

On the evening of 31st January 1916, nine German airships headed across the English Channel to deal with the industrial centres of the North-west. Their primary target was Liverpool, but German navigational aids were not quite up to the standard of their aeronautics. From that high up, and especially to an untrained eye, a Black Country canal can look much the same as the River Mersey. When L21 and L19 prepared for a bombing run on Liverpool they were in fact approaching Tipton...

Travelling at around 50 miles an hour, Zeppelin L21 was the first to arrive at about 8.30pm. Three high-explosive bombs dropped around Union Street, killing 14 individuals, including three generations of the same family.

Lower Bradley was next to suffer, followed by Wednesbury, where a further 14 deaths occurred in the vicinity of King Street. And so the pilot blundered blindly on towards Walsall, delivering his payload with random precision. The Congregational Church was hit first, then the grounds of the General Hospital.

Once L21 was over the centre of Walsall, it claimed its most high-profile casualty. The Lady Mayoress – Mary Slater – was sitting on-board the No. 16 tram in Bradford Place when the explosion hit her. She died of her injuries several weeks later. The spot where the bomb landed is now marked by the Walsall cenotaph.

The killing was over; L21 turned east and crossed over the Norfolk coast before landing safely at Nordholz. If the exploits of L21 had been tragic, those of L19 were closer to farce. It was overhead by about 11pm the same night, looking in vain for Birmingham. With the city concealed under black-out darkness, L21 wandered towards the Black Country, following much the same route as its predecessor. The fires lit by L21 gave a rough indication of where to go. However, the bombs which fell on Tipton, Walsall and Birchills from L19 fell relatively harmlessly, destroying buildings, but causing no fatalities. After that failed midnight sortee, L19 likewise headed eastwards to Norfolk and the safety of the open sea. Fortune did not follow it. The Zeppelin was hit by Dutch sentries, puncturing its hydrogen tank, and the airship ditched into the North Sea. All 16 of its crew were drowned.

The raid was one of 52 Zeppelin raids over Britain between 1915 and 1917, and one of the deadliest. Over the course of the war some 500 civilians lost their lives. A bigger effect, perhaps, was the menace and fear that these attacks brought to the population. Here was an early indication of what war in the air might look like.

IMAGES:

The poster (top right) attempted to turn the raids into a powerful recruiting aid. The middle image shows bomb damage caused in Union Street in Tipton. The bottom image was issued as a postcard during the war, as the anti-zeppelin defences took shape.



WHEN THE LAMPS WENT OUT