

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Listen to a reading of this article

SSZ15 - an airship lost in the English Channel



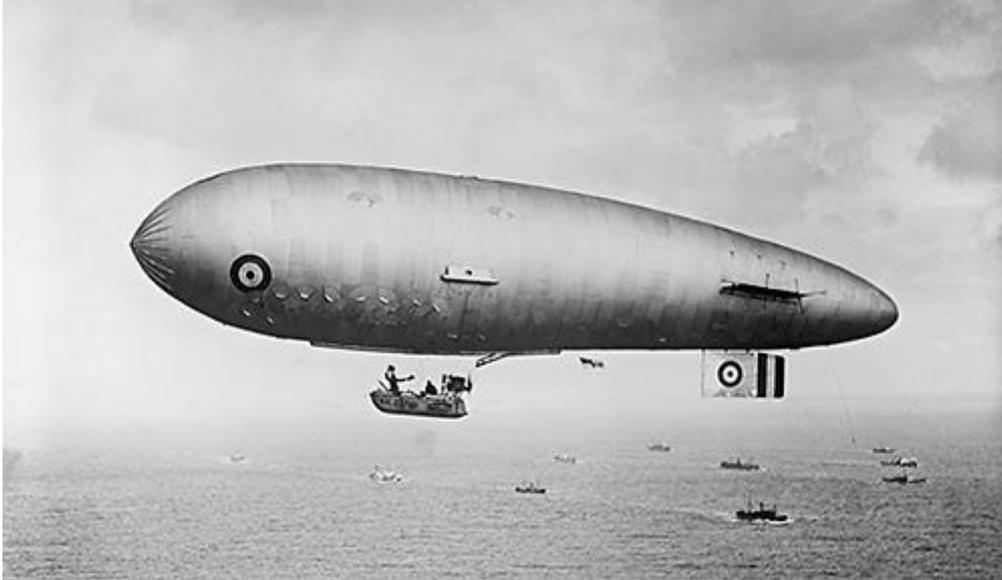
Pen & Ink reproduced here with the permission of Mike Greaves ASGFA www.greaves2connections.com

The Forgotten Wrecks are not all ships and boats. Airships and aircraft of various types were essential to the anti-submarine effort of the First World War.

Airships offered a range of advantages over aircraft, including increased flight time, the ability to fly in low cloud and fog, and the option to hover slowly to search below. Visibility from an airship was excellent; they could fly both high and low and there were no wings to obscure the view. If an engine should fail, they could remain airborne while the problem was addressed. Disadvantages included a slow speed (40 – 55 mph), vulnerability to enemy aircraft, the need for light winds plus significant infrastructure requirements at base, including hydrogen and hangars.

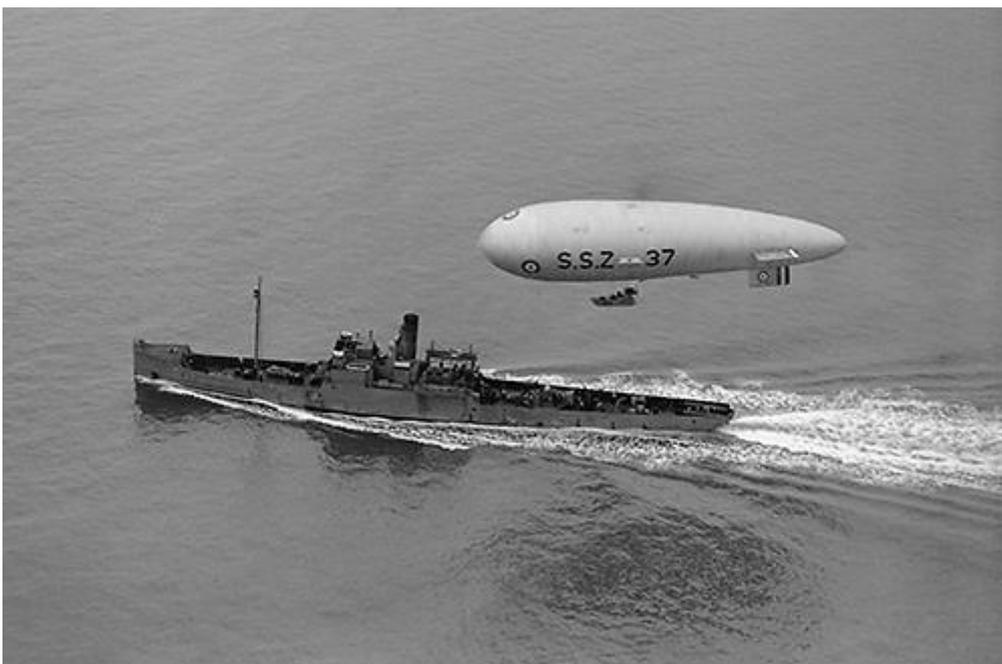
SSZ 15 was a Submarine Scout Zero class, non-rigid airship. It had a boat-shaped car made of an ash frame covered in plywood. This was slung beneath a large bullet-shaped hydrogen-filled balloon (or envelope) of nearly 2,000 cubic metres (70,000 cubic feet) capacity. The envelope, typically made from layers of cotton fabric proofed with rubber, was approximately 44 metres (143ft) long with a diameter of 9 metres (30ft). The SSZ airships had a crew of 3; the pilot sat in the middle and the engineer sat behind him. At the front of the car, the wireless operator manned a machine gun. 77 airships of this type were built to carry out coastal patrols from stations along the south coast.

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR



A Submarine Scout Zero class airship patrols over merchant shipping. © IWM (Q 20643).

On the morning of 13th April 1918, SSZ 15 set out from Bridport in Dorset. The pilot, lieutenant G R J Parkinson, was accompanied by Air Mechanics R T James (engineer) and V H Hudson (wireless operator). At approximately 9.45pm, after the airship had been in the air for almost 15 hours, SSZ 15 was seen landing on the sea two miles south of Exmouth, probably as a result of engine failure. Rescue boats were sent out but on arriving at the airship the crew were nowhere to be found. They were officially reported as missing, presumed drowned.



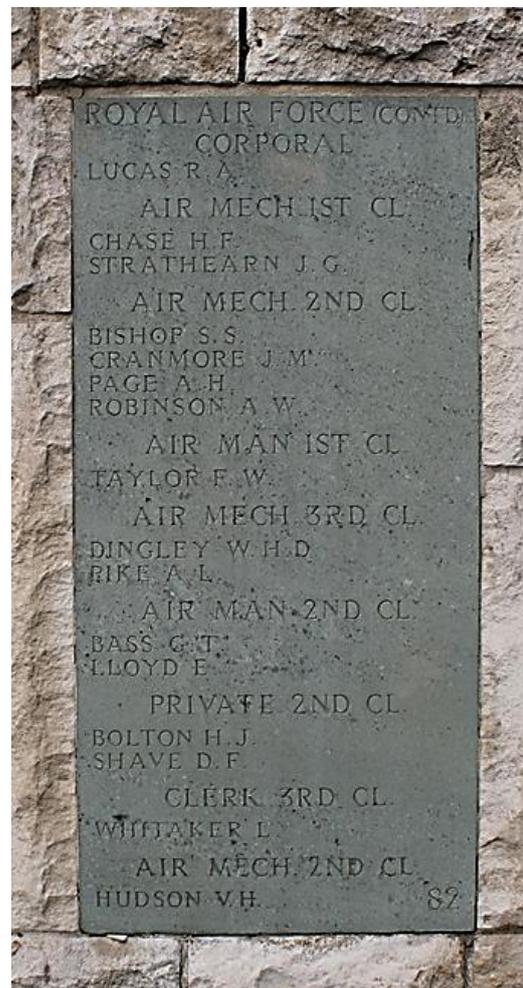
SSZ 37 flies above a minelaying sloop. Airships were ideal escort craft and could even be launched and recovered from ships at sea. © IWM (Q 48005).

FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Zero control car was designed to float on water and the crew were equipped with life jackets. However, historic records show that other airships were recalled that afternoon due to rising winds and decreasing visibility, so it is possible that poor weather contributed to the crew's loss. Parkinson's body later washed up at Exmouth and James's body was found at Berry Head, near Brixham. Valentine Hudson was never found. SSZ 15 was listed as 'Lost at Sea', so we can presume that it sank but its remains have not been found to date.

People who were lost at sea during the First World War and have no known grave, are commemorated on the [Hollybrook Memorial](#), near the General Hospital in Southampton. Because Valentine Hudson's body was never found, his name can be found on one of the stone panels (Panel 82) of the memorial (see photo). The Maritime Archaeology Trust is currently working on a 3D digital model of the Hollybrook Memorial which will soon enable people to 'virtually' visit this important site. The Forgotten Wrecks project has created a 'Community' on the Lives of the First World War digital memorial for SSZ15, it comprises a page for each of the 3 men who were tragically lost with the airship. It is hoped that somebody out there might have links with these individuals and may be able to shed more light on the story, please contact us if you can help. [Click here to visit the SSZ15 community on the Lives of the First World War website.](#)

In December 1917, Wilfred E. Jones of the Royal Naval Air Services was overseeing SSZ15 at an airship station in Cornwall when the weather took a turn for the worse. His incredible story is told here: [SSZ15 Incident](#)



Panel 82 of the Holy Brook Memorial
Valentine Hudson's name can be seen at the bottom

The Maritime Archaeology Trust is indebted to Brian Turpin, airship historian, for generously sharing his extensive knowledge on airships.