

THE NIGHT OF THE ZEPPELINS

**BILLERICAY AND THE CRASH OF
THE ZEPPELIN L32**

AND

LITTLE WIGBOROUGH

AND THE CRASH OF THE

ZEPPELIN L33

ON 24TH SEPTEMBER 1916

By CHARLES PHILLIPS

In the early hours of Sunday 24th September 1916 the German Zeppelin L32 was shot down and landed near Billericay. Also on the same night the Zeppelin L33 was shot down and landed at Little Wigborough. Whilst the L33 was brought down intact by its commander and all the crew survived, the L32 was not so lucky and all the crew perished.

The idea of bombing Britain in the First World War did not come from Kaiser Wilhelm II, who was only initially only interested in attacking military targets. Apparently it was on Korvetten Kapitän (Corvette Captain) Peter Strasser of the German Imperial Navy who is credited with the idea of using mass airship raids into Britain. He persuaded his superiors who persuaded the Kaiser.

Bombing raids on Britain by German airships had started on 19th January 1915 when two airships, raided Great Yarmouth killing two people and injuring 16. Both the German army and the German navy participated in bombing raids.

The Germans used two types of airship: the Zeppelin (L or LZ) which had a metal frame and the Schutte-Lanz (SL) which had a wooden frame. The first air raid by German airships in which bombs were dropped in Essex took place on the night of 15th / 16th April 1916 when the Zeppelin L6 dropped 34 bombs on Maldon and Heybridge which damaged a number of properties, injured one small girl and killed a chicken. However this was not the first air raid on Essex in the war as a raid by an aeroplane had occurred on 21st February 1915 which crossed the coast at Clacton and bombed Braintree, Coggeshall and Colchester without casualties. The first air raid against London took place against London on 31st May 1915 killing seven and injuring 35. On the night of 31st March /1st April 1916 in air raids on Braintree four people were killed and Sudbury in Suffolk five people were killed. Casualties from the air raids in the early days were heavy as people used to stay out to watch them rather than take shelter

The British took counter measures against the raiders. Blackouts were imposed at night. Anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were set up. Home defence airfields, such as North Weald Bassett, Rochford, Fairlop, Hainault, Stow Maries, Goldhanger and Sutton's Field Hornchurch were established. Coupled with this were emergency landing grounds. The reason for the establishment of the emergency landing grounds was that at that stage of aeroplane development aeroplanes were not the most reliable and engine failure was a common occurrence. Running short of fuel was another hazard and having somewhere to land fairly quickly in the event of battle damage was an advantage. Although each of the emergency landing grounds were allocated to one of the Home Defence Squadrons operating from Flight Stations they could be used by any squadron for an emergency landing. The nearest emergency landing ground to Billericay (where the L32 was brought down) was at Hall Lane, Mountnessing. An emergency night landing ground was established there in April 1916, when the airship raids were causing a real panic. The landing ground, which at 21 acres was the smallest emergency landing ground in Essex had a problem in that it sloped steeply to the north with a wood on one side and undulating fields that fell away in all directions on the other three sides. Not the ideal place. However there was a panic on.

Something had to be done to stop the Zeppelin raids. The landing ground was opened, according to Paul A Dowsett's *Fields of the First* (1997), for the use of No 39 Home Defence Squadron who were at the time stationed at North Weald Bassett as part of the 49th Wing South East Area. It has not been established what facilities were provided at the site, but there were not any ground signals for landing aircraft placed on it as far as is known. Nor is a telephone number for the landing ground known, but this would have been essential for the troops manning the site to receive

orders to place landing flares. When it was realised that Mountnessing was not the ideal place another emergency night landing ground was established at Palmers Farm near Shenfield. This opened in September 1916 and Mountnessing closed in December 1916. As far as can be established there were no recorded landings at the emergency landing ground at Mountnessing.

The nearest emergency landing ground to Little Wigborough where the L33 came down was Blackheath Common. This was a more successful emergency landing ground than Mountnessing and was in use from May 1915 to July 1919. It is not known as to which Squadron the landing ground was intended for the use, but in February 1917 No 37 Home Defence Squadron who were stationed at nearby Goldhanger airfield as part of the 50th Wing South East Area were the main users. Only one landing is known to have taken place – on the night of 19th/20th October 1917 when a B.E.2e of No 37 Home Defence Squadron flown by 2nd Lieutenant Armstrong made a forced landing with engine failure.

It should not be thought that the air raids were popular with the crews of the raiding airships. The Diss Express of 29th September 1916 quoted a report from the Budapest correspondent of the Morning Post quoting from a Hungarian newspaper an interview with a Zeppelin commander who attempted to raid London on the night of 2nd/3rd September 1916. As Austria-Hungary was at war with Britain the correspondent was clearly from a neutral country. According to the Zeppelin commander who complained about the 'Jammer' of the German press and people regarding the inactivity of the Zeppelins 'those who wished for more activity on the part of the airships ought to be put in a Zeppelin which visits the British coasts and let them see how they like it'. The commander spoke of the immense difficulties the crews faced during an all night flight at a tremendous height and of the exhausted condition that they were in when they returned to base. 'At a great altitude the cold is

so severe that the men are covered with icicles by the time they reach home, and their clothes have to be cleaned of ice before they can take them off. Besides the cold the danger is also very great, for apart from the shells that come dangerously near sometimes, the rareness of the air causes it to penetrate into the gas holders, the consequences of which is that from the mixture of the hydrogen and the oxygen a certain combustible gas develops which catches fire at the least spark that might reach it. For this reason the men have to wear felt boots, as nailed boots might draw a spark by touching some metal object in the gondola.

The difficulties which confront the Zeppelin crew can hardly be understood by people who have no experience in an airship over the sea and over the shell-swept regions of the air in England. Nerves are the first thing needed in a Zeppelin, and that is why we choose our men from the very young men of the flying schools. They are volunteers, and nobody is obliged to become a Zeppelin crew if he does not choose to, but they cannot be more than twenty-two years old unless they have had previous experience in the air. It is almost impossible even then to send the same crew on two successive days on an expedition of several hundred miles, for their nerves would not stand it'.

On the night of 2nd/3rd September 1916 at the height of the Battle of the Somme in France the Germans launched their largest raid so far with 12 German Navy airships and four from the German Army taking part. Early on the morning of 3rd the Army airship SL11 commanded by Hauptmann (Captain) Wilhelm Schramm after having bombed Saint Albans, was attacked over Hertfordshire by Lt. William Leefe Robinson in a BE 2C, using incendiary ammunition. It crashed at Cuffley, with the loss of the entire crew. The loss of SL 11 ended the German Army's interest in raids on Britain. For the action William Leefe Robinson was awarded the Victoria Cross. He died on 31st December 1918 at from the effects of the Spanish flu pandemic

The German Navy remained aggressive and on the night 23rd/24th September 1916 twelve airships in two groups set out from their base in Nordholz, Germany for England. Eight of these made for the Midlands and Northern England and four (L31, 32, 33 and 34) raided London and the Home Counties.

Following the sound of police whistles sounding the air raid alert in London followed by the sound of anti-aircraft guns some people took shelter in air raid shelters, but others stayed up with late night revellers to watch the progress of the searchlights looking for the raiders.

In the raid 38 people were killed and 125 people were injured.

According to The Times of 25th September in one of the eastern suburbs of London the damage done was chiefly to shops and residential property. The damage caused was mainly by concussion or gravel hurled around by the violence of the explosion of a bomb. One death in a house took place as a result of this but several occupants were badly injured by flying glass. A retired shopkeeper and his wife who were standing at their front door were killed when a bomb fell in their front garden. Where there was a direct hit on a house there was some loss of life and several people were severely injured. The Daily Express of the same date reported that the only damage was to private houses and shops and couple of suburban railway stations. A householder told the Express "I generally take a walk to the end of the road to see if the light over there is in or out. If it is out I know that Zeppelins are expected. It was out last night, so my people and I did not go to bed and most of the folks round about here stayed up".

According to the Express it was round about 12.30 a.m. when the first bombs were dropped. A shopkeeper, a tobacconist, described his experience to the Express. "I was awaked by a loud noise and heard another bang, so I slipped into my clothes and went into the street. Opposite to me an incendiary bomb was flaring near the

front of a shop. I dashed across, picked it up and threw it into the roadway. Then I went to the corner and saw a wrecked house. People were crying out from inside. The roof was down, sloping to the garden, so I climbed up the roof and went inside. We found a woman and three children. They were all injured, and taken to hospital". The Express said that one of the inmates [of the row of houses] was an old woman of about 80 who was killed, whilst another woman was not injured but was covered from head to foot in soot and her little daughter, aged three, on seeing her burst into laughter and cried "Mummy's face all black!" From that point the Zeppelin travelled some hundreds of yards and dropped a bomb on a chemist shop in the high road of the district causing to collapse, but fortunately the entire family were said to have escaped. The Express said that the reason why a number of people escaped injury when their houses were damaged because they were dressed and went outside when they heard that Zeppelins were about. The newspaper said that many thousands were looking out for the raiders and that many stood at their front doors and others walked in the streets. A police constable told the Express "I stood on the top of the police station and I heard the Zeppelin engines, although I could not clearly see the airship itself. What I heard was a noise like one of the early motor-omnibuses – only louder. It was all rattle. The Zeppelin went right overhead, and I hear four guns fired at it". A man told the Express' representative that he had been standing at his door when a bomb dropped on the house. "I had been talking to a friend and we heard bombs. I thought it safer to go indoors. As I turned to go in the bomb fell. It made a really terrible noise. It was so dark that I could only tell by the gap in the line of roofs opposite that the house had gone. The special constables and Volunteers came and climbed amongst the ruins, looking for the family. It was rather uncanny to hear them crawling about and calling out 'Are you there!' to the people buried in the ruins".

The Daily Mirror in its report said that in the London area a considerable number of small dwelling houses were demolished or damaged, a number of fires were caused, two factories sustained injury, some empty railway trucks were destroyed and the railway permanent way was slightly damaged in two places. The Mirror recorded a woman, who with three other women occupied a house in the South East district of London, which was bombed. She said "I can scarcely believe I am alive. I was startled out of my sleep by debris falling about me. The next I found myself half-covered by bricks and mortar. I managed to extricate myself, and shouted out. I was answered by shouts from below stairs, and afterwards fell into a half-dazed condition, and remained so until the rescue party came. My three companions had a similar experience, and only one of us received a slight cut. It was a miraculous escape".

The Essex County Chronicle of Friday 29th September included a report of the damage done by the bombing. It said that the first indication of area where bombs had fallen was the appearance in the roadway of knots of boys on hands and knees busy with chisel and hammer working out pieces of shrapnel from the wood paving. Then came the sad scenes of wrecked London homes which had been wrecked either by explosive or incendiary bombs. According to the Chronicle 'sad stories were told of death and suffering..... Here a sweet little baby had been killed; there an aunt and child who was awaiting his parents return from abroad. Here an old lady, there an old gentleman. In this house a lady reclining on a sofa downstairs had been blown to pieces, and all that could be found was the end of the sofa sticking in the roof! In that house an old gentleman was so badly burned that his life was despaired of. All he could exclaim in his suffering was "Where's my daughter?" and in another part of the house the daughter was asking "Where's my father?" Some houses had been literally made matchwood of'.

The L32 commanded by Oberleutnant (Lieutenant) Werner Peterson made landfall over England at Dungeness and set out with

the intention of attacking London. However a heavy barrage from anti-aircraft guns forced Peterson to abandon his plan to bomb London and he dropped his bombs between Aveley and South Ockendon. Some sources though say that the bombs were dropped in the Thames. Flying a BE2c aircraft on patrol from Sutton's Farm Hornchurch was Second Lieutenant Frederick Sowrey of the Royal Fusiliers attached to the Royal Flying Corps. Sowrey was attracted by the concentrated attention given by the searchlights to an area of sky to the east, which revealed the silver cigar shape of an airship scudding through patches of clouds. However the searchlights lost their quarry and the airship slipped away. According to Sapper F L Mayhew, of the London Electrical Engineers, Royal Engineers quoted by Lyn MacDonald in Somme (1983) the Zeppelin was picked up by searchlights at Cuffley in Hertfordshire. The searchlights held the airship for a few minutes and the anti-aircraft gun, which was a thirteen pounder mounted on a three tons Daimler lorry took some shots at it but was unable to hit it and so the searchlight was shut down. A bit later the searchlight was opened again and the gun had another, but fruitless try. After this the searchlight passed the target to some other searchlights. At 12.45 a.m. on Sowrey flying at 8,000 feet again saw an airship heading east and climbed to 13,000 feet and gave chase. He quickly overhauled the airship, which was the L32 and opened fire with his machine gun. His first and second sweeps failed to produce results, so he reloaded with incendiary ammunition. One short concentrated burst caused a small glow which suddenly exploded into a crimson flash and within seconds the whole airship was a blazing inferno. Feeling elated by his achievement Sowrey returned to land at Sutton's Farm. This is however not quite the whole story. Robert Miller Christy writing in the Essex Review in April 1926 was living in Chignal St James at the time and said that 'About twenty minutes to one, I was awakened – not by the explosions [of distant bombs] (which had ceased temporarily), but by the excited crowing of the pheasants in the woods round the house and the loud bellowing of the cows in the

neighbouring farm. I knew 'something was up' (in more than the colloquial sense), so I arose and went to the window. At once I heard a Zeppelin – L32, as was ascertained later – passing in front of the house, a mile or so distant, coming from the direction of London and proceeding east or south-east. I could not see it in the darkness; but came to the conclusion that it would not be passed as 'fit' by a medical tribunal; for it lacked the familiar note of a healthy Zeppelin and was both 'wheezy' and slow of gait. I decided that it had been 'pricked' (as one would say of small winged game) in the London district, where the guns had been so busy. It passed slowly into the distance and I went back to bed.' This suggests that the anti-aircraft guns had done some damage to the L32. This was later confirmed, as according to obituary for Group Captain Sowrey (as Second Lieutenant Sowrey became) in The Times in October 1968 the airship was twice hit by shells from anti-aircraft guns near Purfleet. About an hour or so later Miller Christy heard for a time 'a renewal of the loud and incessant, but distant, volleying of bomb explosions somewhere in the direction of London'. Very soon afterwards he was 'puzzled by a most extraordinary noise, quite near – *whoo-oo-oo-oo-wop!*' He had no idea what caused it and had to wait until morning to find out, but it served to get him out of bed again and whilst at the window he heard another Zeppelin – the L33, as he later found out quite close to his house, but unseen because it was passing to the back and his bedroom was at the front. From the sound of it he inferred that it was 'even more grievously more wounded than the first; but like the first it soon passed away into the night'.

As mentioned previously following the sounding of the air raid alert in London followed by the sound of anti-aircraft guns some people took shelter in air raid shelters, but others stayed up with late night revellers to watch the progress of the searchlights looking for the raiders. These were joined by many others in towns, villages and hamlets in Essex to watch the impending duel. Over the noise of the airship's engines they heard the noise of the

machine gun of the aircraft and saw a stream of red tracer bullets leave the aircraft and smash into the airship.

As the fire took hold a mighty cheer arose from the ground. At first it was a tiny flicker of light which grew until the whole airship was ablaze and which then began to slowly descend to earth. At North Ockendon Mary Blakeley saw it pass directly over her house. It was so close that she was aware of the 'heat and the stench'. At Kynochtown munitions works near Corringham Catherine Brown and her colleagues saw the blazing hulk of the airship slowly sink to the ground. At Hutton Helen Dixon heard the screams of the crew as they were incinerated aboard the disintegrating airship. In Stock young Lewis Donald Jarvis wrote in his diary 'I watched the Zeppelin being hit by a shot from one of our aeroplanes, and drifting in flames low over the village towards Billericay. The whole village was lit up (and the amount of traffic through the village all the day following was enormous).' In Chelmsford Special Constable Herbert Gripper on patrol in New London Road recorded in his log book '8.30 preliminary [warning]. 9.35 Take action. 12.30 Zep passes SW to NE. Guns fired and bombs dropped. At 1.20 SW saw a Zep on fire which came down at Billericay. Great flame of light. Wonderful sight. At 1.30 another red flame due east. Zep went down at Great Wigborough'. It was said that when the L32 was burning a newspaper could be read from the glow within a distance of twenty miles and that the sky was lit up for sixty miles. I was recently told that someone living at that time in Gravesend saw the Zeppelin come down. The Rev Andrew Clark in Great Leighs wrote in his diary 'Just after 1 a.m. in the S[outh] E[ast] they [those who saw the Zeppelin come down] saw a handful of fire, high up in the sky, burst out. This quickly spread and they saw a Zeppelin end downwards, slowly falling. The light was so bright that you could have seen to pick up a needle from the road. This was the Zepp, which came down between Billericay and Brentwood. 'It was a lovely sight to see'. Unfortunately the Rev Clark got the place of the crash wrong.

At Tolleshunt D'Arcy the local General Practitioner Dr John Salter told the Essex County Chronicle's representative in the area "Shortly after one o'clock in the morning I looked from my bedroom window and saw a light in the sky. It changed from the appearance of a star to a moon; then it got bigger still and burst into flames".



According to a description given of the fall of the Zeppelin to The Times by an elderly farmer he heard the bombs exploding first and then saw the Zeppelin caught in the search lights. 'The guns were firing and it looked all the time as though we should get her'. The farmer said that almost immediately there had been a flash of flame on the top of the airship and it started to dip. At first slightly, but then more sharply. 'The fire ran up her sides, and then she dropped down all blazing red, and squashed up like a concertina'. Bits of fire broke loose from the Zeppelin as she fell. Some of the bits of fire dropped faster than the big mass of fire, but other bits

of fire seemed to hang in the air. The farmer could hear ammunition exploding, but did not notice any more bombs exploding. He supposed that they had been dropped before the Zeppelin had been hit. He reckoned that the Germans must have been burned up as the Zeppelin fell 'for there was simply a tremendous blaze'.

The Times reported that a special constable who saw the Zeppelin 'fired' reckoned that a little more than half a minute occurred between the first spurt of flame and the crash of the Zeppelin in the field where it came down to rest.

The airship fell to the ground. In a field of turnips. To Miller Christy, who had got up again having been puzzled by a rather extraordinary noise, which turned out later to have been the falling petrol tank of the wounded L33, which also been shot down, the L32 fell very deliberately and by stages. To him at certain points the fall appeared to have been arrested and the airship remained almost stationary blazing furiously – a huge volume of black smoke above the flames. Then perhaps blazing petrol seemed to fall out at the bottom and then this in turn seemed to stop, the airship to blaze more furiously, and then to drop more blazing material out of the conflagration. This was repeated several times before the whole blazing mass finally settled down behind the crest of a distant hill. Miller Christy thought that the fall lasted no less than two minutes. The airship came to land at Snail's Farm Great Burstead. Of those in airship's crew of 22 all were dead. One had reached the ground alive, but had died immediately after being found (Oberleutnant Werner Peterson). The first people to reach the airship were the people of the neighbourhood. Next came the police and the fire brigade. The latter to put out the fire in the hope of rescuing any members of the crew who it was thought might still be alive or at least to recover the bodies.

One of the first police officers on the scene was Inspector Allen Ellis of Billericay, who had watched the airship crash and cycled to

the site arriving ten minutes after the crash. Another police officer early on the scene was Sergeant Wolverton also of Billericay. When the two policemen got there the airship was still blazing. Inspector Ellis and Sergeant Wolverton were soon joined by special constables from Billericay and Little Burstead and Great Burstead and constables from Hutton and Brentwood as well as one from Chelmsford. The special constables under Chief Special Constable E M Magor were given the task of guarding the bodies of the crew. They remained on duty until daybreak, by which time Captain Ffinch, the commander of the Essex Special Constabulary had appeared on the scene with some troops of the Irish Guards who were stationed in the vicinity to whom the special constables handed over the duty of guarding the crash site.

The Daily Mirror in its account said that many of the bodies of the crew were found at a considerable distance from the airship and that they had either jumped or fallen out of the airship before it hit the ground, preferring to be killed outright in that manner than die an agonising death in the burning ruins of it. Several of the bodies were buried nearly two feet deep in the ground. A Mr Springett, who was a motor engineer and one of the first to reach the spot where the airship fell said that he was only a hundred yards away from the Zeppelin when it came down to earth and that when he reached the place he heard screams which must have come from members of the crew. He added that the first body that he came to was the commander who was lying about thirty yards from the crash and that he thought that he still breathed. Mr Springett said that they took several bodies from the crash and that it was impossible to describe their condition.

According to Trooper Charles Williams of the Royal Buckinghamshire Hussars and which was stationed in the area quite some distance away from where the Zeppelin came down, as quoted by Lynn MacDonald in *Somme* (1983), the day before had been a peaceful one and all the troops were either in bed except

for those who had late night passes or who had taken the night off without them. Suddenly they'd hear a whirring nose overhead and they'd all rushed out and had stood looking up at the sky and watching. What they saw was the silhouette caught in the sky by a searchlight of a huge cigar shaped thing – a Zeppelin. Shortly afterwards they heard the noise of a British aeroplane going along behind it and tracer bullets went from the aeroplane into the Zeppelin and it burst into flames and it began to fall. According to Trooper Williams the Zeppelin was so huge that it looked as though it was about half a mile or a mile away. Some of the troopers put on their boots and trousers and started off after it. Trooper Williams said that there were dozens of them jumping over fences, but most of the troopers stayed behind watching the flare and that it was such a blaze that they could even hear the crackling nose from it. Whilst they were watching the bugles sounded the alarm and the order to saddle up and 'get going to where the Zeppelin had come down'. As they went they passed a lot of the troopers who were making for the Zeppelin on foot. They told them that they were wanted and they rushed back to camp to saddle up and follow them.

Trooper Williams said that they were ordered to put guard on the Zeppelin, which according to him was still burning and carried on doing so into the early hours of the morning.

The Daily Express of Monday 25th September carried the following description by an eye witness whose house was only three hundred yards from the crash site: "My wife and I had three children – one of whom is a lad in the Scots Guards home on leave – went to bed soon after ten o'clock last night, and about one o'clock heavy gun firing awaked us, and we all went to front bedroom window. We could see searchlights, and in the centre we could plainly see the Zeppelin, which was sailing swiftly across the starlit sky. It looked like an orange coloured cigar. Suddenly the guns ceased booming, and we saw what seemed to be a ball of fire

hanging to the under part of the Zeppelin, which was very high and appeared ridiculously small. Evidently the airship had been struck. First of all it showed a warm red glow, which slowly diffused throughout its length until resembled the glow of a red-hot poker, and almost simultaneously the raider was outlined by lights. The Zeppelin began to fall and the glow became larger, and then a sheet of orange flame shot up. We could now see that the Zeppelin was enormous size. As the flames spread cracks of brilliant yellow light appeared in its massive sides, until at length the whole structure was ablaze, the tongues of flame leaping high and lighting up the heavens and the country for miles around, and turning the darkness into bright daylight. Then the Zeppelin turned right over, canted, and fell nose downwards towards the earth. The descent was comparatively slow, and I shall never forget the spectacle it presented. As it came nearer to us large flaming pieces broke off, making a shower of fire, while the airship drifted almost leisurely earthwards. We could hear the hissing and crackling of the doomed monster and the explosion of bombs, some of which burst in the air, while others fell to the ground and scorched the meadows. Perhaps the most weird sight of all was caused by the blazing petrol and oil, which fell from the airship in thin strings of fire wriggling like serpents – just what you can see at a firework display. We became quite excited as the Zeppelin came nearer and nearer to us, its huge framework roaring like a furnace, and we wondered where it would land and whether it would fall on our house. Down it came, ever towards us, and it really looked as though it would fall on the house, but happily it just missed us and crashed across a field dividing a mangold field from a meadow. Part of it was impaled on one of a line of elm trees running at the side of the hedge. Flames reaching a height of about 60 feet extended throughout the length of the crumpled up Zeppelin and the huge girders and the giant ribs of the framework seemed to writhe in a last death agony. The fire was so fierce that although the fire brigade came along quickly, it lasted two hours or more. At first it was impossible to go near as the machine gun ammunition

was exploding, but as soon as we could we all had a closer view, and saw some of the bodies of the crew. One of them, apparently an officer, was scarcely touched by the fire. Forty-five yards away I saw two other members of the crew who had either fallen or thrown themselves out of the Zeppelin just before it reached the ground. They were dead and I should think that all the bones in their bodies were broken.

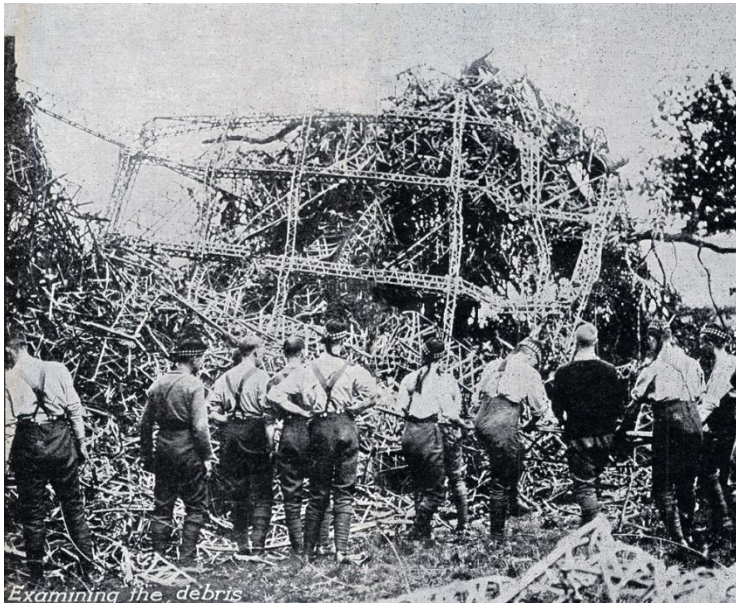
One of the men, I understand, was the commander, and he wore the Iron Cross. I should think that about five or six minutes elapsed before the Zeppelin reached the ground after it was first struck. The bursting of the bombs and the vivid flames had such a terrifying effect on my cows that they raced round and round a field, while three horses bolted from fright'.

A lady who saw the airship fall said that it was "like a flaming shuttlecock" and that it came down like one as well, slowly and swaying. She said that at first it was golden in colour, but when it burst into flames there was a ruddy glow which lit up the sky for miles around. According to her there was very little wind and the blazing airship drifted gently along. As the airship sank to the earth vast curling flames and thick showers of sparks shot out. To her it was a beautiful sight.

The bodies of the crew after being put in a shed which served as a temporary mortuary were later buried in Great Burstead churchyard. Apart from the Commander of the Zeppelin who was given his own grave in Great Burstead church yard, the rest of the crew were buried in a communal grave.

According to Trooper Charles Williams the gathering up of the crew was the worst bit. The ground where they had fallen was soft and when they picked them up there was the indentations in the ground of their bodies. Williams said that they carried them to the farmhouse. He must have for some reason mistaken the shed where they were put for the farmhouse.

There they remained until the 1960s when they were exhumed and taken to the German Military Cemetery in Cannock in Staffordshire.



On 27th October 1936 the graves of the airmen in Great Burstead church yard were visited by some German ex-servicemen who were visiting this country.

The wreck of the airship was 250 yards long and 25 yards in diameter. Bits of the airship were scattered all over the place. It took two weeks to clear away the wreckage and longer than that to repair the damaged farm hedges and gates. And then all hell broke loose. News of the airship's crash had spread by various means – word of mouth; telegraph. By four o'clock some hours before daylight a large crowd had gathered and all around, especially from

London. News of the airship's crash had spread by various means—word of mouth; telegraph.

Some of the people who came to see the crash were still in their nightclothes having followed the glow of the fire for a greater distance than they realised. How embarrassing to be wandering around outside the house and worse in daylight in your nightclothes! Perhaps they weren't embarrassed or cared. There were also London theatregoers still attired for the theatre; the men in top hats and tails and women in evening dress. Six special trains were put on by the Great Eastern Railway (GER) and the station staff at Billericay were kept exceedingly busy. Julian Kay writing in the LNER (London and North Eastern Railway) Magazine for July 1927 recalled hearing a porter at Stratford station on the morning following the crash call out as a special train for Billericay ran into the station "Zeppelin train—all stations to Billericay." In booking the large number of sightseers back home the station ran out of tickets and the staff were obliged to issue substitutes. Note that the GER did not provide special trains back to London from Billericay. This implies that tickets for the special trains were sold at a different price from ordinary tickets. The idea of putting special trains for such a thing cannot be imagined now. Indeed it would not have happened later in the war when things were tightened up rather more.

As to whether the National Steam Car Company which ran a bus service on several days a week from Chelmsford through Stock to Billericay and excursions to Stock and Billericay on Sundays ran any excursions to the site of the crash is not known.

By mid-morning according to Miller Christy thousands of troops had formed a closed circle round the airship and no one was allowed to approach within a couple of hundred yards or so, the crowd forming a broad band outside the ring of troops. Even Second Lieutenant Sowrey had difficulty in getting to the wreck of

the downed airship and had to provide a very lengthy explanation to the soldiers guarding it.



Overhead a British airship sailed continuously backwards and forwards and everywhere roundabout. To Miller Christy it 'seemed as if half the population of Essex and East London were already there, and new comers were arriving continuously. Motors were 'parked' in side roads and cycles were almost stacked in cottage gardens to the great profit of the occupants.' According to The Times of 25th September trades people who had motor delivery vans (probably from London) took large family parties to see the crash. Some Australian soldiers who were either in London or Essex (The Times is not clear about this) hired a taxicab to go and see it. According to The Times, not a man or a boy or a girl would have given up the chance to see the stricken Zeppelin because 'the distance as it fell through the darkness of the night had been underestimated'. Cyclists had often given lifts to people who had travelled rather precariously on the step of their bicycles, whilst girls rode on the carriers of motor-cycles. Small run-about cars carried six or seven people. Even an Irish jaunting car was there. The Times reckoned that there were hundreds of bicycles to 'every mile and in the fields at the end of the journey they were stacked in thousands'. From across the other side of the Atlantic Ocean the New York Times reported that some of the bodies of the crew appeared to be charred beyond recognition, while others were still white and recognisable. All appeared to be young men who were well clad and wearing the remains of stout leather coats and shoes of rather poor quality, which according to The New York Times indicated that good footwear was not plentiful in Germany.

According to the newspaper thousands that day journeyed to Essex to the remains of the L32 and the L33 that fell near Colchester. However quick precautions prevented souvenir hunters making away with anything detachable. The New York Times also reported that when its reporter went to the farmhouse near where the L32 fell amongst other people he found the grandfather of the family eating a hearty breakfast. The old man's comments were "I do think as there do be too much fuss over these 'ere Zepps". However before the troops had cordoned off the airship people had got to the scene. One, Mrs Izzard the wife of W P D Izzard the garden expert of the Daily Mail, who lived in Billericay had tried to approach the fallen airship, which was still burning but was driven back by the heat and lost a shoe. When this was found it led the rumour that there had been a woman on board the airship.

Churches that day had problems, as the congregations were rather sparse. Here is what Cliff Cottey of Stock wrote many years after the event. 'Early in War 1. Zeppelin brought down Billericay Saturday night. Set on fire. Everyone in it died. Next Sunday morning in chapel not very interested in the service. Soldiers marching past – attracted us youngsters. Home to diner. Then off to see the Zep. We went nearly to South Green. Fragments of the Zep were strewn for quite long distances. Aluminium chips, burnt silk cord, and cloth. Quite a time it took, before getting home to a late tea. One incident. Mr J Madle from Stock, brought his sister Emma to see the Zep in his horse and cart. When Jimmy got to a corner of the road a lorry came along with the rudder of the Zep. This piece was longer than the motor carrying it, and on the corner as the motor turned the rudder swung round over the top of Madles cart. Emma ducked in time to save her head being knocked off. A memorable day. Stock boys sold pieces of the Zep and made quite a bit of cash'. They were not the only ones. Quite a few people picked up souvenirs. To quote Miller Christy again 'objects of the Zeppelin were to be found even two miles from the airship showing how it had drifted.....

Not everyone was as lucky as the boys of Stock. One vendor of them, a Londoner, who had gathered a bag full, found himself in trouble shortly after; for he was charged at a neighbouring police court with being in possession of these fragments and 'neglecting to forthwith communicate the fact to a military post or to a police constable contrary to the Defence of the Realm Regulations.' A Billericay man who had taken pieces of the Zeppelin as souvenirs had them confiscated and was prosecuted for doing so. One young lad by the name of Freeman got away with a chart from the airship which he gave to his employer, who sent it to London to be framed before the police came to confiscate it. A Corporal Albert Harrington on guard duty was ordered to stop passing cars and search them. In one he found a bag full of Zeppelin parts and one of its wheels, which he immediately confiscated. The most extreme case of the possession of a Zeppelin relic and landing the possessor in the courts was reported in the Essex County Chronicle of 29th September when a vicar was fined £5 12s 6d for refusing to give up a bomb that was found in the garden of his vicarage. The name of the vicar and his parish was not given. Even soldiers sold souvenirs. The Rev Andrew Clark records that one of the soldiers stationed in Great Leighs had driven the wife of his Lieutenant to the crash site and being in uniform had strolled up to the cordon of soldiers stationed to keep the public off the site. When the sentries changed he did sentry go as if he was one of them and stopping down as occasion served to pick up some fragments and put them in his pockets. When these were full he put others under the collar of his tunic. When he got back to camp the next day he made about £1 from selling bits of the Zeppelin. He reported that one man from Billericay Camp who'd found the Zeppelin's compass refused an offer of £5 for it from a Londoner. Incidentally the Lieutenant's wife had also picked up bits of the Zeppelin as souvenirs. Sergeant Wolverton, who was mentioned earlier, said that his men had claimed to have seen Irish Guardsmen taking items from the bodies.

Occasionally, fragments of the airship's aluminium framing turned up, and a considerable trade was done with the latecomers.

It may have been when the remains of this Zeppelin or possibly the L33 were being carried down Chelmsford High Street in a lorry that it was stopped by a crowd who took parts of it as souvenirs. When the lorry stopped for petrol it was again looted by souvenir hunters and had to be defended by soldiers.

One officer took an Iron Cross off one of his men as he attempted to hide it. Even after the bodies had been placed in the shed looting still took place. Sergeant Wolverton had told Captain Finch that the bodies had not been interfered with when they were placed in the shed. When Sergeant Wolverton returned to the shed with the coroner he found that Commander's silk waistcoat and all his buttons had been cut off. From other bodies that had not been badly burned a fur collar and fur gloves and possibly a gold watch were never taken. They were not the only ones Trooper Charles Williams recalled that they picked up wicker chairs, loaves of German bread and lots of burnt silk and pieces of aluminium. All sorts of stuff. He said that it kept them in beer for months. Everybody wanted something and when the officers weren't looking they were selling them to the crowd for half a crown (two shillings and six pence) and two bob (two shillings) a time. When they weren't on guard duty they were able to get inside the guard line without the officers noticing tucked pieces of burnt silk and broken aluminium under their tunics and sold it to the crowd. At five o'clock in the afternoon the troopers were relieved and went back to camp- taking plenty of souvenirs with them. The blacksmiths and shoeing smiths at the camp turned the aluminium into crosses and medallions and also identification discs and rings bearing the troopers' name and number and embellished with the words 'Zeppelin Souvenir Billericay 24th September 1916'

However before the troops had left they had been provided with lunch from a field kitchen - beef, roast potatoes and Yorkshire

pudding. This made some of the sightseers envious. This may well have given a man an idea. He went to the Union Hunt Kennels at Great Burstead and acquired a lump of horsemeat, which he took home and cooked. He sold 'beef' sandwiches to the visitors who came that way at 2s 6d each. He wasn't the only one to provide refreshments. Early in the day vendors of lemonade and other non-intoxicating drinks had set up temporary booths at the wayside and made large profits from the many people who had set out to walk to crash site and found that it was further than they had expected.

The Southend Standard issued a special supplement. According to the newspaper the destruction of the Zeppelin 'was seen by thousands from start to finish, and the sound of their cheering brought thousands more to their windows to see the end of the intruder.

Sunday was heralded by the explosion of bombs and the explosion of bombs and the distant boom of guns. The raider was coming back, pursued by the Air Service. The gun firing in the west rapidly grew in volume, the rate increasing as [the airship] moved in a north easterly direction. Then suddenly there was a slight flash high in the sky and the gun fire ceased as if by instinct. There followed a tremble of pink flame, which almost immediately fluttered into what appeared at a distance to be a group of stars when a shell firework explodes –the effect being created probably by a ring of flame round the cavity which had been burnt in the envelope of the airship. The sky became suffused with a pink glow, and what had been a small conflagration in a twinkling was transformed into a burning elliptical mass with streamers flying therefrom, and having a huge sag in the centre as if some aerial world had dissolved in fiery chaos. In a flash one end dipped and the doomed structure almost vertically with great speed until the light went and in its place could be seen the incandescent outline of the framework hurtling to the ground, amid roars of cheers from

crowds in the streets, there being nearly 50 congregated at Plough Corner.

A guard of soldiers was rapidly placed round the warped and twisted remains, but apparently even the presence of the military could not prevent a brisk sale of portions of the framework as souvenirs’.

The Essex County Chronicle was rather less lavish in its coverage of the crash and only had a couple of columns dealing with it. According to it ‘Never was there such a night, and never was there such a day as Sunday for sightseeing. The bringing down of the Zepp in flames in a hollow with natural balconies around for spectators looked like a gigantic bit of stage management, so well was it done. And through the middle of the broken monster sticks a British oak, battered and burned, it is true, but still alive. As to the Zeppelin itself, the best description of its appearance as it lies a tangled mess, with its twisted girders of aluminium most prominent with given by a little boy whose father brought him to see it later in the day – it looks “like a great Meccano toy broken up”’.

The Chronicle said that ‘there were many witnesses to the destruction of the Zeppelin on the spot’. It said ‘Inhabitants of houses in the neighbourhood first heard firing about ten o’clock and looked out to see a great airship moving Londonwards, high up in the sky with shrapnel bursting all around. As it proceeded so the firing in the vicinity ceased and was taken up along the course of the flying monster. Then at 1.20 o’clock, after a period of bombing, the noise of a returning Zeppelin was heard, and almost immediately this was picked up by searchlight. In spite of its twisting the lights held it, and shells burst all around it.’ Then ‘there was a period of silence, followed by the sight of a flame appearing on the Zeppelin, which almost immediately burst into flame as a row of gas jets might when suddenly lit together. Flame then seemed to drop down the side and then after a pause, the

flaming mass descended drifting as it went. The noise of the engines could be plainly heard till it landed on the ground, and the sky was lit up some time by the flame. It was as magnificent a display of pyrotechnics as could possibly be produced. Forty, fifty and sixty miles away the earth was illuminated. Twenty and thirty miles away one could read a paper and the time by a watch. There was no need to telephone or telegraph what had happened. Everyone knew, and a cheer went up such as never before been heard in that particular radius, and awoke those who had not been kept awake by the sounds of dropping bombs and firing guns. They also came out and joined the throngs that had everywhere gathered, and presently when in the distance a second flare was seen, indicating that Zeppelin No 2 (L33) had come to the ground and was partly afire another cheer rent the air – and so bed. But this was not enough for many. They must see more, so almost immediately long and unending processions began from London and the two districts in which disaster had come to the enemy – for the brilliant glare of destruction had been seen from London. So intense was the light, extending far beyond the horizon, that it gave a good idea of the size of a Zeppelin.

As the writer watched the falling flame someone near remarked “the Zepp is afire and thirty mortals are meeting their doom.” And so it was. The thought that the hands which had just released death dealing bombs upon the innocent in that awful way made one wonder that, apart from the wickedness of it, the German mind thought it worthwhile, but the German mind is capable of anything – it is German. Those nearest to the field in which the flaming monster fell were, of course the first to be on the spot. Many had feared that their own houses were going to be enveloped by the seething mass, and they actually had burning pieces of Zeppelin fall upon them and on their premises. But the huge mass itself crashed down into as suitable a spot as could be, even with a pond near whence the local fire brigade were quickly pumping water in a brave effort to subdue the flames and perhaps

rescue some of the crew. The flames were put out, but there was no life left. The mass of wreckage had fallen in parts of three fields, a hedge and several trees acting as a sort of buffer and keeping a part of the framework in better condition than any previous fallen Zeppelin. It appeared at first as though a travelling merry-go-round had fallen across the hedge with cupolas and poles on one side and carriages on the other. In a short time a number of bodies were recovered and placed on one side. The number was added to during the night until in the morning the total number of dead Germans was ascertained to be twenty two, of whom some were mangled and maimed, and others had probably died from shock and were little damaged to outward appearance. Several presented a ghastly appearance, and few could look on them without being moved to revulsion. The bodies were ultimately placed in a large barn near the spot where they fell, to await whatever subsequent proceedings might be decided upon. The coroner resolved that no inquest was necessary and the funerals took place on Wednesday. A great number of troops soon gathered and the place was soon placed under military control. Up to this time the police and special constables, who had come from neighbouring towns and villages, had worked very hard in endeavouring to keep order. For some time crowds of spectators came pouring in from all quarters and by four o'clock in the morning an extraordinary crowd had gathered, while all the approaches were packed tight with motor cars and other vehicles. After that time admittance to the field was denied, but the crowds in the neighbourhood continued to grow, and on Sunday they were of an extraordinary number and character'.

According to the Chronicle 'Zeppelin Sunday will figure as a black day in the annals of the Churches, both Anglican and Nonconformist. Congregations were sadly depleted, and amongst those who failed to turn up at their accustomed places were many

who, under ordinary circumstances, show the greatest concern for Sunday observance. But a “bag” of two Zeppelins in one day is something unique as a Sunday attraction, and the most regular attendant at church or chapel might be forgiven absence on such an occasion. Of course there’s another side to the matter. The destruction of the Zepps was a matter for thankfulness, and the church might have been thought the proper place to render it. But the competition – Church v Zepp was very strong’. From the wording of the piece it is implied that Catholic priests had a rather stronger hold on their congregations. Either that or the Chronicle just ignored Catholics.

The Dover Express of Friday 29th September said that ‘The fall of the burning airship was visible at Dover, although many miles away’.

The Hertford Mercury and Reformer of Saturday 30th September reported that ‘It is probable that more people saw the fall of the burning airship last Sunday morning than witnessed the spectacle at Cuffley three weeks earlier, although the distance was much greater. The explanation is that a raid was anticipated, and the inhabitants for the most part sat up to await events and as the sound of the guns and bomb dropping could be but faintly heard, they were more venturesome than on the previous occasion, when the night vultures were too close to be pleasant. In almost every street people collected in groups straining eyes and ears in a south easterly direction. Some saw nothing beyond the occasional flash of a searchlight, but others – and particularly those on higher ground were more fortunate, and shortly after one o’clock a spontaneous shout of ‘Hurrah’ followed by the clapping of hands and excited talk, betokened something of an agreeable nature’.

The Surrey Advertiser of Wednesday 27th September reported that the destruction of the L32 one of the two Zeppelins which fell in Essex was distinctly seen from Kingston upon Thames Superintendent Drury and the men of his section of the Kingston

section of the Kingston and Surbiton Fire Brigade from their observatory over the Fire Station, by special constables, Volunteer Training Corps men and 'residents from other points of vantage'. The view that was obtained was not so good as that of the destruction of the SL11. The L 32 did not appear to have actually been seen from Kingston prior to bursting into flames, 'though star-shell illuminations and air battle flashes marked its course'. The Advertiser said that 'sensation of hearing bomb explosions' and the sounds of gun fire had been heard at an earlier stage of the raid over the London suburbs and that many people were roused from their sleep by the force of the detonations rattling the windows of houses. The Advertiser added that the noise of exploding bombs and gun fire was heard in Guildford by people inside their houses as well as those outside.

Second Lieutenant Sowrey was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his action in bringing down the L32. He remained in service until 1940. On 1st August 1919, Sowrey received a permanent commission in the new RAF, with the rank of squadron leader. On 1st July 1928 he was promoted to Wing Commander and retired from the RAF as a Group Captain on 26th May 1940. He died on 21st October 1968 aged 75.

There were some people who felt sorry for the dead crew of the L32. Catherine Brown who was mentioned earlier recounted years later that some of her work colleagues who lived near Billericay went the day following the crash to see the crash site. They reported that some of the dead crewmen looked only about fourteen. She recalled "We could not help but feel for their mothers in Germany".

The crew of the airship were buried on 27th September.

The Essex County Chronicle gave a description of the funeral of the crew. According to report the coffins were taken on motor waggons from the barn at the farm to the place of internment

(Great Burstead) church. The funeral was conducted by the rector and an army chaplain. The bearers of the coffins were all members of the Royal Flying Corps, by whom all the arrangements were carried out. The men were buried in one large grave, but the commander was buried in a separate grave. The commander's coffin bore the inscription 'Commander Brodruck, killed in action 24th Sept 1916' and was carried to the graveside by RFC officers. The coffins were of Japanese ash. The service was the ordinary form according to the Book of Common Prayer but with the words "These men here departed" substituted for "Our dear brother departed". There was not a large attendance and the funeral was kept quiet. A body of the Essex County Constabulary and the Special Police guarded the approach to the churchyard. At the conclusion of the service buglers sounded the 'Last Post' with the officers standing to salute. Only privileged persons were allowed in the churchyard and the general public viewed the ceremony from behind a hedge in an adjoining field.

A document from the wreckage of the L32 and a description of the last moments of the airship's commander did not come to light until over 15 years after its destruction.

The Daily Mail in January 1932 recounted how the crew of the Zeppelin L32 met their fate on their 13th voyage. The ballast book of the Zeppelin had come to light after being hidden for 15 years. Whilst the finder was by then dead his widow was still alive. According to the article when the finder saw the Zeppelin coming down in flames he rushed to the scene and was one of the first people, if not the first person to reach the blazing wreckage. He saw a man staggering out of the wreckage, his clothes on, fire smoke blackened and carrying a large book. Suddenly his pitched on his face and shouted three times in a shrill voice "Dreizehn" (Thirteen). He was Commander Petersen the only man of the crew to escape immediate death. Apparently as he jumped clear he remembered the superstition attaching to 13 which was uppermost

in his mind as he dropped dead. From another source it is recorded that he had a broken neck. From other sources quoted earlier it is clear that the story is not true and that the finder of the log book fabricated it. More likely the finder of the log book was one of the first people to reach the crash site, found the Zeppelin's log book and decided to keep it for himself without telling the authorities.

The existence of the book had been revealed to a city businessman to whom it had been shown by Captain J Crossley, a retired officer of the 9th Lancers. Captain Crossley had obtained the book from a friend who had obtained the book from the widow of the original finder.

Each page of the ballast book contained a detailed plan of the airship, with the distribution of weight for each bay of it. For every flight the amount of fuel, oil, water-ballast, gas and bombs had been filled in with a pencil, each entry being dated and signed by the commander except for the 13th page. This had only been partly filled in and the commander never lived to sign it at the end of the voyage.

The newspaper said that it was possible that the book might find its way to the Imperial War Museum.

Experts declared that had the book been taken to the authorities as soon as it was found it would have been of immense value because of the secrets it contained.

Turning now to the Zeppelin L33 had been the first of the airships to reach London, the pilot, Lieutenant Emmering, writing in 1925 and quoted in the Thameside Mail of 28th February of that year, said that the English had been able to detect the approach of the Zeppelins from a long distance away and that the airships were surrounded by more than one hundred searchlights. He said that all of a sudden that expect for two groups, all the searchlights were extinguished. The remaining two held the airship in the apex of the

two. These two were then also extinguished and a large searchlight, which Emmering thought had a diameter of three or four yards, caught the airship and let it fly twice through the zone of light. Emmering said that the crew of the L33 could not understand this strange proceeding, but then all the lights went on again and the artillery (anti-aircraft guns), which they had not heard before began firing. This was over the East End of London. The airship was hit by a shell. Emmering said that the first salvo hit the middle of the airship.. One of her propellers was damaged and her gas bags were punctured by shrapnel. Understandable terror seized the L33's crew, yet all remained at their posts. Commander Bocker ordered that the airship's bombs be thrown overboard, which they were. The crew all thought that the L33 would explode at any minute, but the terrific explosions from the bombs sent them higher and they were for a time out of the range of the anti-aircraft guns. During that time the news came that the L32 was in flames and they looked in horror and saw it topple and fall. A second shell had hit the airship. The Watch Officer had the presence of mind to put up double star lights, which they had learned British airmen used to stop the anti-aircraft guns firing when they intended to attack the enemy in the air. The ruse worked. Commander Bocker decided to head back home, feeling that discretion was the better part of valour. Following the Ipswich main line of the Great Eastern Railway the airship reached Chelmsford where it was engaged by a B.E. 2c of 39 Squadron flown from Hainault Field by Lieutenant Alfred de Bathe Brandon. In a running fight that lasted ten minutes Brandon was rather astonished to see that his bullets although hitting the L33 were not having any affect and running short of fuel he gave up and returned to base. Loosing height and gas Bocker ordered the crew to jettison everything they could to maintain altitude. Machine guns, a belt of cartridges, a large aluminium petrol tank, tools, an electric battery in a leather case and a tool box. The Essex Newsmen of 30th September recorded that on the previous Thursday (28th) some harvest men who were engaged in cutting a field of lucerne (alfalfa)

near where the L33 eventually came down found a large machine gun which had evidently been thrown overboard as the airship made its way towards the coast. The metal jacket of the water cooler round the barrel of the gun had a hole blown in it showing that it had been hit and damaged by the anti-aircraft gun fire. The gun which weighed half a hundredweight was handed over to the police. The Herald said that earlier finds in the locality had included a heavy automatic pistol

Miller Christy in his account believed that it was the falling petrol tank that made the strange sound. Over Woodham Ferrers the airship jettisoned a large amount of fuel. Loosing height the airship followed the railway line from there to Maldon, which town the airship only just cleared. By 1.15 a.m. the coast was crossed at West Mersea, but Bocker realised that it would not make it back across the North Sea and decided to bring it down and turned back and bring the airship down, which he did near New Hall cottages, Little Wigborough. There were two cottages – one occupied by Thomas Lewis and the other by Frederick Choat, who were both employed at nearby New Hall Farm.

The reason why Bocker probably decided to bring the airship down on land in enemy territory rather than risk to trying cross the North Sea was that he would have had in mind the fate of the L19. On the night of 1st/2nd February 1916 when returning from a raid on England on the night of 31st January/1st February and suffering engine trouble the L19 crashed in to the North Sea. Her crew survived the crash, but drowned after the crew of a British fishing vessel, the steam trawler King Stephen refused to rescue them, choosing instead to return to Britain to report their discovery to the authorities. The reason for doing so was that the Captain, William Martin was fearful that the 20 airmen of the airship could easily overpower the nine crewmen of the trawler. The incident received world-wide publicity and divided British public opinion and the Captain was condemned by many for leaving the German

airmen to die. Others, praised Martin for not trusting the promises of the Germans. According to Emmering the crew of the L33 hoped to reach the sea before it came down and so be able to cross back to Germany.

The Daily Express of 25th September reported that Commander Bocker maintained that his ship had descended through engine trouble and impressed this story on the rest of the crew. The chief engineer disputed this and the two engaged in mutual incriminations – almost coming to blows. As to where this occurred exchange occurred is not stated.

The inhabitants of New Hall cottages and those who witnessed the L33's descent were alarmed by its dying moments. All the crew survived. Bocker decided to set fire to the L33 and knocked on the doors of the cottages to tell the occupants what he was going to do. The people were, however terrified and refused to open their doors, so Bocker gave up and set fire to the L33. According to Miller Christy the glow of this could be seen from his house in Chignal St James over twenty miles away. One of the occupants of the cottages gave the following description to the Daily Express of what happened when the airship came down "When I saw the Zeppelin first from my bedroom window it had just reached the ground.



I was awaked by the noise of it right overhead and jumped out of bed and ran to the window. It was a dark night, but clear and just

as I looked out the great envelope was lying right across the front like a huge whale. It looked as though it had not been damaged at all. I felt instinctively that it was a Zeppelin, having heard the engines of others when they passed over before. There had been no firing or explosion earlier. There were no searchlight now in the sky and the night was quite quiet. What impressed me most was the yelling of the men in the cars or round the airship. They were shouting their loudest, and I heard what sounded like 'Himmel!' three times. It was, perhaps, two minutes afterwards – though it is difficult to guess at time in an affair like this – when there was a terrific explosion followed by a lesser fusillade, as though a lot of ammunition was being fired off. At the same moment a long tongue of flame shot up into the sky, lighting all the fields round and throwing out a heat so violent that we felt it here quite perceptibly a hundred yards away. There was not much doubt in my mind that the Germans had set fire to their ship to destroy it. The flames sank down after the first glare, but continued for perhaps half an hour, while shots seemed to be coming out from all sides. The framework glowed through it all like red lacework. As soon as the fire died down and there were no more shots I went out to it, but there was only the skeleton you can see from here, and I could make nothing of it myself. This was before the military had arrived. The crew had wandered off, and there was nobody about but myself". The Daily Express recorded that another resident who was wakened by the noise of the Zeppelin's engines in time to see it was flying quite low had one thought in their mind – would it miss the hay ricks. It did. The only damage done to the cottages by the fire was a few broken windows and some burnt paintwork. Bocker had hoped that in torching the airship it would be destroyed in full, however because so much gas had leaked only the covering was destroyed. That was fortunate for the inhabitants of the cottages as rather more damage would have been done to them had there been more gas left to burn in the airship.

Emmering said that when the L33 came down to earth the petrol tanks burst, fire broke out in its stern and the crew were buried beneath the fall. Each man had thought that he was the only man left alive. This contradicts the British account.

The Daily Mirror reported that the L33 descended into a field near a cottage occupied by a farm labourer. In an interview the labourer said that at half past one he was aroused by the 'loud drone of a Zepp engine' and that he got out of bed and 'saw the huge bulk of an airship close overhead'. The airship passed away and then turned back and descended into a field near the back of his cottage. The crew got out and according to the man there was then a huge explosion. Whilst the explosion didn't hurt him or his family it broke the windows at the front of his house and those of his neighbours. He found out afterwards that the all the hair was singed off the back of his dog which was in a kennel outside. The man said that the crew of the airship came to his cottage and started knocking at the door. He never answered and heard the commander cursing. He spoke English and said something about "the damned house". When the man was asked in the commander had said "Kamerad" he replied that he didn't know what else he said, but that he put his wife and three children in the back of the house and made himself 'scarce too'. He concluded by saying that the end of the airship had dropped across the road by the cottage. He was glad that he saw and glad that he was alive.

At Great Leighs the blaze of the L33 was visible and the Rev Andrew Clark recorded in his diary 'A second Zepp, seemed to be a blaze in the N.E. This was the one that came down at Wivenhoe. Here again the Rev Clark was mistaken. According to the Rev Clark from information given to him by Major William Brown of Bishop's Hall in the field Where the L33 came down there was a little boarded cottage. The inhabitants were terrified and were even more alarmed when the crew of the airship went to the cottage and in perfect English told them to leave at once as they were

going to set fire to the Zeppelin. They said that if the flames from airship burnt the cottage whilst its inhabitants were still in it they were frightened that they might be hanged. When the inmates of the cottage had left it one of the crew went forward and set fire to the Zeppelin and an explosion followed. According to Miller Christy in his account of the crash which used information supplied to him by Mr K Forbes of Great Wigborough and Messrs Wilkins of Tiptree the occupants of the cottage mistook the well meant warnings in German or guttural English for horrible threats and were hiding beneath the stairs and in cupboards. When the Commander fired the airship three mild explosions followed and the huge gas bag flared up in a mighty conflagration, which caused spectators hundreds of yards away to gasp for breath.

At Tolleshunt D'Arcy the Dr John Salter told the Essex County Chronicle's representative "No sooner had I got into bed again [after seeing the L32 go down in flames] than my bedroom was lighted from the East; I jumped out and saw flames from the marshes lighting up the sky'. At this point Dr Salter's night bell rang and he was "summoned by a man to attend his wife half a mile from where the Zeppelin had come down." Dr Salter said that he sent his partner to that case. The summons in question was to go to Abbots Hall, Great Wigborough, where a Mrs Clarke was in labour. She gave birth to a daughter who was christened Zeppelina! Zeppelina later married and as Zeppelina Williams she died in 2004 aged 88.

Following the firing of the Zeppelin the crew discharged and threw away their pistols, which were later found. A tragedy then arose.

One of the crew was injured by being thrown out of the airship and suffered a fractured rib and abrasions. Alfred Wright a seed grower and the owner of nearby Grove Farm answered the call for help. Wright reached the crew of the airship, but was unsure if they were armed. He returned to the farm and set off on his motor cycle to West Mersea to contact the military authorities there.

Unfortunately in the darkness he hit a car and his leg was badly injured and later amputated in Colchester Hospital.

According to Dr Salter he had just sent his partner to attend to Mrs Clarke when a motor car drew up. He asked the occupants what they wanted and they asked him to go to attend to a young farmer who was a cripple, but 'as active as a cat'. According to Dr Salter's account he had ridden off on his motor-cycle to fetch the military when he saw the Zeppelin alight on the marshes and had collided with a motor car driving a special constable to the scene. The doctor said the 'poor fellow was smashed up, so after attending to him at a small farm in the lane where the Zeppelin had come down I drove him in my car to hospital'. The Doctor does not mention the injured crewman of the airship. Miller Christy in his account of the incident mentions that neither vehicle had lights [because of the air raid]. However he never recovered and died on 13th November. An account of the accident was given in the report of the inquest held on 17th November on Alfred Wright in the Essex County Chronicle of 24th November. George Tiffin, a master butcher, told the inquest that about 1 a.m. on 24th September he saw a Zeppelin from his window and soon afterwards he saw an intense light in the same direction. He got out his motor car and went with his wife and one W Mussett and on the road picked up Sergeant Baker of the Military Police. They travelled slowly owing to mist and had no lights on the car because Tiffin had been told that it was illegal to do so when there were Zeppelins about. Tiffin in his evidence said that he noise of a single cylinder motor cycle coming towards him and pulled over to the left of the road. He then just saw a motor cycle and heard a scratching noise on the left wing of the car. Sergeant Baker told him to pull as they had touched something. Tiffin stopped the car and got out. He found Wright lying on the grass at the west side of the road i.e on the near side of his car. He asked Wright if he was alright, but the latter did not reply. Mr Trim, the sergeant of the special constables then came up and ordered Tiffin to back up the car to where Wright was lying and to

light up. Wright was then placed on a hurdle, lifted on to the car and taken to his home. Tiffin thought that his car was only travelling at about eight to ten miles an hour and that Wright's motor cycle was travelling at about 30 miles an hour. The inquest was then adjourned until 24th November. At the resumed inquest which was reported in the Chronicle of 1st December the Coroner made an attempt to establish was to whether Wright was travelling on the wrong side of the road at the time of the accident, but as there were no independent witnesses it was impossible to tell what had really happened and he directed the jury to return a verdict of accidental death which it duly did.

Meanwhile Bocker and his crew then marched off in the direction of Peldon. According to the account in the Express Bocker assembled his men in military formation and marched them to the nearest farm house. After a prolonged knocking the farmer came down and Bocker announced that he had come to surrender. "Then you've come to wrong to shop. I don't want you". The farmer said and went back to bed. Next Bocker marched the crew of the Zeppelin to a cottage, but the inhabitants had 'heard his mission' and fled. According to the Express the Germans then broke a window. They then continued their journey to Peldon. On the way to Peldon they met Special Constable Edgar Nicholas riding his bicycle and who was surprised to see a group of men walking along the road at that hour of the morning. (Half past one in the morning) Nicholas dismounted and asked them whether they had seen a Zeppelin crash. Bocker in perfect English asked how far it was to Colchester. On being told the way by Nicholas the latter told them that the Strood leading to Mersea Island was nearer. They asked if there were any troops there and on being told that there were Bocker said that they would go there. The Daily Express in its report said that what was said was "Haven't you any soldiers in this country? Which is the nearest way?" According to Nicholas in his written statement one of the Germans asked him whether he thought that the war was over. Nicholas replied that it was him to

which the German replied "Goot, goot". The Germans set off followed by Nicholas. The Diss Express of 29th September quotes a report by the Daily News reporter in which Nicholas said that he couldn't get much out of the men by way of conversation and that the only one that he could persuade to talk was a man who said in broken English "Zeppelin! We crew. Exploded. We prisoner of war." To Nicholas they all seemed relieved to be out of the war. He described them as all being in their early twenties and wearing plain working uniform 'very similar to present tunics and mostly without caps'.

The Mirror said that when the Zeppelin fell a motorist raced along and just as he reached the scene of the crash he was amazed to see a village policeman lining up the crew.

When Nicholas and the crew of the Zeppelin reached Peldon Hall Farm they were joined by Special Constable Elijah Trayler and Sergeant Ernest Edwards from Hatfield Broad Oak, who was enjoying a few days rest in the area. The men considered their next move and on Nicholas' suggestion they made for Peldon Post Office which had a telephone. On reaching the Post Office Edwards and Bocker went in and found the local Constable, Charles Smith trying to telephone army intelligence and police headquarters. It seems that Smith seems to have taken control and formally arrested the Germans. Bocker asked him if he could use the telephone, but was very politely told that he could not and was told to march his men to Mersea Island where they could be handed over to the military, even though it was clear that the men intended to hand themselves over to the military. Led by Smith and assisted by Special Constables Fairhead, Hyam, King, Traylor, May, Meade, Beade and Nicholas the party set off and en route they were met by a military detachment and the prisoners were formally handed over to them. Sergeant Edwards at this point decided to go home rather than go with them to Mersea Island. This caused him some problems with the Chief Constable of Essex, Captain Unett who asked why he, as

the senior officer did not accompany the escort to Mersea Island. Edwards reply to the Chief Constable managed to satisfy the latter and he retired from the police in 1924. The question of what to do with the prisoners until they could be taken to Colchester then arose, but the vicar of West Mersea arranged for them to be put up in the Church Hall. The Diss Express of 29th September quoted a report in the East Anglian Daily Times of 26th given to the latter by the vicar of West Mersea. The vicar said that Commander Bocker was just under six feet in height and looked extremely stout from having a large number of coats on. The crew with one or two exceptions were extremely civil. Their average age was perhaps 32 and there were not many cruel faces amongst them except the Commander and the second officer. The men seemed extremely grateful for what was being done for them, but the Commander whom the vicar described as surly was not interested in his men and sulked. 'A regular Prussian type' was the vicar's description. He complained to the British staff officer that his keys had been taken from him which was not the proper way to treat an officer. Commander Bocker also objected to being herded with his men in the hall and wanted private accommodation. When a bed was made up for him behind a screen in the parish Mission Room he would not go to it. The second in command was a callow youth of about 22 with big lop-ears and a weak face. The 'sort of young man who is seen in the dock in criminal courts'. The engineer, whom the vicar lent a copy of the Morning Post to let him know how his countrymen were getting whacked, seemed an intelligent sort. Two of the crew of the Zeppelin complained of burns of the head and three had rather badly damaged hands. Others were slightly cut about the fingers and one man had a broken rib. The vicar's wife who was the local commandant of the Voluntary Aid Detachment had nurses ready to attend to the injured and two cooks were on duty to prepare tea. A bed was made up in the vicarage for the man with the broken rib. In the morning prior to their transfer into captivity at Colchester the crew were given breakfast. The man with the broken rib was taken to the military

hospital in Colchester. The crew then spent the rest of the war in captivity.

Constable Smith was rewarded for his prompt actions and was promoted to Sergeant that same day by the Chief Constable of Essex, John Alfred Unett. He was awarded the Merit Star and was forever afterwards known as 'Zepp' Smith. He died in 1977 aged 94. The Essex County Chronicle of 29th September 1916 recorded the awarding of Constable Smith's promotion to Sergeant thus: 'VILLAGE P.C.'s REWARD – The police constable who handed over to the military authorities the commander and crew of Zeppelin has been promoted to sergeant and awarded the merit badge for coolness and judgement'.

Dr Salter told the Chelmsford Chronicle's reporter that after having attended to Alfred Wright he went back to look at the Zeppelin and was permitted to do so for half an hour. He said that the back had broken off in the fall and the envelope containing the gas had been burnt off, but that the engines which were as beautiful as watch were complete. It was 750 feet long and 70 feet high. Salter was able somehow to see the Commander of the Zeppelin although he did say not how and said that he looked 'a brute of a man'. Although if the Doctor was called to attend to the man with the broken that it was there that he saw the crew of the Zeppelin.

Because of the public euphoria at the destruction of two more airships a public subscription was raised to present each of the officers with an inscribed pocket watch.

From reports in the Essex County Chronicle 29th September and the Bury Free Press of Friday 30th September the downed Zeppelin also attracted large crowds to see it. The Chronicle mentions huge crowds on Sunday going to see Little Wigborough Zeppelin. The Free Press' representative said that on Monday morning they set by road from Bury St Edmunds with a friend to

the hamlet where the 'for the first time in history, a live crew attached to enemy aircraft landed on English soil'. The day was described as sunny. For the greater part of their journey there was no indication that anything unusual had happened and it was not until they had left Colchester that they perceived that something unusual had happened for they found themselves in a great stream of traffic, the like of which had never been seen in East Anglia before the weekend. On the last few miles of the journey they witnessed thousands of people 'either going or returning, on the highway. The Free Press report said 'Surely every mode of travel known to mankind - or to womankind for that matter - was brought into use, whilst large numbers were to be seen cheerfully, if slowly, "padding the hoof". Probably many of those who had travelled from distant parts by train to the town previously referred to, and on arrival there, finding they were unable to charter any kind of conveyance, had decided to walk to their desired goal rather than miss such a unique and wonderful spectacle. What kind of a scene this road presented on Sunday, when perhaps many times the number of people passed along it, goodness only knows. We eventually reached the village of - , (Little Wigborough), and a friendly farmyard offered us the opportunity for dismounting. We entered the field opposite by scrambling up a bank. Through this and another field we proceeded, both of which we observed had been well trodden by the Sunday crowds. A little more ditch scrambling, and the fallen Zeppelin came into view. The spectacle which met our gaze was indeed an extraordinary one. Certainly what impressed me more than anything was the tremendous size of the airship. We were allowed to get within about two hundred yards of the wreckage, which, by the way, was well guarded by the military. We were enabled therefore to get a capital view, and although only the framework of the mammoth envelope was to be seen from where we watched, one got a very good idea not only of the enormous size, but also the outline of the most modern of Germany's Zeppelins, for modern it certainly was according to an official statement which has appeared in the Press this week, its

completion taking place as recently as last month. The length of it must almost have been the length of Abbeygate Street; certainly the Butter Market could not contain it, whilst the height of some parts were quite the height of the Norman Tower'. (The places in question are places in Bury St Edmunds). 'A sentry informed me that the height then was much less than on Sunday morning, as the base of the envelope had been apparently gradually giving way under the strain of the huge weight of the framework. One part of the skeleton of the envelope, he said, must have shrunk between twenty and thirty feet during that morning. The correct shape of the envelope, however, could easily be outlined, although of course parts of it had bulged or buckled considerably. The nose portion was apparently quite intact, for it had retained its exceedingly graceful shape perfectly. As the eye passed along the top of the envelope from the bow end it suddenly lost the stay which obviously ran the whole length of the envelope, for there was a huge v shape drop and then a bulge of gigantic dimensions. The sentry informed me that this was the part of the framework which had suffered from the explosion. The tail end was generally well outlined although it could easily be discerned that this was the part that had received punishment from the shells of our anti-aircraft defences. The entire framework was of bright metal, doubtless aluminium, and with the mid-day sun full on it, glistened like silver, truly a magnificent sight to behold. With the aid of a pair of field glasses I was enabled to get a capital idea of the workmanship involved in the construction of the airship. The girder work struck me as being exceedingly fine, but the whole spectacle presented a masterful example of human engenuity. The tail end was pointing towards the coast, which, of course, proved that the Zeppelin was travelling inland when she alighted. A villager told me that a short time before it came down it passed over the district making seawards. Evidently the commander realised that his ship was damaged so severely that he deemed it prudent return and come to earth rather than risk the fate which awaited the crew of the ill-fated Zeppelin L19. The two cottages, forming one building,

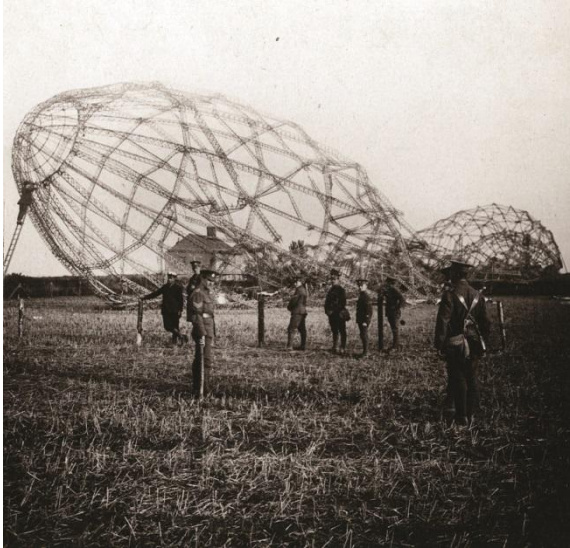
which lay parallel to where the remains lay certainly had a miraculous escape, for not more than twelve yards intervened from the airship. Their position was on the opposite side of the Zeppelin from where we stood, so that we obtained our view of them through the aluminium framework. The effect to me was that of a solitary rooster in a spacious fowl run'.

Miller Christy says that they came from Colchester, Maldon and the surrounding country. The crowd though was a smaller one than that to see the one that fell near Billericay. The nearest railway station was Tolleshunt D'Arcy on the branch line from Kelvedon to Tollesbury. As to whether any special trains were put on is not known. The line did not have a Sunday service. It seems though from the report in the Bury Free Press that people had travelled by train to Colchester and walked to the site of the crashed Zeppelin. In its report of the crash The Times said that no one was allowed to go within a quarter of a mile of the airship and that the huge crowd who had gone to see it were kept back by soldiers with fixed bayonets. A local farmer near where the airship came down stood at the gateway to the fields from which a view of the wreck could be seen and made a collection for the Red Cross to which people gladly gave to get a view of it. The Chelmsford Chronicle of 6th October reported that a total of £74 4s 10d was raised. Of this £10 was allocated to the Tendring Hundred Red Cross Fund, £15 to the Harwich Division of the Red Cross, £10 to the Red Cross in London, £4 4s 10d to the Red Cross Fund of Colchester Hospital, £20 to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), £5 to the YMCA Hut Fund and £10 to Prisoners of war.

Brandon, who unsuccessfully attacked the L33 over Chelmsford, was appointed a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order. This was in addition to the Military Cross which he been awarded for a successful attack on the L15 on 1st April 1916. Brandon who was New Zealander returned to New Zealand after the war and was originally a lawyer after a short period assisting in the preparation

of a report on New Zealand air defences, returned to his law practise and died on 19th June 1974 aged 90.

Of the other two Zeppelins that took part in the raid, the L31 intercepted and destroyed by British fighter pilot Lt V Tempest on 2nd October 1916 near Potters Bar whilst the L34 was intercepted and destroyed by British fighter pilot 2nd Lt Ian Pyott in BE2c no. 2738 off Hartlepool on 27nd November 1916.





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I have attempted to trace the sources of the illustration,
but without success. I apologise for any copyright
unintentionally accidentally infringed.

In researching this book I have found a number of
contradictions in the contemporary reports. I have tried
to describe what happened as best as I can. I apologise
for any errors that have inadvertently crept in.