

**Zeppelins
Encounter
Heavy Anti-Aircraft Fire
During WWI**

The following stories are eyewitness accounts of encounters with heavy anti-aircraft fire during World War I by German Zeppelin airship crews.

For those not aware, the Germans built 80 Zeppelin airships during WWI and used them to bomb England and her allies.

Great Yarmouth, in 1915, was the first target.

This marked the first time in history that a human population was bombed by an aircraft.

These airships would eventually become known as “Height Climbers” for their ability to reach ever higher altitudes in avoiding enemy aircraft and anti-aircraft fire.

The highest altitude reached was over 24,000 feet.

Early in the war, England began to think the Zeppelins were invincible because no matter how many rounds of ammunition their fighter aircraft expended, they could not shoot down the Zeppelin raiders.

This serves as a testament to the strength and resiliency of the German Zeppelin airship design.

ENGLISH MUNITIONS

L 46

Oberleutnant z. S. Richard Frey

At 2.35 a.m. we were over the railway junction at Louth, south of Grimsby. With the agreement of the Kommandant we set up for a bomb run. Suddenly the defences beneath us came alive. Apparently none of them had expected an attack so late, and hurried back to their posts. Powerful searchlights probed the sky looking for us, and then the guns opened up with a terrible cacophony of sound that is hard to imagine. We came under an intense anti aircraft fire. The shells hissed up around the airship, detonating with a sharp crack and scattering their deadly shrapnel all around, above and beneath us. For several unpleasant moments the ship was lit by the glare of star shells. These rounds consisted of a magnesium flare fitted with a small parachute and would hang in the sky, falling only slowly.

Even less pleasant were the incendiary shells which you could follow the path of. There were two types: one was a smaller calibre greeny-white phosphor shell we called 'Bleichgesicht' [Paleface] and the other was a 15 cm round with a fiery red mass. When you saw them you were compelled follow their trajectories until they were clear of the airship, for if any one of them had hit us, that would have been it. The Palefaces were less dangerous for they reached the highest point of their trajectory at around 5000 metres, slowed and then tumbled back down towards the ground. The fiery red balls would go up to 8000 metres.

A DIRECT HIT

L 13

Obermaschinenmaat 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 defences. 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 Kapitänleutnant, I can't even hold her level any more. 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 metres ahead of the aft gondola, stood the Wachoffizier. With him he had the sailmaker with his pot of cellon glue, and the fuel man, who was lying on his belly holding two parts of the pipe through which petrol was leaking out. The

Wachoffizier 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. At 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 cbm, 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 vapour.

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.

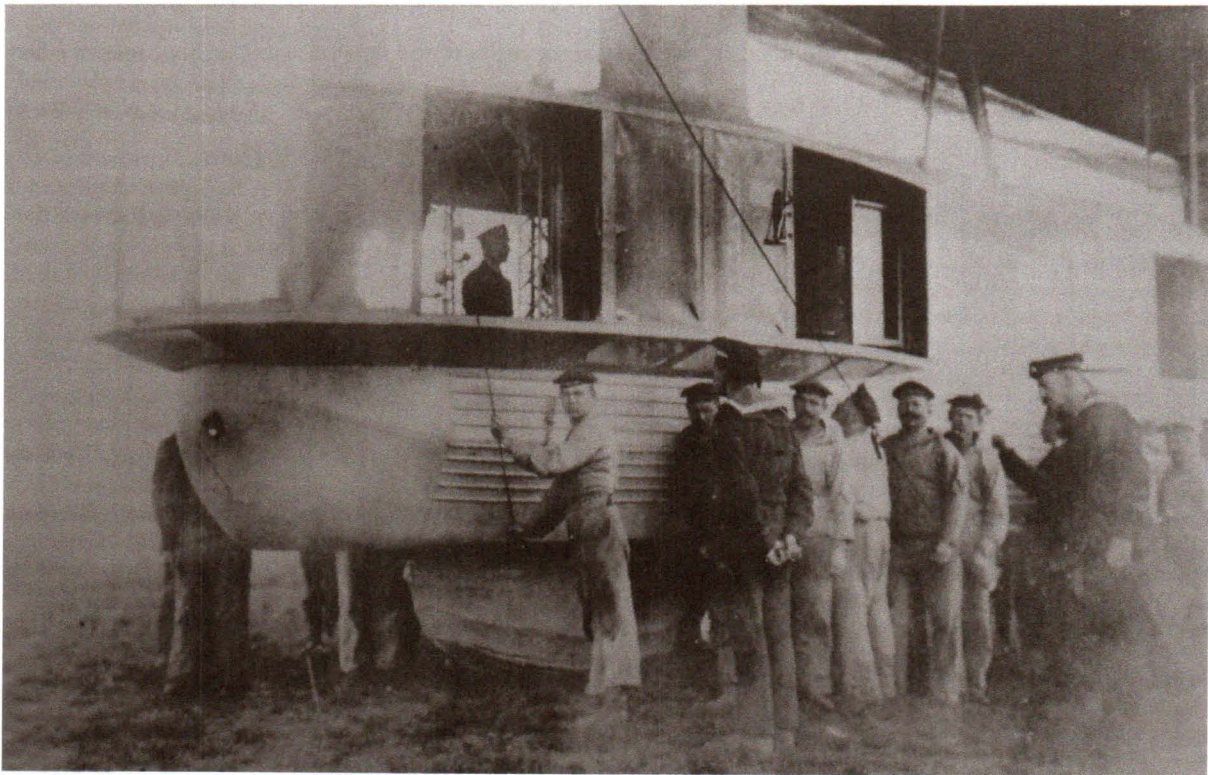
For us the most important aspect was that we had got home in one piece. We were very grateful that our trusty ship had held out. We were especially thankful that the people who had designed and built her, had made her strong enough not to break in half despite the loss of two gas cells, and yet still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

BOMBING RAID ON LONDON

L31 ✈

Obermaschinistenmaat Pitt Klein

The English defences had developed a new tactic. Before we reached the urban sprawl of London, squadrons of fighters had taken off and climbed up to our normal operating height. As soon as we appeared over London, we were hemmed in by barriers of artillery fire. The searchlights lit up the ships as bright as day; the gun batteries sent up a ring of fire. The fighters then closed until they were within range, and fired off light signals to those on the ground. The gun batteries would cease firing so as not to endanger their own aircraft, and the squadrons would rush in to attack the airship with death-defying bravery, under heavy return fire from the machine guns.



The L 31 is readied for take-off, Kapitänleutnant Mathy is framed in the window.

We had 4200 kgs of bombs on board on this occasion, including four of the mighty six hundredweight bombs. This was the largest bombload we had ever carried. In order to be able to achieve safe heights we flew with minimal manning; that meant leaving half the crew behind.

We flew over Essen, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Mecheln and Antwerp. Owing to a favourable tailwind, we arrived too early; it was not yet dark enough. We therefore cruised over Antwerp for a while, dropping down a bit to be able to take in the sights of the town more easily. Darkness fell. We climbed back up to 4000 metres and headed out over the Channel towards the Thames. As per usual we came under a steady fire, both over the sea and as we neared the Thames.

We passed over the brightly lit fake targets, built by the English in an attempt to make us waste our bombs. The eerie fingers of light corralled us in. Shrapnel was bursting beneath us; incendiary shells hissed past. The airship climbed at a steep angle.

‘Full speed ahead, all engines’ the engine telegraph rang, three times.

The bomb run was beginning! The engines gave all that they could. With luck they would hold out. The propellers beat the air, but their noise was drowned out by the crash of gunfire from below. Above Hampton all Hell was let loose; we were right above it. There were the water works; we had wrecked these once before. Down with the bombs! Tremendously violent explosions went off. The blast wave pushed the airship bodily upwards. The guns blazed away. The waterworks was hit. The buildings were engulfed in flame; the huge tongues of fire lit up the enormous devastation.

As we approached the City we could see our comrades over the urban sprawl, already under heavy fire. We heard the enormous explosions of their bombs; we saw columns of fire spew upwards and a pall of smoke rise from the effects of their incendiary bombs like some volcanic eruption. We could also see the twinkling of thousands of exploding shrapnel shells and the arc of incendiary shells as they rose up towards the ship and then fell back down onto the city. A terrific flash burst upwards into the sky, eclipsing all those so far. Great tongues of flame rose from its epicentre. A gasometer had received a direct hit.

My heart was literally pounding, watching our friends in action over this inferno. They were illuminated as bright as day by searchlights. Curtains of anti aircraft fire closed in around them, forming a great dome of fiery trails. It was like some immense firework display; the incendiary shells left their gun barrels glowing red hot but as they rose they turned a brilliant white before fading a little as they fell back down on London, triggering fire upon fire.

From time to time one of the other airships would dim a little in the haze but we could always make out their silhouette. On the ground columns of flame pierced the night, increasing in number; the explosions grew louder and more terrible; every now and then large parts of the City, the Thames and all its bridges were lit up bright as day. More and more searchlights of greater magnitude flashed upwards, filling the night with dazzling brightness. I counted at least sixty seven groups of searchlights, but had to stop long before I was finished to see to my engine.

The defences had found the range. The incendiary shells closed in on our colleagues so intensely that we reckoned they would go down in flames at any moment. A great burden was lifted from my heart as we saw the airship, its bomb run complete, slip through their clutches and make for the coast. Having attacked Hampton we were the last ship to fly over the target zone.

We were at a height of 4500 metres. A few kilometres away the L 32 was in action. Less than twenty four hours ago we had been sitting with them, enjoying a meal and a drink. The enemy fire closed in on the L 32; from our position it looked as if the airship was being overwhelmed by incendiary shells. Our hearts were in our mouths. Every other instant I winced. Surely this shell or that shell would hit the ship this time! The searchlight fingers closed greedily in on the L 32, lighting it up into a 200 metre long, 30 metre wide target.

The L 32 dropped bomb after bomb. They sowed death, ruin and destruction in their wake. Terrific explosions went off, pillars of fire soared upwards and debris flew through the air.

God no ! Over there! – signal flares from the fighter squadron. My heart pounded so hard I thought it would burst through my chest.

The L 32 had no more bombs. It was climbing to get away from the insane, seething cauldron. The searchlights held it fast. "Look!" a single voice cried out in our ship. We gripped the sides of the gondola and stared across the void, our eyes full of dread. A flame shot out of the L 32. With a rapidity that we could barely grasp, it grew larger and larger. Greedily, it tore through the whole ship, racing from stern to bow. L 32 was a sea of fire. Now it had reached the forward gondola!

The entire City, as far as the eye could see, and all the sky above were bathed in its lurid glare like daylight. The rear gondola broke off and sank into the abyss. Seconds later the lateral gondolas followed. The airship broke up in the middle. One giant blazing white hot mass cascaded down onto the city; the other half followed it down, still on fire.

Our hearts and heads were pounding; our nerves stretched taut to breaking point; we wrung our hands and covered our faces. Our comrades, dear friends, brothers in arms!

‘All engines full speed ahead’ the engine telegraphs rang even before that monstrous glare, the torch of death that had been the L 32, had fizzled out. We did not need to look too hard to find our targets; they were clear to see by the light of all the fires and searchlights. **On into the inferno’s abyss!** Even if ten thousand shells came up to meet us all at once, we would still press on, no matter what. The four six hundredweight bombs rained down. Incendiary bombs followed; spare tanks of petrol too and high explosive bombs. Them or us!

Our **high explosive bombs struck the munitions factory in Woolwich.** Violent explosions tore the air. **It felt like the end of the world.** Pieces of building, chunks of machinery and thousands of unrecognisable fragments whirled through the air. Between them, our colleagues had dropped two hundred and twenty five hundredweight of bombs; we added another eighty four. That was war, England; that was the meaning of war! **That was our answer to the Hunger Blockade!** A hurricane or typhoon was child’s play in comparison to the destruction and devastation wrought that night.

Hundreds and hundreds of metres into the air we soared at full speed, freed from the weight of our bombs. We had spat death and destruction; no time for thoughts of our own danger or close shaves with eternity. Only one thought possessed us: that’s for the L 32! We broke out of the defensive barriers. The arcing hiss of incendiary shells, vicious bursts of shrapnel were behind us and beneath us. **We were dripping oil, petrol and sweat; our hands were shaking,** our eyes lit up wildly. We looked around us. **We were alive!** We could breathe! We had escaped the inferno! Out of that vicious, tempestuously violent fight.

Across the way we could see the L 33 and our colleagues still caught up in the seething turmoil of the terrible defensive fire. L 33 was trying to break out of the lines of defence. We stared anxiously in their direction. Our gaze was rooted to the spot; we stood like statues.

Oh God! **L 33 had been hit!** ‘May God have mercy on their souls!’ we prayed in earnest desperation.

The L 33 began to sink, descending out of control. Down, down, ---- surely it must burst into flames. What was that licking at her sides? Would they share the same fate as the L 32? Lower and lower the L 33 sank. The gun batteries fell silent. The English realised that they had crippled

the L 33 and wanted to capture it intact provided it didn't burn. It seemed an age before it was down. Surely it must be on the ground by now! Thank the Lord our friends were alive! A great plume of flame rose, flared up and died back into a glowing white hot mass. The crew were safe and had set fire to the L 33.

Totally exhausted, full of the horrors of the night and deep remorse at the loss of our friends, we landed back at Ahlhorn after a flight of nineteen hours in which we had covered over 1700 kilometres. There was no time to rest; already we were getting the airship prepared for its next flight.

That ill-fated night weighed heavily down us all. We were all haunted by the terrible spectre of fire; the dreadful sight of our colleagues and their ship going down in flames was etched deep into our minds. The question was asked whether any of our friends had sought to jump clear by parachute. The night sky had been lit up so brightly by the countless searchlights, fires, explosions and the blazing torch of the L 32, that we ought to have been able to see everything that had taken place. But we could not recall having seen anyone trying to use one. The sheer horror and shocking nature of the event meant that none of us could say for sure any more. I had the impression that I had seen some of the crew falling through the air, but without using any parachutes.

At the first sign of flame I had subconsciously started counting; the L 32 had been consumed in just 18 seconds. Afterwards I was shaken and surprised that I had been able to count like that in the heat of the moment. It was something I had had to do; I did not do it deliberately or even against my will. Perhaps it was a result of the many conversations we had had about burning. Just twenty four hours earlier we had sat down with our colleagues from the L 32 and talked through the same topic with them again: What would you do if your airship caught fire? I could still picture some of their faces, and hear their voices. One man had said:

“Death will come so quickly that there won't be time to think or even act instinctively.”

Another had observed:

“It's pretty obvious that because of the enormous fire we'd all instantly be rendered unconscious and wouldn't know anything more about it.”

We felt the ground beneath our feet: we were alive! --- but then so had our friends been yesterday.....

We were all profoundly shaken. Our way of speaking, which was already pretty coarse thanks to our nautical background, took on an aggressive edge. That was our nerves; for months now they had been so frayed and run down that we barely recognised ourselves any more. That they had been further jarred by such a massive blow was quite understandable. We could not shake off the terrible images. Even the greatest skill of the Kommandant, the most painstaking attention to detail, the strictest adherence to duty and the greatest operational capability of our airships was not much use in the face of the vast array of men and equipment the English now fielded. It was pure luck, a complete fluke, almost a miracle for an airship to come through it all.

Reference document:
"The German Naval Guide to Airship Handling"