The Airship Near London

Making history on British turf with dirigible airships

 Six photographs from British photographer H. Scott Orr—gelatin silver prints depicting events in the air above Hertfordshire near London in the early morning of September 3, 1916—captured the event that would cast a certain pilot into instant fame, forever change the nature of airship warfare, and pave the way for an upswing in British homefront morale. The small photos depict the Schütte-Lanz SL-11, captained by Hauptmann Wilhelm Schramm, first as an imposing figure in the dark English sky and then as a deep-red fireball, hurtling to earth following the tactical victory achieved by British pilot Lt. William Leefe Robinson VC in destroying the airship using incendiary ammunition. The photographs bid a closer look at both the bombastic event itself and the psychological techniques at play, following an illumination on the function of German airships against the British Isles in the First World War and the British defense against them.

Germany, as in almost every other element when war broke out in 1914, was superior in air force, especially in the case of airships, boasting between its army and navy a collection of 13 airships in August 1914. They would ultimately produce 99 additional airships over the war’s entirety. Of the two military branches, the German navy held the greater arsenal of airships, with 78 of the final count of 112. While the fleet was composed of a variety of airships, of prime popular interest is the headlining Zeppelin and, more importantly for the photographs under study, the Schütte-Lanz (Beaubois, 89). Following a British attack upon and destruction of an airship in its own hangar, Germany issued a sort of manifesto for their airship operations, “[responding] with the order *‘Gott strafe England’* [‘God punish England’] … the British Isles became the regular and unremitting objective for German airship attacks” (ibid, 91). The navy-commanded airships soon took supremacy, performing extensive naval recon and improving upon the botched London bombings earlier attempted by the army’s airships (ibid, 92). The bombings were never extensive or meant to incur the catastrophic damage that the next World War’s bombing strafes would see, but were implemented in a rather more guerilla fashion, a method of throwing a wrench in England’s productive capabilities. As Henry Beaubois recounts in *Airships*:

Not only did these heavy and persistent bombing attacks boost the national pride and morale of the German people but, more important, they obliged the British chiefs-of-staff to keep a part of their air forces stationed in England. Another useful side-effect of these attacks from the German point of view was the disruption of war production by the incessant air raid warnings, during which time factories were closed down. In the eyes of the German High Command, these ends fully justified the large scale of the means[.] … The heaviest attack was on 2 September when a fleet of sixteen airships took off from their bases, bound for Britain. (101)

The large raid alluded to at the end of the passage is actually partly captured in Orr’s photos; the airship pictured is one of the 16. Before discussing the fate of the Schütte-Lanz 11, however, one should become acquainted with British air defenses at the time.

To put it bluntly, there was not much air defense. Beaubois states that “in the three years between 1915 and 1918, only three Zeppelins were shot down by anti-aircraft batteries whereas fourteen enemy airships were destroyed by fighter airplanes or seaplanes during attacks on England” (101). Why are these statistics so low? Indeed, the quoted passage alludes to the greater efficacy of airplanes in countering airships, as opposed to anti-aircraft guns, and this after Lt. Robinson first dropped an airship from the sky over England. The British defense, underwhelming as it initially was, actually began preparations almost immediately after the war broke out: “In early September 1914 Winston Churchill drew up the policy that was to guide the Admiralty in its task of defending the country from this aerial threat [dirigible airships]” (Whitehouse, 63). The general plan was to A. deny German access to the Channel using airplanes at the French and Belgian coasts, B. keep in “constant telegraphic and telephonic communication” between all plane squadrons, and C. keep a squadron of planes in England in order to fly to the defense of London when needed—“Churchill also emphasized that all available [anti-aircraft] guns be mounted at all key military and naval areas” (ibid, 64). The initial defense measures of 1915 were fruitless; slow plane squadrons rarely came across airships in a timely manner if at all, and anti-aircraft guns were difficult to aim and completely useless without searchlights on-target, which were in turn useless in cloudy conditions and could not always keep up with the airships or remain within light range (ibid, 66-7). Due to German subterfuge there was also an initial misunderstanding on how best to combat the airships:

“[T]he British were laboring under a belief that the main gas cells of a dirigible were surrounded by an envelope that was filled with an inert gas, so that any bullets that penetrated would simply mix the inert gas with the hydrogen, and no blast would result.” (ibid, 67)

Additionally, “It is interesting to note that up to this time it was not considered necessary to equip any of the anti-Zeppelin machines [planes] with rifles or machine guns” (ibid, 69). Lt. Robinson would use a machine gun a year later to destroy the first airship over Britain. This historic moment is captured in Orr’s photos, as is the restricted element of British defense.

 The first thing one notices in Orr’s photos are simple enough: first there is an airship, then there isn’t one. Closer analysis, however, reveals some telling details of the anti-air situation. Searchlights pepper the sky in all six images, and only one if any seem to be on-target. The night is also rather overcast, and the SL-11 seems to be taking a great risk by descending beneath cloud-cover, presumably to more effectively drop bombs. Despite this risky maneuver, one can see through the photos that the searchlights weren’t very effective, and thus the anti-aircraft guns were limited in what they could accomplish. Indeed, Lt. Robinson’s account of his operation reveals just how off-kilter the ground defenses were: “‘When I drew closer I noticed that the anti-aircraft fire was too high or too low, also a good many rose 800 feet behind—a few tracers went right over’” (Whitehouse, 149). Pairing the account with the photographs helps one visualize just how ineffective the anti-aircraft was. The photographs also give a good impression of how quickly the SL-11 could move and maneuver. Given the nature of cameras in 1916, one can only assume that Orr didn’t move between taking the photographs. That in mind, the only way to explain the jarring perspective shift that occurs between the first three photos is that the SL-11 itself is moving: by the third photo seeming to be quite a bit farther from the viewer than in the first. There is no indication at how much time passed between Orr’s photos, but the final three (of the airship falling) seem to have been taken in quick succession. By Lt. Robinson’s estimate from the earlier account, the SL-11 was around 12,000 feet above the ground when he shot it down, so it likely would have taken a few minutes to fall the distance of over two miles. Given that information one can assume, without the knowledge of any potential in-between negatives that Orr may have trashed during the exposure process, that the first three photos were also taken within minutes of each other. The airship’s speed is put in perspective with this information. Orr sent Lt. Robinson the photos and, a full month after the pictured events, on October 3, 1916, he would receive a warm response, with Lt. Robinson commenting on the “really magnificent pictures” and asking for three more sets to hand out to his friends. What Orr’s photos don’t capture is the fame or Victoria Cross that Lt. Robinson would receive after destroying the SL-11 and its 16-man crew. Lt. Robinson was an instant sensation. In his book *The Zeppelin Fighters* (copyright 1966), Arch Whitehouse states:

“Even today, if you ask any Elderly Englishman the name of the airman who brought down the first Zeppelin, he will with no hesitation of any sort reply, ‘Oh, that was that chap Leefe Robinson. … We’ll never forget that night.’” (79)

Whitehouse’s hypothetical account even includes the widely-dispersed bit of misinformation that the airship downed was a Zeppelin, rather than a Schütte-Lanz. It didn’t matter to the British people, though, what the airship was exactly, just that the dreaded thing was destroyed.

The British suffered under the influence of the German airships. Not by any great means—as earlier stated, their objectives over the British Isles included only small-scale bombing runs meant to briefly clog up British production for the war effort. Michael Howard, in his book *A Very Short Introduction to the First World War*, refers to them as a “dramatic nuisance,” but a nuisance that nevertheless “provided propagandists with further evidence of German ‘frightfulness.’” He goes on to say, referring specifically to the later German Gotha bombers but at large to Germany’s efforts in bombing London during the Great War: “The physical damage and casualties were slight but the moral effect was enormous” (86). For the first time in history, the British homefront was able to daily experience the horrors of the war across the Channel, even if just barely. Running the numbers, it’s clear that the Second World War brought those realities to the homefront in a markedly more visceral way, but one can only imagine the public’s reaction following the first ever bombing run on English soil on January 19, 1915, over Norfolk (Whitehouse, 69-70). Actually, Arch Whitehouse would have one believe that “there was no panic or frantic seeking of revenge” following the bombing, and that, indeed, some of the citizens cracked jokes, like “‘All I can say is, it was the biggest sausage I ever saw in my life,’” and “‘Just like a church steeple that has been blown over and is floating away.’” There was much speculation over the airship itself, but the sensationalist reactions were actually left to the Americans across the pond (ibid, 71). In her *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain refers only fleetingly to a diary entry of hers that described “the *excitement* at Oxford on May 31st over a big Zeppelin raid on London,” (italics mine) before moving on to other topics (157). This isn’t to say that there weren’t any British people who felt the vulnerability and horror as earlier described, but, as is the case with people in general, feelings were mixed. Indeed, any national feelings of dread regarding the airships may have been fully spun into triumphant ones following Lt. Robinson’s actions in the early hours of September 3, 1916: “Robinson’s [‘kill’] was staged high above the outskirts of London where millions looked up and beheld the first of a series of defeats that eventually drove the military dirigible out of the skies” (Whitehouse, 79-80). Indeed, German airship operations decreased following Lt. Robinson’s maneuver, and who can quantify the heartening effect that his triumph may have had on the British public in late 1916, during the worst times of the war and before the promise of eventual American support? Orr’s photographs may very well have captured an important turning point in the war for British homefront morale. At the very least, they certainly captured the moment of a great upswing in national morale.

H. Scott Orr’s photos are more than a curiosity, a cool oddity of an antiquated vehicle suffering the effects of an antiquated war. They actually mark the coming-of-age of British air defense, the meteoric rise to fame of Lt. William Leefe Robinson VC, the final days of German airship operations over England, and the moment an entire nation saw hope in the war, glittering redly in the sky and hurtling to the earth.

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