History Notebook
Number 7

'Somewhere over Essex'
The Zeppelin Raids on Essex
by Inspector Martyn Lockwood

Cartoon drawn by an unknown artist. The actual date this was drawn is uncertain although it is possibly 1915.
The prophecy was to come true
Source: Essex Police Museum
By the summer of 1916, the war in France had reached stalemate with both sides dug in facing each other in a war of attrition. At home an ever growing list of casualties appeared in the papers and families lived in dread of the knock from the telegram boy.

In this country the civilian population were experiencing at first hand the terrible effects of war. Raids by Zeppelins which took place under the cover of darkness, had begun on the night of 19 January, 1915, when Great Yarmouth was attacked. During 1915, raids on this country led to the deaths of over five hundred civilians. The public outcry was enormous - England had lost her island security. Counter measures were slow. Zeppelins were hard to shoot down and it was 1916 before an effective defensive system was established. Raids took place over Essex with Maldon and Heybridge being attacked on the 15/16 April, Southend on the 10/11 May and again on the 26/27 May, when three people were killed. In March, 1916, an attack took place at Braintree where four people were killed, and in April, Harwich was bombed. An early deterrent to these attacks took place at Southend when German prisoners of war were housed in Victoria Avenue.

Night fighters were used to combat the menace and in Essex No.39 Home Defence Squadron was established, flying from fields at Hainault, North Weald Bassett and Suttons Farm (Hornchurch) and No.37 Squadron flying from Goldhanger, Rochford and Stow Maries.

The first success against Zeppelins took place on the 2/3 September 1916 when a BE2c night fighter flown by Lt. W. Leefe Robinson, flying from Suttons Farm, intercepted and shot down the SL11, which eventually crashed at Cuffley, Hertfordshire, killing its crew of sixteen. At last people had something to celebrate, Leefe Robinson was a national hero awarded the Victoria Cross, and in addition some £4,200 in prize money, donated by a grateful public. However his fame was short-lived and he died in the influenza pandemic in 1918.

The next successes took place again over Essex on the night of the 23/24 September when a number of Zeppelins, including the new Super Zeppelins (L31, L32, L33 and L34), raided London and the Home Counties. These new airships 650 feet long, 75 feet in diameter and displacing some 50 tons were capable of a maximum 65 miles per hour and carried a bomb load of 5 tons.

L32, commanded by Oberleutnant Werner Peterson of the German Naval Airship Division, set out with the intention of attacking London, but the heavy barrage from anti-aircraft guns forced him to jettison his bombs over the River Thames.

Flying from Suttons Farm, Lt. Frederick Sowrey on routine patrol in a BE2c, spotted the L32 picked out by searchlights and commenced his attack. Firing repeatedly into the Zeppelin and despite being fired on by the enemy he was rewarded by the awesome spectacle of a rosy red glow within the heart of the airship. Seconds later the L32 was rocked by explosions and the vessel plunged earthwards, crashing at Snail's Hall Farm, Great Burstead, near Billericay. There were no survivors. For his actions Sowrey was awarded the DSO.

Picked up in the beams from the search-light, the action had been watched by cheering sightseers who rushed to the crash site in their thousands to gaze at the scene and gather what souvenirs they could, pieces of the Zeppelin being sold off at sixpence (6d) a time.

One of the first police officers to arrive at the scene was Inspector Allen Ellis from Billericay, who had watched the stricken airship crash. He cycled to the scene arriving some 10 minutes after the crash and was soon joined by special constables from Billericay and Little & Great Burstead and the constables from Hutton and Brentwood. The special constables under the charge of Chief Special Constable E. M. Magor were given the task of guarding the bodies of the crew until the arrival of the army when they were handed over to them.

The bodies of the twenty two crew were buried at Great Burstead with full military honours, but in 1966 were exhumed and re-buried at the German cemetery at Cannock Chase in Staffordshire.

The L33 commanded by Kapitan Alois Bocker, was on its first mission and bombed London causing the deaths of a number of civilians; but eventually it was hit by an anti-aircraft shell causing considerable damage. The Zeppelin
turned over the Essex countryside and above Chelmsford was attacked by a squadron of night fighters from Hainault Farm. Notwithstanding several hits the Zeppelin managed to elude its attackers. Despite jettisoning guns and equipment from the stricken airship, Bocker realised his craft was doomed and would not make the journey across the North Sea to its base.

The airship continued to lose height and eventually crash landed near New Hall Cottages, Little Wigborough, much to the alarm of the inhabitants who witnessed the dying moments of the giant airship. Deciding to set the ship on fire, Bocker knocked on the doors of the cottages to warn the families of his intentions. However the terrified people refused to open the door and finally Bocker gave up and set fire to the Zeppelin. He then gathered his crew together and in a body they marched off down the lane toward Peldon.

Travelling on his bicycle in the opposite direction, attracted by the fire, was Special Constable Edgar Nicholas who was surprised by the sudden appearance of a body of men marching along a lane at that hour of the morning. He dismounted and flashlight in hand asked Bocker whether he had seen a Zeppelin crash.

Bocker in perfect English asked him how many miles it was to Colchester. Nicholas replied, “About six”. He was thanked by Bocker and Nicholas in his subsequent report on the incident stated that he ‘at once recognised a foreign accent.’ The Germans continued their march followed by Nicholas. As they approached Peldon they were joined by Special Constable Elijah Traylor and Sergeant Ernest Edwards from Hatfield Board Oak, who was enjoying a few days rest in the area. The men considered their next move and eventually decided to escort the Germans to Peldon Post Office where they found the local constable, Pc 354 Charles Smith, who was busy trying to contact the military garrison at Colchester.

Pc Smith appears to have taken charge of the situation and formally arrested the German crew. Bocker asked Smith if he might use the telephone but the request was politely refused and he was told to march his men towards Mersea Island so they could be handed over to the military. Pc Smith led the way assisted by Special Constables Fairhead, Clement Hyam, Charles King, Elijah Traylor, Joseph May, Horace Charles Meade, Harry Beade and Edgar Nicholas and on route they were met by a military detachment and the prisoners were formally handed over to them.

Pc Smith was rewarded for his prompt actions by being promoted in the field to the rank of sergeant by the Chief Constable, Captain Unett that same day and awarded the coveted Merit Star. Force orders dated the 24 September
recorded the event thus;
'Pc Smith is promoted Sergeant and awarded the merit badge for coolness and judgment, in handing over to the Military Authorities, the Commander and crew of a Zeppelin…'

From that day he was known as ‘Zepp’ Smith and he died in 1977 at the grand old age of 94.

Sgt Edwards having handed over the prisoners to Smith, then decided to leave it to him and the special constables and returned home. This caused some raised eyebrows and Captain Unett sent a short, terse memo to the officer saying ‘it is understood you did not accompany the escort to Mersea Island. Why?’ His two page reply appears to have saved him and he retired from the force in 1924.

Such was the public euphoria at the destruction of two more Zeppelins that a public subscription raised money to present each of the police officers with an inscribed pocket watch - the one presented to Edgar Nicholas can be seen in the Essex Police Museum, together with other exhibits of that fateful night in September 1916.

At nearby Great Wigborough a baby daughter was born to Mr and Mrs Clark at about the same time as the L33 was set alight. At the suggestion of the doctor, Dr Salter, from Tolleshunt D’arcy, (himself a Chief Special Constable), who attended the delivery, the baby, was christened Zeppelina.

During both World Wars, the Special Constabulary gave valuable support to the police service, in the maintenance of law and order. Today Special Constables working alongside their regular colleagues still provide an integral part of the policing of Essex and give the public a level of service of which we can be proud.

Footnote: The L31 was shot down on 2 October by a pilot flying from Suttons Farm, killing all the crew. L34 was shot down on the 29th November and crashed into the sea killing all its crew.