspicion in official circles that the Killingholme "boat" had not destroyed the L 62.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a recent member of the Society, Dr. Robinson has found an outlet for much enthusiasm for LTA's. "I never forgot the sight of the 'Shenandoah' flying over the house when I was 5 years old" he says, and he recently took time out from a busy practice to visit Germany and talk to many surviving German Navy Airship personnel. (Nearly one-half of all rigid airships in service were operated by the German Navy.) Through the help of the Director of Naval History, RADM E. M. Eller, USN(Ret.) he was enabled to research the Tambach Documents, original German Navy records and airship log books, now in custody of the U. S. Navy and the British Admiralty. He advises the ambitious researcher into these documents to have a thorough knowledge and readability of technical German as no help can be obtained "on location".

Dr. Robinson has written a comprehensive history of LTA's in WWI entitled "The Zeppelin in Combat", which is now in the hands of a publisher, and promises for the next issue of the Journal an article on Kapitänleutnant Bockholt and the L.59, an account of its long range supply mission to Africa.