"WELL HIT!" – THE STORY BEHIND THE FORGOTTEN 'FIRST' SHOOTING DOWN OF A ZEPELIN OVER GREAT BRITAIN

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The story behind the forgotten 'first' shooting down of a Zeppelin over Great Britain.

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Terror Weapon

In the first two years of the Great War, successful bombing attacks by the German "terror weapon", Zeppelin airships, had induced wide spread panic and horror in the hearts of the civilian population of London and East Anglia. Despite efforts to protect our capital and military sites, the raids continued; it appeared we had no effective defence!

But the events on the night of March 31st 1916 were to change our previous unsuccessful defence. The Zeppelin LZ15, on a night time raid, flew over the Thames riverside village of Purfleet, in the parish of West Thurrock, Essex. Below was a detachment of Royal Garrison Artillery Anti-aircraft gunners, protecting the Government Gunpowder Magazines and Barracks, ready for action.

During the ensuring defence, the Purfleet gunners were credited, amongst others, with crippling and causing the LZ15 to crash, eventually, into the Thames. The destruction of the first Zeppelin over Great Britain was one of the first successes the native population could celebrate.

So great was the threat to the Capital that the Lord Mayor of London, having offered a reward of £500 to the first person to destroy a Zeppelin, was eventually allowed by the War Department to present gold medallions to the 353 men who helped achieve the destruction of LZ15. First in line for these awards were the 42 Gunners and 2 Electrical Engineers at Purfleet.

Zeppelin

The inventor of the rigid type airship was Ferdinand, Count Von Zeppelin, who was educated at Stuttgart and joined the German Army in 1858, retiring in 1891 with the rank of General. By 1884 Germany had an experimental airship establishment, and in 1901 it formed its first Airship Battalion, which by 1911 had risen to four battalions and 200 first line flying machines.

At the outbreak of war, Germany was to have a fleet of 25 military Zeppelins available for aerial bombing and reconnaissance. The Naval Zeppelins or "P" type, were given the suffix LZ (Luftschiff Zeppelin) to their registration number.

Zeppelin LZ 15

LZ15 was commissioned on the 12th of September 1915. It had impressive specifications, a length of 536' 5", diameter of 61' 4", height 79' 4", inside were 16 cells which held 1,126,400 cubic ft. of hydrogen.

Germany paid special attention to purifying the gas to lessen the risk of explosions. The structural framework was made of Duralumin as opposed to the Schutte Lang rigid airship which had a framework of wood. The bomb load was of about 1.5 tons, half usually being incendiaries.

The Zeppelins were hard to control in strong winds and were difficult to navigate accurately, especially during night time raids when the "black out" had been introduced. Military objectives were first approved for bombing on the 9th January 1915, the first raid being on the night of 19th/20th January. In July 1915, the Kaiser sanctioned the bombing of London, although he ordered that historic buildings, like St.Paul's, should be spared!

Anti-aircraft Guns

In Great Britain it was only in 1911 that some anxious questions were raised in Parliament and elsewhere about the growth of the German Airship Battalions and the provision of our own Anti-Aircraft defences. In 1913 the Royal Regiment of Artillery had ordered some quick firing, high angle guns for anti-aircraft defence and it was stated in the April of that year that anti-aircraft guns were in a position to open fire without delay!

A range of land and naval service mountings were developed, for use with 3 inch, 4 inch, and 12, 13 and 18 pdr high angle guns, allowing for mobile, transportable or fixed defences. The 3 inch 20 cwt high angle gun, purpose made for anti-aircraft defence, was used in static emplacements, (as opposed to the 13 pdr mobile gun units mounted on the backs of lorries), and had the following specifications;

Weight of gun	12,500 lbs.	Vertical Range	18,000 feet.
Weight of shell	12.5 lbs.	Horizontal range	31,000 feet.
Elevation of barrel	90 degrees.	Muzzle velocity	2,500 ft/sec.
Traversing	360 degrees.	Rate of Fire	15 rounds/min.

However, even a month after declaring war with Germany in 1914, there were only 33 purpose designed Anti-Aircraft guns to defend the whole country! To compound the problem the defence of London was controlled by the Admiralty and the defence of the naval ports by the War Office. In fact, a special request by the Admiralty to defend two ammunition dumps had resulted in some 6 inch howitzers and a 12 pdr gun being sited at high angle fixed positions (they could not traverse).

At Woodbridge, for instance, the 1st Battery Essex Royal Horse Artillery, constructed one of these modified gun pits to allow a field gun to be fired at high angle. It was made from a circular concrete gun pit with a four wheel trolley on which the mount of the gun was fixed with the trail of the gun in the bottom of the pit to give maximum elevation.

The crews operated day and night duties, Gunner H. V. Tuck recalled:

> "It was the first gun to fire at a Zeppelin, which was on the night Liverpool Street was bombed, on the night we had the alarm we turned out in our shirts and pants and fired three shots, and were credited with a near miss. The crew took a risk owing to excess elevation of the gun coming over onto them, but fortunately this did not happen". (Essex Countryside Vol. 16 No. 138 July 1968)

The London Defences

In fact the first raid on London by a Zeppelin was ordered on the 9th August, but bad weather delayed this action until the successful raid by Zeppelin LZ13 on the night of 8th/9th September. Defences at this time included a simple system of ground observation posts, established to give early warning of the raider's approach. The London gun defences consisted of four 6 pdr. Hotchkiss, six 1 pounder pom-pom, and two 3 inch naval guns.

The orders placed by the Ministry of Munitions for new anti-aircraft guns of an improved design were only slowly coming to fruition. There was also no height finding equipment to aid the fire control, actual engagements of targets was carried out by "guess and by God", although drill, practise and actual engagement was to hone the accuracy of the gunners.

In addition there were 12 acetylene searchlights manned by 120 special constables. The organisation was, in the main, made up of civilian volunteers, which was not entirely satisfactory. Admiral Sir Percy Scott, on taking over command of the London defences in September 1915, enrolled all the volunteers into a Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve Corps. (R.N.V.R.)

Almost to the end of 1915 communications for the anti-aircraft defence system were chaotic. Information on sightings of enemy craft passed from the Police to the Admiralty Staff, from there to the War Office, then to Scotland Yard, who informed the railways and then the Speaker of the House of Commons. Eventually the news came through to the dispersed gun and searchlight sites.

Eventually it was seen best to divide the responsibility so that Admiralty would engage targets over the sea and War Office would deal with enemy targets over the land. This policy was ratified by the War Committee of the Cabinet on the 10th February 1916. An Anti-aircraft Section was then formed on the 16th February on Field Marshal Lord French's Home Defence Staff.

At this time there were 65 guns mounted in the London defence system, a few of the 3 inch 20 cwt guns were now being delivered. The men manning the guns were made up of Territorial Field and Garrison Units of the Royal Artillery, as well as Regular branches of the Regiment. Some Officers and N.C.O.s had now received short courses of instruction at the School of Artillery, Shoeburyness, but the majority took over their new equipment with inexperienced gunners.

The Zeppelins continued their raids across the country and on London, the defences appeared to be unable to stop them, blackout precautions were put into force as panic increased with each successful raid across the nation.

The Purfleet Defences.

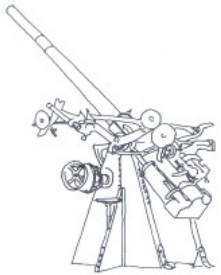
The guns at Purfleet were set up to protect the government magazines and large barrack accommodation, including a P.O.W camp, built close to the Thames riverside edge, by the outlet of the Mardyke, which drains the Orsett and Bulphan fens. Here blackpowder, Cordite and other munitions were stored in a series of five brick walled and roof slated magazines dating to the 1760s and in other magazines and depot buildings. The original magazines having been moved from Greenwich to a safe distance from London in case of damage to the capital if an explosion occurred.

The Magazines compound had its own garrison staff and guards who lived in the purpose built barracks with a hospital and a Commandants House, all constructed within the perimeter of two high brick security walls with appropriate entrances with guard rooms. The magazine labourers also lived nearby in the small village of Purfleet.

The exact location of the anti-aircraft guns is not clear, however, a Gun Position Observation Post appears to have been set up at the top of a tall military water tower of 19th century date. This was situated at the highest

point of Tank Road, opposite Purfleet School, but within the outer and inner brick security wall of the Garrison establishment. The water tower has since been demolished, but gave its name to Tank Road.

The Purfleet battery consisted of 1 x 3 inch 20 cwt and 2 x 1 pdr. Pom-Pom ex-naval guns. Several witnesses refer to a gun being on top of the water tower, perhaps this was one of the pom-pom guns as the 3 inch 20 cwt gun would be too heavy to mount in that position. A group photograph of the Purfleet gun detachment, shows a circular type concrete block constructed "Pill Box".



A 3 inch 20cwt. anti-aircraft gun. This type of gun was still in us during the early stages of th 1939-45 war.

Recently an aerial photograph had identified this or a similar pill box close to the main railway line opposite the Peter Lind construction site. This circular type of pill box appears to be unique, in this country, but examples of the Boer War defended block houses built by the British troops are somewhat similar. The construction appears to be of pre-moulded concrete blocks measuring 18 inches x 24 inches which may well have been made by one of the local concrete companies. The structure appears to have only one door at ground level and one or more loop hole musketry points on the ground floor level. There is however, a first floor observation or gun mounting position which is walled to a height of about 4 feet and has a distinctive central mounting, probably of metal for either a gun or optical sights.

Later incidents with Zeppelins over Thurrock refer to a gun site on Tunnel Farm, West Thurrock, which might be the site of the 3 inch 20 cwt gun, although accounts of the action suggest the captain in charge was close to the gun site. At least one searchlight appears to be sited on Beacon Hill, Purfleet.

The battery was manned by the 1st/3rd (Purfleet) Company Essex and Suffolk Royal Garrison Artillery (TF), (formed in 1908 from the 1st Suffolk and Harwich R.G.A. (V) with 4 companies as a Defended Ports unit with its H.Q at Dovercourt.) the Commanding Officer was Colonel Charles Lloyd. While at Purfleet the Company Commander was Capt. John Harris. The searchlights were deployed by the Essex Fortress R.E.(T). Some of the Garrison may have been recruited from the district we now call Thurrock.

New Defence Scheme.

However by the beginning of 1916 despite the mounting of guns, only one Zeppelin had been slightly damaged by ground fire. However badly the gun's had been doing, the air force night fighters were having no success at all.

The new anti-aircraft defence section organised a 25 mile wide belt of searchlights which extended from Northumberland to Sussex, with new developments in the system of communication. Each company of searchlights was now controlled by the commander of the squadron whose aircraft patrolled over that company, and each searchlight position was connected to Squadron H.Q. by telephone. Squadron H.Q. received its early warning and information from the War Office Intelligence staff.

The defences for the London and Thames Section consisted of 27 guns, the searchlights were manned by the London Electrical Engineers R.E. (T.A) and one Tyne Electrical Engineer R.E. (T.A.) unit at the Darenth site. Surely the time was now right for some success!

The Purfleet Incident

On the night of 31st March 1916 another attack by five Zeppelins was underway. The sky was almost cloudless and there was a dead calm, ideal for Zeppelins! The raiding party included LZs 13, 14, 15, 16 and 22. LZ22 went north and bombed Humberstone and Cleethorpes, then returned home. The others were directed towards London and as secondary objectives may have been targeting large ammunition works and magazines such as Stowmarket, Woolwich, Erith, Purfleet, Kynocktown and Waltham Abbey.

The Zeppelins were first seen approaching the East Coast. LZ13 headed inland, Gunner Turner of Essex and Suffolk R.G.A. (T), from Harwich recalled the action of his 6 pdr guns sited in Stowmarket, near to Nobels Explosives Factory:

> "The Zeppelins had been observed earlier that day by the Royal Navy patrol and reported to G.H.Q.. They were unable to get in touch with us owing to gales having blown down all telephone and telegraph wires, and an R.E. (signals) dispatch rider, sent to advise us, had crashed into a fallen tree and lay badly injured.
> "Soon after 8.15 p.m. a large magnesium flare dropped almost over the top of the huge Nobel's Explosives factory, so when the flare dropped, it was our first intimation that Zeppelins were about. The gunners were apparently well on target and although they probably did not hit LZ13 they 'Drove it off' ". (EC Vol. 19 No 167 Dec 1970)

Raider's Approach

Zeppelin LZ15 Commanded by Kapitan Joachim Breithaupt, took a different course and headed south after crossing the coastline at Dunwich, passing over Ipswich, Colchester and Danbury. It approached the Thames overhead of Orsett. Turning SSWest with the river Thames on his port beam, he flew on into No 19 Royal Flying Corps Reserve Squadron area, travelling at about 40 mph at an altitude of 11,000 feet, it was just after 9.00 p.m.

Apparently the gun batteries at Thames Haven, Kynocktown and Pitsea all opened up, but the Zeppelin received no damage in the initial attacks. Indeed they must have been on the outer limits of their effective fire range. The same gun batteries took action that night against LZ14 also in the fleet of attacking Zeppelins, which skirted the defences, dropped a few bombs near Thames Haven (close to Kynocks Explosive Factory) and then returned to Germany.

At this time 2nd Lt. Powell R.F.C. took off from Suttons Farm airfield, the first of the 19 Squadron pilots to get off the ground, followed by 2nd Lt. Alfred de Bath Brandon R.F.C. a young New Zealander in a B.E.2c from Hainault at 9.25 p.m. and Lt. Ridley R.F.C. from Joyce Green at 9.30 p.m.

A B.E.2c aircraft.
Over 2000 of these aircraft were produced by the government aircraft factory at Farnborough. It was the first inherently stable aircraft, but because of its lack of manoeuvrability it was used mainly for reconnaissance and home defence.

Powell was at 8,500 feet and Ridley at 9,000 feet when they both saw LZ15 caught in searchlights. Apparently the N.C.O. at the Perry Street searchlight received orders to "uncover the light" and the beam by pure chance illuminated the bows of LZ15 just north of Dartford. It was engaged by ground fire from the Brent gun site. Only Ridley was close enough to engage target, he managed to fire twenty rounds at the Zeppelin but then lost sight of her in the darkness when the searchlights lost the target.

Again the LZ15 was caught by the searchlights and was clearly lit, by units from Erith, Dartford, Abbey Wood, Purfleet and Plumstead. Brandon seeing the LZ15 illuminated made three separate attacks using a box of Rankin explosive darts, incendiary bombs and his machine gun, causing some damage.

The gun batteries at Purfleet, Abbey Wood, Erith Marsh, Southern Outfall, Plumstead Common and Plumstead Marsh had now all opened a heavy barrage of fire. The Purfleet guns delivered a number of accurate rounds and were credited with causing damage to four of the sixteen gas cells containing the hydrogen gas that kept it aloft, by the action of their shrapnel shells as the airship passed over the Wennington Marshes.

An account published in the Daily Sketch at the time and partly censored gives a vivid account of the action given by some of the Gunners, presumably in the 'Purfleet' area, a bombardier recalled:

"We received the alarm about nine o'clock. In less than three minutes we were at our posts and ready to fire. We picked the 'Zepp' up about 9.45 p.m., flying at about 15,000 feet, and coming over from the North East. Naturally we started to fire right away before the searchlights had even picked her up, but we didn't hit her, although we got perilously near.

"Very soon after we started, the gun at ..... got busy and the searchlight too. It was a grand sight. She was lit up like a silver cigar, and we could see the shells bursting all around her. Presently a shot from the gun caught the Zeppelin in the stern and a little flame shot out from the envelope, whether from our bursting shell or the balloonette I couldn't tell from our position. Anyhow, the explosion seemed to throw it round, and at the same time it dropped by the stern with nose in the air, of course we were busy with our gun, but the boys couldn't help making a slight pause to shout 'She's hit'".

Another gunner associated with the gun credited in damaging the Zeppelin gave this account to the Daily Sketch reporter:

"We brought her down alright, anyone will tell you that for miles around. The whole crew did it. If anyone is responsible at all it is Captain ..... to do, and if he fails he delays or upsets the firing , but Captain ..... is a marvel".

In fact the Captain was ill and on doctors' orders was to stay in bed, but on hearing the alarms, got out of bed, wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and proceeded straight away to the gun, to take command.

Another gunner in the same gun detachment reported,

"The Captain gave us the orders, and we fired. The first shot was too short, the second and third were too high, but with wonderful quickness the Captain soon found the range, and when we did hit the target it went

through the stern and swung back on her course, which was straight to London. When we landed one it was easy to get another in and we did, near the bow".

Mr. J. C. Ovenal, a boy at the time, living in Sussex Terrace, in Purfleet Village, recalled how it was proved that the Dartford Guns had not been accurate in their firing:

"I well remember the excitement of the night. The searchlight on Beacon Hill picked up the Zeppelin and the gunners on the water tower at Purfleet opened fire, as did the gunners on the south side of the river at Dartford.

"During the excitement shrapnel was falling, and in particular a noisy 'whizz' over our house and a big 'plop' on the other side of the road caused my father to investigate next morning. He located a large piece of shell weighing one and three quarter pounds, buried 18in. deep in the ground. He retained this piece as a memento.

"It came to the notice of members of the gun crew who attended church parade at Purfleet Baptist Mission on Sunday mornings. This was followed by a visit to our house by the officer in charge of the Purfleet gunners, who borrowed the memento. At the enquiry which followed, it was resolved that the base of the shell was from the Dartford gun, proof that Dartford shells were falling short of the target, and the credit for bringing down the Zeppelin was given to the Purfleet crew and the gold medals were awarded to them". (EC Vol 18 No.165).

A first hand account was given by the Regimental Quarter Master, Sergeant Fred Joscelyne of 1/3 Company Essex & Suffolk R.G.A. in the Grays and Tilbury Gazette, April 4th 1936. Having been enlisted on August 5th 1914, on March 31st he was stationed at Purfleet. He recalls:

"They received the Field Marshals warning about 8.o'clock at night that enemy aircraft were on the way. They, upon this, took up their posts for action. Their C.O. who had only that day come out of hospital, went up into the Battery Tower to direct the gunfire. It was however, about 9.42 when the Zeppelin was first sighted. Firing immediately opened and the fourth shot proved a direct hit, striking the airship near the centre; it was then over Rainham. The observers noted the hit and in response to orders, 30 more rounds were fired.

"The Zeppelin rose, sunk, rose again, swerved now this way, now that, and at one time seemed as though about to nose dive, appearing about perpendicular in the air so ..... were her efforts, to get out of

range. Presently when somewhere above the Wennington - Aveley area, she dropped a number of bombs, all of which fell in a field, their explosions breaking the windows of a row of cottages. The fire of the detachment was continued for about 12 minutes at the end of which time the Zeppelin was out of sight. The detachment knew nothing further of her until they received notification from the Admiralty, stating the airship had fallen into the Thames just below the Nore."

A few days later they received a letter from the Field Marshal congratulating the detachment on their fine work. (Grays & Thurrock Gazette 4/4/36)

The LZ15 now seeking its retreat was in dire straits, amidships cell 11 was empty, cell 12 forward and cell 9 aft were leaking and cell 16 in the bow was empty. She turned for home and jettisoned bombs in the Rainham and Aveley area, a picture postcard published at that time is thought to be the remains of the recovered bombs.

LZ15 still needed to lose weight, so equipment and ballast were thrown overboard but she still slowly descended. At 10.00 p.m. they sent a signal, "Have been hit. Request Ostend keep watch on airship wavelength, LZ 15". The final signal was sent from the stricken craft at 11.25 p.m. "Require immediate assistance between Thames and Ostend, LZ15". Then the radio and secret orders were thrown overboard and into the Thames. At 12.15 the damaged craft broke her back and ditched in the Thames estuary.

Mr M.A.Whybrow who enlisted in the Royal Navy in January 1914, became a telegraphist, his first ship *Olivine* was a requisitioned deep water trawler taken over by the Admiralty for service with the Nore defence flotilla, he recalls:

"I was on duty in the radio cabin when I took a message from H.Q.: *'Look out for damaged Zeppelin flying low.'* I went up to the ship's bridge, where the look out man was on duty. I saw a light flashing in the sky. It was higher than the top mast of any ship. Our skipper weighed anchor and in a few minutes we spotted the Zeppelin. The under carriage was floating and the crew were calling for help. I was in the dinghy that rescued all the men from the Zeppelin. In the morning we transferred the prisoners to H.M.S. Vulture".

He also remembers the fate of LZ15 "They then tried to tow the Zeppelin to Margate but it sank just before approaching the shore". (EC Vol. 29 No.292. 1981.)

The event was witnessed by Mr Tibbenham who was stationed on the Knock Lightship, he could remember seeing the airship come down about a mile or two from their base and saw the crew climbing onto the envelope and then being taken off by some naval vessels. Interestingly, he was able to recover some of the metal structure of the LZ15 which he made into brooches for the ladies in his family. (EC Vol. 18 No.165)

The Medals

In the autumn of 1915, after two bombing raids on London, the Lord Mayor of London, Colonel Sir Charles Wakefield, offered a prize of £500 to the first person or persons who were instrumental in bringing down a Zeppelin over the British Isles. This fact had been given much coverage in the daily papers and was probably well known amongst those manning the London and Thames defences. It was therefore not surprising to find on April 3rd Captain J. Harris writing to the Lord Mayor of London and claiming the £500 prize on behalf of his unit.

Sir Charles Wakefield submitted this claim to the War Office for approval, but it was felt that under Kings Regulations, there was no allowance for the Army to legally accept such a prize. It was followed by an investigation by the G-O-C-in-C. Home Forces who resolved that this was part of a larger action. They finally awarded two hits each to Purfleet, Erith and Abbey Wood and commended the shooting of the gun at Southern Outfall and the work of each part of the defences that night. He remarked: "The success achieved was due to the concerted action of a team and not to the individual skill of any member of it". It was therefore agreed with Colonel Sir Charles Wakefield, to produce a gold medallion to all who helped destroy the LZ15.

This resulted in 353 service personnel receiving a gold medallion, about the size of an old two shilling piece, struck by Messrs. Mappin & Webb. On the obverse it carries the arms of Sir Charles Wakefield with the inscription "Presented by the Lord Mayor of London, Colonel Sir Charles Wakefield", on the reverse there is a representation of a 3 inch 20 cwt gun with the inscription "Well Hit March 31st, April 1st 1916", with the name of the recipient above.

The Times newspaper wrote soon after this event:

"Just as gunfire is a protective measure so are aeroplanes when boldly and skilfully handled; and it is a combination of the two methods, together with developments of searchlights, which will some day make it far more difficult for Zeppelins to raid our shores".

Although many will remember the brave airmen who received Victoria Crosses in action against the Zeppelins that same year and soon after this event, the likes of Leefe Robinson, Tempest and Sowrey, let us not forget the gunners of Purfleet who had already played their part in the battle against the Zeppelin.

The **Purfleet** detachment are listed below and were unofficially recognised as the most successful of the Batteries in the action that night;-

3rd Company Essex and Suffolk Royal Garrison Artillery (TA) Purfleet.

Captain Harris. J.
Lieutenant Laird.
Lieutenant Newton.
Lieutenant Fox.
Lieutenant Howerd L. G.
R.Q.M.S. Joscelyne F.
Sergeant Guiver. V & French.
Corporal Beale and Downer.
Bombardier Dawkins.

Gunners Atwood, Birrell, Birrell (brothers), Clarke, Coggers, Dawkins, Derbyshire, Evans, Edwards, Flack, Fish, Gladwin, Goddard, Green, Holland, Horsley, Hooper, King, Kidd, Langdon, Lewis, Livermore, Lazell, Moore, Phillips, Ridd, Sayers, Shelley, Sullivan, Tubbs, Warren.

6th Company London Electrical Engineers RE (TA) (Searchlights) Purfleet.

Captain Hunter. E.B.
Sapper Cushway. A.J.

Note 1. Gun batteries in action 31st March..

Dartford (The Brent Gun) : 1 x 3 inch 20 cwt.
Erith 2 x 6 pdr. both manned by 5 Company., Cornwall R.G.A. (T.A.)
Abbey Wood (Lessness Abbey) 2 x 3 inch 20 cwt, manned by Regular R.A.
Southern Outfall 1 x 13 pdr.
Plumstead Common 1 x 3 inch 20 cwt. 1 x 13 pdr both manned by 2 Company.
North Woolwich 1 x 3 inch 5 cwt manned by Regular R.A and Glamorgan R.G.A. (T.A.)
Royal Arsenal Defences 1 x 3 inch 5 cwt. 2 x 6pdr. 1x pom-pom manned by Regular R.A. and Kent R.G.A. (T.A.)

All the searchlights were manned by the London Electrical Engineers, R.E.(T.A.) except the Darenth site which was manned by a detachment of the Tyne Electrical Engineers, R.E. (T.A.)

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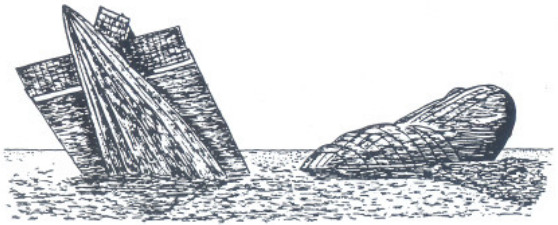

The end of Zeppelin LZ15 in the Thames Estuary