

Pin – Points in the Past

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On the morning of 5 September 1917 information was received at the Royal Naval Air Service station at Great Yarmouth, on the east coast of England, that German *Zeppelins* were operating off Terschelling Island, 200 miles away across the North Sea. Two aircraft, a twin-engined *H.12* flying-boat and a single-engined *D.H.4* land-plane, were at once sent off to attack them.

The *H.12* flying-boat N.8666, "the most famous flying-boat in the Service", was piloted by Flight Lieutenant Robert Leckie, D.S.C., with Squadron Commander V. Nicholl and two air mechanics completing the crew. Bob Leckie already had one *Zeppelin* to his credit, the L.22, which had been shot down in flames on 14 May 1917 by the crew of N.8666 while he was at the controls; in the intervening weeks he had made several other attacks on *Zeppelins* as the flying-boats based at Yarmouth and Felixstowe waged an active and successful campaign against the big gasbags.

THE ATTACK

Thirty miles from Terschelling the *H.12* and the *D.H.4* came upon two *Zeppelins*, L.44 and L.45 covering mine sweeping operations, which Leckie stalked for ten minutes as he tried to manoeuvre the aircraft into a favourable position to attack. When the flying-boat opened fire on one of the dirigibles it replied with heavy machine-gun fire and, dumping its water ballast, quickly climbed out of range. A squadron of enemy cruisers also opened accurate fire on the two aircraft, damaging the flying-boat. After a few minutes the engine of the *de Havilland* seized, forcing the pilot to make a crash-landing on the rough sea. Although one engine of the *H.12* was not running well, prejudicing their own chances of getting back to base, Nicholl and Leckie "never hesitated one moment." Leckie shoved the nose of the flying-boat down in so steep a dive that it almost went out of control; then, landing near the wreckage of the *de Havilland*, he skilfully jockeyed his craft on the turbulent waves until the two men of the crew were, with great difficulty, pulled on board.

With six men on the flying-boat, and one engine dud, Leckie was unable to get the *H.12* into the air again, so he started to taxi across the sea towards England. Water leaked in through holes punctured in the hull by the anti-aircraft fire from the ships; more water poured into the front cockpit as the flying-boat plunged its nose into the waves until Leckie was immersed almost to his knees as he sat at the controls. Knocking out the ends of some empty petrol tins, the men began to bail for their lives. Early in the evening the engines stopped for lack of fuel and the flying-boat drifted at the mercy of the wind and sea.

Through the night the men had to bail steadily to keep their craft afloat. Cold, soaking wet, sea-sick, exhausted, hungry and thirsty, they all took turns at the endless task. When the small quantity of fresh water (less than two gallons) was consumed, they tapped the engine radiators for rusty water to slake their throats. There was no food. The float at one wing-tip, damaged by flak, was torn away by the sea and, to keep the wing from dipping into the water, the men got some "rest" from their bailing chores by crawling out on the other wing where for two-hour stretches they clung to the struts, washed by

waves that broke over the craft. For two more weary, seemingly interminable days and nights the ordeal continued: bail, bail, bail . . .

THE RESCUE

Meanwhile, surface vessels and aircraft had been scouring the seas in search of the missing men. Until dark on the 5th they hunted; the next day and the next they were out again—and found nothing. Hope was running out that the men would ever be found - if, indeed, they were still alive. Four homing pigeons that were carried on the flying-boat for such emergencies had been released at intervals with messages telling of the *H.12's* plight. Three of the birds were never seen again. But the fourth pigeon landed at the coast guard station at Cromer, Norfolk, with a message that provided the clue, which finally led to the rescue of the six men.

In the message Nicholl had estimated that the flying-boat might have drifted east-north-east and, acting on this hint, the commander of H.M.S. "Halcyon" decided to search areas farther north than those covered in the previous days. His hunch paid off. About midday on 8 September a lookout on the vessel saw sunlight glinting on the wings of the flying-boat as it tossed on the sea about 100 miles north-east of Great Yarmouth.

The shipwrecked men were soon safely on board the "Halcyon", all showing visible traces of the terrible experience they had endured for over 72 hours. Sturdy N.8666, too, was brought home in tow by the "Halcyon" and survived to fly again.

THE AFTERMATH

Although Leckie did not get his *Zeppelin* that day, just eleven months later, on 5 August 1918, he sent the L.70 down in flames with the Commander-in-Chief of the German Zeppelin Service on board over the North Sea while manning the guns in the rear cockpit of a *D.H.4* flown by Major E. Cadbury. For this new exploit he received his third decoration, the D.F.C. Robert Leckie was the only airman in the Great War who had two *Zeppelins* to his credit.

After service in Canada with the Air Board as Director of Flying Operations from December 1919 to June 1922 he returned to duty with the R.A.F. In 1940 he came back to Canada to direct training for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, transferred to the R.C.A.F., and became Chief of the Air Staff at the beginning of 1944. Forty-four months later, just 30 years after his gruelling experience in the North Sea, he retired from the Service as an Air Marshal.

(The water-colour painting by Charles Dixon, which provides the subject for this month's Pin-Point, has hung for untold years in the Officers' Mess at R.C.A.F. Station Trenton. As the years and generations passed, the time and circumstances of its acquisition were forgotten. Forgotten, too, was the story which the painting depicts: a story that is one of the most dramatic episodes of the 1914-18 war and a brilliant page in Canada's heritage in the air. - Editor?)

