

World War I

Feb 2, 1916:

Zeppelin crashes into North Sea

Two days after nine German zeppelins dropped close to 400 bombs throughout the English Midlands, the crew of the British fishing trawler *King Stephen* comes across the crashed remains of one of the giant airships floating in the North Sea.

Developed by a German army officer, Count Ferdinand Zeppelin, and first flown in 1900, the zeppelin was an impressive aircraft by the beginning of [World War I](#). With the capacity to carry five machine guns and up to 2,000 kilograms (4,400 pounds) of bombs, it could reach a maximum speed of 136 kilometers per hour (84.5 miles per hour) and a height of 4,250 meters (13,943 feet).

The first zeppelin attack on England took place on January 19, 1915, when two of the airships bombed the English coastal towns of Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn, killing a total of four people. The first bombing raid on London came on May 31 of that year, when a single zeppelin dropped 90 small bombs and 30 grenades on the city, leaving seven dead and 35 wounded.

The raid of January 31, 1916, by nine zeppelins was one of the largest Britain saw during the war. The Germans bombed the West Midlands towns of Bradley, Tipton, Wednesbury and Walsall. Across the region, more than 70 people were killed and more than 100 injured in the attacks.

Just before daybreak on February 2, *King Stephen* skipper William Martin spotted a downed airship partially submerged in the North Sea. The skipper and his crew waited at a safe distance until daylight when they confirmed the wreckage was that of a German zeppelin with the identification mark L-19. With three of its four engines failing, the *L-19* had reportedly come under Dutch fire, which punctured its gas cells and brought it down, killing some of the crew.

The nine unarmed men aboard the *King Stephen* saw that about 20 German soldiers had survived the crash. Fearful that the German airmen could easily overpower them and take control of the ship, Martin and his crew refused the soldiers' pleas for help and did not take the men aboard, choosing instead to return to Britain to report their discovery to the authorities. The remaining crew of the *L-19* disappeared with their craft. Word of the incident soon got out in both Germany and Britain--some saw Martin's decision as a necessary one to protect his crew, while others, including some Britons, vilified Martin for what they saw as an unpardonable act of cruelty, even for wartime.