

## A DIRECT HIT

L13 – German Naval airship

Nighttime raid over England during WWI

*Chief Machinest Mate Pitt Klein*

The sheer volume of high explosive shells, shrapnel and incendiary shells **going off around us frayed the nerves** and put us all on edge. Every sinew taut, we tended our engines as the ship zig-zagged over the town's defenses. Suddenly the ship gave a huge shudder. I was knocked off my feet and caught hold of the engine to steady myself.

What was that?!

A direct hit?

Were we on fire?

Our hearts were in our mouths; our pulses raced, our temples pounded. The airship steadied. We stared at each other. The engine telegraph rang three times:

'All engines full speed ahead!'

So, we weren't on fire after all!

But what was going on?

Back in the rear gondola we were a bit isolated and out of the loop. We were trying to get out of the firing zone.

"Climb, climb!, climb!"

The Kommandant shouted in the elevator helmsman's ear. But Obersteuermannsmaat Peters shook his head and said grimly:

"Herr Kapitanleutnant, I can't even hold her level anymore. The ship is going down – we must have been hit."

Slowly but surely the ship was gradually descending. The very next instant, for whatever reason, the engines stopped. We scanned the engines furiously, desperate to find the reason.

"What is going on? What on earth is happening?"

I noticed that the feed pipe was no longer supplying petrol. I shouted this out to my colleagues and gestured accordingly. The cause had to lie inside the hull. I worked my way up into the ship and along the keel gangway. There, six meters ahead of the aft gondola, stood the Watch Officer. With him he had the sailmaker with his pot of celloid glue, and the fuel man, who was lying on his belly holding two parts of the pipe through which petrol was leaking out. The Watch Officer pointed to the keel gangway which had been **pierced by a shell**. The sailmaker then pointed to the two emptying gas cells above him.

"A right mess!" he cursed.

Amazed by these incredible freak chances, I stood rooted to the spot. The **shell had cut the gangway in two** and had gone off inside a gasbag but had immediately been **snuffed out by the pure hydrogen**.

I lay down on the gangway to help. **All the while the guns beneath us thundered and rounds were going off**, and the ship was gradually sinking lower and lower. As fast as humanly possible we connected up a spare fuel line to the nearest fuel tank. Precious interminable minutes, full of suspense and anxiety went by until finally the rear engines sprang back into life and the propellers wound back up to speed. Astonishingly, incredibly, our luck held.

There was not much left of the two gas cells to patch up. They were done for. The gas, some **6000 cubic meters, had leaked out** and the empty bags hung in tatters. This posed a new threat. What if, given the loss of gas, the reduction in lift and this weakness in the middle section, **the hull were to break in half?!**

Other than the gas cells and the keel gangway, the shell had taken out the wireless cable and main fuel supply line. Yet more incredible luck. We could not understand how, when the electrical lead to the wireless had been torn, the **spark had not ignited the petrol vapor.**

But for now, it was high time to head for home. We chose the shortest, most direct route possible. **At any time, the hull might give way in the middle and bring us down in the sea.**

In order to prevent any further height loss, and to make us as light as possible, we jettisoned all the engine spares, most of the machine guns and most of the ammunition out over the North Sea.

We flew over Dutch territory between IJmuiden and Delfzijl. In our current situation we had no other option, no matter how lively things were getting on the ground for us.

Due to the exceptional amount of gas that we had lost, and despite all our best efforts to lighten the ship, it was so heavy that during the landing the two air bumpers on the bottom of the gondolas were smashed to pieces and dug up the ground like ploughs. The rear gondola was pushed up into the hull. **We would have been quite badly injured if we hadn't thrown ourselves flat on the floor just in time.**

For us the most important aspect was that we had got home in one piece. We were very grateful that our trusty ship had held out. We were especially **thankful that the people who had designed and built her** had made her strong enough not to break in half despite the loss of two gas cells, and yet still be able to complete the long, long flight back from England under her own power.

**FYI:** all the German Zeppelins were **filled with hydrogen** as their lift gas, so if one gas cell caught fire, the airship would be engulfed and plummet to the ground.