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THE FRIEDRICHSHAFEN RAID, NOVEMBER 21, 1914

One of the most remarkable early long-range missions of the First World War was the attack by three pilots of the British Royal Naval Air Service on the building sheds of the Luftschiffbau Zeppelin at Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance. Flying 80 h.p. Avro 504s--soon to be considered fit only for training--Squadron Commander E. F. Briggs, Flight Commander J. T. Babington and Flight Lieutenant S. V. Sippe proceeded 125 miles from Belfort in France to the target and dropped their 20-pound bombs. Briggs, his plane hit by ground fire, was forced to land; the others returned safely.

Since 1922, when the first volume of the British air history, The War in The Air, was published, the claim has stood unchallenged that two of the bombs "fell on the sheds themselves, one greatly damaging a Zeppelin; the other destroying the gas-works, which exploded and sent up gigantic flames in the sky."¹ No reliable German account of the raid is to be found in print. A quite different story, however, appears in the German Navy's official archives. Since there is no reason to doubt the veracity of an official report written for the admiral directing German naval aviation, the document is given in full as a correction to the generally accepted British claim.

At the time of the raid, a Zeppelin, L 7, was being completed in the smaller building shed for the German Navy; in fact she had made her first flight on November 20, and was commissioned for service on November 24, flying that same day to Leipzig. On November 22, L 7's commander-designate, 27-year-old Oberleutnant zur see Werner Peterson, wrote to Konteradmiral Phillipp in Wilhelmshaven:

SECRET!

Report concerning the English air attack on the Zeppelin works on November 21, 1914, at noon:

The attack was carried out on the 21st undoubtedly due to information from spies or agents that the ship had completed inflation on the 20th.

Towards noon telephone information was received here from Lörbach-

¹Sir Walter Raleigh, The War in the Air, Vol. I, p. 400.

Oberrrheim (Baden) that three enemy aircraft had been sighted, flying in the direction of Konstanz. The same information was received from Konstanz at 12.15 p.m. The troops and guns were therefore alerted. I received the report by telephone in the Kurgarten Hotel and immediately went to the Zeppelin works. The weather was clear, sunny, wind north-east, moderate to strong.

I found myself close by the gate-house of the works as the guns and machine guns opened fire. At the same time I observed the first aircraft (biplane), heading for the Zeppelin buildings from the lake at an altitude of several hundred meters. The shell bursts from the antiaircraft guns lay very close to him. Meanwhile the plane flew over me and dropped the first bomb, which was easily visible while falling. It hit a house and exploded (about 60 meters from me) and partly destroyed the upper story (1 dead, 2 injured). Then it flew over the sheds and, descending to 150 meters, very skillfully dropped a bomb which, however, merely landed on the field, then another which was accurately aimed and hit between the two sheds (minor damage to the shed doors of the new hangar.) Meanwhile he had been hit by a shell splinter and the plane glided down in a turn, making an emergency landing in front of the sheds. The plane was almost undamaged. The pilot, an English naval officer, Lieut. Brigg (sic) of the Royal Naval Flying Corps (sic), in uniform with leather outer clothing, was pulled out of the plane by militia and our petty officers, after trying to fire a few shots from his pistol. He was rather severely wounded, in the head, but not so that his life was endangered, and was taken to the hospital. His undamaged plane, a new, light "Avro" machine, had suffered a decisive hit by a shell splinter and had been hit by about 10 bullets (one of them in the fuel tank).

While this plane was descending, the second plane appeared at about 200 meters above the gas works, dived low in the heavy fire and above the shot-down machine released 2 bombs which exploded on the field. Then he flew very fast above the sheds and dropped a bomb, which hit the workshops and caused damage and which damaged a window of the shed in which "L 7" lay: 20 meters farther and the inflated ship would have been destroyed. Then he disappeared over the lake in the direction of Manzell, where he dropped a bomb close to the airplane hangar. Today he was reported from Konstanz as having come down. The 3rd plane, which I did not see, turned back prematurely.

Following points in my opinion deserve attention:

(1) According to the assertion of Briggs, there were only English naval officers in all aircraft. They were equipped with good and accurate maps and sketches, which point to extensive espionage. They had taken off from Belfort.

(2) Manner of attack: Approach high, dive steeply, drop bombs and disappear climbing.

(3) The Plane which landed: "Avroe" (sic) biplane, 80 hp Gnome engine on the bottom of each plane a large red ring, is very clear and visible from a distance.

(4) Bombs: Hailes patent, almost like our Carbonit, with aiming vanes and propeller fuse, weighing about 7.5 - 10 kg. Good explosion, poisonous fumes, Each carried 4.

(5) Defences: The guns (3 Krupp anti-balloon guns) aimed well, bursts generally close to the target, some of the burst lagged behind because of its high speed. 68 rounds were fired by three guns (2 were aimed together). Furthermore, 2-3 machine guns and a column of militia fired.

The ship remained completely undamaged.

There is no suggestion from British sources that the inflation of L7 on November 20 was known to them, and it is stated that the 21st was simply the first good flying day after the arrival of the Avros in Belfort on November 13.

Why was the attack never repeated--particularly when the British account labels it such an unqualified success? Did the British Intelligence have secret information to the contrary? Or did the London government hesitate to embroil itself with neutral Switzerland? The Swiss submitted a protest, claiming violation of their air space by the raiders, and there seems little doubt that this happened. The question is not settled in Professor Raleigh's history, so unsatisfactory in other respects; and we are left guessing as to why Friedrichshafen was left undisturbed through four years of war while the Zeppelin menace was causing the British great concern.

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