

THE DRAGON SLAYERS

One day during the turbulent year of 1916 farmer Tom Crawford was looking over his fence, surveying with misgiving the ninety acre oil-streaked barren field that only the year before had been good grazing land. It was not the sacrifice of his pasture he resented. These things were necessary in times of war. What irritated him was the nonchalant lack of concern of the men who had ruined it with their military paraphernalia, particularly their infernal flying machines. Now Crawford watched one of the pilots tinkering inside the cockpit of his aeroplane, an old black-daubed BE2c biplane, and spoke his thoughts out loud. The pilot, a man barely in his twenties, with wavy hair and a wisp of a moustache, straightened up and addressed his accuser. He tapped the Lewis gun mounted above the cockpit.

'If you don't clear off I'll turn this bloody thing on you.'

The young pilot was Lt William Leefe Robinson, flight commander of B flight, 39 Squadron. The squadron belonged to the Royal Flying Corps' new Home Defence Wing and Tom Crawford's requisitioned field, part of what locals knew as Sutton's Farm, was now the military's prosaically designated Landing Ground No.II. The area had been chosen for its flatness and good drainage. Two miles to the northeast lay the Essex town of Hornchurch.

The establishment of the Home Defence Wing was the latest attempt to thwart the almost unchallenged night raids on England by the Kaiser's prowling Zeppelins. Since the first tentative probings in early 1915, lack of enemy response and increasing experience had boosted the confidence of

the airship commanders. The bombs dropped from the Zeppelin gondolas had killed or injured hundreds of people, mostly civilians, and damaged or destroyed untold thousands of pounds' worth of property, even though a good proportion of the bombs missed their intended targets.

Londoners had had their first real taste of what was to come on 8 September 1915 when Heinrich Mathy, commander of Naval Zeppelin L13, wreaked a trail of havoc and death over the city. His ship, one of an attacking force of three, had enjoyed the most spectacular success with a lethal mix of incendiaries and high explosives. Newspaper headlines screamed 'Murder By Zeppelin' and deplored the capital's feeble defence capability. Mathy had easily evaded the aimless sprinkling of anti-aircraft shells and had not been troubled by the handful of Royal Naval Air Service aircraft sent up to find him as he cruised over the city raining down destruction. The official account of the night's skirmishes included the even more shameful: 'Royal Flying Corps. No action'.

And yet the sinister behemoths were not invulnerable. Their crewmen were all too aware of the vast gas bags crowded in the vessel's flimsy envelope over their heads, each constraining the lifting force of thousands of cubic metres of highly inflammable hydrogen. A careless spark could touch off an inferno worse than the fires of hell, as could a lucky shell from a hostile gun. With the War To End Wars only a few months old, Flt Lieutenant Marix had flown his RNAS Sopwith Tabloid from Antwerp to bomb the Zeppelin base at Düsseldorf, successfully incinerating Z9 in its hangar. And the following year Flt Sub-Lieutenant Warneford had attacked a returning raider over Ghent and brought it down in flames with bombs from his Morane monoplane. The Germans withdrew their fragile monsters to safer havens out of range of enemy aircraft.

But important men had faith in the ability of the airships to cause material and psychological damage to the hated *Engländer*. There was old Count Zeppelin himself, a Württemberger whose career as a cavalry officer in the German army had stalled after his outspoken criticism of the predominance of Prussians in the upper echelons. His frustration had driven his genius into darker realms of inspiration. He would build a fleet of aerial

warships which could drop bombs on the enemies of the Hohenzollern Reich or bring soldiers to fight them. No less enthusiastic was *Führer der Luftschiffe* Strasser of the Imperial German Navy, who had no doubt that it should be England that felt the deadly sting of the Count's invention. Commander Mathy had obliged him handsomely.

Responsibility for the defence of Britain lay with the Royal Navy. No doubt spurred on by the anger of affronted citizens, the Board of Admiralty took steps to improve the defences. Admiral Sir Percy Scott was given the task of finding solutions. He came to the conclusion that not only the anti-aircraft guns should be deployed more effectively but also that aeroplanes flown by specially trained pilots should be part of the shield. But other voices favoured the guns over the aeroplanes and the Board of Admiralty approved this strategy. The few RNAS machines allocated for defence would be mainly in the hands of pilots not experienced enough to serve in units abroad.

Among those who had personally witnessed Mathy's attack in the autumn of 1915 was the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener himself. Bypassing the machinations of the Navy's defence committee, he charged the Royal Flying Corps with the responsibility of stopping the Zeppelins. Sir David Henderson, Director-General of Military Aeronautics, wearily reminded Kitchener that home defence was the Navy's job. But the Secretary of State would not be denied. Aeroplanes, pilots and landing grounds must be found. Thus it came about that farmer Crawford lost some of his pasture when the military powers picked it out as one of the spots from which to launch aeroplanes against Zeppelins attacking London from the most direct approach.

The addition of Sutton's Farm and Hainault Farm (Landing Ground No. III) brought to a total of six the RFC airfields defending London, the others being Northolt, Hounslow, Joyce Green and Dover. RNAS aircraft would operate from Chelmsford, Maidstone, the Isle of Grain, Hendon and Chingford. Locations for extra emergency landing grounds included Hyde Park, Regent's Park and Buckingham Palace. More searchlights and better and more numerous anti-aircraft guns were demanded by Sir Percy Scott to improve further the capital's defence capability.

Meanwhile the Zepps kept coming, able to harrass London with impunity. October 13th 1915 was a perfect night for the marauders, moonless, with the anticyclonic southerly wind a mere whisper. Mathy and four other commanders pointed their ships westward. London, with its half-hearted dim-out, would be simple to find, despite the forecasters' warning of fog patches and scattered cloud. Von Buttlar in L11 failed to make the rendezvous over the Haisboro Lightship and the others pressed on without him. The idea was to fan out as they approached the target and to attack from different directions to cause maximum confusion. In the brand new L15 Commander Breithaupt was seemingly undeterred by the defending guns despite the evident increase in their numbers. His high explosives ripped into London's heart, devastating theatres, ripping up roads and shattering gas and water mains. Horrified citizens watched the orgy of destruction by the light of buildings set on fire by Breithaupt's bombs. The thunder of the defending guns only compounded their terror.

At Sutton's Field Second Lieutenant John Slessor had been asked to prepare for anti-Zepp patrol, but could do nothing expect rail against the thick fog which kept him on the ground. His frustration was heightened by telephone calls from the War Office advising him of Zeppelin sightings. But soon after nine o'clock the fog cleared and Slessor, guided by a line of petrol flares, lifted his BE2c into the blackness to search for the intruder. Very soon he spotted a Zeppelin hovering well above him and started a laborious climb towards his adversary. His weapons were incendiary bombs which had to be pushed down a tube in the cockpit floor. Full of petrol, the bombs were supposed to ignite as they left the tube and catch the airship's skin by means of hooks. But before he could attack the Germans heard his engine and saw his exhaust flames. The Zeppelin released a cloud of water ballast and easily soared out of range, escaping into cloud. Unbekown to Slessor it was Breithaupt's ship. The commander was checking his position after his successful raid on central London. The young RFC pilot caught no further sight of the enemy that night. To rub salt into the wound the Sutton's Farm searchlight, switched on to help him land in the fog, merely blinded him at the

critical moment. His BE2c hit the edge of the field, crumpling its wing tip and damaging its undercarriage.

The night had belonged to the Germans. They had got away with it again, even though the intensified barrage from the defending guns had troubled them more than before, despite its inaccuracy. First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill had promised a 'swarm of hornets' to rebuff the attackers. Where had they been, Londoners wanted to know, when Breithaupt, Mathy and the others were devastating their city and killing their fellow citizens?

As winter approached it was the weather rather than British guns and aircraft that kept the Zeppelins in their hangars. The War Office and the Admiralty had yet to agree on a coordinated policy for home defence. The Army was willing to accept responsibility but lacked sufficient pilots. Those completing their training were desperately needed to make up depleted strength on the Western Front. Nevertheless, the airship commanders had begun to respect the ever-increasing potency of the capital's anti-aircraft barrage. On 31 January 1916 a fleet of nine Zepps gave London a wide berth and pointed their bulbous noses towards the Midlands. Despite the misty weather, populated areas which had not been adequately blacked out gave them targets on which to drop their bombs. Seventy people were killed and over one hundred injured. But luck abandoned Commander Loewe in L19. Out of fuel, he was forced to ditch in the North Sea. A passing British trawler spotted the wreck but ignored the shouted pleas from Loewe to save his crew, all of whom had survived the crash but who were now frozen from exposure. Soon afterwards the Zepp sank, taking its wretched crewmen to a watery death.

No doubt this latest raid concentrated the minds of War Committee members when they met on 10 February. Agreement was reached that there should be yet more guns and searchlights and more aeroplanes allocated to air defence, especially in the Midlands and the North, the new hunting grounds of the Zeppelins. Slowly, in pitifully small numbers, BE2c's found their way to the training squadrons detailed for defence duties.

But it was the South's turn again on 31 March 1916. Fearful East Anglians heard the menacing drone of propellers over their heads as four bomb-laden invaders cruised to their targets inland. Mathy's L13 headed for Stowmarket, meaning to attack the munitions factory there. In L15 Commander Breithaupt sought out the arsenal at Woolwich but several searchlights found him and pinned him against the night sky with their piercing beams. His boldness earned him an intense barrage of shells from the guns shielding the capital's eastern flank and he was forced to waste his bombs on open fields miles away from his target. At Hainault Farm a BE2c took off to intercept the raider. Its pilot was Lt Alfred Brandon, a New Zealander whose total time in the air amounted to a paltry thirty hours and whose only night flying experience was two dusk landings.

L15 had not escaped unscathed from the anti-aircraft shells exploding round it. The great ship was bleeding hydrogen from several punctured cells and was losing height. Now the novice Brandon found the wounded vessel and manoeuvred his cumbersome aeroplane over it, trying to ignore the hail of machine gun bullets streaming towards him from the ship as he approached. He released some of his incendiary darts and was disgusted to see that they had no effect whatsoever on the adversary. He tried to wheel round for another attack but disorientation in the pitch blackness took him away from his target and he caught no further sight of it.

That Breithaupt received no more attention from the luckless Brandon was scant comfort. He ordered his wireless operator to transmit that the ship had been hit and that Ostend should keep a listening watch in case they were unable to get back home. At the same time a message came over the air from Mathy. L13 too had suffered damage and was turning back.

The transmissions were picked up by the wireless operators in L14 and L16, wandering around to the east of London. Böcker was undeterred, although he was careful to keep his ship away from the lethal fireworks peppering the sky over the capital. He found his way to the oil storage tanks at Thames Haven and dropped a mixture of high explosives and incendiaries. Little damage was done. Soon afterwards he turned his ship for home. Peterson, less confident, abandoned his mission as soon as he picked up the

message from L15. His bombs whistled down on the militarily insignificant town of Bury St Edmunds and then he too flew out to sea.

In contrast to Peterson the cold, professional Mathy in the damaged L13 was still finding targets, aiming his bombs on anti-aircraft gun sites and aerodromes. The lightened ship was able to climb away despite leaking gas bags and having accomplished his task Mathy ordered his navigator to steer for the Dutch coast and home.

Breithaupt was in worse shape. His L15 was not only losing its lift, but the ruptured gas bags were located in the middle of the ship, straining the lattice of light aluminium girders. Limping homewards, the ship's structure finally gave way and it fell into the sea broken-backed twenty miles to the east of Foulness. Most of the crew survived and were lucky enough to be rescued by a British armed trawler which transferred them to the custody of a destroyer. The Germans were brought ashore at Chatham, the first Zeppelin fliers to be captured. It was a triumph of sorts for the sorely tried populace of England.

A stalemate had been reached. German Army Zeppelins appeared over England again on 25 April but only Commander Linnarz in LZ97 got anywhere near London, where he was repulsed by intense gunfire. Two 39 Squadron BE2c's also found the invader. Lt Leefe Robinson from Sutton's Farm opened fire while still 2000 feet below the airship but it easily climbed out of range of his bullets. An aeroplane from Hounslow, flown by Captain Arthur Harris, (who would later be renowned as supremo 'Bomber Harris' in the Second World War) prepared to attack in turn but its gun jammed as soon as the pilot started firing. Linnarz escaped, surprised and shaken by the warmth of his reception, and hurried back to the coast, guns blazing after him all the way.

2 May saw a combined fleet of Army and Navy Zeppelins in British skies. Scotland and the North of England felt the explosion of bombs as the airships sought out naval bases. But no serious damage was done and the cost was dear. One of the returning ships crashed on the Norwegian coast and was destroyed. Two days later L7, attacking the British Fleet in the North Sea, was shot down in flames by the light cruiser *Galatea*. The Germans

called a halt to offensive operations until the new L30 class Zeppelins were available in the summer.

39 Squadron's headquarters were at Hounslow aerodrome. Here, the officer commanding, Major Higgins, organised the disposition of men and equipment at the squadron's bases, including the newer satellite aerodromes at Sutton's Farm and Hainault Farm. The need for better pilot training and effective ammunition had at last been realised. Inexperience among pilots and poor runway lighting made night operations hazardous, particularly when the weather was bad. Major Higgins brought new flares into service and introduced longer flare paths to assist pilots trying to take off or land in fog.

It had long been mistakenly believed that the difficulty experienced in setting a Zeppelin on fire was because the exhaust gases from the ship's engines were pumped round the gas bags, thereby excluding oxygen and preventing any incendiary device from setting off combustion of the hydrogen. The BE2c's of 39 Squadron were now carrying drums of Buckingham ammunition for their Lewis guns. These were explosive-incendiary bullets designed to rip through outer skin and inner gas bags to allow air to mix with the hydrogen and ignite it. Interspersed with the Buckingham bullets were tracer shells to assist with aiming.

In July and August German Navy Zeppelins nibbled at England's eastern fringes, meeting little resistance but achieving nothing of significance, except that L24 killed ten people in Hull. Among the raiders was Mathy, familiarising himself with the recently built L31. On 24 August Mathy decided that London should feel the potency of his new charge. He probed as far west as Greenwich, wrecking houses, killing nine people and injuring forty. Seven RFC and eight RNAS aeroplanes were sent up to intercept Mathy and the other raiders. Only one found a Zeppelin to attack. A 50 Squadron pilot from Dover saw the searchlights pick out L32, Peterson's new ship. But once more the enemy was too high and Woodhouse's bullets fell short. And once more the British newspapers rebuked the Army for its dereliction of duty.

The first link in the air defence chain was the Admiralty wireless station at Hunstanton on the east shore of the Wash. Here telegraphists had the task of listening for transmissions sent from Zeppelins. The Germans evidently

saw no need to keep radio silence when the huge grey airships set off on their missions. Many signals included the ships' identification letters and now and then a careless commander would let slip the name of the target. The transmissions were in code but the skilled cryptographers in the Admiralty's Old Building in Whitehall invariably deciphered them without too much trouble.

On the afternoon of 2 September, nine days after Mathy's foray over the East End, Hunstanton began picking up Zeppelin signals and relaying them by telephone to the Admiralty. With southern England oppressed by murky weather an attack seemed unlikely. But the decoded messages told a different story. Some included the ominous phrase 'only HVB on board'. The *Handelsschiffsverkehrsbuch* was a basic naval code book and a signal to the effect that only this book was carried implied that more secret code books had been left at base. This precaution in turn signified that the Zepps would be over territory where, if brought down, the code books would be of merely limited use to an enemy. Therefore 'only HVB on board' meant England.

More suprisingly, the cryptographers discovered that the fleet numbered eighteen ships, with the German Army and Navy mounting a coordinated attack. At 9.15 in the evening GHQ Home Forces ordered air raid action and soon afterwards the first two marauders were seen approaching Haisboro Lightship where they loitered, giving the others a chance to catch up. The raiders' first bombs fell near the RNAS station at Bacton, on the Norfolk coast. The searchlights there felt for the attackers but could only splash light on the broken layer of cloud hiding them.

When Sutton's Farm received the air raid action order a fog was settling on the field. First watch had fallen to Lt Leefe Robinson, who now supervised the preparation of BE2c No 2693 for its two-hour patrol while airmen lit the flare path. The young pilot's first decision was whether the visibility was adequate for a safe take-off. The problem of finding the field again when his stint was over was for the moment disregarded. A glance at the flares, flickering in the fog. Up at the black heavens. No 2693 was ready and waiting, dripping with condensation, ammunition drums full. Yes, it was time to look for Zepps.

An airman pulled the big four-bladed prop through several compressions to suck mixture into the cold cylinders and then Robinson switched on the ignition. The airman, sweating with his exertions despite the cold, heaved the successive blades more vigorously and eventually the engine caught. The pilot warmed it up and waved chocks away. He lined up with the flares and opened his throttle fully. No 2693 trundled over the dirty grass, picked up its tail and took off into the fog. As Robinson hoped, he was soon climbing into clearer air, but there were no Zepps to be seen.

While the RFC pilot was stoging around fruitlessly in the murk an invisible Zeppelin was sowing mayhem on the north-eastern outskirts of the city he and his colleagues were supposed to be defending. But then searchlights at Finsbury Park and Victoria Park picked out the raider and gave something for the gunners on the ground to aim at. The airship yawed her bow to the east and tried to shake off the attentions of the defenders. Robinson, patrolling at a cold, lofty 13,000 feet saw the illuminated raider and turned his aeroplane towards it. But suddenly a bank of cloud swallowed the quarry and the pilot and ground gunners lost contact. Angry, Robinson wove through the dark sky, peering for another sight of the enemy, knowing from past experience that he would probably be disappointed. Reluctantly he returned to his patrol with the realisation that the fuel remaining in his tank would not keep him airborne for much longer.

Luck! A wandering searchlight happened to catch a Zepp and splashed it with its dazzling beam. For the second time Robinson pushed his throttle wide and aimed the BE2c's blunt nose at the target, trying to ignore the buffeting of shrapnel shells bursting around him. Another pilot from Sutton's Farm and one from Hainault also saw the illuminated Zepp and closed in on it.

This time Robinson was careful to keep the ship in sight. He flew under its nose and sprayed a drum full of bullets along the length of the huge silver cigar. Nothing happened. Quickly changing drums, he turned to make another pass. He could see his tracer stabbing the hull but incredibly the Zepp seemed completely unscathed, cruising serenely in the night sky. Robinson loaded a third drum onto the Lewis and manoeuvred for another attack,

wondering if his tactics were wrong. Maybe concentrated fire would do the trick. He emptied the drum into one spot near the stern. This time his bullets did what they were designed to do. Hydrogen spilled from the shredded gas bags and mingled with the surrounding air and an incendiary triggered combustion.

Thinking at first he had failed again, Robinson suddenly saw a reddish glow inside the Zepp's skin. Immediately huge flames leapt from the stricken ship, infinitely more brilliant than the searchlights. Within seconds the ghastly inferno was sinking earthwards trailing angry red sparks, visible from Staines to Southend. Thousands of feet below, Londoners watching the battle cheered and sang and engine drivers blew their whistles.

The man responsible was stunned by what he had had done, conflicting feelings of horror and exhilaration swamping his mind. Adding to the fiery spectacle, he shot red stars from his Very pistol and dropped a parachute flare. He headed for home, managed to spot the Sutton's Farm flares through the mist and landed on the last of his fuel, too tired and cold to celebrate his feat. It was quarter to three in the morning. Colonel Holt from the RFC's Adastral House phoned to congratulate the pilot and to remind him to write his report before he went to bed. Grudgingly, Britain's newest hero complied.

The victim of the night dropped to the ground and its glowing wreckage hit a field at Cuffley, just east of Potters Bar. A wooden-framed Army Schütte-Lanz ship, it burnt away to nothing except charred debris and soot blackened wire. Some of the smouldering lumps found by firemen and police who had rushed to the site proved to be the grisly remains of the ship's crewmen.

The ball of flame in the black sky had also been witnessed by the commanders of other Zeppelins. The prospect of their own incineration melted their resolve and they immediately ran for home, L16 chased by a British aeroplane. Peterson, already a worried man because of his wife's ill health, lost control of himself. Believing that the burning ship was his friend Mathy's, the distraught commander burst into tears. He abandoned his mission and jettisoned his bombs on innocent Hertford as he sped homewards.

The fiery downing of a Zeppelin was a catharsis for London. For too long its citizens had huddled in cellars and under tables when the Uhlan monsters had been unloading their deadly cargoes on their city. Memories of past failure were instantly purged by the highly visible destruction of one of the invaders. People named 3 September 'Zepp Sunday' and Leefe Robinson became an instant celebrity. A grateful nation awarded him the Victoria Cross and promoted him to Captain. Prize money poured in, totalling more than £4000. The young pilot treated himself to a new Vauxhall car.

At Nordholz, the German Naval Airship base, Strasser decided to take the initiative back. In his view the loss of the Shütte-Lanz was the result of Army incompetence. The Navy would force the enemy to respect German military might. On 23 September eleven Navy ships set off for England. Eight were briefed to attack targets in the Midlands and North, but three old hands were going to punish London. Mathy and Peterson were commanding L31 and L32 and the trio was completed by L33, a new ship with Böcker in charge. Streatham, Brixton, Kennington and Leyton all reeled from the explosions of Mathy's bombs. The commander's new tactic of blinding searchlight crews with flares dropped from his ship proved highly effective. Bombs gone, the veteran steered for the coast and left England just south of Yarmouth, his faithful L31 completely unharmed.

Böcker was less fortunate. He aimed his bombs at Sutton's Farm but they exploded near Hornchurch, well away from their target. He made his way south and began attacking East Ham and Bromley but a withering barrage of anti-aircraft fire deflected him back to the north east. The guns had made their mark and L33 was in trouble, with holed gas bags and a damaged propeller. Worse was to come. As the wounded beast struggled home it was intercepted by 2nd Lt Brandon, patrolling from Hainault Farm. Brandon attacked with his Lewis gun but with no result. He turned back, thinking to fire his Le Preur rockets at the floundering hull but lost his target in the blackness. It made no difference. Despite shedding water ballast L33 was sinking fast. Böcker ordered his crewmen to throw loose equipment overboard to lighten it. It was soon obvious that a sea crossing was out of the question and the stricken ship bumped to earth three miles from Mersea. Although the

Zeppelin caught fire, most of its hydrogen had already leaked away and Böcker and his crew scrambled uninjured away from the wreck. They gave themselves up to the police.

L32 had also been buffeted by shrapnel as Peterson flew northwards over Kent towards Dartford. On the other side of the Thames the searchlights and guns found him again. Hurriedly he dropped bombs on Aveley and turned eastwards towards Tilbury. But tonight there was no escape. Brandon, still patrolling after losing his first contact, saw Peterson's ship caught in the light beams. He steered towards his new target, closing as quickly as he could. Then he saw that another pilot had already got there. It was 2nd Lt Fred Sowrey from Sutton's Farm.

Sowrey's Lewis had already spat out two drumfuls of ammunition, the pilot weaving to avoid the ship's machine gun fire as he attacked. Emulating his friend Leefe Robinson's strategy he concentrated his third drum at one spot on the hull. A light glimmered inside the skin and suddenly the ship was afire. Like the ill-fated Schütte-Lanz it sank earthwards with dreadful pyrotechnic grace as all on board, including the luckless Peterson, were burnt to death.

Despite the loss of L32 and L33 the battle between London and the Zeppelins was not yet over. A week afterwards eleven airships set course for England. But only the obsessive Mathy steered for the capital city. He approached from the north but heavy gunfire stopped him in his tracks at Cheshunt, where he dropped most of his bombs. 2nd Lt Tempest from Sutton's Farm, on patrol at 15,000 feet, spotted L31 as the searchlights held it in their beams. He in turn had been seen by the Germans. Mathy was lower than the aeroplane rushing towards him. He dropped more bombs and started to climb out of trouble. The two adversaries were at about the same height when Tempest began his attack, spraying incendiary bullets into the ship. It lit up 'like an enormous Chinese lantern', as his report later described it, and burst into flame. To avoid the burning wreck threatening to engulf him Tempest had to spin his BE2c out of its way.

It was the end of Mathy and it was the end of Zeppelin attacks on London. The Germans, in a sinister precursor of what was to come a quarter

of a century later, began instead to send large conventional bomber aircraft to continue the assault. There were occasional Zeppelin sorties over other parts of England but results were patchy and the cost was dear. L34 was set on fire on her maiden raid. On the same night L21 fell burning into the North Sea. The following June L48 met a similar fate. In the so-called 'Silent Raid' on 17 October 1917 the ships flew in at 20,000 feet to stay out of range of guns and aeroplanes. L45 killed 31 people and did some damage but did not survive the mission. Engine failure and gale force winds combined to bring the ship down in France, where it crashed. Two other Zeppelin casualties fell to the ground in France, L50 in a crash and L44 after it had been set on fire by anti-aircraft guns. The crews of L45 and L50 lived to tell the tale but the wretches on L44 were killed.

The final Zeppelin foray came on 5 August 1918. Flt Lt Cadbury, based at the RNAS station at Great Yarmouth, took off in a DH4 to intercept airships spotted hovering out to sea. Both Cadbury and his observer, Leckie, had previous experience of attacking Zepps. Now the formation of three ships saw the aeroplane closing on them and turned away northwards. Cadbury caught up with one of them and attacked head-on, aiming his tracer into the ship's nose. Flames shot out and wrapped themselves round the dying vessel as it fell towards the sea. The two companion Zeppelins managed to escape, one of them after being hit by Cadbury's bullets. Luckily for the Germans the DH4's gun jammed before he could dispatch them, too, to a fiery death.

Cadbury's victim turned out to be L70. Its destruction by fire was especially symbolic because its commander was the man whose faith in the Zeppelins never wavered, *Führer der Luftschiffe* Peter Strasser. The death of Strasser was the death of the Zeppelins.

This article first appeared in 'Aeroplane Monthly' in 1996 under the title 'Slayers of the Uhlan Dragons'.

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