

# THE ZEPPELINS OF COGNELÉE AND THE 'FIRST BLITZ'

Jean-François Husson with the collaboration of Dennis Abbott

Germany launched terrifying Zeppelin raids on Britain from occupied Belgium during the First World War. This is the story of one of these bases and of the race between the German Navy and Army to be the first service to bomb London – a race that failed to change the course of the conflict.

During the First World War, Cognelée, a village a few kilometres north of Namur, was home to a Zeppelin base – the only one in occupied Belgium run by the Kaiser's Navy. The German Navy hoped the base would enable it to strike against London before the Army could.

## A deep-rooted naval rivalry

If Franco-German tensions on the eve of the war were about "revenge" following the French defeat of 1870-71 and colonial policy disputes (notably the Tangier crisis in 1905 and Agadir crisis in 1911), German-British tensions were linked to the arms race, with Germany set on equipping itself with a navy to compete with the Royal Navy and thus become London's equal on the international stage. The policy, initiated by Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, was

implemented by the naval laws of 1898 and 1900. Zeppelins and other airships were one of the instruments of this policy. After von Tirpitz's initial interest in airships as reconnaissance aircraft for the fleet, the Marine-Luftschiff-Abteilung, or Marine Airship Division, was set up in 1912 and became official in May 1913.

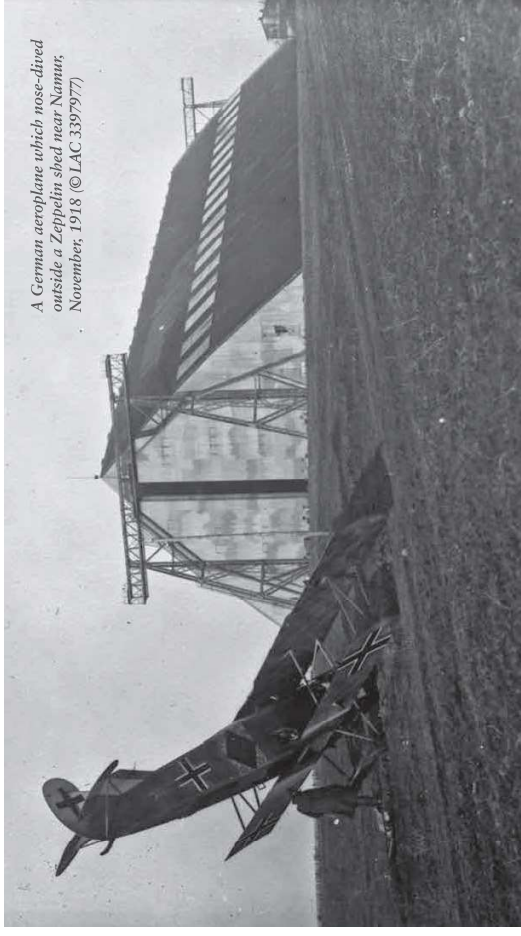
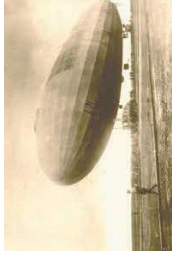
In addition to this essential reconnaissance role was a second: the ability of Zeppelins to carry out strategic bombing raids. Even before the war, the Germans saw their airships as the best way to strike Britain, protected by the sea and the Navy. Britain feared the Zeppelins because they could launch a direct attack on UK territory, while the heart of Germany was virtually unreachable.

Striking Britain served a dual purpose for the German Navy: on one hand, to bomb naval or port installations, in coastal ports or in London (the docks, Admiralty headquarters); on the other, to target the capital itself, with a view to terrorising the civilian population and damaging morale.

After an initial reluctance to accept his military leadership's urgent requests to attack London and reservations about the targets, Kaiser Wilhelm II gradually changed his mind in view of operational realities.

## The Naval Airship Division at war

Aircraft were divided in Germany between the Army and Navy. Unlike Britain, which merged the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) to form the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1918, the two services



A German aeroplane which nose-dived outside a Zeppelin shed near Namur, November, 1918 (© LAC 3397977)

remained separate in Germany – regularly partners and competitors throughout the war.

The Navy's Zeppelin bases were located in northern Germany, from Wildhausen and Ahlhorn in the south to Tondern in the north. They were close to the main ports and the expected fields of action for fleet support missions: the North Sea between northwest Germany, Denmark, Norway and northeast Britain, where the battles of Dogger Bank (1915) and Jutland (1916) took place, and the Baltic Sea. The Navy also had two bases on the Western Front, at Cognelée and Düren (North Rhine-Westphalia), as well as bases further east: Wainoden, Seerappen, Jüterbog and even Jamboli in Bulgaria.

German Army airship bases, in Dusseldorf and Spich, were more oriented towards France, with additional bases set up after the occupation of Belgium in Gontrode, Evere, Berchem-Sainte-Agathe and Etterbeek, as well as just over the border in Maubeuge, where French military installations had been taken.

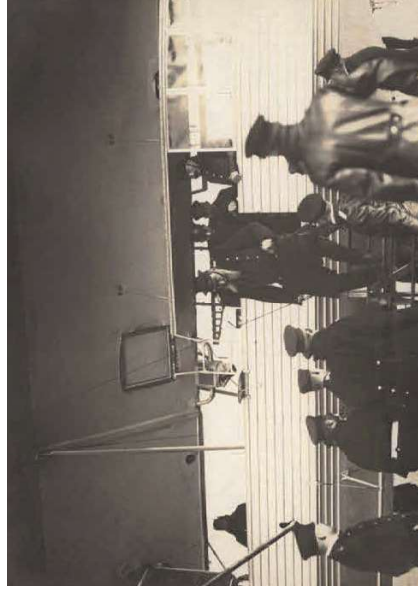
The bases in and around Belgium made targets in southern Britain more accessible, with access to ports such as Southampton which were unreachable from other bases.



A Martinsyde G 100 fighter bomber © IWM (Q 57579)



German bomber AEG G.II at Cognelée in November 1918, ready to be handed over to the Allies (Photo Australian Armed Forces)



Grand Admiral von Tirpitz after a flight in the Imperial Navy Zeppelin L 1, 1912 or 1913 (Wikicommons)

Some Zeppelin bases passed from one service to the other and/or were used by both services. This was notably the case of Cognelée, a Navy base regularly used by the Army.

It is worth noting that the term “Zeppelin” covers several types of airships, produced by different companies. The German Navy had 62 Zeppelins of various models as well as eight Schütte-Lanz airships, three Percival and a single Gross-Basenach.

It is one thing to have airships, but it is also necessary to house them. The German Navy ordered a series of new hangars in September 1914, three of which were to be in Cognelée, given that the Battle of Antwerp was still raging. Why set up a base so far from the German fleet? For Douglas H. Robinson, author of *The Zeppelin in Combat*, the establishment of a base so far from the usual fleet bases was proof of Navy command's determination to beat the Army in carrying out the first raid on Britain.

As plans for an attack on London were drawn up in October 1914, Rear Admiral Philipp, commander of the German naval air force, was opposed to the use of Cognelée (then under construction) for such raids, fearing it would trigger possible unrest.

If this risk did not materialise, another emerged. Over-optimistically, the German Navy planned to have its new hangars in place by the end of October or early November 1914, but none were completed on time. In the event, the consequences were not too damaging as the production of airships was also delayed.

At Cognelée, the first hangar (Friedrich) was completed in April 1915 and the other two (Baldur and Eitel) in June. By this time, the Royal Naval Air Service aircraft based at Dunkirk were fully on the offensive, targeting German naval installations on the Belgian coast but also inland (including the bases around Brussels and Cognelée). It was therefore too risky for the Germans to station airships close to the coast.

German activity at Cognelée was also determined by the level of manpower available, with 490 men based there in November 1914, 443 in May 1915 and 220 in January 1916.

## Raids on Britain

The first bomb dropped on Britain during the war was from a Friedrichshafen FF 29 seaplane flying over Kent on 24 December 1914. Early seaplane raids were followed by Zeppelin raids on coastal



*The L.Z.37 shot down by Flight Sub-Lieutenant Warnford, the first Zeppelin destroyed by an allied pilot. Oil on canvas, Gordon F. Crossby, 1919 © IWM (Art.IWM ART 3077)*

towns and ports from January 1915; London was targeted from May 1915 in what was later called the ‘1st Blitz’, in reference to ‘The Blitz’ during the Second World War.

A first raid on London, launched by the Navy from Dusseldorf on 26 February 1915, failed. A further, equally unsuccessful, attempt was made in March. Although the Navy would carry out several

more raids on Britain – the last on 5 August 1918 – operations from Cognelée were largely the responsibility of the Army.

The Army won its race with the Navy, with L.Z. (Luftschiff Zeppelin) 38 the first to bomb London on the night of 31 May to 1 June 1915.



*Very first Bomb on London*



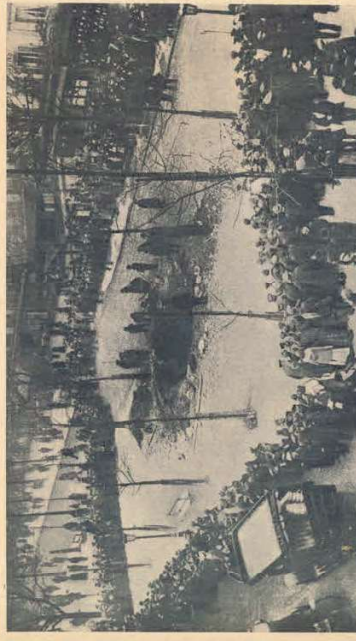
*Flight Sub-Lieutenant Warnford (IWM)*

*(Right) Press echo in Russia of the damage caused by the attack on Paris by L.Z.77 and L.Z.79 in January 1916.*

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ЛЪТОПИСЬ ВОЙНЫ 1914–15–16 ГГ.

№ 84



*Париж. Бомба, брошенная с целесильна, пробившая люкверху дирижаблскую лупу.*

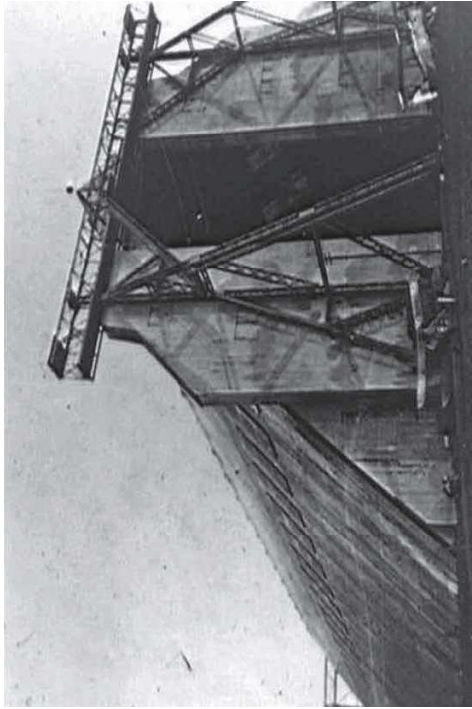
L.Z. 38, based in Evere and commanded by Major Erich Linnarz, was later destroyed in its hangar during a British attack.

The 31 May raid also involved L.Z. 37, based at Cognelée, however damage to the airship's outer shell meant it had to turn back without completing its mission. L.Z. 37 was attacked a few days later by Flight Sub-Lieutenant Rex Warnford VC of the RNAS on the night of 6/7 June 1915. After chasing the airship from the coast, he managed to bomb the Zeppelin and set it on fire over Sint-Amandsberg

*A plaque in London's Farringdon Road marking the site of a Zeppelin raid by L.Z. 74 (Photo: Christophe Braum, Wikicommons)*



*The Zeppelin L.Z. 77 that carried out some raids on England. © IWM (Q 58481)*



Fort Cognelee, Belgium  
1918-11. A German  
Zeppelin shed with Allied  
aircraft parked in front.  
(Original prints held with  
AWM Archive Store) (Donor  
M. Corbhill)

A Zeppelin  
Brought  
Down: The  
Fate of the  
L.Z.77 in  
France a  
Wholesome  
Warning -  
Illustrated  
London News  
March 4 1916

near Ghent. The ensuing explosion overturned Warneford's plane and stopped his engine. Forced to land behind enemy lines, he managed to repair and restart the plane before the Germans could capture him. Yelling "Give my regards to the Kaiser!", he took off and returned to base. Less than a fortnight later, 23-year-old Warneford was killed with an American journalist passenger when the right-hand wings of his aircraft collapsed in mid-air.

Another raid from Cognelee was that of L.Z. 74 on the night of 7/8 September 1915. L.Z. 74 was commanded by Hauptmann Friedrich George and

the mission was carried out jointly with S.L. (Schütte-Lanz) 2 based at Berchem-Sainte-Agathe. This third Zeppelin raid on London resulted in 18 dead and 28 wounded. L.Z. 74 flew over the Tower of London before dropping its bombs on districts south of the Thames, before returning to Belgium.

L.Z. 97, also belonging to the army, also carried out raids on London, Boulogne and Bucharest. Commissioned in April 1916 and withdrawn in 1917, it was based for a time at Cognelee.

As mentioned earlier, London was not the only target: the Navy also bombed port facilities. Hull was



Zeppelin airship engine nacelle (Felix Schwormstädt, watercolour, 1917 - coll. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz)



The Underworld: Taking cover in a Tube Station during a London air raid - 1918 (© IWM Art 935)

attacked by three Zeppelins on the night of 5 March 1916. One of these, L13, which took off from northern Germany, missed its target and returned to Cognelee.

### Paris, Verdun, ...

The Zeppelins at Cognelee also carried out operations in France. For example, L.Z. 79 attacked

the arms works at Le Creusot in eastern France during the night of 25-26 January 1916.

In preparation for the Battle of Verdun, a raid from Cognelee targeted Paris on the night of 29-30 January 1916. It was led by L.Z. 77, commanded by Hauptmann Alfred Horn, and L.Z. 79 commanded by Major Viktor Gaissert. L.Z. 77 was damaged and

reached Paris but did not cause any damage and returned to Cognée. L.Z. 79 dropped 2,500 kg of explosive bombs on the capital. It was attacked by French fighters but did not explode. The Zeppelin became difficult to control, however, and while attempting to return to German-held territory, it finally crashed at dawn near the Belgian city of Ath on 1 February, killing nine people on the ground, while the crew suffered no casualties.

A raid on 21 February 1916 against the Revigny railway junction, serving Verdun, was less favourable for the Zeppelin crews. It was carried out by four airships – L.Z. 77 (still commanded by Alfred Horn), S.L. VII, L.Z. 88 and L.Z. 95 (commanded by Friedrich George) – several of which left from Cognée. The airships met strong opposition. L.Z. 77 was hit by an incendiary shell and crashed at Brabant-le-Roi in northeast France with the loss of the crew and commander. L.Z. 95, following it, saw the burning airship and turned back for Cognée. It too was hit by Allied artillery and crashed at Daussoulx, not far from its base. The German authorities sought to conceal the two losses but this did not prevent the press in unoccupied territory from reporting them.

### British response

The raids on Britain did not go unanswered. The Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service deployed fighter squadrons both in England and at Dunkirk to meet the airship threat and attack German Zeppelin bases.

Particularly exposed because of their proximity to Allied airfields, the bases in Belgium were regularly targeted. Cognée was hit several times. On 3 August 1916, five Martinsyde G.100 fighter bombers from 27 Squadron RFC attacked Cognée and railway installations at Ronet, southwest of Namur. One of the bombers was shot down and its pilot, 20-year-old Lieutenant James Clifford Turner, was killed. He is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves section of Belgrade Cemetery in Namur. His funeral was conducted by the Germans with full military honours; a large civilian crowd attended despite orders against a patriotic demonstration.

Three weeks later, on 25 August 1916, two RNAS Sopwiths carried out another attack. Faced with a

particularly strong and accurate anti-aircraft defence, they were unable to hit the hangars. Operating nearly 200 kilometres from home was not without danger: the fuel safety margin was limited by the load of bombs each plane carried; on the way back, one of the aircraft ran out of fuel but managed to land in Holland.

Shortly after the Armistice, Namur and the surrounding region saw many British, Canadian and Australian troops passing through. Cognée welcomed several squadrons of the Royal Air Force: No 5, 7, 9, 43, 70 and 149, the last based there the longest, from 26 November to 24 December 1918. Two RAF airmen from this squadron died during this period and are buried in Belgrade cemetery.

### Assessment

It is clear that the Germans greatly overestimated the capabilities of the Zeppelins. While psychologically they inspired fear in the British population, particularly in London, they did not shake Britain's resolve to fight the war any more than the 1940 Blitz.

British casualties caused by Zeppelins in 1914-1918 were 557 killed and 1,358 wounded, while damage was estimated at £1.5 million at the time, or about £82 million today.

On a military level, fear of the raids diverted air defence resources which could not be allocated elsewhere. The most significant effect was on ammunition production, with an estimated loss of one sixth of total production during the period.

Finally, in its race with the Army to bomb London, the German Navy lost.

## MEDAL guide

### Second World War Medals

Full details of the Second War awards were originally given in a pamphlet issued by the Committee on the Grant of Honours Decorations and Medals in June 1946. Compared with the medals from previous campaigns the awards for the Second War were somewhat unimpressive, being a series of campaign stars, the War Medal and the Defence Medal. No individual could receive more than five campaign stars and the two other medals.

It was decided by the Honours Committee that, unlike First War awards, medals would not be named. This decision makes it difficult to validate awards to individuals unless there is a named gallantry medal or a preceding or post war campaign medal attached to a group.

#### The 1939 – 45 Star



This was awarded for service between the 3rd September 1939 and the 2nd September 1945. It hangs from a ribbon with equal bands of dark blue, red and light blue symbolising the Royal and Merchant Navies, the Army and the Royal Air Force.

The criteria for award were:

**Royal Navy** – six months service in areas of active operations. Members of the Fleet Air Arm could qualify by either six months afloat or under any of the qualification period for the RAF.

**Army** – six months service in an operational command. Airborne troops qualified if they had taken part in any airborne operation and had completed two months service in a fully operational unit.

**Royal Air Force** – operations against the enemy providing two months service had been completed in an operational unit. Non aircrew had to complete six months service in an area of an operational army.

**Merchant Navy** – six months service afloat providing at least one voyage was made through an operational area. Service performed during the Dunkirk evacuation qualified as did service in fishing vessels and coastal craft.

- Time spent as a prisoner of war also qualified regardless of length of service.
- A recipient of an honour, decoration, mention in despatches or King's Commendation in respect of operational service qualified regardless of length of service.
- Service in areas where troops were evacuated were also eligible – entry into the zone of operation being the only qualification.

#### Clasps to the 1939-45 Star



There were two clasps issued with this medal and were stitched on the ribbon. The first was for the Battle of Britain. This clasp was awarded to the crews of fighter aircraft who flew at least one operational sortie in the Battle of Britain – 10th July – 31st October 1940.

In February 2013 a new clasp was announced for Bomber Command crews following much lobbying on behalf of the veterans. The Bomber Command Clasp is granted to the aircrew of Bomber Command who served for at least six days, or completed a tour of operations, on a Bomber Command operational unit and flew at least one operational sortie on a Bomber Command operational unit from the 3 September 1939 to the 8 May 1945 inclusive. This applies to Servicemen after they have met the minimum qualification for the 1939-45 Star.

Tony Smith



Grave of Lt Turner, 27 Squadron RFC, shot during a raid on Cognée in Aug. 1916 (photo by the author).

*Further reading:* On the base: Liégeois, C. (2018). La base de Zeppelins de Cognée. In P. Bragard, V. Bruch, & C. Liégeois (Eds.), *Béton et zeppelins : Travaux militaires allemands à Namur, 1914-1918* (p. 120-223). Les Amis de la Citadelle de Namur (in French).

On the German Naval Airship Division: Robinson, D. H. (1994). *The Zeppelin in combat: A history of the German Naval Airship Division, 1912-1918*. Schiffer Military/Aviation History.

On Zeppelins raids: the series of books by Ian Castle and his website [www.iancastlezepelin.co.uk](http://www.iancastlezepelin.co.uk).  
On WWI air operations, mainly from the British side: Jones, H. A. (1928-1935). *The War in the Air. Being the Story of the part played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force* (vol. 2-5). Clarendon Press.

#### Battlefields today

The foundations of a few buildings and some blockhouses are the only remaining traces of the Cognée base. Temporary exhibitions are organised from time to time.

In London, several plaques mark the places where the bombs fell and, at the Imperial War Museum, the gallery dedicated to the WWI evokes both the naval rivalry between Germany and Great Britain and the Zeppelins bombings.