

THE CURSE OF THE KING STEPHEN

By Rachel Branson



Painting of the King Stephen and L19 Zeppelin by Norma White of New Waltham

On Thursday 3rd February 1916, a report appeared in the Hull Daily Mail, entitled “A Grimsby Skipper’s Adventure”. It told of how, in the early hours of the previous day, the Grimsby steam trawler King Stephen had encountered a disabled Zeppelin whilst out fishing in the North Sea. The crew of the L19 airship had begged to be taken on board the trawler, but the captain had refused as the Germans outnumbered his crew by at least two to one and, once on board, could easily have taken possession of the King Stephen.

By the following day, that small paragraph in a local newspaper had become front page news throughout Britain, making the King Stephen’s skipper William Martin an overnight celebrity in this country and public enemy number one in Germany. But the events in the North Sea were only the

beginning of a story that would rumble on for years and would see Skipper Martin pay a terrible price for fame.

In the days following the incident, the full story of the King Stephen's encounter with the L19 emerged. Whilst returning from its bombing mission, the Zeppelin, under the command of Lieutenant-Captain Odo Loewe, had strayed into neutral Dutch territory and been subjected to "severe rifle fire". Subsequently it had lost three of its four engines and sunk slowly into the North Sea, where it was found by the King Stephen. The trawler's mate, George Denny, was among the first to be interviewed by the press.



"I was the first to notice the Zeppelin flashing a signal," he said, "and we naturally thought it was some vessel requiring assistance. We got in the gear and steamed to the spot. By the time we got there it was daylight. There were eight men on the platform, all of them waving and shouting to us. The greater part of the airship was under water, and about fifty feet of the forepart of the envelope was above water. In fact, the top part was as high as our mast. We had to go close up to hear what the Germans were saying. I counted eighteen men. The Commander was in uniform, and all of them had lifelines attached to them. From the hatchway they kept shouting to us in broken English, 'Save us, save us. We give you much gold if you take us off.' One of the Germans made as if he were going

to jump overboard, but as he was a great height up he apparently changed his mind. I and the skipper talked the position over. We argued that there were twenty or twenty-five of the enemy and only nine of us. Most of them would be armed, while we had nothing.

We decided it was not safe to have them on board because they could easily have overpowered us and taken our ship into Germany; that is if they had not put us into our own boat and sent us adrift. So the skipper shouted to them that we could not take them off. They then commenced shouting and saying that they would not touch us if only we would save them. They kept screeching out, 'Save us, save us.' We thought the best course to adopt was to hurry away and report to the first naval vessel we met, and leave them to deal with the matter. As we left some of the Germans, I am told, but personally did not hear it, shouted out, 'Gott strafe England,' (May God punish England) and they shook their fists at us."

Asked as to the condition of the Zeppelin when the King Stephen left, Denny said,

"All the after part and the underneath cars, etc., were below water. It looked as though part of it had collapsed. All the forward part of the ship was inflated and, judging from the noise that was going on below the scuttle hatch, they were trying to do some repairs. The sea was very smooth at the time and there was no immediate fear of the Zeppelin sinking, but soon after we left a gale sprang up, and I should not like to say that she would remain afloat long after such a wind. The whole ship would have to rise and fall with the heaving of the sea and the heavy weight would prevent her from lifting properly with each wave. It would act like an anchor and as the sea would naturally beat against the framework it would wreck it."

Asked his opinion as a practical man what chance there was of the Zeppelin being towed to some part and salvaged, Denny said in emphatic tones,

“None, because with all that dead weight in the water she would not bear the strain of a pull and directly the tow rope began straining I am certain the framework of the Zeppelin would collapse. It might be done in very fine weather, but not with the present condition in the North Sea.”

Reports suggest that the authorities were first informed of the presence of the disabled Zeppelin when the King Stephen met with the Hull tug Hulman at the mouth of the Humber. They were told that the Zeppelin was 80 miles north-east of the Spurn, although another report stated that it was 120 miles north-east and that a tug named Bertie had also spotted the wrecked airship.

Based on the information from the King Stephen, two naval vessels were despatched to search for the Zeppelin, but when they returned to port, they reported that there was no sign whatsoever of the airship or its crew.

In the aftermath of the events, there was little sympathy in this country for the drowned Germans. This was hardly surprising given that, only days earlier, the L19 had played its part in a bombing raid on England, which had resulted in the deaths of 26 men, 28 women and 7 children. Many felt that Skipper Martin's actions were just retribution against what one newspaper headline referred to as 'baby killers' and 'murderers'. Even the Bishop of London spoke out and urged the public to stand behind the skipper who could not trust the word of the Germans. As he put it, "Any English sailor would have risked his life to save human life, but the sad thing is that the chivalry of war has been killed by the Germans and their word cannot be trusted."

Meanwhile in Germany, it was the English who were being called murderers. The Lokal-Anzeiger newspaper commented that,

“This fresh infamous action provides yet another of these disclosures which the present war has furnished of the brutality of the British character of which ‘we barbarians’ were so little aware that it took us a long time to realise its possibilities.”

The King Stephen’s actions were deemed even more cruel than those of the crew of Baralong, a merchant ship which, in August 1915, had sunk a German submarine and then shot ten survivors in the water and another four who had taken refuge in an abandoned ship. To the Germans, it seemed that killing survivors quickly was a more compassionate act than leaving them alive, albeit with little hope of rescue. As a result the King Stephen was put on the German Naval High Command’s most wanted list.



It is unclear how Skipper Martin (pictured left) felt about his new found fame, but, in the early days at least, it had its benefits. At the end of February 1916, the Hull Daily Mail reported that he had been “the recipient of many monetary gifts from all parts of the United Kingdom, in addition to scores of congratulatory letters and has just received a draft for £22 from an admirer in South Africa.” At the same time, he was also reunited with the sister in Birmingham whom he had not

seen or heard of for nineteen years after she saw his picture in the newspaper. Far from God punishing them as the Germans had cursed, it seemed that Skipper Martin had been rewarded for his actions. He even had a poem written about him (by F. Ellis)!

SKIPPER MARTIN

*It was in the early morning
About half past three or four
And the trawler named King Stephen lay
Some twenty miles from shore.*

*Alert and keen and watchful
Were the trawler's crew of nine
For well they knew the North Sea waves
Hid many a deadly mine.*

*Into the darkness peering
The skipper's eye caught sight
Of a distant gleam on the starboard side
A strange, uncertain light.*

*Too low for a star, he mused
Nor is it a moving boat
I must hurry along and try to reach
Whatever may be afloat.*

*"So, ho! Men," cried the skipper
"Make straight for yonder light.
There are men out there that call to us
To aid them in their plight."*

*At once, through waves and darkness
They start upon their way
Intent on bringing quick relief
And help as best they may.*

*And now they are alongside
Then they see from off their deck
A score of German men and more
Upon the sinking wreck.*

*Cried the Captain from the platform
Of the hapless Zeppelin
"Save us, and here's my promise true
Rich harvest ye shall glean.*

*"Gold shall be yours in plenty
To free you from all care,
Only put out a boat at once
And rescue from despair."*

*Prudent is Skipper Martin
Kind hearted though he be
And he knows the value of an oath
That is "made in Germany".*

*He thought of treaties broken
And there rose before his eyes
A host of other things that told
Of treachery and lies.*

*His crew were nine – theirs twenty
It was more than he could dare
And Wilhelmshaven – he'd no wish
To be dragged as prisoner there.*

*So, round he turned, reluctant
To leave them in such sort
But hoped to find a ship more fit
To bring them into port.*

*A ship was found, and hastened
To the spot the skipper told
Where the captain of the L 19
Had tempted him with gold.*

*But an angry sea had strangled
And flung them on its floor
Where the Lusitania victims sank
Not many months before.*

*We uphold you, Skipper Martin
And here our tribute bring
No matter what the Germans say
You did the proper thing.*

However, several months after the L19 incident, it seems that things began to go badly wrong for both Skipper Martin and the King Stephen. On 24th April, the trawler, which had been converted into a Q-Ship (decoy vessel), was reported captured and sunk and its crew taken prisoner. The Germans were triumphant, but they were in for a disappointment. Although it was the same vessel, it was not the same crew. The hated Skipper Martin had not left dry land since his encounter with the L19 and would never be fit to do so again.

In addition to all the money and congratulations, Skipper Martin had also received anonymous threatening letters, as a result of which he was forced to change his address. This improved the situation somewhat, but in an interview with the Liverpool Echo in January 1917, Martin told their correspondent that he had begun to feel ill two months after the North Sea episode when he received a parcel bearing an Ipswich postmark and containing packets of cigarettes and tobacco. It had been sent anonymously, but inside was a note which read "Best wishes and hoping you will enjoy the best of health."

Martin was quoted as saying,

"I smoked one of the cigarettes and felt queer afterwards. I was smoking another when I felt worse and I did not finish it. I have not smoked any more, but ever since I have been slowly getting worse until I am as you see me now. Some weeks ago I found it necessary to call in my doctor and he is now attending me. He states my heart is very much affected."

Rumours abounded that the cigarettes had been poisoned, but Skipper Martin's doctor thought otherwise. Whilst these days he would probably be struck off for a gross breach of patient confidentiality, in January 1917, Dr Grimoldby cheerfully told reporters that,

"Yes there are plenty of rumours, and the man himself believes he is suffering from poisoning, but such belief is sheer bunkum. He is a difficult patient to treat, because I have to combat a diseased mind, which is the most difficult problem known to medical men. Martin firmly believes that because he refused to rescue the Zeppelin crew that the Germans are upon his track. This idea is firmly fixed in his mind. Moreover, he feels he is going to die, and with such feelings the physical

aspect of his illness is most difficult to combat, As a matter of fact, the real nature of the illness is a formidable heart trouble. He is suffering from a dilated aorta and when the dilation increases, there is naturally increased pain, and this correspondingly increases his morbid feeling. There is not the slightest suspicion of any poisoning. He tells me that in his younger days he did a great deal of boxing and this explains the present trouble with the aorta, since in all probability he received a heavy blow over the heart in one of his boxing bouts. This is the real illness, but his mind dominates the physical side and he has made up his mind that he is going to die and unless he conquers this idea it may hasten the end. “

Incapable of conquering either his demons or a defective heart, Skipper William Martin died on Saturday 24th February 1917 at his Heneage Road home. He was only 45 years old and left behind him a widow Louisa and six children. Cause of death was given as ‘dilation of the heart’, although the Hull Daily Mail suggested that “the primary cause of death was a belief that the Germans would track him down” and another paper reported rather dramatically that “he died from sheer fright.”

The Hull Daily Mail write up went on to say that Martin had kept himself alive long enough to see his son Arthur who was in the Navy and had then died a few days after the young minesweeper arrived home. It also backed up Dr Grimoldby’s dismissive attitude towards the skipper’s claims to have been poisoned.

“Our correspondent has seen the analysis (of the cigarettes), which shows they were of the ordinary kind, and free from poison. But Martin’s condition had become so low that nothing his doctor or his friends could do served to disabuse his mind. He has proved a victim of hallucination. Three weeks ago his youngest child (a baby) died and this was an added trouble.”

Once again, Germany made the most of the news, with the Lokal-Anzeiger announcing,

“Captain Martin, according to reports in English newspapers, died as the result of persecution. They say that he received threatening letters from English people who mean well towards the Germans, and that he was so deeply moved by them that he finally became insane...His death will be a warning to some of his comrades.”

Reports in Germany also quoted London papers, which suggested that “when Martin returned to his native village his neighbours ignored him and he was insulted until the way he was treated began to prey upon his mind.” However the New York Times reported that no evidence of these quotes could be found in the London papers and it does seem unlikely. Whilst bringing celebrities crashing down to earth is now something of a national sport in this country, it is hard to believe that Martin’s neighbours turned on him. Hatred of the Germans would surely have overridden any jealousy of his sudden celebrity.

It also seems unlikely that his mental illness was caused by guilt at abandoning the crew of the L19 to their fate. In a statement, posthumously published in December 1918 when it was felt that it was safe for the full facts to come out, Skipper Martin says,

“I had all my own men safe and sound and I was determined to take no risks. I knew what the Germans had done to my class in the North Sea and, besides, Zeppelin crews dropping bombs on houses and killing women and children didn’t appeal to me...”

It wasn't a nice feeling to leave eighteen men to drown, even if they were your enemies, though richly deserving their fate...The Germans were doomed, but I felt I had done the right thing under the circumstances."

Given these words, it is hard to believe that William Martin died guilt-ridden at having left the crew of L19 to die. Had he done otherwise, it is safe to assume that his own crew would either have been killed or captured and imprisoned by the Germans, who outnumbered them two to one. Of course, this wasn't how the Germans saw it, but did they hate him enough to pursue him on dry land and poison him? Despite the analysis showing no trace of poison, it is possible that the cigarettes were laced with something undetectable to scientific testing at that time. A positive test result might even have been covered up by the British authorities as it would not have been good for public morale if it got out that a war hero had been done away with so easily by enemy poisoners lurking in Suffolk. However, it's equally possible that the cigarettes were just a well-meaning gift from someone who wasn't to know that tobacco isn't actually good for your health! Martin's shoemaker father-in-law Abraham Read originated from Suffolk, so they could have been sent by an old family friend or distant relative. Sadly, unless the evidence is still in a cold case storage facility somewhere, we will never know the truth.

Another more sensible theory is that notoriety just didn't agree with Skipper Martin and the stress of all the attention caused the onset of both his heart trouble and his mental illness. It's clear that he received hate mail, which was sufficiently bad to cause him to move house, so it's reasonable to assume that heart and mind could have been affected by it. Perhaps what began as mild anxiety and depression and heart pain brought out the worst in each other and combined to hasten his demise. Although the treatment of mental illness still has a long way to go in this country, back in the early

1900s, poor old William Martin wouldn't have had a prayer. His doctor's "stop brooding and get over it" attitude was fairly typical of an age where shell-shocked soldiers were shot for cowardice and the concept of PTSD would have been hysterically laughed at over brandy and cigars by men who hadn't seen action in decades, if at all. Only physical illness existed for the likes of Dr Grimoldby, so once the dark thoughts took hold, the King Stephen's skipper was as doomed as the crew of the L19.

It was a sad end for Martin, denied a dignified death thanks to gossiping GPs and being caught in the middle of the vicious propaganda war that was being fought in the pages of the British and German newspapers. His mental issues were hung out on the bylines for all to see and his demise must have been hard for his family to deal with. It would appear that his son Arthur took it particularly hard and didn't react at all well when his mother remarried only months after his father's death. A court report in the 1917 Boxing Day edition of the Hull Daily Mail reveals that nineteen year old Arthur was summoned to court charged with assaulting Louisa. It was claimed that whilst drunk, he went to her house, struck her in the face, dragged her into the street by her hair and would have done her further violence had it not been for the intervention of passers-by.

In his defence, Arthur told the court that he had kept the family home going after his father's death but they had quarrelled after his mother's marriage and he had moved out. He denied striking her and insisted that he had done no more than restrain her to prevent injury to himself. The Stipendiary bound him over to keep the peace for six months.

It would be interesting to know what happened to Louisa, Arthur and the other Martin children and whether they remained a family at war. Even though Arthur had tried to keep the family together, Louisa was in a difficult position with so many children. The probate records show that William

Martin left effects of £355 when he died, which would equate to around £10,000 in today's money. Things could have been a lot worse, but realistically the money would not have lasted for long with such a large family. Little wonder then that if an offer of marriage came along, she would have accepted it, albeit only a few months after burying her husband.

Unlike Skipper Martin, some of the captured crew of the King Stephen did survive the war. On 19th November 1918, the Hull Daily Mail reported that the Mate, John H. Greenwood of 1 Highfield Avenue, Grimsby, had been repatriated on the Australian liner, the Wilochra. Whilst in captivity, he had been a model prisoner of war, refusing to work and being placed in solitary confinement on a number of occasions as a result. Another crew member named France was in Scarborough hospital having sustained a broken shoulder after being struck by a German, whilst two enginemen, Mr Priestly of 62 Harold Street, Grimsby and Mr Kerrison of 10 Lovett Street, Cleethorpes had also been returned home. Although the crew were not treated too badly by the German sailors who initially captured them, it was commented that were it not for the food parcels from England received during their internment in various camps, they would have died.

Over the years, the story of the King Stephen has kept resurfacing. In one article from August 1938, the writer talks of the crew of the King Stephen being sent to the salt mines after being pursued and captured by three submarines that had lain doggo for three months near the Humber. It also says that when the Germans found out that Skipper Martin wasn't on board, secret agents were sent to Grimsby to get him as well and that his death was all a bit of a mystery.

Evidently the Germans hadn't forgotten about the incident either and an article in the Hull Daily Mail in May 1945 describes a Nazi "hate book", which had come into the possession of an RAF man from

Hull. The aim of the book was to make Germans hate their enemies and in it was a sketch of the Zeppelin L19 and the King Stephen as an example of British brutality.

When the story of the King Stephen was first mentioned to me some months ago, much emphasis was placed on the fact that Skipper Martin had apparently lied to the authorities about the position of the Zeppelin because his trawler was fishing illegally. The implication was that the German crew had died because of the lie he told, which had sent the navy on a wild goose chase to an area miles away from the actual crash site. There was even a BBC Inside Out programme made about the incident in 2005.

Nearly half a century ago, Colin Walker, the news editor of the Grimsby Evening Telegraph, also researched the King Stephen story, interviewing two surviving members of the crew, the Burret brothers, as well as delving into the Admiralty archives. What he discovered seemed to corroborate the claims that Skipper "Mad Brummie" Martin (was this nickname coined as a joke before he died or a cruel jibe afterwards?) had indeed deliberately given an incorrect position for the Zeppelin.

Walker quotes a naval staff monograph which states:

"The King Stephen steamed off to find a patrol boat, the shouts of the Germans to be saved dying away in the distance, but it was not until she reached the Humber in the morning of February 3rd, 1916, that she found any vessel to receive her report. Even then, the skipper gave the wrong position. He had been fishing in the prohibited area and did not wish to incriminate himself."

It was evident to Walker that the King Stephen had been fishing in the Cleaver Bank zone of the North Sea, which was in Dutch waters and forty miles further out than where the trawler was supposed to be fishing. This would tie in with the early newspaper reports where there was confusion over whether the Zeppelin had been spotted 80 or 120 miles north-east of the Spurn.

So, does this evidence make Skipper Martin the murderer that the Germans claimed he was? My grasp of North Sea geography is shaky and my knowledge of fishing vessels sparse, but to me the figures just don't add up. Having consulted several publications by people who know far more than me about steam trawlers, it would appear that the average speed at which they could travel in 1916 was around 10 knots or 11.5 miles per hour. Assuming the Zeppelin was 120 miles from Spurn, it would have taken more than 10 hours for the King Stephen to get to the mouth of the Humber, the point at which they informed the Hull tug that the Zeppelin was in the North Sea. Even if they had only been 80 miles out, as reported by Skipper Martin, it would have taken around 7 hours to make the trip.

A sealed bottle picked up by fishermen on the west coast of Sweden six months after the L19 was lost was found to contain messages from the crew for their families, including one from "Hans" to his "dear wife and mother." It read:

"I am still living, but nothing to eat. This morning British trawler came up, but would not save us. Her name was King Stephen, of Grimsby. Courage. Sinking. 12 noon. We have had prayer and said goodbye to each other."

In the statements made by the crew of the King Stephen, they first approached the L19 at daybreak. In early February, this would have been around 7.30 in the morning. If, as Hans says, the Zeppelin was sinking at noon, then it made no difference whether it was 80 or 120 miles from Spurn. Unless the King Stephen had come across a naval vessel within the first few hours of leaving the Zeppelin, there was no way that a rescue could have been made in time.

Although Skipper Martin *was* fishing in a prohibited area and his actions may have been partially motivated by a fear of being banned from fishing, ultimately the decision he made was in the best interests of the crew of which he had command. He chose to put their safety before that of his enemy and it is hard to imagine that any other skipper, whether British or German, would have acted differently if put in that position. The early months of the First World War when soldiers called a truce and played football at Christmas were long gone. Human life had lost its value in a brutal war and, short of Martin's cook being a lethal weapon like Steven Seagal in "Under Siege", had the skipper allowed the Germans to board the King Stephen, superior numbers and not chivalry would have won the day.

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