

The Scareship Age, 1892-1946: Collected Blog Posts from Airminded

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Cover Image: Photograph of a [German airship](#) in flight over Germany, late 1900s. Courtesy Peter Edwards.

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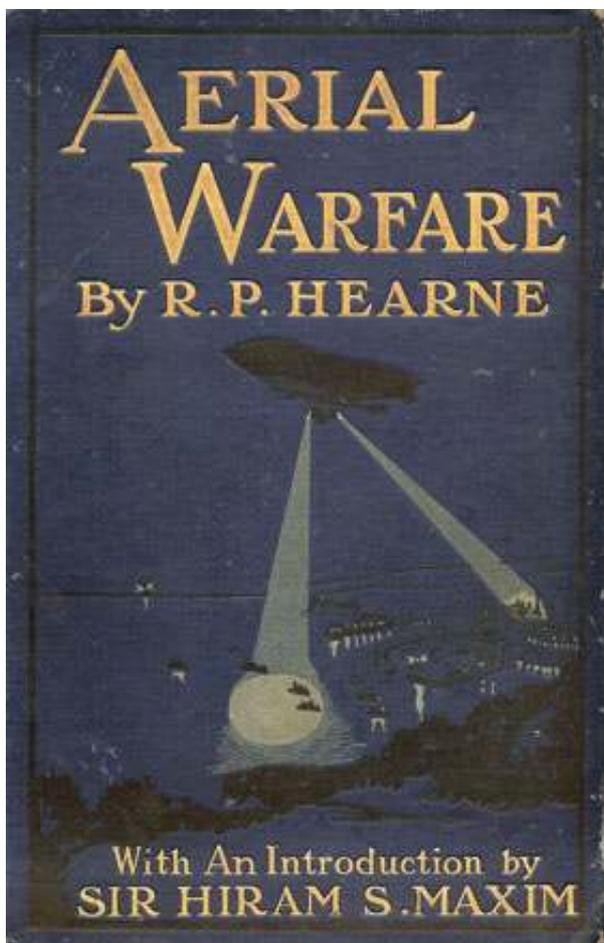
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The Scareship Age



On the night of 23 March 1909, a police constable named Kettle saw a most unusual thing: 'a strange, cigar-shaped craft passing over the city'¹ of Peterborough, Cambridgeshire. His friends were sceptical, but his story was corroborated, to an extent, by Mr Banyard and Mrs Day, both of nearby March, who separately saw something similar two nights later. In fact, these incidents were only the prelude to a series of several dozen such sightings throughout April and especially May, mostly from East Anglia and South Wales. As the London *Standard* noted in May, there seemed to be common features to the various eyewitness accounts:

With few exceptions they all speak of a torpedo-shaped object, possessing two powerful searchlights, which comes out early at night.²

So, what was torpedo-shaped and capable of flight in 1909? An airship, of course. The press (metropolitan and provincial) certainly assumed that the most likely explanation for these 'fly-by-nights' was an airship or airships, generally terming them 'phantom airships', 'mystery airships',

'scareships' or something similar.

But whose airship? Where was it from? There were actually very few airships operating in Britain at this time. The first edition of *Jane's All the World's Air-ships*, first published in 1909, listed just two, with several in the process of being built or bought. One of these was a small army airship, *Baby*, while the other belonged to the pioneer aviator E. T. Willows. These two small, underpowered aircraft could hardly be responsible for the mystery airship sightings, some of which took place on the same night but at widely separated locations. And although several sightings took place in and around Cardiff, near Willows' base, he was actually in London at the time, exhibiting one of his airships.

A more sinister origin for the phantom airships seemed likely. For in 1909, the world's most powerful airships were all German. Count Zeppelin's monster aircraft were as long as a battleship, could stay aloft for hours or even a day at a time, and could carry a dozen men (or an equivalent load of bombs). No other country had anything nearly so impressive; nor did any aeroplane have remotely the same performance. More importantly, the Anglo-German antagonism was now in full swing. The famous dreadnought panic ('we want eight and we won't wait') had taken place just a few months earlier; and since then certain sections of the press had been obsessed with hunting German spies, who were apparently everywhere. One of the most popular plays on the London stage in 1909 was Guy du Maurier's *An Englishman's Home*, which dramatised an invasion of Britain by a thinly-disguised Germany -- by now such a clichéd plotline that P. G. Wodehouse felt able to parody the genre in his short story, "[The swoop!](#)" German periodicals boasted that the Zeppelin would give the British what was coming to them. So it seemed plausible that Germany was sending over its new weapons by night to spy on Britain, or even to practice navigation and bombing techniques for the war-to-come. And Conservative newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* did not hesitate to use the 'fact' of German aerial espionage as a cudgel with which to beat the Liberal government, for its slow progress in forming a military wing. The Wright brothers were then in London trying to sell their aeroplane to the War Office, which showed little enthusiasm, while reports came in from Germany about the wild popular enthusiasm there for Zeppelins as the answer to the Royal Navy. Little wonder then, if nervous people saw things.

Some of the sightings themselves did support the idea that Zeppelins were responsible. For example, a Mr. Egerton Free of Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, saw a long sausage-shaped airship manoeuvring over the cliffs for a few minutes at dusk. It hovered at 600 feet for a few minutes, and then departed in a north-easterly direction. The next day, Free found 'a curious object', a sort of piston weighing 35 lb and stamped with the words 'Müller Bremen Fabrik'.³ This was taken to mean that it was made in a factory in Bremen, Germany, and the War Office was reported to have confiscated it. But -- aside from the fact that investigations failed to turn up any such factory -- we now know that it was virtually impossible for German airships to have visited Britain in 1909. No German record has ever been found of such flights, which would have been hazardous in the extreme for the underpowered and slow airships of that time. Also, while Essex and Norfolk were likely enough landfalls for airships crossing the North Sea from Germany, South Wales was not. And the mystery airships were almost universally seen to be carrying searchlights, which they played on the landscape below -- a common enough device in drawings of airships at this time (see image above), but not at all common in practice, and not conducive to secrecy, either.

This is all very curious. But it gets curiouser, and indeed, curiouser. The first 'curiouser' comes from the fact that 1909 was not the last year that Britain was visited by phantom airships. A well-publicised incident at [Sheerness, Kent](#), in October 1912, where engine sounds were heard traveling overhead, led to questions being asked in Parliament. And this was followed by dozens of sightings of mystery airships in [February 1913](#), exceeding the 1909 visitations in number and geographic spread, and at times witnessed by crowds of thousands of people. When war came, so did another spate of sightings; in August 1914, the War Office even sent one of its precious few aeroplanes to conduct a fruitless aerial search of the Lake District for the airship rumoured to be based there, and non-existent airships continued to be spotted into 1916.

The second 'curiouser' is because Britain was not the only country where mystery airships were seen. Other times and places where something comparable (multiple and often widespread sightings of non-existent aircraft) occurred include:

- Russia: 1892, 1912-3
- United States: 1896-7, 1904-10, 1914-8
- Canada: 1896-7, 1914-7
- South Africa: 1899, 1914
- France: 1903, 1912
- Denmark: 1908
- New Zealand: 1909
- Australia: 1909
- Sweden: 1909
- Belgium: 1913
- Netherlands: 1913
- Germany: 1913
- Romania: 1913
- Austria-Hungary: 1913
- Norway: 1914-6

Forget about [old, weird America](#) -- there's clearly an old, weird world thing going on here. A veritable Scareship Age, in fact, 1892-1918. Later instances could be adduced (the Scandinavian ghost flyer of 1932-4, the [Battle of Los Angeles](#) in 1942, the Scandinavian and Greek [ghost rockets](#) of 1946) but clearly, activity peaked during the years of flight's infancy.

Many of these episodes can be correlated with wars or war scares. For example, the South African sightings of 1899 took place after Boer officials were warned to be on the lookout for (non-existent) British airships, while those of 1914 were commonly thought to be (actually existing) aeroplanes from neighbouring German South-West Africa, although the range was far too great for this to be possible. Germany's own phantom airships included a supposed Russian airship and an airship crashing in flames into a forest, perhaps seen as the beginning of another [Echterdingen miracle](#).

But others have little to do with war. In particular, the American waves before the First World War were not fearful reactions to foreign aviation developments, but joyous affirmations of native technical genius. For easily the most common explanation given for the presence of an airship was that some lone inventor had been tinkering away for years in a barn, and was now taking his machine out for a series of test flights. For example, the mystery aircraft seen by thousands of New Englanders in December 1909 was reputed to belong to a local businessman, Wallace E. Tillinghast, who told a journalist that he had flown it from Worcester, Massachusetts to New York City (and once around the Statue of Liberty!) But just as with the British phantom airships, the popular explanation does not hold water, for no evidence in support of any of these rumoured inventors has ever subsequently come to light. And the large number of simultaneous (or nearly so) sightings makes it impossible to believe that so many secret aircraft were out and about on the same night. For example, on 23 December 1909, an airship-with-searchlight was reported to have flown off into the west from Marlboro, Massachusetts in the late evening; while another was seen to do the same thing from Southbridge, 40 miles away -- while yet another was seen late that night over Providence and Pawtucket, Rhode Island. (By the way, night flights were a extremely hazardous undertakings for aeroplanes at this time, the first (known!) one took place in Argentina the following March, though I think Zeppelins had already performed this feat.)

So, this is where [Joseph Corn's idea](#) about the essential difference in the popular response to aviation between Britain and America comes into play. Americans were essentially optimistic about

the coming of flight. In seeing airships that weren't actually there, they were affirming their faith in the beneficial nature of aviation, and in their nation's ability to master it. But when Britons saw airships that weren't there, they were projecting their fears of foreign invasion and domination onto the night sky. Very early on, it seems, the British learned to associate aircraft with danger, not opportunity.

It's not quite that simple, of course. For one thing, it is possible to find more optimistic interpretations of the British scareships. Some newspapers did speculate that it was a local invention, in particular the *Liberal Manchester Guardian*; but this was not the majority viewpoint, and it certainly wasn't the "obvious" one. Similarly, one explanation proffered during the massive series of sightings in the United States in 1896-7 was that the airship was a new weapon being developed for use by Cuban rebels against Spain. Even then, however, it was still a reassuringly American invention. It should also be noted out that strange lights in the sky were not always thought to be man-made machines; those seen at Egryn in North Wales in 1905 were interpreted against the backdrop of the Welsh Revival then sweeping the land. Even Martians were invoked, on occasion, or remnants of the lost tribe of Israel (!) Such alternatives seem to have been more the exception than the rule during the Scareship Age.

Another problem is that nearly all we know about the phantom airships comes from contemporary newspaper accounts, and it's not clear how far these can be trusted. In 1966, for example, a journalist in New Zealand tracked down and interviewed four of the surviving witnesses to one of the spectacular airship sightings of 1909. They had been children at the time, and could remember all the fuss and excitement; but although they had been named and quoted in contemporary newspaper reports, only one could remember actually having seen anything. And journalists were not above outright fabrication: the Aurora, Texas airship crash of 1897 was invented by one such scribe. And of course, even when the witnesses were real, their stories may not have been. Moreover, just because the newspapers thought the phantom airships belonged to German spies or American inventors doesn't necessarily mean that all their readers did too. „But at least some did. A Great Yarmouth, Norfolk man wondered 'What are the Germans up to?'⁴ when he heard the sound of an engine overhead, and this appears to be what most other people were wondering too.

The astute reader will notice that I haven't speculated as to what people were actually seeing, since in the vast majority of cases they can't possibly have seen what they thought they were seeing. The reason is that for my purpose here, belief matters more than reality. And that belief appears to have been shaped by national political and cultural characteristics, hope and paranoia, which shaped what the *Manchester Guardian* called 'The gathering cloud of rumour'.⁵ Real or not, the phantom airships were direct reflections of their age: the Scareship Age.

Some suggested reading: on the British scareships, Alfred Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government, 1909-14* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) and David Clarke, "[Scareships over Britain: the airship wave of 1909](#)", *Fortean Studies* 6 (1999), 39-63; on the 1909 New England wave, Stephen Whalen and Robert E. Bartholomew, "[The great New England airship hoax of 1909](#)", *New England Quarterly* 75 (2002), 466-76; on phantom airships in the English-speaking world more generally, Nigel Watson, *The Scareship Mystery: A Survey of Worldwide Phantom Airship Scares (1909-1918)* (Corby: Domra, 2000).

Image source: R. P. Hearne, *Aerial Warfare* (London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), front cover.

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The phantom balloon scare of 1892

Perhaps the first mass outbreak of mystery aircraft sightings took place in 1892 in Russian-occupied Poland, near the German border. The *Manchester Guardian* reported on 26 March that a 'large balloon coming from the German frontier appeared about the fortress of Kovno'.⁶ The Russian defenders fired at it, but it returned safely over the border. On 7 March, something similar had been seen near Dombrowa:

The balloon was coming from the south-west, and following a north-easterly direction along the Ivangorod-Dombrowa Railway, and this in spite of the fact that a north-east wind was blowing. The balloon disappeared behind the clouds, but reappeared about forty-five minutes later with a light burning (it was then half-past six in the evening), and following a course directly opposed to the former one. It is presumed that the balloon must have been provided with a highly perfected steering apparatus.⁷

A few days later came further reports: sightings 'German balloons' are now said to be 'becoming frequent'. On 22 March a balloon was seen over a railway station at Pronshk[ol?], near Warsaw; the fortress of Novogeorgievsk; and the town of Kelets. The following day, people in Warsaw saw 'a balloon over the city casting rays of light from an electric apparatus'. It stayed visible in the same place until 1am, when it moved to the west. A balloon 'projecting powerful electric search lights over a large extent of country' was seen in areas (presumably) near the Silesian border, towards evening or at night, apparently remaining motionless at a 'great height for as long as forty minutes'.⁸

Clearly the Russians believed they were seeing German balloons. The Russian military fired upon one; and the *New York Times* reported that the Russian government intended to make a formal protest to Germany about the supposed overflights, citing 'a breach of the military laws'.⁹ The *Manchester Guardian* suggested (on what basis, I don't know) that 'both the French and German military authorities are in possession of some sort of apparatus for steering balloons'.¹⁰ But we know now that this was not true. All anybody had were the usual static observation balloons, which were certainly not capable of the movement seen over Russian Poland.

So what was going on here? This was early on in the Russo-German antagonism. The [Reinsurance Treaty](#) between the two empires lapsed in 1890, and Russia was drawing closer to France. (The [Franco-Russian treaty](#) was drafted in August 1892.) Russian troops were pouring into Poland, whether for the annual exercises or some other reason was not clear. (Germans reportedly feared an attack; the Russian foreign minister had to assure the German ambassador that the mobilisation was only precautionary.) Russia itself was still suffering from a terrible famine after a crop failure in 1891, which had claimed the lives of several hundred thousand people over the winter.

So the situation in Russia was unsettled. The phantom balloons were thought to be piloted by German spies, and there is evidence that Russian authorities were worried about espionage, just as in Britain in 1909. For example, a Russian commander is reported to have demanded permission to expel civilians from the border areas, 90% of whom were Jews, 'who are regarded by the Russian authorities as certain to be friendly to an invading force, and as already acting as spies for the Germans'.¹¹ This while Jews were being ejected from St Petersburg for the Pale of Settlement. Russians felt threatened by enemies within and without.

So in my usual way I'm suggesting that fears of war, of a technologically advanced enemy and a treacherous civilian minority combined to cause a phantom balloon panic, an early episode in the [Scareship Age](#). Russians projected their fears onto the night sky. As for what actually triggered the sightings, Venus seems a likely candidate, as it was very bright and highly visible low in the western sky after sunset at this time. That can't explain all the sightings (it had set long before 1am, for example), but it's undoubtedly responsible for some of them.

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Believing is seeing

I was pleasantly surprised when [A Fortean in the Archives](#) linked to my post on [Boer War airpower](#) for several reasons. Firstly, because it's always nice to be linked to. Secondly, because I've been following A Fortean in the Archives for a while now: the Fortean in question is [Mike Dash](#), a former contributing editor of *Fortean Times* who has a PhD in British naval history and has written a fine call-to-arms for Fortean historians called *Borderlands*, which deserves to be more widely read. And thirdly, because of the post itself, which is about the curious episode of Walter Powell, a Conservative MP who disappeared in 1881 when his balloon was swept out from Dorset over the

English Channel. This was highly publicised in the press, and for the next week or so reports came in of sightings of Powell's balloon. Many were from fairly plausible locations (Dartmouth, Alderney, northern Spain), but a couple were from Scotland nearly a week later, which is not plausible at all. So in at least some cases, whatever they did see, it wasn't Powell in his balloon. This suggests that expectations were playing a role: having been told by the press that a balloon was lost at sea, people were apt to interpret anything aerial they didn't recognise (a planet, a [Reticulan](#) scoutship) as Powell in his balloon.

This is a useful reminder that phantom airship 'scares' were only incidentally due to fear; the real cause was expectation. An even clearer example comes from Canada in 1896. The context was the attempt by [S. A. Andrée](#), a Swedish engineer, to reach the North Pole by air. His [plan](#) was to launch in a balloon from Danskøya, an island near Spitsbergen, and drift north with the wind. After reaching the pole, the balloon would eventually land in Canada or Russia. The Swedish and [international press](#) covered the preparations for the voyage in some detail. On 30 June, the balloon was inflated, and Andrée and his two companions announced their intention to start for the pole when the wind was favourable.

The very next day, some people in Winnipeg saw a balloon they identified as Andrée's, far off in the distance, which excited some comment in the press. More interestingly, on 3 July, the chief of the [Kispiox](#) people and a group of trappers saw something balloon-like, brightly-lit and travelling north while at Blackwater Lake in British Columbia. Not far away, on the Skeena river, an Aboriginal boy saw something very similar on the same date. Both of these reports were relayed through a local Indian Affairs agent, who had warned the locals that they were 'liable' to see Andrée's balloon travelling north over the next month, and presumably accepted the sightings as being reliable.

And so they did, or rather 'did', because Andrée's balloon never left the ground. The wind at Danskøya kept blowing steadily south, and the expedition was put off until the following year. Free ballooning was not at all common in the 1890s, and it's unlikely that anyone would have tried it over the wilds of British Columbia. So there was nothing to see along the Skeena, yet something was seen, precisely because something was expected.

The Andrée expedition did set off in [1897](#), on 11 July, but the balloon crashed into pack ice after only two days and 300 miles. Andrée and his companions tried to return on foot, but perished before reaching safety. Their fate was unknown until 1930. It will come as no surprise that more phantom sightings of Andrée's balloon were reported from Canada: this time from Rivers Inlet, Kamloops, Victoria, Goldstream, Douglas, Winnipeg, Rossland, Souris and Honora. Most spectacularly, thousands of people in Vancouver saw 'a very bright red star surrounded by a luminous halo' to the south for a quarter of hour on 13 August, which again was identified with the now-wrecked Andrée balloon. With mystery aircraft, expectation is everything.

Source: Robert E. Bartholomew and George S. Howard, *UFOs & Alien Contact: Two Centuries of Mystery* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), chapter 3.

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The Boer War in airpower history



The [Boer War](#) of 1899-1902 doesn't often appear in airpower history. This may have something to do with the fact that it took place before the invention of the aeroplane, which I suppose is reasonable. But there are still interesting and even important connections and influences to be traced. Here are a baker's half-dozen.

1. Airpower was actually used during the war, in the form of British [observation balloons](#). The [Royal Engineers](#) deployed three balloon sections to South Africa; one was part of the besieged forces at [Ladysmith](#) while the others took part in many of the operations from Modder River to the advance on Pretoria, observing enemy troop movements and directing artillery fire. (In the photo above, British infantry are crossing the Zand while a balloon keeps an eye out for Boers.) The balloon sections seem to have been quite useful in the early part of the war, but less so in the later guerrilla phases, where the British tried to hem in the remaining Boer forces against their [system of blockhouses and wire fences](#). It seems it was possible to make the balloons mobile by simply hitching them to a wagon, but obviously they had no independence of action and had to stick to where the main body of the troops were, which was usually where the Boer commandos weren't. Still, I wonder if anybody on the British side thought about bringing in lots of balloons to give the counterinsurgent forces eyes in the sky.

The Boer War was, briefly, also a phantom airship, or rather phantom balloon scare. The Boers were initially quite worried about the British balloons, for which they had no counter. It was thought they might be used to float over Boer cities to drop bombs. In October 1899 the following telegraph message was sent from (actually, the [source](#) says received by, but that makes little sense) the Transvaal headquarters:

Balloons -- Yesterday evening two balloons were seen at [Irene](#), proceeding in the direction of [Springs](#). Official telegraphists instructed to inform the Commander in Chief about any objects seen in the sky.

Here's an example of the sort of response that was received, in this case from [Vryheid](#):

Airship with powerful light plainly visible from here in far off distance towards [Dundee](#).

Telegraphist at [Paulpietersburg](#) also spied one, and at Amsterdam three in the direction of Zambansland to the south east.

Shots were fired at these supposed balloons or airships, and Transvaal apparently bought powerful searchlights from Germany to sweep the skies for them (although if that's true, it must have been done before the outbreak of war, because the British imposed an effective blockade on the Boer republics). The British balloons were nowhere near the Transvaal, so the Boers were seeing what they didn't want to see, so to speak. But lest it be thought that Tommy Atkins was too sober and rational to be afflicted with such visions, General Buller's men thought they were being followed by a light which appeared at dusk, which they called the 'Boer signal'. It was probably Venus. (Source: Nigel Watson, *The Scareship Mystery: A Survey of Worldwide Phantom Airship Scares (1909-1918)* (Corby: Domra Publications, 2000), 109-10.)

3. A very high proportion of senior figures in the early RFC fought in the Boer War: [David Henderson](#) (who was in fact in charge of military intelligence in the guerrilla phase of the war), [Hugh Trenchard](#), [Frederick Sykes](#), for example. [P. R. C. Groves](#) and [L. E. O. Charlton](#), two early RFC officers who later became well-known airpower pundits, also fought in South Africa (Charlton was wounded and received the DSO). I'm sure there would be others. I've noted a similar geographical funnel [before](#), mostly for the same men as it happens, and the same explanations probably apply: they actively sought out opportunity and adventure (Groves and Charlton, at least, were both volunteers), which is the sort of person most likely to try their hand at a new (and dangerous, possibly career-ending) service. Also, flying was a young man's game, but the decade's span between the end of the Boer War and the formation of the RFC meant that men who had volunteered for South Africa while young (Sykes was 22 when he volunteered for the Imperial Yeomanry) and had remained in the Army were beginning to reach ranks where they could be entrusted with serious responsibility. The other aspect to that is that the Army had expanded massively (relative to Victorian norms) to meet the needs of the war and then contracted again afterwards. Those who did hang around were likely to find themselves underemployed at various times and without prospects for promotion, and a new challenge like flying might appeal (Trenchard's biography bears this out). There are other possible effects of the Boer War which I'll come to presently.

4. From the Boer side, [Jan Smuts](#) also fought in the war, as the leader of a commando which raided deep into the Cape Colony. His connection with airpower history is, of course, as that he was asked by David Lloyd George to formulate the Imperial War Cabinet's response to the Gotha raids in 1917. The resulting eponymous reports led to [the formation of the RAF](#) in 1918 (though Henderson helped with the writing too). Someone with Smuts' many talents probably would have risen to great prominence anyway (he was already Attorney General of the Transvaal Republic at the outbreak of war) but I think the combination of the military feats he performed during the war and the political leadership he displayed during the negotiations over the peace treaty and then the Union Treaty and made him something special in British eyes. So if not for the Boer War, Smuts might not have been present at the birth of the RAF.

5. Getting into more speculative territory, I wonder if the economic warfare carried out by the British army against the Boers -- burning farms, removing livestock, imprisoning civilians, in order to cut off the commandos from their sources of supply -- influenced later airpower thinkers? Most of the theorising about economic warfare before 1914 came from navalists like Corbett, and there are [definite continuities](#) with airpower theory there. But a throwaway comment by Beau Grosscup in *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2006), 22, that 'Trenchard was trained in the British military tradition of offensive economic warfare' (i.e. which informed his later advocacy of strategic bombing) got me thinking. My first thought was what tradition?? and as Grosscup has a fair bit of questionable history that's still my considered opinion. But if the Army did have experience with economic warfare which might influence its strategic thought, it would have to have been in South Africa, the only time it had fought something like a European economy since the Crimea. And, as noted above, Henderson et al all experienced the war against the Boers at first hand. Having said that, the economic strangulation of the Boers was only part of the answer: their morale remained strong and they kept fighting until well after their military position was hopeless. And the knock-out blow is all about breaking morale. Which leads me to the next point.

6. The Boers engaged in terror warfare against the towns they besieged, [Ladysmith](#), [Mafeking](#) and [Kimberley](#), by way of artillery bombardment. (I'm not making a moral judgement by using the word 'terror', and anyway the British killed far more civilians through neglect in the concentration camps.) Boer artillery was few in number, but they did have some heavy pieces, including the famous '[Long Toms](#)'. These would periodically shell the besieged towns, generally causing few casualties but sometimes causing a great deal of fear. The bombardments had the greatest effect in Kimberley where it seems (I don't have figures, unfortunately) that a number of women and children were killed in the shelling. The defenders dug shelters, hid in the diamond mines, built their [own artillery piece](#) for counter-battery fire and even improvised a warning system (a lookout on a tower would wave a flag when he saw a puff of smoke from the Long Tom, then buglers would sound the alarm, giving civilians about 15 seconds to take cover). But [Cecil Rhodes](#), who was in Kimberley during the siege, was not at all happy. He continually pestered military authorities about raising the siege, used his newspaper to spew venom at them for doing nothing, and even had to be restrained from physically assaulting the commander of the town's defences for delaying dispatch of yet another plea/threat to Kitchener. He had just been prevented from holding a town meeting criticising military inaction, essentially proclaiming that the town's morale was on the verge of collapse, when the relief column finally arrived. Of course, the food shortages were more important than the bombardment (Kimberley was under siege for 124 days). Still it seems to me that we have here a small-scale model of how, in some of its more genteel versions at least, the knock-out blow was supposed to lead demoralised citizens to force their government to do whatever it took to end the war.

7. Finally, was [NATO's air campaign against Serbia in 1999](#) a vindication of the victory-through-airpower theory? The Boer War says no! At least, that's the conclusion of Kieran Webb, 'Strategic bombardment and Kosovo: evidence from the Boer War', *Defense & Security Analysis* [24 \(2008\): 303-15](#). Here are the concluding two paragraphs:

Keegan's argument that Kosovo was a turning point is not only countered by its rarity but also by the fact that similar circumstances had happened previously. Analysis from the Boer War found evidence of bombardment having a strategic effect at the [Battle of Paardeberg](#) in 1900. Here the leadership was susceptible to domestic pressure, and bombardment managed to minimise human casualties while it destroyed items of economic and personal value. The result was that the besieged Boers rejected the chance to escape when it was available to them and surrendered to the British even though they had not run out of food or ammunition.

Other battles fought during the Boer War could not be won by bombardment alone. Both Boers and the British managed to find ways to withstand enemy artillery and could be defeated only through the use of ground troops. Just as Kosovo was exceptional in its era, so was Paardeberg in its time.

Intriguing, but outside my area!

For an excellent overview of the Boer War which isn't unbalanced by an obsession with airpower, I recommend Denis Judd and Keith SurrIDGE, *The Boer War* (London: John Murray, 2003).

Image source: [Library of Congress](#).

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Scareships over Australia — I

It's a little-known fact that Australia had a phantom airship scare of its very own. That's mostly due to phantom airships themselves being little-known, on the whole. But the Australian sightings of August-September 1909 were also less numerous and less spectacular than the other waves that preceded it that year, in [Britain](#) in May and in [New Zealand](#) in July and August. They are still, however, interesting, and the Australian reaction to these visitations differed from that of their imperial cousins.

The Australian press did report on the phantom airships seen flying over Britain and New Zealand, though not in great detail. On [19 May](#) the *Sydney Morning Herald* said that 'For several weeks a mysterious airship has occasionally been seen over the eastern counties of England, chiefly at night' --

and not much more than that. A few days later, on [22 May](#), the *West Australian* told of 'reports of a mysterious balloon having been seen at night time over the east coast' of England, which had been 'confirm[ed]' by policemen and sailors. The subsequent 'solutions' to the mystery were reported more fully, such as the [advertising airship found at Dunstable](#) (see, e.g., *Adelaide Advertiser*, [28 May](#)) and the so-called [admission](#) by a Dr M. Boyd that he was the inventor and pilot of the mystery airship (a claim which itself was later -- or earlier, going by the Australian publication date -- [debunked](#)). The possible German origin of the mystery airship(s) was stressed in most of these accounts: for example, the *West Australian* noted that 'The vessel is supposed to be a reconnoitering balloon belonging to the German fleet now manoeuvring in the North Sea'.

The sightings across the Tasman were given a bit more attention, though less context -- it seems nothing was said about where New Zealanders thought the airships might have come from. Several newspapers printed the following story (here taken from the *Brisbane Courier* for [31 July](#)):

Remarkable stories are coming from the South Island regarding a mysterious light seen at night. The suggestion is that the light is shown by an airship. In some cases it is circumstantially declared that the light appears in the centre of a black body. One observer declares that the airship is shaped like a boat, with a hat top, and was speeding at about 30 miles an hour. An airship has also been seen by about 30 people in the Oamaru district. The most circumstantial report comes from Gore, stating that it was reported that an airship had been seen there for the last four nights, and that last night it was distinguished at 9 o'clock, passing at a great height, and travelling south, with a headlight attached.

About a week later, another, now more dismissive report again circulated in a number of the major dailies:

Circumstantial accounts have been received from different parts of the Dominion of an airship having been seen both day and night.

One informant declares that the occupant of the airship sang out to him in a foreign language.

Generally speaking, the reports, though circumstantial, are not taken too seriously.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* of [7 August](#) the above was revealingly entitled 'AERIAL HYSTERIA. NEW ZEALANDER'S [sic] SCARE'. After such a smug headline it is entirely satisfying to note the first reports of true-blue fair-dinkum you-beaut Aussie scareships surfaced just a few days later, which I'll discuss in the following post.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Scareships over Australia — II

The first [Australian scareship](#) to be reported was not described as an airship, but simply as 'beautiful revolving lights', albeit of a mechanical aspect. This was published in the Melbourne *Argus* of [9 August 1909](#). Reverend B. Cozens, of the [Port Melbourne Seamen's Mission](#), came into the newspaper's office to make a statement about something he had seen from a farm at Kangaroo Ground, to the east of Melbourne, on the previous Saturday night (7 August):

At 10 o'clock on Saturday night my wife and I saw two beautiful revolving lights high up in the air above the [Dandenong Range](#). These lights whirled like the propellers of ships, slowed down, dipped, and rose again, as if they were beating up in a zig-zag course against the wind. They were about six miles apart, and about half a mile in the air over the top of the range. They changed from white to red and then to blue, as if they were revolving beacons with three-coloured slides.

A neighbour, J. Swain (a monumental mason with premises in the City) and his two sons also saw the lights. They watched the lights for two hours, by which time one of the lights had nearly disappeared behind the ranges. Reverend Cozens got up again at 2am and saw the second light had also nearly disappeared in the same place, and also 'five more very dim in the distance, driving up in

the track of the ones we had seen':

They seemed to be coming from the lakes along the coast [...] The whole impression of their movements was that of machinery.

Some readers of the *Argus* immediately [wrote in](#) to say they'd seen the same lights on both Friday and Saturday night from North Malvern. The *Sydney Morning Herald* also [picked up](#) the Cozens story, describing it as 'Another aerial mystery'. This may be a reference to the New Zealand sightings, already well under way. But that night, 9 August, New South Wales had its own visitor, at Moss Vale south-west of Sydney, as reported by the *Herald* the [next day](#). Many people apparently gathered in the main street and 'speculation was rife as to the meaning of the strange illumination'.

Above the large light some large body was distinctly visible, as the rays of light were reflected upon its surface. The supposition generally held is that the mysterious floating body is either a large balloon or airship. That this object is not stationary has been proved by getting objects near at hand in line with the light, and in a few minutes it was found to move a considerable distance.

It was also seen by passengers on the overnight express to Melbourne: 'the distance was too great to detect the nature of the floating body', but it was called an 'airship' anyway. Far to the north, in Queensland, the *Cairns Post* reported the [same day](#) that at Bundaberg something had been seen which looked as if 'a balloon were floating in midair with a powerful lamp suspended from it'. The airship presumption had very quickly taken hold.

11 August brought more reports from Moss Vale and also from Goulburn, further south. Apparently the airship had been seen for some days before reaching the press. Now the story was being reported not just in [Sydney](#) but in [Adelaide](#) and [Melbourne](#). The *Argus* amusingly (to me, at least) couched the sightings in terms of [sibling rivalry](#):

Since the appearance of the mysterious moving light in the heavens was reported from New Zealand and Victoria, the people of New South Wales have turned their attention skyward, with the result that they determined that neither the Dominion nor the sister State shall have the monopoly of a visitation of this kind.

This tells us that even at this early stage the idea of visiting airships was not taken too seriously by newspaper editors. (But that didn't stop the *Argus* publishing another Victorian sighting that [same issue](#).)

Reports now started to come in from all over. The following day, Saturday, 14 August, the *Argus* printed [another letter](#) confirming Reverend Cozens' sighting. Across the continent, the *West Australian* published a [longish account](#) of a police investigation of what appeared to be a 'lighted airship' over Victoria Park, a Perth suburb. These were thought to have been related to the two lights which passed 'rapidly' over Pingelly, a town east of Perth, on the previous Tuesday evening. The [Government Astronomer](#) had been informed of the Pingelly lights by telegram, and [Perth Observatory](#) turned its telescope to the skies over Victoria Park, but 'without leading to any discovery':

No explanation could be offered with regard to the lights alleged to have been seen either at Victoria Park or at Pingelly.

And from Zeehan in Tasmania came [reports](#) of 'two lights, white and brilliant, which seemed to be travelling rapidly in a north-westerly direction, against the wind'. Indeed, [according to](#) the Hobart *Mercury* something similar to the New Zealand lights had already been seen around Tasmania in July, which if true would make these the earliest Australian sightings. The following [Tuesday](#), it was reported that among the residents of Penguin the 'airship theory' had the 'most supporters' among those who had seen the mysterious lights.

Now, I did say that the Australian scareship sighting were less spectacular than those in Britain and New Zealand. But that was before I came across this bizarre story from Bulli, on the New South Wales coast south of Sydney. As reported in the *Adelaide Advertiser* of [17 August](#), people there didn't just see the usual two lights in the western sky, but saw and heard them collide, with a sound

'like the distant roar of falling waters'. But wait, there's more:

Last night several inquisitive residents of Bulli proceeded to investigate the lights by means of a telescope, and on their authority it is stated that it looked like a distant world, on which they could plainly see a group of gigantic creatures illuminated and adorned by a celestial radiance quite foreign to anything on this earth. They appeared to be trying to signal to the earth, and one in particular, who seemed to have control of the others was so enthusiastic about it that he wanted to jump right off to this planet, whilst the reminder of the group were doing their best to restrain him. Then a dark bank of cloud crossed over the sky and the silent watchers went home.

It is believed locally that the nocturnal illuminations were caused by the [Martian peoples](#) who have got word that the American astronomers are about to establish [communication](#) with them by signalling. It might be mentioned that this is the district recently subjected to the [tiger scare](#).

It's hard to know what to make of this. It sounds for all the world like a leg-pull, and there are certainly [precedents](#). And it may be telling that only the *Advertiser*, out of the major dailies, seems to have reported the Bulli... thing. But the *Advertiser* did publish a follow-up article [two days later](#) suggesting that the Bulli 'collision' may have been the result of the spontaneous ignition of coal gas. Bulli was indeed [coal country](#), and there had been a big gas explosion at a mine there in 1887. Maybe this was an attempt to extend the joke, but it seems fairly serious to me and it's wedged in a perfectly sober general news section.

Reports of airship sightings are now starting to thin out. The *Argus* published another eyewitness account on [19 August](#), presumably from Melbourne, describing a light low on the horizon continually changing colour, 'first a deep fiery red, then a most beautiful blue, then to white', and so on. On [24 August](#), the Kalgoorlie *Western Argus* published an article originating in Perth, but dated 18 August, nearly a week earlier. It tells of a letter written by Wilfrid Gull, the young owner of a property near Balingup in Western Australia. Gull recounts riding home after midnight from visiting friends, when a 'bright light suddenly made its appearance in the sky'. It came nearer and he 'observed that the light belonged to a long, dark object'. As it passed overhead and seemed to descend 'straight upon him', Gull had cause for some 'trepidation'. He went back for his friends and together they watched the object moving around the sky until 3am when it disappeared. The *Western Argus* also reported that:

Quite recently a lady in Claremont declared that not only was a veritable airship seen there by her husband and herself, but that its proximity to her house was such that her spouse called out to the occupants to be careful of the chimney, to which reminder he received a reply in some language to him unknown.

At Colebrook in Tasmania, [according](#) to the *Mercury*, several residents, 'in all seriousness' saw 'The much-talked-of airship' on 21 August. At one time it assumed 'the shape of a torpedo; at another, like that of an umbrella, and carried head or side lights, which flashed at times like the search lights of a warship'.

A dispatch from Gundaroo to the *Queanbeyan Age* (not far from the site of the future national capital) on [31 August](#) laconically reported that 'The mysterious lights which are causing such excitement are visible here nightly'. The [next day](#), the *West Australian* had a rather more excited report from W. A. Fearn of East Fremantle, who saw a 'bright light in the sky' on 26 August, which was 'making a beeline for Perth at a terrific pace':

It was brightly lighted up and appeared to have a dark object in the centre, and was evidently being propelled by some mechanical arrangement, as nothing else could have sent it along so fast. By my calculation I should say it was travelling at the rate of 160 miles an hour.

Fearn notes that he has been looking out for explanations in the press, but not finding any begs leave 'to trespass on your valuable space' to ask for enlightenment.

By now sounding rather bored, the *Advertiser* reported on [3 September](#) that 'A large three-winged apparatus, presumably an airship, passed over Dorrigo [New South Wales] yesterday [1 September] at about noon', flying west. It 'hovered and appeared to be about to descend', but kept its course and

disappeared out of sight. This ought to have excited more interest, as it's the first daylight sighting I've come across, as opposed to lights in the sky. But even wonders pale after a while.

The Dorrigo airship was almost the last sighting of all. Judging from an apparent first-hand account published in the Perth *Western Mail* on [11 September](#), the very last may have been on 5 September in Fremantle, nearly a month after Reverend Cozens had his encounter.

Also: I found a couple of other articles with information about sightings not noted above: Hobart *Mercury*, [19 August](#); Brisbane *Courier*, [28 August](#).

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Scareships over Australia — III

What did the phantom airships mean to people at the time?

One thing is clear. The press very early on referred to the mysterious lights as airships, and it does seem that this was probably the most popular theory among those who saw them. But it was very far from a universal view. The 5 September 1909 sighting in Fremantle gives some idea of this. The account given in the Perth *Western Mail* on [11 September](#) appears to be a first-hand description of the conversation between a number of eyewitnesses, arguing over what it is. (The tone is certainly one of amusement, but it doesn't seem to be made up.)

A Strange Luminary. -- "There's the airship! Who's a liar now, eh?" As he made the remark an excitable old gentleman waved his hands towards the sky, and in a little while some twenty persons were standing in Market-street, Fremantle, on Monday, shortly before 10 p.m. gazing interestedly heavenwards. The star was apparently undergoing a bewildering series of changes. From shining with great brilliancy it would suddenly grow dim and indistinct, only to shine strongly again in a few seconds. At times its light was completely lost for four or five seconds, 'It's caused by clouds passing over it,' was the dictum of one of the bystanders, whose opinion was met with the retort, "Then why don't the other stars show the same variation?" "It's Mars nearing its period of occultation," observed a gentleman who subsequently expressed his indignation at this solution of the celestial phenomenon advanced by two elderly ladies. "It's my opinion," remarked one of the latter, with the warm approval of the other, "that things are getting too strong on this earth, and that light is placed in the sky as a warning to the world." This portentous theory did not receive the approval of the bystanders, who went their ways perplexed by the pranks of the planet whose light shone intermittently as if in mockery of the watchers below.

So the writer describes it as a 'star' or a 'planet'; the first person to remark upon it called it 'the airship'; another man specifies it as Mars (presumably meaning [opposition](#) instead of 'occultation'), and two women advance an apparently religious interpretation. But this just scratches the surface. Other explanations of the lights included (with varying degrees of seriousness): a [conjunction of Venus and Jupiter](#) (which had their closest apparent approach on 12 August), a [fire balloon](#) or a [gas balloon](#), possibly sent up by hoaxers; the effects of [alcohol](#) (even though being drunk does not cause hallucinations); a [will-o'-the-wisp](#) (citing Dickens as an authority); and an [illuminated advertising sign](#) above a Perth drapers' emporium. The [Martian explanation](#) had the backing of W. E. Raymond of [Sydney Observatory](#), who told the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) that the planet was about to enter opposition, meaning its closest approach to Earth and a period of unusual brightness, peaking in the last week of September. (Mars might have explained some sightings late at night -- though it's a poor fit for the Cozens affair, which is hard to explain astronomically -- but Venus and Jupiter work better for the more numerous sightings of twin lights in the west or north-west in the early evening.) A different theory involving the same planet held that [Martians were signalling Earth](#).

The Hobart *Mercury* of [19 August](#) suggested that, out of the various theories,

The most feasible appears to be that of the Aerial League [of Australia], which claims to have investigated that the Goulburn light, at any rate, was nothing more nor less than an illuminated box kite, and that the New Zealand mystery was a "joke along the same lines."

What of the 'airships'? Airships must have airship-makers and airship-pilots. But there is very little speculation in the sources I've seen as to who was responsible for these supposed airships. This seems odd. Nobody had yet flown in Australia (at least in public): the first person to do so was [Houdini](#) the following year (I think that's true for any form of powered flight, including airships). Surely there would have been some curiosity about who might be have achieving this great feat nightly in Australian skies? But I can find only two suggestions.

One was published in the *Queanbeyan Age* on [17 August](#). It does in fact note that 'many have been the conjectures as to its [the airship's] origins and object'. And, after explaining that the mostly likely explanation for the lights was Mars, says 'away with our fears of aerial invasion'. This clearly suggests that there was some idea that the airship was foreign and possibly hostile, as was certainly the presumption with the British phantom airships, and was also discussed in New Zealand (in connection with a German warship known to be in the South Pacific at the time). I'm not sure why Australian newspapers were so coy, if such fears were really widespread.

The other discussion of the airship's origin is more interesting and appeared as a leading article in the *Hobart Mercury*, on [23 August](#). It began with a paean to progress:

That we to-day live in the most wonderful age the world has ever known will be probably the judgment of historians of the far future [...] If the first few years of the twentieth century are to be taken as the guide, then we may look for it to greatly widen the bounds of human knowledge and experience. Perhaps, the most notable achievement of the day is the development now being given to aviation.

Remarking that [Blériot's flight over the English Channel](#) -- less than a month previously -- 'convinced the world' that 'the air had been conquered', the *Mercury* claimed that

with this conviction has come an eager speculation the world over. People everywhere are seeing visions. Every fine night somewhere fiery cars are seen flashing across the sky like a Greek goddess on a mission to earth. These visions have been seen in England, Ireland, America, Scotland, South Africa, New Zealand, New South Wales, and now in Tasmania.

(This shows an unusual awareness of the [worldwide nature of phantom airship scares](#), incidentally.) After allowing that 'probably Venus and Jupiter had something to do with' some of the sightings, the *Mercury* goes on to suggest another viewpoint:

Recently the Minister of Defence offered a bonus of £10,000 for the first Australian flying machine suitable for use in war. That announcement disclosed the fact that an astonishing number of inventors in these States were at work upon aviation. These inventors doubtless are working in secret, and possibly many of the objects seen in the air at night have relation to their experiments.

If there was already an idea that Australian ingenuity was [hard at work](#) on the problem of air defence, this could help explain why the Australian press did not panic in the same way the British press had earlier in the year when confronted with supposed overflights by airships of unknown origin. The British, by and large, did not have such confidence in either their military or their civilian aviators, and when combined with seeming government inaction in the face of huge advances in aviation being made on the Continent (neither Blériot nor Zeppelin were Englishmen), all you needed was a credible German menace to generate a full-scale scare. I'm not sure that this difference is enough, and in any case I don't know enough about the Australian situation to know if it was real or not. One thing Australians inherited from the Mother Country was a propensity to panic at the thought of invasion, but in 1909 it seems that we declined to do so. I'd be interested to know why.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Scareships over Australia — IV

Phantom airships come and go, but sometimes they come again. According to the scattered accounts of the 1909 Australian wave I've seen (meaning Bill Chalker's [The Oz Files](#) and [random](#)

[internet sites](#)), there was a late airship sighting on 25 October 1909 at Minderoo station in Western Australia. But I couldn't find that event in any newspaper report; instead I found one that took place on 25 October 1910. This means that it was not directly related to whatever caused the rash of scareship visitations in August and September 1909, whether that be astronomical or sociological or aeronautical or etc in origin, the Minderoo airship sighting was a separate event. And a very strange and interesting one too.

There were a number of stories about the Minderoo airship in the press, including: *West Australian*, [5 December](#); *Sydney Morning Herald*, [5 December 1910](#); *Advertiser*, [5 December](#); *Western Argus*, [6 December](#); *Mercury*, [7 December](#); and *Western Mail*, [10 December](#). The longest and fullest was that of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, from which I'll quote here.

The source for the story was evidently an official one. The bulk of the article comprises the report of the Sub-collector of Customs at Bunbury, L. C. Timperley (a name which none of the newspapers gets right, but he was the son of the former Sub-collector of Customs at Bunbury, [William Timperley](#) and was still working for Customs in [1934](#)), to his superiors in the [Department of Trade and Customs](#). It would seem that the Minister himself, [Frank Tudor](#), released Timperley's report to the press (the byline is given as Melbourne, the temporary seat of government at the time). The reason for this is not given, but presumably it was political.

Timperley begins:

I beg to report that in consequence of a report circulated to the effect that an airship had been seen at Minderoo station, I have made further enquiries into the matter, and now place before you the particulars as given me. On Saturday, 12th inst, I interviewed Mrs. A. J. Roe, wife of the manager of Mr. [David Forrest's](#) station, Minderoo, 22 miles out of [Onslow](#), and received from her the following information:

In Australian English, a [station](#) is a very, very, very big farm, used for raising sheep or cattle. I'm not sure how big Minderoo was in 1910, but [a few years ago](#) it was 226,585 hectares (about 560,000 acres or 2270 square kilometres). So it's not particularly big as these things go, but it is fairly well known, as it was the family seat of the [Forrest dynasty](#), who had already provided [Western Australia's first premier](#) and, more recently, [Australia's richest person](#). So Minderoo was not your average farm. It was, however, quite close to the coast, relatively speaking, only 22 miles from the port at Onslow. But it was a desolate 22 miles, with hot and dusty roads which would have been travelled by horse in 1910. Minderoo did apparently have its own telegraph station, however.

The other thing to note here is that Timperley seems to have investigated the airship mystery on his own initiative. He may have been concerned about the use of an airship to circumvent the customs regime he was paid to enforce (at Bunbury, a port on the Indian ocean, he would have been in charge of inspecting ships' cargoes). Or he may have been mindful of the implications for defence: for the previous few years he had been a lieutenant in the [18th Light Horse](#), a militia formation; he became a major in the [10th Light Horse](#) in the war to come. So he had military interests as well. (See below.)

'At 5.30 p.m. on October 25, when at the Minderoo homestead, my attention was directed by a native to a big object in the air, several miles away. The object was travelling from us in an easterly direction. It looked compact, like a dirigible balloon, but appeared to be squarer, more like an aeroplane. The sun shone on it, and flashes came from it, as though reflected from something revolving or off metal work. The colour of the object was dark brown or black. It was too far away to distinguish its exact nature and size, or whether any persons were in it. There was no mirage at the time, and not on any account could such an object be taken for a bird.'

This appears to be a direct quote of a statement made by Roe, the station manager's wife and one of the witnesses. And yes, the 'native' who pointed out the airship to her was an Aboriginal.

Unlike most of the 1909 phantom airships, this one was seen in broad daylight: at 5.30pm in late October at Minderoo's latitude the Sun is still well over 35 degrees above the horizon. So this was no mere night light, no planetary conjunction or will-o'-the-wisp. Given that it was moving away in an 'easterly direction', it must have been somewhere in the opposite side of the sky to the Sun, and

moving inland, away from the coast and towards the desert. The object was dark in colour and appeared somehow mechanical, perhaps more like an aeroplane than a dirigible (which is what we would now mean by the word 'airship', which was a [more generous term](#) at this point in time). Roe assured Timperley that it was not a mirage or a bird, both of which would have been familiar sights. She, unfortunately, didn't give (or Timperley didn't ask or didn't report) any information about the airship's apparent speed or how long it was visible for. But reading between the lines, the dismissal of the bird theory seems to be based on its appearance and not its motion; likewise, no mention is made of ludicrous speed. So we can probably infer that the airship was visible for a few minutes.

Mrs. Rowe [sic] stated she is positive it was an airship of some kind, but did not care to sign a statement, for the reason that she could give no details on account of the distance the machine was away. A couple of white men, station hands, and a civilised native also saw the aerial object from the shearing-shed, which is a mile from the homestead. From what I can gather it appears that both parties saw it about the same time. I have to-day interviewed the native, Frank, who drew a rough sketch for me of what he saw, and it resembled a dirigible balloon. He also stated that neither he nor the other natives at Minderoo had seen anything like it before. I venture to think an airship of some kind was seen. The natives being noted for their keen eyesight, I think it improbable that the object seen was a bird, and yet mistaken by them.

There were at least three more witnesses, two white men and one 'civilised' Aborigine, Frank, who independently saw the airship from a mile away. It's a shame that the newspapers did not publish Frank's drawing (perhaps it still exists, attached to Timperley's report, deep in the [National Archives of Australia](#) somewhere?)

The strange visitor may be the result of a Western Australian inventor, who wishes to perfect his machine before making his invention public, and has chosen this remote locality for his preliminary flight. On the other hand, it is possible that some foreign vessel is anchored off the coast reconnoitring the country. Personally, I am convinced that the statement made by Mrs. Roe is authentic. I am, however, at a loss to understand why the occupants of the mysterious aerial visitor did not alight and report when so near the telegraph station. Should this report not be considered a Custom's matter, possibly it may be of some use to the military authorities.

Timperley concludes that Roe was telling the truth about what she saw and that the airship was real. But he is puzzled as to where it came from and who was flying it. But he does think the 'mysterious aerial visitor' important enough to bring to the notice of his superiors at Trade and Customs, perhaps at risk to his own career; and if they weren't interested, he unsubtly hints, perhaps his report should be passed on to the Defence Department. For Timperley this would seem to be no trivial matter.

After quoting Timperley's report, the *Sydney Morning Herald* remarks that the Minister for Trade and Customs will indeed 'probably forward the report to the [Minister for Defence](#), who has charge of the military airship competition' (so that's still running!), and the [last published reference](#) to the Minderoo airship I could find says this was done, though that may have been just an assumption. But the final sentence of the *Herald* article is this:

Up to the present the [Defence Department](#) does not appear to be aware that any competitor has a machine so perfected as to accomplish the flight described from Onslow.

This pushes the foreign reconnaissance theory into the fore, which (a) perhaps hints at some bureaucratic or political jostling (Tudor was a player; he became leader of the Australian Labor Party in 1917 after it split over conscription) and (b) makes me wonder, again, why there was no true scareship panic in Australia. And (c) makes me also wonder what the hell it was they saw at Mindaroo on 25 October 1910, because it wasn't any foreign airship either.

A postscript to this postscript: in 1934 Timperley was again in the news after [discovering](#) the [carcass](#) of a [sea monster washed up on the shore](#) of [Rottneest Island](#). Phantom airships, light horse, sea monsters: not your average customs career, I suspect.

You can discuss this entry at [Air-minded](#)

The Sheerness Incident

[Sheerness](#) is a town at the mouth of the Medway, on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. For several centuries, it was a dockyard for the Royal Navy (the [Nore Mutiny](#) took place nearby in 1797). In 1912, Sheerness was an important part of Britain's naval defences, helping to guard the Thames Estuary -- and hence London -- against a possible German invasion.

On Monday, 14 October 1912, between about 6.30pm and 7pm, many people in Sheerness and in Queenborough, two miles to the south, heard a sound like an aeroplane engine coming from the skies overhead. Sunset was shortly after 6pm, and so it was rapidly getting dark. Some witnesses -- including a Royal Navy lieutenant -- believed they could also make out a red light, and possibly a searchlight, passing to and fro over the town. It was assumed by some townsfolk that the pilot was from the Royal Naval Aerial Service station at nearby Eastchurch, where there was a flight training school;¹² perhaps the pilot was in trouble. The aerodrome was alerted by telephone, and flares were lit in an effort to guide the aircraft in. But although the engine sounds were also heard at Eastchurch, nothing was seen. By about 7pm the sound, and the light, was no longer detectable.

Where did the sounds come from? Eastchurch had no aircraft up that night, so it wasn't from there. In fact, night flying was relatively rare at the time: Claude Grahame-White was the first to do it successfully in an aeroplane, in 1910. The world of British aviation in 1912 was a small one, and if a pilot had successfully undertaken a hazardous cross-country night flight it seems unlikely that it would have remained a secret. (An unsuccessful flight, of course, would have been even harder to miss!) Newspapers no longer reported on each and every flight, but weekly aviation magazines seem to have had notices of many of them. For example, *Flight* reported on flights at Eastchurch by nine different pilots during the week in question, though for 14 October itself only noted that 'Lieut. Briggs was out with passenger on Monday'.¹³ So it seems unlikely that any British pilot was flying that night over the Isle of Sheppey.

The next most obvious explanation was that a German airship was responsible, and most press speculation focused on this possibility. Hence the question asked by William Joynson-Hicks in the House of Commons on 18 November 1912: whether J. E. B. Seely, the Minister for War, had any information concerning a 'Zeppelin dirigible passing over Sheerness on the night of October 14, about 8 p.m'. Seely did not, and neither did Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty. But Churchill promised to make inquiries. In fact, the Air Department of the Admiralty was already on the case, having ordered the commander of HMS *Actaeon* to prepare a report on the incident as early as 25 October. On 21 and 27 November, Churchill reported to Commons on the results: he could not say whether it was an airship or an aeroplane, nor could he identify its nationality; he could only say that it was 'not one of our own airships'.¹⁴ But that was only what Churchill felt it prudent to say in public. Privately, in a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, he said that 'there was very little doubt that the airship reported recently to have passed over Sheerness was a German vessel'.¹⁵ In fact, this was of course was implicit in Joynson-Hicks's use of the word "Zeppelin". In its giant Zeppelins, Germany had the means to carry out such a long-distance flight. And due to the Anglo-German antagonism, it presumably had the motive. Air-minded nationalists in Germany thought that a big fleet of Zeppelins was just the thing to counter British naval superiority, so it seemed plausible -- to air-minded nationalists in Britain, at least -- that the Germans might want to practice flying to a British naval base and back.

There was even a candidate. The German press had reported that the new German naval Zeppelin, L1, had undertaken a proving flight north from Friedrichshafen (in Bavaria), out over the North Sea on 13 and 14 October. But the problem was that, according to those same reports, the L1 had ended its flight at Johannistal, near Berlin, at 3.30pm, 3 hours before the engine sounds were heard at Sheerness. But perhaps it was the case, as naval officers at Sheerness and Portsmouth suggested to the *Daily Mail's* correspondent, that the reported times of the L.1's flight were intentionally altered by 24 hours.¹⁶ The Germans -- including Count Zeppelin himself -- publicly denied any involvement, but then they would, wouldn't they?

Another, much later suggestion is that the Sheerness Incident was hoaxed by Grahame-White and

Churchill in order to demonstrate Britain's vulnerability to German air attack.¹⁷ This has a superficial plausibility. As I noted above, Grahame-White was an experienced night flier. He was also very concerned about Britain's lack of aerial defences. And he was Britain's greatest aerial propagandist. On 26 September 1912, all of these aspects of Grahame-White came together when he held his first "Illuminated Night Flying Display" at Hendon. Accompanied by a fireworks display, and watched by ten thousand spectators, five aeroplanes carrying searchlights "bombed" a dummy battleship.¹⁸ As for Churchill, he was certainly interested in aviation and worried about the aerial threat to Britain. So perhaps they concocted this stunt to highlight Britain's vulnerability to air attack.

And the Sheerness Incident certainly did that. The conservative press read between the lines of Churchill's non-committal statement about the identity of the aircraft, and henceforth used the incident as proof that Germany had the capability and the intention to attack Britain from the air. This lent plausibility to further reports of phantom airships seen in British skies early in 1913, which in turn reinforced the calls from the conservative press for the government to spend a million pounds on air defence. As an anonymous Royal Flying Corps pilot told the Standard:

We are helpless. We have neither aeroplane nor dirigible capable of coping with these vessels [the phantom airships] in the air [...] The fact is that we have been hopelessly left behind in military aeronautics, and there seems very little prospect of any advance being made as long as responsible Ministers give public utterances of their being content to wait to pick the brains of foreigners.¹⁹

The government didn't rush to expand its air forces, but it did rush through Parliament [legislation](#) banning the overflight of, among other things, naval bases. Although the bill was in preparation before Sheerness, the incident was mentioned in CID discussions as further justification (along with a much less dubious overflight by the Hansa of a British cruiser squadron at Copenhagen).

So what really happened at Sheerness? It's hard to say. It seems pretty clear that something was definitely heard. There were many witnesses -- we have names for some of them -- and the press accounts were corroborated by the Admiralty's investigation. And given that the people of Sheerness knew what an aero engine sounded like, it also seems likely there was an aircraft aloft that night. I don't buy the theory that it was a conspiracy by Grahame-White and Churchill. Partly because such subterfuge seems out of character for such relentless publicity-seekers as these two were (I can imagine Grahame-White taking part in such a stunt but he would have soon enough revealed his part in it), but mostly because no actual evidence has ever surfaced, despite the vast amount of research done on Churchill since then. And if Churchill was in on it, why wait for a month before drawing attention to the incident?²⁰ It's more likely that a German airship was involved, but again, if so then it's strange that no evidence for this surfaced in the last 95 years. It's the sort of thing that would turn up in post-war memoirs, even if the original records had been lost or destroyed.²¹ Really, I have nothing better to offer than the possibility that it was in fact some British airman who went out for a jaunt over the Isle of Sheppey one autumn evening, and for some reason the investigators never got wind of the flight. That's admittedly rather lame, but then I'm more interested in how the incident was interpreted and the conclusions drawn from it, than in what really happened that night over Sheerness ...

Further reading: Alfred Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government, 1909-14* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 223-7.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Something like a railway carriage

On the last night of January 1916, a large force of seven Zeppelins crossed over the Wash into Norfolk, heading for the industrial cities of the Midlands. Unsure of their location, most of them instead dropped their bombs on relatively unimportant targets. But at least they got home okay. The defending aircraft of the RFC and RNAS had an awful night: 22 sorties resulted in six aircraft being written off, two squadron commanders killed and no contacts with the enemy.

Or at least ... no confirmed contacts with the enemy. Four pilots did report seeing something, but

they were well to the south of the probable Zeppelin flightpaths, over London and Essex, and so their reports were dismissed by those higher-up as mistaken identities, phantom airships. At 7.40pm, Lieutenant R. S. Maxwell saw 'an artificial light' north of his [B.E.2c](#) while 10000 feet above London, and gave chase before losing it in clouds. 2nd Lieutenant C. A. Ridley, another B.E.2c pilot, also saw a 'moving light' over London at about the same time, and so they may have actually seen each other. Later in the night, at around 9pm, Flight Sub-Lieutenant H. McClelland (also flying a B.E.2c) also thought he saw 'a Zeppelin' by searchlight over London.

Strangest of all was the report of Flight Sub-Lieutenant J. E. Morgan, an RNAS pilot who sortied in his B.E.2c from Rochford in Essex at about a quarter to nine. At 5000 feet, slightly above and to starboard, he spotted

a row of what appeared to be lighted windows which looked something like a railway carriage with the blinds drawn.

(This is apparently a quote from Morgan's after-action report.) Thinking that this was a Zeppelin only a hundred feet away -- and presumably having no time to maneuver for a better shot -- he fired his Webley at it! It then seemed that 'the lights alongside rose rapidly' and disappeared. Morgan then started looking for somewhere to land: he saw some lights below which he thought was Southend Pier but turned out to be a Dutch steamer off Thameshaven. He managed to put down safely and flew back to Rochford the following day.

This episode has been assimilated into UFO lore as an early military encounter, a precursor of the [foo fighters](#) of the Second World War. There are a few scanty accounts on the net, but easily the best - [here](#) and [here](#) -- is by [David Clarke](#), who lectures in journalism at Sheffield Hallam University. He has worked closely with the National Archives in recent years with regards to their release of official documents relating to UFO sightings.

Clarke looked for Morgan's original report, but has not been able to find it. (He did find other documents, such as the Rochford aerodrome log which notes 'Zeppelin' next to Morgan's flight.) So he drew on the (very short) quotes from it given in Joseph Morris's *The German Air Raids on Britain, 1914-1918* (Dallington: Naval & Military Press, 1993 [1925]), 81-2, which perhaps could be considered a semi-official history: it was certainly written with privileged access to official records of the services and ministries involved. Morris doesn't venture an explanation for what Morgan saw, other than that it was a 'phantom airship', and if this is all we have to go on it does sound mysterious.

But, looking at Christopher Cole and E. F. Cheesman, *The Air Defence of Britain 1914-1918* (London: Putnam, 1984), 83-9 (which Clarke also cites), they provide details which aren't in Morris. For example, they say that when the row of lights 'rose rapidly', Morgan at first thought his B.E.2c was diving, but an instrument check showed that it wasn't. So either Morgan's report was still extant in the early 1980s when Cole and Cheesman wrote their book, or they had another source (or else just made stuff up, which doesn't seem their style). Morgan himself was [killed in 1917](#), so it probably wasn't him. I'd guess they did see the original report, or perhaps a different precis of it, as they give a quote which is similar to that in Morris, but not identical:

a row of lighted windows ... something like a railway carriage with the blinds down.

Maybe this source is still out there somewhere? If so, it might shed some light on what it was that Morgan actually saw. Cole and Cheesman suggest that it might have been the Zeppelin L16 (which theory ufologists don't seem to mention). An airship gondola could well look 'something like a railway carriage with the blinds drawn': it wouldn't be well-lit, but I think there would be some light coming from inside. As noted above, L16 was supposed to have been much further north, but tracing the actual routes taken by airship raiders can be quite hard. The airship captains usually didn't know where they were, the pilots who flew against them often didn't know where *they* were, and the defenders on the ground often didn't see anything at all. The most reliable indicator of a Zeppelin's position is usually the bombs it dropped, but L16 turned back early due to engine trouble. So perhaps this explains Morgan's sighting. On the other hand, would a Zeppelin captain respond to being shot at by a pistol by climbing rapidly? Unlikely: he wouldn't even have noticed it. He might have seen the B.E. and dropped ballast to outclimb it, though, maybe into a layer of cloud which would explain

why it disappeared.

But otherwise, if it wasn't an airship, what might Morgan have seen?

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

The Zeppelins of Halifax

A post at [Axis of Evil Knievel](#) reminds me that today is the 90th anniversary of the [Halifax disaster](#). On 6 December 1917, two ships collided off the Nova Scotian port of Halifax. One, the SS *Mont-Blanc*, was carrying huge quantities of TNT, guncotton, and other highly combustible materials, destined for the war in Europe. It caught fire and exploded, laying waste to the town for a radius of 2km and killing around 1500 people -- mostly ordinary civilians -- within seconds; about 500 more died from their wounds over the following days. It's still one of the biggest man-made, non-nuclear explosions ever.

Joanna Bourke, in her *Fear: A Cultural History*, discusses the research of Samuel Prince into the social effects of the Halifax disaster. Prince interviewed many of the survivors (of which he was one!) shortly afterwards; this research formed the basis of his [sociology PhD](#) (Columbia University, 1920). Summarising some of Prince's findings, Bourke writes that

Survivors proved incapable of understanding what was happening. **Many hallucinated, their eyes tricking them into seeing German Zeppelins attacking them from the air.** A man on the outskirts of the town claimed to have heard a German shell whistling past him. Such visions had been stimulated over the preceding months by rumours of the possibility of a German attack. Residents with German-sounding names were set upon. Some survivors still believed that the Germans had something to do with the disaster.²²

Hallucinations of non-existent Zeppelins? Those would be [phantom airships](#), then. Together with the rumours about an impending German attack, this all sounds a lot like the situation in Britain before the war, when non-existent Zeppelins were also filling the skies: people expected the Germans to come, and, given half an excuse, they saw (and heard) them.

Of course, the explosion itself was a unique circumstance, and might be thought sufficient explanation for any hallucinations. But the rumours of a German attack were already circulating beforehand, so the undercurrents of fear and suspicion necessary for a panic were already present, it would seem. And, the explosion aside, there was nothing very unusual about what people thought they saw: Canada had been visited by mystery aircraft before, almost since the start of the war. Most notably, on 14 February 1915, Ottawa was blacked out because four aircraft had apparently been spotted crossing the St Lawrence from the American side; soldiers getting ready to leave for the Western Front were ordered to patrol the roofs of government buildings with their rifles, in order that there would be at least some resistance when the raiders came. (Which they never did.)²³

If anybody ever comes to write the history of the Scareship Age, the Halifax disaster should be part of it.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Dreaming war, seeing aeroplanes — I



While researching a possible [British mystery aeroplane in 1936](#), which turned out to be nothing interesting, I came across a genuine mystery aeroplane scare which I'd never heard of before, from Australia and New Zealand in March and April 1918. I'm sure somebody else must have noticed it before now, as it was trivial to find using [Trove](#) and [Papers Past](#). But I haven't been able to find mention of it in my usual sources, so here's what I've got so far.

Firstly, some context. In March 1918, it was getting on for four years since the start of the Great War. The soldiers of Australia and New Zealand had been engaged in combat for just under three of those years, two of them on the Western Front. The armies there seemed to be in a deadlock. All that can be done is to keep the [two ANZAC corps](#) supplied with men and munitions; but in Australia it is only a few months since the public rejected [conscription](#) for a second time, in a bitterly divisive [plebiscite](#). If victory seemed to be a long way off, at least so did defeat.

On 16 March, most of Australia's big daily newspapers featured prominently a story that an officer of the German commerce raider [Wolf](#), which had been terrorising merchant vessels in the [south-west Pacific](#), had boasted that its 'seaplane flew over Sydney Harbour early one morning and that they knew the disposition of shipping there'.²⁴ (The *Wolf's* seaplane, a Friedrichshafen [FF.33](#) nicknamed *Wölfchen*, 'little wolf', is shown above.) If true, this would have taken place in July 1917 and would be the first time a hostile aircraft had reached Australian skies. The Minister for the Navy, [Joseph Cook](#) -- a former prime minister and an ardent pro-conscriptionist -- was dubious however, noting that 'the German, throughout the course of this war, had proved himself a frightful liar'.²⁵ He did venture, however, that it might be a good thing if the Germans came back in greater force:

Perhaps a few planes over Sydney dropping bombs would help Sydney to visualise the actualities of war, and stimulate recruiting [...] At the present time, it was humbug to talk of peace. We must wait until Germany was soundly beaten. We should be acting war, thinking war, and dreaming war.

But just a few days later the German armies launched a [massive offensive](#) in France. The Allied lines sagged under the strain. All of a sudden, far from Germany being soundly beaten it looked like it might actually win the war.

Now, it would be convenient for my narrative if, after the news about the *Wolf's* seaplane flying over Sydney and the dramatic change in Allied fortunes in Europe, people began to imagine hostile aircraft in the sky. Reports of mystery aircraft *did* increase greatly after then, but there were in fact a few earlier ones from New Zealand (and possibly some from Australia, much earlier; see below).

The first was reported in the *Nelson Colonist* on 2 March. At 7am the previous day, 'A lady who was bathing at Tahuna [...] saw two seaplanes quite distinctly', over Tasman Bay.²⁶

They were flying together near the surface of the water, and then separated, one going in the

direction of the eastern hills. She watched this one until it was lost in the clouds. She then endeavoured to locate the other, but it had disappeared.

Also noted was a rumour that 'a few days ago [...] a seaplane had been seen in the Sounds, but the story was scouted', i.e. dismissed. The 'Canterbury headquarters office of the Defence Department of the group commander at Nelson' investigated these reports of 'enemy seaplanes', but 'seriously discounted the story as improbable'.²⁷

On 6 March, the *Christchurch Press* said that

What appeared to be an aeroplane with lights was seen by several people in the city yesterday evening between 7 o'clock and 7.15. It seemed to be travelling in a south-westerly direction, at a rate estimated at something like 20 miles an hour, and was at a considerable height. To some, at first sight, it looked like a planet, but its fairly rapid movement dispelled that idea. Others surmised that it was a fire balloon, but to other observers it looked like an aircraft under control. It seemed to pass along the edge of a dark bank of cloud in the southern sky, and was finally lost to sight.²⁸

The [Aviation School at Sockburn](#) said it that it was not one of their machines, which anyway were not used for night flying. This prompted a reader to write in to the *Press* to ask

if your readers have seen the occasional visit of a well-lighted aeroplane late at night south-west of Christchurch? Repeatedly, during the moonlight cloudless nights lately, the members of our household have watched this visitor, and towards morning apparently as far south as the Ninety-mile beach it was seen distinctly. If not a Sockburn aeroplane, what was it?²⁹

At this point the mystery aeroplanes disappeared for a few weeks, or at least I can't find any reference to them. They next turn up on 21 March, across the Tasman in Victoria:

While on duty near Nyang on Thursday, Constable Wright, while awaiting assistance to get a car out of the stiff sand, observed two aeroplanes flying very high pass almost due westwards over the route of the railway line from Ouyen to Adelaide. No notification had been received of any projected flight. The day was very clear, and the constable says that he distinctly saw the glint of the machines in the sunshine.³⁰

(Note that this is a daylight sighting, quite unusual for mystery aircraft.) A few days later, another mystery aeroplane was seen back in New Zealand:

Reports were received in Whakatane last night [26 March] that an aeroplane had been seen during the day hovering over Taneatua, nine miles from Whakatane, and the vicinity. Mr. McGougan, of Opouriao, is said to have observed the flight of the aeroplane, which is said to have lifted from the direction of Whale Island, and to have taken a westerly course over the township of Taneatua, towards the Urewera Country. Two other men, employed on Mr. P. Keegan's station, have stated that their attention was drawn by a buzzing noise, such as would be made by the flight of a powerful aeroplane. The report of the appearance of the machine was sent round by telephoned to the inhabitants of the district.³¹

However, this was apparently a hoax:

The Hon. [T. M. Wilford](#), Minister of Justice, told the *Christchurch Sun* that the Commissioner of Police had reported to him that enquiries had been made into the story. The particular individuals who were supposed to have seen an aeroplane had been interviewed, and not one of them had heard or seen the alleged aeroplane.³²

If nothing else, that the police and the military both investigated mystery aeroplane sightings in New Zealand shows that the government, at some level, thought they were plausible and credible.

As I started this post with Cook's scepticism about the *Wolf's* seaplane over Sydney Harbour, I'll end it with some scepticism of his, er, scepticism. The *Poverty Bay Herald* in New Zealand actually printed this story on 30 March, filed at Melbourne on 19 March, but as no attribution is given and I

can't find it elsewhere, this seems the appropriate place for it. Intriguingly, it notes rumours of mystery aeroplanes seen in Victoria late in 1917:

One Victorian member of the House of Representatives stated to-day that during the conscription campaign it was stated several times from the platform in the east end of Victoria that a coach-driver in [Gippsland](#) and some other persons had seen an aeroplane circling over the country at a great height.³³

The implication was that the story of the *Wolf's* seaplane and the Gippsland reports of a mystery aeroplane somehow reinforced each other. In fact, *Wolf* had been in Gippsland waters at the beginning of July 1917, when it laid mines off [Gabo Island](#), but that was several months before the conscription campaign began, so *Wölfchen* couldn't have been responsible.

There's more to come. [Next](#) I'll look at April, which is when the real fun begins: Victoria has a rash of mystery aeroplane sightings, Australia has an invasion (?) scare, and New Zealanders poke gentle fun at their bigger neighbour.

Image source: [Wikipedia](#).

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Dreaming war, seeing aeroplanes — II

At the end of March 1918, the NSW Minister for Education, [Augustus James](#), gave a speech at North Sydney Boys' High School's prize day. No doubt with an eye on the press, he spoke rather gloomily about the war situation, especially in light of the continuing German offensive on the Western Front:

"We know to-day," he said, "that we are face to face with a crisis. At any time we may hear of the British forces being broken. The Germans may capture a portion of the French coast which the Allies are at present holding, and from it deal a blow at England. The safety of Australia depends on England. Where will Australia stand if England is beaten in this war? What would we be able to do in the event of an invasion by a foreign army? We have neither the rifles nor the trained men, nor have we a submarine or aeroplane capable of use in any attempt to drive off any enemy."³⁴

James was not far wrong. After nearly four years of war, you might think that Australia was a vast armed camp, but in fact most men and materiel were sent overseas, to Europe or the Middle East, as soon as they were ready; much of the balance was used for training. It's unlikely that James had any inside knowledge, but at this time there was only a single aeroplane in Australia 'available for any offensive action', an [F.E.2b](#) purchased with funds donated by [Alfred Muller Simpson](#) of South Australia.³⁵

And while I don't know for a fact, it's hard to imagine that New Zealand's defences were in any better shape. As [we've already seen](#), however, the government there took the reports of mysterious aeroplanes seriously. But it was also trying to damp down alarm. An article on "'Aeroplane scares" and regulations' in the *Poverty Bay Herald* on 8 April noted that

Since the disclosure of the boast by an officer of a German raider that he had passed over Sydney in a seaplane, the authorities in New Zealand have had to cope with quite an epidemic of reports about mysterious aeroplanes circling around the more remote parts of New Zealand. In every case careful investigation has to be made, and in every case the report has been found to be without foundation. Some of these reports have found their way into the newspapers, causing somewhat of a scare, and it is intended to prosecute under the War Regulations any person who in future circulates without good cause any such report likely to cause public alarm. If New Zealanders see any more mysterious visitants in the sky their best plan will be to carefully verify the sight, and quietly inform the nearest police or defence officer, avoiding any public mention, for fear that it comes under the scope of the numerous

possible offences against these comprehensive War Regulations.³⁶

This is quite interesting. It places the blame for the sightings on the German claim that the *Wolf's* seaplane had circled over Sydney; but this can't be true, for the mystery aeroplanes preceded that news by at least a couple of weeks. There is also the suggestion that some sightings were not reported in the press, so clearly we can't rely on newspapers for the full story. Finally, and this suggests that this story is officially inspired, there is the warning that as press reports were causing 'somewhat of a scare', anyone who 'circulates without good cause any such report likely to cause public alarm' will be prosecuted under the War Regulations. Yes: a government cover-up! It seems to have worked, too, as I haven't found any other press reports of mystery aeroplanes over New Zealand until very late May. Henceforth the (reported) action took place in Australia.

Specifically, at Toora in eastern Victoria. Between 4 and 5am on the morning of 16 April, a Mr Griffin

was astonished to see a large aeroplane making a circle close to the town and over Port Franklin. It manoeuvred about for an hour, and then departed in the direction of [Wilson's Promontory](#).³⁷

The [Minister for Defence](#) was notified of this 'strange aeroplane' the following day; he promised to make enquiries.³⁸ It did not belong to the Central Flying School at [Point Cook](#) (which anyway is not nearby). The article in the *Adelaide Advertiser* notes that while 'civilian aviators were not forbidden to traffic in the air in Australia they were forbidden under regulations to fly over certain areas'. Unhelpfully, it doesn't say whether Toora was one of these areas!

That same night, possibly a few hours earlier, lights in the sky were seen in the [Goulburn Valley](#), in the north of the state near the border with NSW:

Early on Tuesday morning [16 April], when returning from a dance at Wunghnu several Tallygaroopna residents aver that they saw mysterious lights in the sky. One of them a returned soldier, is positive that they were night lights from an aeroplane.³⁹

And the *Advertiser* also reported on 19 April that

Several residents of Casterton declare that they have seen, and others that they have distinctly heard, aeroplanes passing over the town during the past week.⁴⁰

Casterton is way over the other side of Victoria, near the South Australian border. So at this point the mystery aeroplanes have been seen in the east, the north-west, the south-west and the north of the state, mostly in the last few days. All of a sudden it's a genuine mystery aircraft scare.

However, the Casterton sightings were very quickly dismissed. The Defence Department got the local police to make enquiries, and the result was that 'there does not seem to be any satisfactory evidence of any aeroplanes being actually seen or heard in the district'.⁴¹ From the very sparse nature of the initial report compared with most of the others, it seems to have been just a rumour, then. But a rather more concrete sighting was reported from a place about 80km south-east of Casterton. The date is not given, but the first mention I've found was on 20 April; the following report was reprinted in the *Portland Courier* from the *Hamilton Spectator* on 22 April and refers to a 'morning or two ago', so I'd guess the sighting took place around 18 April.

While camped with a mob of cattle in a cleared paddock between Byaduk and Macarthur, Mr Sutton, a drover, was a morning or two ago awakened about two o'clock by the animals moving about. It was apparent that they had been frightened, and shortly afterwards Mr Sutton saw two rockets shoot into the air. This was followed by a bright light in the sky, and he was amazed to see an aeroplane descend, and soon after go up again. It is also reported that an aeroplane has been seen and heard by people in other neighbourhoods near Hamilton.⁴²

Okay, that last bit is more rumour. But if Sutton's story was accurate then it's quite a spectacular

one. That the cattle were frightened by something suggests that he wasn't simply imagining things (although they could have been startled by something else). Rockets? That suggests a signal from the ground to the aeroplane, presumably to arrange a rendezvous, and so we're moving from reconnaissance from sea raiders to some sort of enemy within. Then again, how did Sutton 'see' an aeroplane at in the middle of the night? Was he only guessing that it was an aeroplane, or was it illuminated by the rockets? All very puzzling.

As might have been expected, there's too much material left to cover to do it justice in this post, so I will save the promised discussion of the invasion (?) scare for another day.

[You can discuss this entry at Air-minded](#)

Dreaming war, seeing aeroplanes — III



On 23 April 1918, this brief article, filed from Melbourne, was the lead story in a number of Australian newspapers:

Within the past 48 hours information has come to hand which points to the probability that the realities of war will soon be brought before Australians in a most convincing fashion. Steps have been taken by the Defence authorities to cope with a situation which may at any moment assume grave proportions. More than this cannot be said for the present.⁴³

That's not much, but it seems to have created quite a stir: according to the Perth *Sunday Times*, 'Australia was startled out of its somnolence'.⁴⁴ The Melbourne *Argus* reported that 'Uneasiness was caused in Melbourne and in other centres' by the previous day's story, giving rise to 'most exaggerated rumours in the city'.⁴⁵ A report in the New Zealand press also dated 24 April (but not published for another week) noted that the public in Sydney 'fairly seethed in excitement' at this news when it was published in the *Daily Telegraph*.⁴⁶ Why? The report explains that

At the moment, Australia is suffering an attack of nerves in the matter of raiders, and any old story is accepted and sent wildly circulating. Certain definite signs of uneasiness in official circles, and certain things which cannot be hidden from the people have given colour to the wildest rumours. There is "something doing" -- but nothing to justify the excited stories of an imminent enemy attack on Australia which are now current.

So it seems that rumour had already prepared Australians to think that German naval raiders were lurking off the coast, and when they were told that 'the realities of war' might soon be present to them 'in a most convincing fashion', they believed that this meant an 'imminent enemy attack on Australia'. Or, as the *Sunday Times* put it, they had 'Visions of a German squadron breaking the British blockade and landing an expeditionary force on the Commonwealth coast'.⁴⁷

The reason given by the New Zealand journalist for this 'attack of nerves' is the mystery aeroplane sightings: [those at Toora and Casterton](#) are mentioned, and that Australian aeroplanes could not be shown to be responsible. Then there were 'reports of aeroplanes and strange lights on or near the coast between Melbourne or Sydney' -- which I haven't come across yet -- 'and a whole crop of rumours based on certain events of which the censorship forbids mention'. More government cover-ups! But the New Zealander perhaps slips one past the censor with this gem used to introduce the story:

A couple of days ago a man, selling the noon editions of the evening papers, stood in Castlereagh-street [Sydney] bawling "Raiders off the Queensland Coast." The rush for papers nearly carried him off his feet; and when the purchasers of his wares found not a line about a raider anywhere, they just grinned and, in the strange Australian way, seemed more inclined to commend his enterprise than damn his dishonesty.

I have no idea if the newspaper-seller was passing on a rumour he'd heard or just made it up on the spot, but this episode permits us a brief insight into the way these stories might have spread.

So what was the story behind this ill-advised warning? It seems that, thanks to the mystery aeroplane sightings, the government did in fact take seriously the possibility that German commerce raiders were operating off the Australian coast at this time. I haven't found a good account of this episode (possibly because of my unfamiliarity with Australian historiography) but we can reconstruct much of it from both primary and secondary sources.

First of all, there's a statement from the Minister for Defence, made the same day as that alarming press report:

Referring yesterday to the rumours, which were in circulation, the Minister for Defence (Senator George Pearce) stated that there was nothing that need alarm the public, but it had been thought advisable to take certain action of a precautionary nature to guard against any interference with our shipping.⁴⁸

Why was it 'thought advisable'? Well, confirming the New Zealander's narrative, Pearce went on to speak 'in reference to the various reports of aeroplanes having been seen in certain places in Victoria'. He didn't comment directly on their reality (or lack thereof), but for the benefit of planespotters explained how to distinguish friend from foe:

All British and Australian aeroplanes are visibly marked with three concentric circles of colour -- red, white, and blue.

German planes are marked with large black crosses, in the shape of the "Iron Cross."⁴⁹

He then pointed out that 'Any German or other enemy subject using an unmarked plane, or one with British markings, is subject to the penalty of a spy'. Once again, this opens up the possibility of a threat not just from a German warship, but from German agents too. A commentator in the *Evening News* remarked that

It is not impossible for enemy sympathisers in Australia to manufacture an aeroplane or two; indeed, there are certain lonely districts in Victoria where the thing might be done. Not impossible, but not probable.⁵⁰

Any sightings should be reported 'at once to the nearest military officer or the police, and that not only should markings be described, but date and time, direction from and to, sound, and if possible sketch of outline'. So the mystery aeroplanes were clearly a matter of concern, and the reason for the precautions.

And what were the nature of those precautions? They should not be exaggerated: as of 23 April, one shipping company was advised by the Royal Australian Navy that 'it need have no fear for its vessels [...] Enquiries of other shipping firms showed that not one single sailing had been cancelled'.⁵¹ So Pearce's precautionary measures did not extend to the interruption of commerce.

But what did happen was a not-insubstantial mobilisation of what few military and naval forces Australia had left for home defence. Coastal defence batteries which had been stood down were 'remobilised and the forts again manned for a month' in April 1918.⁵² German men interned at [Trial Bay](#) on the NSW coast were moved inland to [Holsworthy](#) at about this time too, because of the possibility of a rescue by a German raider.⁵³

Obviously the greatest burden of defence against raiders would fall on the Navy. The official history of the Navy in the war has this to say:

In 1918 the news of [the Wolf's doings of the year before](#), the possibility that Germany might get a successor to her through the blockade, and the widespread rumours concerning enemy aeroplanes -- too numerous to be neglected, however unlikely -- made it advisable to establish a more thorough system of patrols. The lack of warships was made up for, as far as possible, by commissioning a number of small craft, which could at any rate give warning of an enemy's approach, and by resuscitating the older warships, however inefficient.⁵⁴

In the areas near where the mystery aeroplanes were spotted, the patrol vessels were *Coogee* (a converted ferry), [Countess of Hopetoun](#) and [Protector](#) (the latter two survivors from colonial days), with others covering the coast right round from Western Australia to the Torres Strait.

And what of the Australian Flying Corps? As noted in my previous post, it had just one bomber available in Australia, an F.E.2b. And according to James Kightly, it was based at Alberton in Victoria from 20 April, and later moved to Yarram. From these bases it conducted reconnaissance sweeps off the Gippsland coast looking for German commerce raiders until at least May. An unarmed Maurice Farman [Shorthorn](#) assisted *Protector* in her patrols from Bega, on the south-eastern coast of NSW. James also notes that 'In March-April 1918, there were numerous "sightings" of lights in the sky and on the grounds and mysterious aeroplanes -- leading to the conclusion that up to four raiders could be operating off the coast of Australia' -- so in fact he beat me to these mystery aircraft!⁵⁵

And that's pretty much where the story ends, at far as I can tell. There were very few more mystery aeroplane reports. On 29 April, an aeroplane flying over Sydney 'caused many of the people who saw it to become unnecessarily alarmed': it was in fact a new military aeroplane being test-flown by Lieutenant Stutt.⁵⁶ And nearly a month later, the *Grey River Argus* in New Zealand claimed that 'A report was circulated in town last evening that an aeroplane had been seen over the sea near the hospital last evening' (yes, that's two 'last evening's, so either 28 or 29 May).⁵⁷ No suggestion that it was mysterious in any way, but then why report it?

That seems an unsatisfactory place to leave it. Perhaps I'll leave the last word to our Kiwi friend, who (in a different version of the article quoted above) places the raider scare in the context of the failure of the government to win public approval for conscription, the continuing German offensive in France and Australia's defencelessness. Scares have their uses, after all...

But military circles are likely to be disappointed. They did not expect compulsion for service abroad, but they did think that men would be compelled to provide a couple of divisions at least for home defence. The anti-compulsionists won all along the line at the recruiting conference last week, and now only volunteers are called for, to build up a small home army. Certain possibilities make that home army quite a necessity but apparently it is to be built up with all the muddling and expense that marked the creation of the armies now abroad.⁵⁸

PS Okay, here's a different last word, a memory of a [1909 scareship](#) sighting in Western Australia: *Sunday Times* (Perth), 28 April 1918, [6](#)!

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Smugglers!

This post should probably be called 'Smugglers?' but like many people I owe an intellectual debt to [Enid Blyton](#).

I've seen mentions of mystery aircraft in Britain in the 1930s but until now never a primary source reference. Thomas Bullard's most interesting *The Myth and Mystery of UFOs* notes that 'Mystery airplanes also appeared at this time over English locations, first to suspicions of criminal activity, then to worries over Nazi espionage', and provides two references.⁵⁹ One of them is inaccessible to me (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 July 1937, 7) but the other is from *The Times* (16 April 1936, 9) which I can get online. And here it is:

WATCH FOR MYSTERIOUS AEROPLANE

Our Folkestone Correspondent telegraphs:--

A mysterious aeroplane has caused the authorities to keep a watch at [Capel le Ferne](#) during the past fortnight. It was reported that a machine had flown low over the village, which is between Folkestone and Dover, on two successive Thursday evenings. On the second occasion it appeared to land at a remote spot, but within a minute or so it was seen making its way across the Channel again. A large grey motor-car was seen to come from the place on the second occasion, and to go towards London. Since then the aeroplane, which is said to be of foreign origin, has not been seen.

Well, that's a bit underwhelming, it must be said. There's nothing in the report itself to suggest that it wasn't, in fact, an actual aeroplane, though that may be because of its brevity (perhaps a local newspaper would have more). Aircraft were reasonably common by the mid-1930s. Smaller ones could still land on improvised airstrips; and with a bit of ground assistance they could probably do so at night. The question is, though, why would anyone want to? The only sensible answer would seem to be to smuggle something into the country, whether it be contraband or people. And it's certainly noteworthy that Capel le Ferne is about the closest point on the English coast to the Continent (the Channel Tunnel passes underneath it; next door is the site of [Hawkinge](#), one of Fighter Command's forward bases during the Battle of Britain). So in theory it would be a good spot to duck across the Channel, land, and take off again before anyone on either side noticed.

And such things did happen. Here's a prosecution for smuggling of cigars and brandy, reported in *The Times* (18 December 1936, 3) -- as the crimes took place only seven months later than and about five miles north from the Capel le Ferne incident, it could even be the same gang at work:

Mr. Stephenson said that it was a breach of regulations to unload any goods from an aeroplane unless at a proper Customs aerodrome [...] In this case [defendant Frederick] Hayter landed not at a Customs aerodrome but a place called Wickham Bushes, near Dover. He committed a breach of regulations by not reporting either to a police or excise officer that he had landed.

The pilot, Hayter, made a statement to Customs describing 'how he landed from [Le Touquet](#) in a field near Dover and hid a suitcase containing 12 bottles of old brandy under a haystack'. One of the accused was a local farmer and presumably the alleged haystack was in one of his fields.

So probably not a visiting spacecraft or even a projection of fears of aerial incursion, but: smugglers!

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

The red balloon scare of 1940

I hadn't come across this before. [@ukwarcabinet](#) linked to some informal notes of a [War Cabinet](#) meeting held on [8 February 1940](#). It was pretty quiet, even for the [Bore War](#), and 'Some of the subjects discussed were rather discussed by way of filling in time'. Including this:

At the end of the Meeting there was a reference to a scare which had started through a red balloon floating about in the Eastern Counties. This balloon had been sent up for meteorological purposes, but it had apparently given rise to a scare that gas balloons were being let loose by the Germans. The [London Passenger Transport Board](#) had told their employees to be ready to put on their gas-masks!

It seems they weren't particularly concerned by this incident, despite what it might have said about the fragility of morale. The scare wasn't kept secret; the Manchester Guardian had already reported it that morning (p. 7), with some extra details:

"ENEMY GAS"

Harmless Balloons Start Rumours

Extraordinary rumours in Eastern English and Scottish coastal districts followed the discovery yesterday of a number of small balloons. These were harmless British meteorological balloons but stories which had spread in various parts of the country had suggested that they were of enemy origin and that they contained dangerous gas.

At King's Lynn (Norfolk) these stories led to the police issuing the following statement:--

The enemy has dropped balloon toys which may contain gas, highly inflammable, and explode on being touched or handled by lines attached. Police and [observer corps](#) should be informed if any are found.

The balloons are used for testing atmospheric conditions and occasionally they sink to the ground without bursting. They are harmless except that they contain hydrogen, and are therefore likely to explode if brought into contact with a naked flame.

So the story is that British meteorologists launched some weather balloons which came down in the eastern parts of England and Scotland. Passers-by found them, thought them suspicious, and reported them to authorities, which in turn made public statements that they were dangerous German weapons -- either incendiary devices or actual poison gas bombs. In more normal times, it's unlikely that a stray weather balloon would be interpreted as something dangerous, just something curious. Now, with the war strangely calm and the [expected bombers](#) nowhere to be seen, it's more understandable that people would be jittery and overreact to mundane (if rare) sights (it had happened [before](#) and would happen [again](#)). And it certainly had to be considered that the Germans might try to use some sort of secret weapon against Britain. But the fact that the scare seems to have happened simultaneously in widely separated places -- London, Norfolk, Scotland -- suggests that there was something else going on too. Was the Met Office trying out a new balloon design? Perhaps it was the red colour mentioned in the War Cabinet discussion which made the balloons look especially sinister? Anyway, it's another scare to add to my list.

PS I think I should get credit for not mentioning [Nena](#). Until now.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

The day of the parashot

A few days after Xmas, I felt like I should be getting back into reading something thesis-related, but at the same time I still felt like I was still in holiday mode. So I compromised and read something on topic, but a bit lighter than my usual academic fare, namely *Waiting for Hitler: Voices from Britain*

on the Brink of Invasion by Midge Gillies (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007). The name suggests that it's along the lines of the 'forgotten voices' type of book that seem to be everywhere lately, but I couldn't say because I haven't actually read any of them. While it's certainly heavy on quoting 'ordinary' people (Mass-Observation diarists, Dunkirk veterans, internees) and, I'm sure, doesn't break any new historiographical ground, it's based on a lot of research, is well-written, and easily moves between the big picture and the small one. I learned a lot about a topic I don't know much about, namely the British home front from the start of the Norwegian campaign in April 1940, to the start of the Blitz in September. It's easy for me to focus too much on the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, but in some ways the period leading up to them is more interesting, because people didn't know what was going to happen next and that's often when fears come out to play.

One of the aspects of *Waiting for Hitler* I appreciated was Gillies' attention to rumours and panics as an index of the insecurity of the British people as they prepared for a possible German invasion. These are fascinating. For example, the slit trenches being dug in Hyde Park were said to be for mass burials in the aftermath of air raids, not protection from bombs. Troops practicing machine-gunning a buoy in a Cornish harbour turned into the accidental death of a boy by machine-gun fire the next day, and then the massacre of dozens of children on the beach the next, strafed by German aeroplanes. Rumours turned the deputy Labour leader [Arthur Greenwood](#) into a traitor locked in the Tower, and pencils and chocolates into the poisoned weapons of fifth columnists. In Southampton, the smell from a pickling plant was responsible for a minor panic, when somebody thought it might be poison gas:

ARP wardens paraded in gas masks, while hairdressers slammed their windows and told customers to keep their heads in washbasins.⁶⁰

It may sound silly, but it wasn't really, because the government's ARP literature warned people to be wary of strange smells as possible evidence of a gas attack.

Stories abounded of new German weapons. For example:

there were tales of German experiments with a cobweb-like material that they had tested over France in 1939. The substance, which they released in large white balloon-like capsules, had covered several square kilometres and clung to people's hands and faces. In another version it was reported that the substance had appeared over Britain, but it turned out that this was gossamer produced by spiders mating in mid-air.⁶¹

Most of these weapons didn't exist, but the rumours helped explain to those who passed them on why so many armies were crumbling so quickly before the German onslaught. One of the weapons was quite real, however: the [paratrooper](#).

German paratroopers had featured in the invasion of Denmark and Norway, where they were used to secure airfields as forward Luftwaffe bases or to land occupation forces. Airborne units were also used to capture key fortifications and bridges in Holland and Belgium (in particular, the state-of-the-art [Fort Eben-Emael](#)). These spectacular operations seemed to provide a crucial part of the explanation for the stunning success of the German army's blitzkrieg, and naturally the thought arose -- no doubt helped along by the extensive press coverage -- that paratroopers might next fall on Britain. This was particularly worrying because much of the army was in France with the [British Expeditionary Force](#).

Hence the invention of the 'parashot', one of the crop of [new war words](#). A parashot was simply somebody standing guard in a field or somewhere all night, with a weapon such as a shotgun, waiting for a parachutist to come down. Some parashots took up the task spontaneously, but most joined the Local Defence Volunteers, later renamed the [Home Guard](#). What I didn't realise was that the LDV was announced as early as 14 May, just 4 days after the start of the German offensive in the West. Somehow, I had it in my head that it was a post-Dunkirk affair, only a few weeks later, which would make sense: the BEF had survived, but only just; it had lost all of its equipment; the French had surrendered (or were soon about to). Invasion seemed probable and there was little to stand in the Germans' way. On 14 May, however, the Allied forces, though shocked by the speed of the German advance, were still intact; the BEF wasn't yet in retreat. For anyone who remembered the miracle on the Marne in 1914 (ie, all of the senior military and political leaders), to start planning for defeat might have seemed premature. It seems clear that the new menace of the paratrooper helps explain the new

zeal for an army of part-timers, schemes for which had been kicked around Whitehall since early in the war. In his BBC broadcast calling for volunteers for the LDV, Anthony Eden, the newly installed Secretary of State for War, opened by discussing at length the new danger:

I want to speak to you to-night about the form of warfare which the Germans have been employing so extensively against Holland and Belgium -- namely, the dropping of troops by parachute behind the main defensive lines.⁶²

He then explained the way in which such parachute raids would be carried out:

The troops arrive by aeroplane -- but let it be remembered that any such aeroplane seeking to penetrate here would have to do so in the teeth of the anti-aircraft defences of this country. If such penetration is effected, the parachutists are then dropped, it may be by day, it may be by night. These troops are specially armed, equipped, and some of them have undergone specialised training. Their function is to seize important points, such as aerodromes, power stations, villages, railway junctions and telephone exchanges, either for the purpose of destroying them at once, or of holding them until the arrival of reinforcements. The purpose of the parachute attack is to disorganise and confuse, as a preparation for the landing of troops by aircraft.⁶³

As well as activities of the contemporary fifth column across the Channel, this strongly resembles the supposed plans of the secret army of German tourists or immigrants so characteristic of the invasion scare novels before 1914, but I'll let that pass. Eden assured his listeners that plans had been made against to defend against such an attack, however just to be on the safe side ...

We want large numbers of such men in Great Britain who are British subjects, between the ages of 17 and 65, to come forward now and offer their service in order to make assurance doubly sure. The name of the new force which is now to be raised will be the "Local Defence Volunteers". This name, Local Defence Volunteers, describes its duties in three words.⁶⁴

That the government would feel it necessary to call for (it hoped) 150,000 or so volunteers for a second-string army shows how unnerved it was by the blitzkrieg. That 750,000 men would in fact volunteer within the first month shows how unnerved they were. There's lots of anecdotal evidence to support this, particularly near the south and east coasts -- golfers seem to have been particularly concerned that their greens might be perfect landing grounds for gliders, though perhaps this was because an invasion would interrupt their game! Rumours, urban legends practically, of spies parachuting into the country and traveling about disguised as nuns were rife (the give-away was supposedly their hairy arms).

And, on at least one occasion, paratroopers were actually seen floating from the sky:

The concept of the German storm-trooper descending from the sky was so vividly etched on people's imaginations that it led to a nationwide optical illusion on the stormy Thursday following the invasion of Holland [16 May]. Such was the hysteria about aerial attack that several people mistook silver barrage balloons lit up by flashes of lightning for parachutists. The sightings gained credibility because the Evening Standard had reported that some Germans wore sky-blue uniforms and used transparent parachutes that allowed them to drift to earth invisibly.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, Gillies doesn't give any references for this, and the extent of the sightings is unclear.⁶⁶ But such a panic fits perfectly into the precedent set by the phantom airships three decades earlier: people are told that strange new enemies are coming by air; they scan the sky anxiously, paying closer attention to it than they normally would; they then see something unfamiliar or under unusual conditions and assume it's the terrible new weapon they've been warned about.⁶⁷ And it's an air panic too, even if it doesn't involve Zeppelins or bombers.

So I got yet more material to cram into my thesis. Bigger is better, right?

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

The pigeon has landed

As a follow-up to the previous chapter on the widespread fear of German paratroops in Britain in May and June 1940. Here's a sterling example from somewhere in London, as described in the Ministry of Information's Home Intelligence report for 7 June 1940:

A false alarm on a housing estate of parachutists occasioned by a flock of pigeons resulted in about half the tenants rushing to the roof and the rest rushing to the shelters in the basement. In the melee several women fainted. These people are normally calm and collected. They seem to need more advice as to what to do and how to do it on such occasions.⁶⁸

It's hard to imagine how an ordinary flock of pigeons could be mistaken for descending parachutists. But if there's one thing I've been hammering over and over on this blog, it's this: fear can make people see danger in the innocuous, whether it's meteors, motor cars, Venus, weather balloons, or even nothing at all. Having said that, there's less evidence of widespread misperception of this sort (as opposed to rumours, of which there are many, though with frustratingly few details) in the MOI reports than I might have expected.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

New light on the Battle of Los Angeles

The [Battle of Los Angeles](#) took place on the night of 24 February 1942. It was more of a 'battle' than a battle: only one side did any shooting, and it's not at all clear that there was a second side. The defenders of Los Angeles thought there was: they claimed they were shooting at aircraft of mysterious (but presumed to be Japanese) origin. This is where I come in.

The incident is mainly known now by a photograph showing ... something... trapped in searchlight beams, which appeared in the Los Angeles Times on 26 February 1942. Its authenticity has never been questioned, but it was clearly heavily retouched. Recently, an [earlier copy](#) of the photo turned up in the archives of the LA Times. It's definitely been retouched less, if at all. I'm not even going to reproduce the better-known-but-retouched version (which can be seen [elsewhere](#)); instead, here's the newly-found-and-less-retouched version:



This photo (or rather its retouched version) has been used to argue that there was in fact ... something... over Los Angeles that night (most likely an extraterrestrial spaceship, obviously). Unlike [Kentaro Mori](#), I do think there is... something... there. But it's not a [Zeta Reticulan](#) battlecruiser. It's a cloud.

Firstly, there must be an actual, physical object being illuminated here. Crossed searchlight beams alone wouldn't produce the effect seen here, at least with contemporary photographic technology. The following photo (taken at [Bremerton](#), Washington state, also in 1942) shows this:



The photographic film (or plate) is already saturated due to the brighter beams; and you can't get whiter than white.

Secondly, searchlights shining on clouds do produce irregular shapes of light. Here's another contemporary photo, of searchlights illuminating the base of a cloud deck (again, coincidentally, this was taken in [southern California](#) too, roughly contemporaneously):



You can tell it's a cloud deck (or at least a big cloud) because of the way the beams just stop going vertically and diffuse away horizontally a little. All of their light has been absorbed and scattered by the cloud. In the Battle photo, the beams do continue through the object, though much diminished; the object's edges are a bit better defined than in the above photo. Both of these would be consistent with a small cloud. (See [here](#) for similar arguments.)

Thirdly, see those little blobs surrounding the object in the Battle photo? They're due to bursting anti-aircraft shells. The question is, are they actual flashes of light from the explosions themselves, or are they the puffs of smoke left behind, showing up because of the lightshow? I think it's mostly the latter, because nearly all appear to be in searchlight beams (though that could be a coincidence of perspective). However, the blobs above the object aren't, and I think that's because they are being illuminated by light being scattered upwards from the cloud. That wouldn't happen if the object were solid: being lit from underneath, it would reflect light down and to the sides, not up. But a small cloud will scatter light in all directions, including up. (But it's possible, too, that the blobs above the object are actual shell explosions: they are noticeably bright, after all.)

So, that's my take on the Battle of Los Angeles photo. But it's worth remembering that the photo only represents one aspect of what happened that night. And the Battle itself came after a series of events which heightened alarm on the West Coast. (The Bremerton photo above may have been taken during one of these scares.) Most obviously, of course, there was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. There then followed reports of an aircraft carrier off San Francisco combined with radar tracking of aircraft coming in from the sea (8 December); reports of a group of 34 Japanese warships near Los Angeles (9 December) The next few months were relatively quiet, but the loyalties of ethnic Japanese living on the West Coast were coming under increasing suspicion. Meanwhile, the other side of the country was having scares about German attacks: an air raid alert in New York (9 December) turned out to be a false alarm; but U-boat shellings of oil refineries on Aruba (a Dutch colony, but in America's backyard) were quite real (16 and 19 February 1942). Back in the west, an oil refinery at Ellwood, California, was similarly [shelled](#), this time by a Japanese submarine (23 February). A report by naval intelligence warned that an attack of some kind could be expected on 24 February; reports of 'a large number of flares and blinking lights' were seen near armaments factories that day; and then the Army's radars detected an aircraft 120 miles to the west of Los Angeles, approaching the coast. Air defences were naturally put on the alert; a blackout was put into effect. The official US Air Force history describes what follows:

At 0243, planes were reported near Long Beach, and a few minutes later a coast artillery colonel spotted "about 25 planes at 12,000 feet" over Los Angeles. At 0306 a balloon carrying a red flare was seen over Santa Monica and four batteries of anti-aircraft artillery opened fire, whereupon "the air over Los Angeles erupted like a volcano." From this point on reports were hopelessly at variance.

Probably much of the confusion came from the fact that anti-aircraft shell bursts, caught by the searchlights, were themselves mistaken for enemy planes. In any case, the next three hours produced some of the most imaginative reporting of the war: "swarms" of planes (or, sometimes, balloons) of all possible sizes, numbering from one to several hundred, traveling at altitudes which ranged from a few thousand feet to more than 20,000 and flying at speeds which were said to have varied from "very slow" to over 200 miles per hour, were observed to parade across the skies.⁶⁹

Four aircraft were claimed to have been shot down for the 1440 AA shells fired, though no wreckage was found. Several civilians died (from falling shrapnel and/or heart attacks, accounts seem to vary). The next day, the Secretary of the Navy, [Frank Knox](#), said it had all been a false alarm; [Henry Stimson](#), Secretary of War (responsible for air and coastal defence) maintained that up to five aeroplanes had been over Los Angeles. Perhaps they were launched from Japanese submarines; or perhaps Japanese secret agents were flying civilian planes over Los Angeles for some sort of psychological warfare operation. (All of which confirmed the need to [intern ethnic Japanese Americans](#), of course.) But there's no evidence that there were any aircraft (or spacecraft) over Los Angeles that night. It was another mystery aircraft scare, a repeat in pattern if not in detail of the Russian balloon scare half a century before.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

The field marshal and the ghost rockets

Field Marshal [Jan Smuts](#), prime minister of South Africa, broadcast a speech on the BBC on 29 September 1946. He talked about the prospects for peace in the post-war world, a subject on which he could claim some authority, since he had helped unify Anglophones and Afrikaners after the Boer War, and was involved in the Paris peace conferences after both world wars. The speech was mainly about the United Nations (or as he quaintly called it, 'Uno') and the growing signs of friction between the former Allies on the Security Council. And we all know how that turned out. (Churchill had given his ['Iron Curtain' speech](#) in March.) But one section is somewhat confusing for modern readers:

The United States may not long continue to enjoy the sole secret of the atom bomb, and this and other no less deadly weapons will at no distant date be in the possession of other nations also. **The flying bombs, now seen nightly in the west, are indications of what is going on behind the curtain.** It is highly doubtful whether any new weapons, or indeed any mechanical inventions, could ever be relied on to remove the danger of war. A peaceful world order could only be safely based on a new spirit and outlook widely spread and actively practised among the nations.⁷⁰

Flying bombs seen nightly in the west? What flying bombs?

Smuts was referring to reports which had been coming out of Sweden since May, and more recently from Denmark and Greece. Fast moving objects, sometimes with wings, sometimes without, were seen flashing across the sky. Some had flames shooting out the rear; others appeared to manoeuvre. Some of them crashed; residents of Malmö reported that windows were broken when a rocket 'exploded' over their town.⁷¹ They were sometimes even tracked on radar. A photo was even taken of one. They were seen by military personnel as well as by ordinary people. An example:

One of the mysterious bombs which in recent weeks have been passing across Sweden was seen last night by an officer of the Air Defence Department of the Defence Staff. He reports that the bomb looked like a fireball with a clear yellow flame passing at an estimated height of between 1,500 and 3,000 feet and at a considerable but quite measurable speed.⁷²

The term now given to these objects is ghost rockets.

Suspiciously immediately fell on the Russians, who had taken possession of the German missile research station at [Peenemünde](#), along with many of its scientists and equipment. This was where [V-1](#) and [V-2](#) development had taken place during the war. As the *Manchester Guardian* editorialised:

No one has said who starts them [the ghost rockets] on their journey, but it does not need much imagination to see Russian engineers, no doubt assisted by obedient German scientists, operating from a research station on the Baltic coast. Russia, of course, could have found a more secret practice range, but she probably enjoys revealing a little of her plaything, just as America carefully lets us know at least enough about her bomb to hold it in respect.⁷³

There was even a precedent: the Germans had test-fired many V-1s and V-2s over the Baltic, and one of the latter landed on Swedish territory. The resultant wreckage was of some use to Allied scientific intelligence in working out just how much of a threat the new rocket weapon would be. But as R. V. Jones, who was involved in both the wartime and (more peripherally) the ghost rocket investigations, pointed out, with hundreds of sightings being reported from Sweden, some proportion of the supposed rockets would have crashed and the wreckage discovered. The Swedish military did look, even searching the bottom of a lake which a winged missile had crashed into. Nothing was found (although in *Most Secret War*, Jones relates an amusing episode about one fragment which initially denied analysis, but which turned out to be a lump of coke).⁷⁴

As with the phantom airship scares a generation earlier, parallels can be found nearby in time and/or space. As I noted above, ghost rockets were also reported from Denmark and Greece. Both of these countries were fairly close to the new Iron Curtain, so it wasn't too implausible to think that they too might be playing unwitting hosts to Soviet weapon tests. But then ghost rockets were also seen in

Portugal, Belgium and Italy -- except for the last, much farther away from the Soviet sphere. Some of the ghost rockets were undoubtedly meteors (the Perseid meteor shower coincided with the August peak of sightings; the photo mentioned above looks a lot like a meteor to me), others may have been new and unfamiliar jet aeroplanes (Sweden received its first Vampires in June). The British Consul at Salonika thought what he saw was nothing more than a Very light.⁷⁵ But, as usual, not everything can be explained this way.

Going backwards in time, to the early 1930s, so-called '[ghost flyers](#)' were seen, often in snowstorms, in the northern parts of Sweden, Norway and Finland. These aircraft were seen (and heard) mainly at night, sometimes flying at low-level. But they carried no markings, and military searches found neither the ghost fliers nor the aerodrome they presumably operated from. Explanations at the time included Soviet or Japanese (!) spies, alcohol smugglers or misperception and mass delusion. Soviet or even combined Soviet-German exercises are perhaps the most likely [explanation](#), though no archival smoking gun has been found.

And going forward a few decades, and into a different medium altogether, in the 1980s and early 1990s Swedish coastal waters were plagued by incursions from [mystery submarines](#). This time the witnesses were Swedish naval personnel, and the submarines were detected with sonar. Again, the chief suspect was the Soviet Union (though NATO has been blamed more recently), and after the '[Whiskey on the rocks](#)' incident of 1981, when a Soviet diesel sub ran aground near a major Swedish naval base, that's understandable. But even trained sonar operators make mistakes: one prominent incident in 1982 was, it seems, caused by a [charter boat](#).

So, to generalise wildly about a country I know not a lot about, the Swedish ghost rockets, ghost flyers and mystery submarines sound like the paranoia of a small country stuck in between hostile blocs and trying to stay neutral. Technology made it easier for foreign powers to sneak in and spy on Swedes. Although the geopolitical context was different, this sounds a lot like the situation in Britain in [1909](#) and 1913. The enemy outside became the enemy within.

Back to Smuts. He didn't place much emphasis on the ghost rockets; they were just further evidence of what everyone already knew, that new weapons were changing the world (yet again), and that the world needed to change its ways in consequence. He didn't have any very compelling answers to this problem -- maybe a world government proper, one day; for the moment, he wanted the great powers to have full and frank discussions about what they really wanted from each other, rather than issuing spurious vetoes -- but that he felt he had to try was just as much a sign of the times as the ghost rockets themselves.

You can discuss this entry at [Airminded](#)

Notes

The Scareship Age

¹ *Standard* (London), 17 May 1909, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Globe* (London), 17 May 1909, p. 7.

⁴ *Norfolk News* (Norwich), 25 January 1913, p. 10.

⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1909, p. 7.

The phantom balloon scare of 1892

⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 26 March 1892, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 March 1892, p. 8

⁹ *New York Times*, 30 March 1892, [p. 5](#). See also *ibid.*, 26 March 1892, [p. 3](#).

¹⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 26 March 1892, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 31 March 1892, p. 8.

The Sheerness Incident

¹² [Short Brothers](#) was also based at Eastchurch at the time, though I've not seen this mentioned in reference to the Sheerness Incident.

¹³ *Flight*, 19 October 1912, [p. 932](#).

¹⁴ *The Times*, 28 November 1912, p. 10.

¹⁵ Minutes of Committee of Imperial Defence meeting, 6 December 1912, CAB 38/22/42.

¹⁶ *Daily Mail*, 18 November 1912, p. 7. Another possibility, championed by C. G. Grey of the *Aeroplane*, was that the civilian Zeppelin *Hansa* was responsible for the Sheerness Incident: *The Times*, 13 January 1913, p. 6. Though as its flight from Hamburg reportedly ended at Gotha (in central Germany) at 4 p.m. on 14 October, *Hansa* doesn't really seem any more likely a suspect than does the L1.

¹⁷ Granville Oldroyd and Nigel Watson, "The Sheerness Incident: did a German airship fly over Kent in 1912?", *Fortean Studies* 4 (1998), 151-9.

¹⁸ David Oliver, *Hendon Aerodrome: A History* (Shrewsbury: AirLife, 1994), 19. In fact, as early as July 1910 he had dive-bombed the real fleet -- without a real bomb, of course -- so he was clearly not averse to stunts.

¹⁹ *Standard*, 25 February 1913, p. 9.

²⁰ Also, Joynson-Hicks, who was the first to mention the matter in Parliament (and presumably would have been tipped off, according to the conspiracy theory), addressed his question to Seely, not Churchill. Besides which, Jix was a Conservative, and Seely and Churchill Liberals -- unlikely allies.

²¹ Douglas Robinson, who wrote what is still the standard work on the operations of the German naval airship division, apparently concluded that it could not have been a Zeppelin, though I haven't seen his assessment myself.

The Zeppelins of Halifax

²² Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2005), 70. Emphasis added.

²³ Nigel Watson, *The Scareship Mystery: A Survey of Worldwide Phantom Airship Scares (1909-1918)* (Corby: Domra, 2000), 117-20.

Dreaming war, seeing aeroplanes — I

²⁴ E.g., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 1918, [13](#).

²⁵ *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 March 1918, [4](#).

²⁶ *Colonist* (Nelson), 2 March 1918, [4](#). Reprinted in *Grey River Argus*, 8 March 1918, [2](#); *Poverty Bay Herald*, 11 March 1918, [7](#).

²⁷ *Poverty Bay Herald*, 11 March 1918, [7](#).

²⁸ Reprinted in *Thames Star*, 9 March 1918, [4](#); *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 9 March 1918, [5](#); *Colonist* (Nelson), 9 March 1918, [3](#); *Poverty Bay Herald*, 11 March 1918, [7](#).

²⁹ Reprinted in *Thames Star*, 12 March 1918, [2](#).

³⁰ *Argus* (Melbourne), 23 March 1918, [23 March 1918](#), 17.

³¹ *Poverty Bay Herald*, 1 April 1918, [2](#); see also *Thames Star*, 28 March 1918, [2](#); *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 1 April 1918, [4](#).

³² *Evening Post* (Wellington), 5 April 1918, [6](#); see also *Thames Star*, 6 April 1918, [2](#); *Marlborough Express*, 6 April 1918, [4](#); *Poverty Bay Herald*, 8 April 1918, [4](#).

³³ *Poverty Bay Herald*, 30 March 1918, [6](#).

Dreaming war, seeing aeroplanes — II

³⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1918, [12](#).

³⁵ James Kightly, 'Australia's first domestic battleplane', *Flightpath* 20:4 (2009), 54. I'm indebted to James for providing me with a copy of his article.

³⁶ *Poverty Bay Herald*, 8 April 1918, ²; reprinted in *Ashburton Guardian*, 6 April 1918, ³.

³⁷ *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 19 April 1918, ⁷.

³⁸ A brief notice in the *Portland Guardian* says that the Defence Department was investigating the sightings in other parts of the state too: 19 April 1918, ².

³⁹ *Broadford Courier*, 19 April 1918, ³.

⁴⁰ Also reprinted in *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 19 April 1918, ². See also *Portland Guardian*, 19 April 1918, ².

⁴¹ *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 April 1918, ¹²; also in *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 20 April 1918, ⁴.

⁴² *Portland Guardian*, 22 April 1918, ²; see also *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 20 April 1918, ¹².

Dreaming war, seeing aeroplanes — III

⁴³ *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 April 1918, ⁷; reprinted in *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 23 April 1918, ². A different version, originating in the *Age* (Melbourne) adds the sentence 'The uneasiness of the Defence authorities has been intensified by certain evidence which has come before them since Saturday morning' [20 April]: *Sunday Times* (Perth), 28 April 1918, ¹³.

⁴⁴ *Sunday Times* (Perth), 28 April 1918, ¹³.

⁴⁵ *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 April 1918, ⁹.

⁴⁶ *Evening News* (Wellington), 1 May 1918, ¹¹; reprinted in *Poverty Bay Herald*, 4 May 1918, ⁷.

⁴⁷ *Sunday Times* (Perth), 28 April 1918, ¹³.

⁴⁸ *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 April 1918, ⁹.

⁴⁹ Also printed in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April 1918, ¹¹.

⁵⁰ *Sunday Times* (Perth), 28 April 1918, ¹³.

⁵¹ *Evening News* (Wellington), 1 May 1918, ¹¹.

⁵² Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941), 7th edition, 198. Scott doesn't mention the mystery aeroplanes, saying that the remobilisation was due to 'the realisation that the German raider *Wolf*, as well as the *Seeadler*, had in the previous year been operating in neighbouring waters', but that realisation in and off itself would not appear to justify a belief in a current threat.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 122-3.

⁵⁴ Arthur W. Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy, 1914-1918* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941), 9th edition, 373.

⁵⁵ James Kightly, 'Australia's first domestic battleplane', *Flightpath*, 20:4 (2009), 54. See also this 1938 article posted at [Wings Over New Zealand](#), which refers to sightings of the *Wolf's* seaplane, but either those took place in 1917 or they weren't actually of the *Wölfchen*.

⁵⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1918, ⁷.

⁵⁷ *Grey River Argus*, 30 May 1918, ².

⁵⁸ *Poverty Bay Herald*, 4 May 1918, ⁷.

Smugglers!

⁵⁹ Thomas E. Bullard, *The Myth and Mystery of UFOs* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 115.

The day of the parashot

⁶⁰ Gillies, *Waiting for Hitler*, 159.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶² *The Times*, 15 May 1940, p. 3. The full text is [online](#).

[63](#) Ibid.

[64](#) Ibid.

[65](#) Gillies, *Waiting for Hitler*, 60.

[66](#) It's 'a nationwide optical illusion', yet only involves 'several people'. James Hayward, *Myths and Legends of the Second World War* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003) has a chapter on the paratrooper panic and hairy nuns, but doesn't appear to mention this particular incident.

[67](#) It's true that the phantom airships in 1909 and 1912-3 were seen in peacetime. I would argue that, coming off the back the intense Anglo-German naval rivalry, the spy mania, the invasion novels and all the rest of it, some people felt virtually under siege by Germany already. There's a degree of circularity in that argument -- but I think the loop is broken by the fact that non-existent airships were seen during the First World War itself.

The pigeon has landed

[68](#) Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, eds., *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain's Finest Hour, May to September 1940* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), 91.

New light on the Battle of Los Angeles

[69](#) William A. Goss, 'Air defense of the Western Hemisphere', in Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds, *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume I: Plans & Early Operations, January 1939 to August 1942* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983), 283-4.

The field marshal and the ghost rockets

[70](#) *The Times*, 30 September 1946, 5. Emphasis added.

[71](#) *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1946, 6.

[72](#) Ibid., 8 August 1946, 6.

[73](#) Ibid., 13 August 1946, 4.

[74](#) R. V. Jones, *Most Secret War* (London: Penguin, 2009 [1978]), 511-2.

[75](#) *Manchester Guardian*, 7 September 1946, 6.