

# Zeppelin Background

Lighter than air flying machines were successfully developed before aeroplanes. Count von Zeppelin was impressed by their potential and built his first successful airship in 1900. From then, civilian airships developed rapidly before World War One. Passengers travelled in considerable comfort in gondolas slung underneath the huge 190 metre-long hydrogen-filled rugby ball-shaped balloon. They had more space than in many modern aeroplanes and could stroll about admiring the view.

The German Army and Navy both saw the potential that airships had for reconnaissance. They were used almost from the opening of the war for getting information by flying over enemy lines far above gunnery range.

As it became clear that the war would be long and drawn out, Zeppelins were sent to bomb British cities. Their route was over the North Sea from their bases on the north west German coast. The early raids caused lots of damage and many civilian casualties.

At first, as these documents show, British defences were totally inadequate to deal with the Zeppelin threat. However, by 1916 a range of anti-airship defence measures were introduced. Many more guns were deployed, and searchlights. Fighter aircraft were also sent against them. British defences learnt to pick up their radio messages, so had warning of

their approach, and a central communications headquarters was set up. It was realised that Zeppelins were extremely vulnerable to explosive shells, which set light to the hydrogen, often in spectacular fashion. Zeppelin raids were called off in 1917, by which time 77 out of the 115 German Zeppelins had been shot down or totally disabled. Raids by heavier than air bombers continued, however. By the end of the war over 1500 British citizens had been killed in air raids.

The vulnerability of Zeppelins to explosive shells, and their relatively slow speed, led to rapid development of heavier-than-air machines. By 1918 both sides were using large numbers of aeroplanes, not just for reconnaissance, but as fighter air support and as bombers. Air war, and the threat it brought to the lives of civilians, had become part of 20th century warfare.

After the war both Britain and Germany continued to develop airships for passenger services, offering a much more roomy, comfortable service than early aeroplanes could provide. However, the spectacular crash and fire of the R101 in 1930 discredited this form of air flight.