

WWI, Walthamstow & Airships

Jack Collett, The Pulham Pigs & Friedrich Christiansen

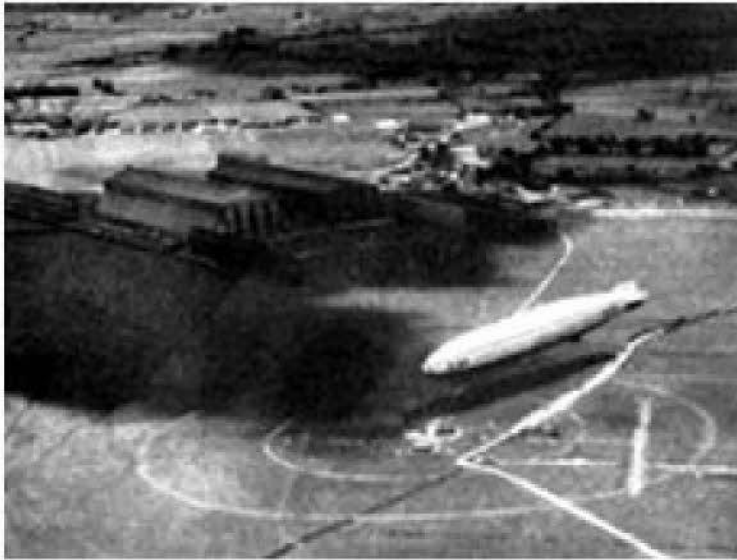
Jack Collett (1899-1917)

Jack Collett was the first of his family to be born in Walthamstow. His parents came from Cornwall and sometime between 1895 and 1901 they moved to live at 16, Clacton Road in Walthamstow. He had an older brother and sister who were born in Cornwall and two younger brothers who were born in Walthamstow. By 1911 they had moved again and were living at 12, Devonshire Road in Walthamstow and in 1918 they moved to 1, Cornwallis Road, Walthamstow.

When WWI started in 1914, Jack was only fourteen years old. As soon as he could, he enlisted and joined the Royal Navy Air Service (RNAS) This was the early days of flying and the Royal Flying Corps had only been formed in 1913. The new service had both an army and a navy element with a Military Wing and a Naval Wing (RNAS),

The Pulham Pigs

In September 1917, 18 year old Air Mechanic 2nd Class Jack Collett was one of five crewmen of the



non rigid Airship C27. This was based at Pulham in Norfolk, at an Airship station that had been secretly built in 1913. Because of their yellowy colour and rotund shape, the airships were known locally as Pulham Pigs.

The role of Airship C27 was to patrol and observe the enemy coastal areas of Belgium and Holland. This was the time when the WWI war was at its most intense period with major battles at Ypres, the Somme and at Arras.

The RNAS Airship base at Pulham, Norfolk with a tethered airship

German Airships Attack & Bomb Britain

During the latter part of 1915 and throughout the duration of the war, Germany repeatedly sent airships to bomb England with explosive bombs, incendiary bombs, and aerial torpedos. For strategic and propaganda reasons London was the prime target of the German Airships.

At the beginning they sent under half a dozen, Zeppelins which were a rigid type of airship. These were some four hundred yards long and were driven by very powerful engines which enabled them to travel between sixty and eighty miles per hour, They carried a cargo of approximately four tons of incendiary and other explosives. These could arrive any time after 9 o'clock at night during the winter and bomb London and other places from a moderately safe distance above.

Walthamstow Bombed By Mistake

On the 17–18 August 1915 , four Zeppelins attacked London . Two of them turned back with mechanical problems and one bombed Ashford, Kent in the belief it was Woolwich. The forth, Zeppelin Airship *L.10*, became the first airship to reach London. However, *L.10* made a navigation error by mistaking the reservoirs of the Lea Valley for the River Thames, and consequently dropped its bombs on Walthamstow and Leytonstone.

The first bomb was on Lloyd Park, Walthamstow at 22.32. It then dropped bombs over Hoe Street, Bakers Avenue, Lea Bridge Road, Dunton Road, Farmer Road, Leyton High Road, Midland Road, Moyers Road, Grosvenor Road, Claude Road, Murchison Road, Albert Road, Twickenham Road, Oakdale Road, Ashville Road, Grove Green Road, Lincoln Street, Mayville Road and Southwell Grove. The attack killed 10 people and injured 48. Damage to property was estimated by the London Fire Brigade at £30,750.

Walthamstow Watches The Destruction of An Airship

Airship SL11 Attacks London

On the afternoon of the 2nd September 1916, sixteen airships, comprising twelve from the German Naval Airship Division and four from the Army Division, set out for England on what was to be the biggest air raid of the war. For the first time the two services were combining. The vessels were carrying a total load of 32 tons of bombs. Among the airships was SL11 which was a recent addition to the fleet from the Shutte Lanz factories at Leipzeig.

The Commander of SL11 was English born Hauptman Wilhelm Schramm who had a 16 man crew of machinists, gunners, elevator man, bomb man and other officers.

In the early hours of the 3rd September, Airship SL11 was wreaking destruction over North London. The Finsbury and Victoria Park searchlights caught her over Alexandra Palace, and the gunners filled the air around the ship with explosives. Schramm turned his craft and headed for Walthamstow trying to dodge the fingers of light. Hundreds of people watched, but no matter how close they burst, the ground defence's shells seemed to have no effect. The spectators that night however were treated to a sight that was completely new to their experience. The crowds fell silent. A British aircraft, running a gauntlet of shell fire, was fast approaching.

The Airship Intercepted

The aircraft was BE2c 2963 and the pilot was William Leefe Robinson. His airplane was one of ten aircraft that had gone up to try to intercept the airships. However, there was thick fog was thick and the airships had taken advantage of cloud cover. Robinson was convinced it would be clearer higher up. He had just enough fuel to keep him aloft for three and a half hours and three drums of Brock and Pomeroy ammunition (A mixture of Brock and Pomeroy was found to be the most effective against the Zeppelins. The Pomeroy bullet was effective in opening tears in the gas cells releasing



the Hydrogen which allowed the Brock ammunition to ignite the gas) Attracted by a commotion over Ponder's End and Enfield Highway he headed for what he presumed must be an airship. The shell fire grew intense as he neared SL11, and might very well have put an end to his attack before he had got within range. Robinson headed straight for the airship. The watching crowd below swelled as the news spread that a pilot was within striking distance of the hated airship. Suddenly the firing stopped, the searchlights swung frantically, and to cries of despair and frustration from the crowd, the airship found cloud cover and disappeared from sight. Then, as suddenly as it had vanished, the airship reappeared. Every gun roared and the night sky came alive with explosions. The aircraft was rocked by the blasts, but closed in on

the airship.

The Airship Is Attacked & Destroyed

Robinson had his first drum of Brock and Pomeroy ready, and as he flew alongside the airship he riddled its entire length with bullets. He turned his tiny aeroplane around and viewed the Schütte-Lanz. The airship appeared to be completely unaffected by the attack. Robinson fitted his second drum and raked the length of the vessel a second time. Still there was no result. It seemed the massive craft was impregnable. It sailed on almost majestically, as though studiously ignoring the puny aircraft circling below it. To the thousands of spectators it seemed as though a midge was fluttering around a lamp, vainly beating its wings against a glowing bulb. Robinson had one drum of ammunition left and precious little fuel. Now, behind and slightly below the airship, he changed tactics. He dived at the thin end of the craft, heading for the twin rudders above and below the pair



of elevators, any one of which was larger than his entire machine. His last drum of ammunition was poured into that one area. Now the guns of the ground defences were silent and all eyes were fixed on the airship, glowing in the searchlights' powerful beams. They had no idea what the pilot was doing. They knew nothing of new incendiary bullets. They did not realise that, as they watched a stream of explosive was pouring into the smallest section of the airship, ripping through its cotton skin. The first indication to them, to the pilot, and probably to the airship's crew themselves, that the longed for victory was at hand, was a dull pink glow from within the rear portion of the ship. Within seconds the tail section was alight, and flames

over 100 feet long shot out into the night sky. Almost in an instant the entire hull of the airship seemed to be in flames. Thousands .of cubic feet of hydrogen ignited with a brilliance which lit the sky, turning night into day. The spectators were dazzled. The searchlights were suddenly unnecessary. Observers in airship, while in the very act of bombing the capital, had been attacked and completely destroyed. Reigate reported seeing the explosion. It was 2.30 in the morning on Sunday 3 September, and 12,500 feet above London a German airship had been intercepted and destroyed.

For thousands of people it was without doubt one of the most memorable events of the entire war. The aerial battle was clearly visible throughout North East London and it is difficult to imagine one man achieving anything more spectacular. The blazing wreckage of SL11 slowly fell to earth in a field in Cuffley, Hertfordshire. Before it reached the ground London was celebrating in boisterous fashion. Oblivious to the fact that other enemy airships were overhead, the city erupted in a frenzy of



rejoicing. There was singing and dancing in
Lieutenant William Robinson with the BE2c 2693

the streets, small boys paraded up and down while their parents hugged one another or burst into patriotic song. Factory hooters and engine whistles added to the din. The excitement was to last for days. Long before dawn hundreds of sightseers set out for Cuffley to view the wreckage.

London Celebrates

On Sunday, 3rd September 1916, later referred to as "Zep Sunday", the news of Robinson's victory had spread with incredible speed. After months of fear and anxiety there was an overwhelming urge to witness the death throes of the airship, to savour the victory, even to gloat over the dead. Over the next two days 10,000 people travelled to the tiny village of Cuffley. Special trains were laid on from King's Cross. Extra ticket collectors were sent to the village station to help deal with the crowds. The Plough Inn nearby had soon sold everything that could be eaten or drunk, and had to bolt its doors to keep the crowds out. The field in which the airship lay was turned into quagmire as thousands of boots tramped through the wet soil. The roads leading to the site were jammed with cars. Police and troops were called in to control the crowds. There was a scramble for souvenirs, although keeping pieces of airship was a punishable offence. There was also much morbid curiosity over the charred bodies of the German crew. Tempers grew short as the day wore on and later visitors found the troops guarding the wreckage less than polite.



SL11

Funeral of the SL11 Crew



Hauptman Wilhelm Schramm & The crew of Airship

Airship Crew Buried

The few remains of the airship were quickly collected. The bodies of the crew were buried after a short inquest and a brief service. Many objected to the decent funeral arrangements for the "Baby Killers", and over 300 special constables were called in to keep order. Some eggs were thrown at the coffins, and some letters were shot off in fury to the newspapers. The formalities were seen to as quickly as possible. The celebrations however continued.

The King Honours A Hero

For his extraordinary bravery and heroism 20 year old Lieutenant William Leefe Robinson was awarded the highest military Honour that the country can bestow – the Victoria Cross. He was promoted to the rank of Captain and went on to be shot, wounded and captured while flying a Bristol fighter in 1917. Sadly, he barely survived the Armistice that signalled the end of the war, as he died at the end of 1918 from the influenza pandemic that killed more people than the war.



Victoria Cross *London Gazette* 5.9.1916

Lieutenant William Leefe-Robinson
Worcestershire Regiment and 39 Squadron,
Royal Flying Corps

Date of Act of Bravery, 2-3.9.1916. Zeppelin
Attack over Hertfordshire.

For the most conspicuous bravery. He
attacked an enemy airship under
circumstances of great difficulty and danger,
and sent it crashing to the ground as a
flaming wreck. He had been in the air for

more than two hours and had previously attacked another airship during his flight.