

On 19 July 1918 seven Sopwith Ship's Camel Tractor biplanes took off from the converted large cruiser HMS Furious in a bombing raid on the Imperial German Navy's airship base at Tondern and destroyed two German Zeppelins, L.54 and L.60 and a captive balloon. It was the first ever attack made by wheeled aircraft flying from a carrier flight deck.

Background

Two earlier operations against Tondern airship sheds (Operations F5 and F6) planned for Furious had not gone ahead; F5 in late May, was abandoned after Furious had left port, possibly because of a perceived U-boat threat. F6 did set off on 27 June 1918, but was abandoned on 29 June due to very high winds.

The Raid

On 17 July 1918, the third attempt, (Operation F7) HMS Furious left Rosyth, with a large escort of battleships and cruisers. The raid had originally been planned for two flights of four aircraft but one pilot was posted leaving no time to find and train a replacement.

Weather forced a delay of 24 hours until the early hours of the 19th July. Within a few minutes, all the aircraft took off from the water, the last by 03:21.

Flight 1

Lt William Douglas Jackson (Hon Captain, Flight Commander)

Lt (Hon Capt) William F Dickson

Lt Norman Edmundson Williams (in N6605)

Flight 1 arrived on target at around 04.35 and the three airship sheds were attacked. The largest shed contained Zeppelins L54 and L.60 which were destroyed. Dickson made it back to the British ships and after ditching in the sea (the only method of recovery at the time) was picked up by HMS Violent. Jackson made a forced landing in Denmark as did Williams at Scallinger near Esbjerg. The extraordinary story of what happened to Williams and Jackson, including Jackson's escape, can be read [here](#) .

Flight 2

Lt Bernard Arthur Smart (Hon Capt, Flight Commander)

Lt (Hon Capt) T K Thyne (who had been involved in with deck-landing trials on Furious with Jackson)

Lt Samuel Dawson (in N6823)

Lt Walter Albert Yeulett.

Thyne returned to the fleet with engine trouble and was safely picked up. The remaining three aircraft spotted the target at 04.45.

Flight Lt Smart's own account says...

"At 0445 hours, I saw Tondern some 10 miles to the South-West and steered West. Shortly after fairly heavy anti-aircraft fire opened on us. I was unable to see the sheds for some minutes, but eventually three A.A. batteries close together attracted my attention, and near them I discovered the sheds, two large ones and one smaller, one of the larger having the roof partially destroyed and emitting large volumes of dense black smoke [thanks to the earlier visit of the first flight]. When in position I gave the signal and dived on the remaining large shed, releasing my bombs at 800 to 1,000 feet. The first fell short, but the second hit the centre of the shed, sending up a quantity of smoke or dust. Whether this burst into flames later I am unable to state, as the whole surroundings were thick with mechanics or soldiers armed with rifles and machine-guns, which gave so disconcerting a fire that I dived with full engine to 50 feet and skimmed over the ground in a zig-zag course to avoid it, and by the time I got clear I was unable to see the sheds on account of the thick screen of smoke from the first shed.

The clouds were now very low and a general haze made visibility bad. I searched in all directions for the remainder of my flight, but seeing nothing made straight for the pre-arranged rendezvous at Brede. Here

I slowed down to wait for the others, but after doing a circuit at slow speed and with still nothing in sight, I decided it was inadvisable to wait longer as I had already been in the air nearly two hours and the wind had increased; also the clouds were so low and thick as to give all of us, though separated, ample protection from superior forces of hostile craft.

I proceeded in a North-West direction above the lower clouds and on descending to pick up my bearings, my engine failed to open out and I got to 400 feet before getting a single fire. Then two or three of the cylinders cut in, but I dropped to about 20 feet before getting 1000 revs., which was just enough to keep me in the air.

I skimmed along at this height until the engine gradually got better, but it was quite 10 minutes before she was doing 1200 again. I followed the coast until sighting Lyndvig Light, when I went out to sea and after two or three minutes saw a destroyer. I released the axle pins and dropped the wheels by slide-slipping alternately, and landed ahead of H.M.S. Violent at 0630 hours."

Smart was left sitting on the tail of his sinking aircraft for 15 minutes in a 15-foot swell, and ultimately fell into the sea, losing his lifebelt. And, having swallowed a lot of water, he was "done in by the time the boat arrived ... three able bodied seamen clutched hold of me and hauled me aboard like a sack of flour'.

Dawson made a forced landing at Holmsland Klit in Denmark and like Jackson and Williams was interned. Yeulett, was never seen alive again. Yeulett and his aircraft were later washed ashore.

Awards

On 22 July Dickson and Smart were awarded DSOs (Smart as a bar to his previously earned DSO) under unusual circumstances; they were both invited aboard the Admiral's flagship, where, to their surprise, they were introduced to the King. Smart recalls "The King seemed awfully pleased and knew practically every detail. He talked to me for nearly ten minutes and wanted to know all about the show. His questions were very sensible and to the point and his speech is very dignified and gentlemanly. Having given me the Bar he shook hands, after which I saluted and walked off, when Dickson had to go through the mill.'

Dawson, Jackson, Williams and Yeulett were awarded DFCs (Yeulett posthumously) The citation in the London Gazette 21 September 1918 read 'Was engaged in a long-distance bombing raid on an enemy aircraft station, under very difficult circumstances, and carried out a successful attack from a low height in the face of severe enemy fire'.

A superb website dedicated to the Tondern Raid, with much more fascinating detail, can be found [here](#) . Image of Lt Walter Albert Yeulett courtesy William Casey.

In the following extract from Chapter XX 'Smart Enemy Airmen' of 'Zeppelins over England' by Kapitänleutnant zur See Freiherr Horst Treusch von Buttlar Brandfells, the German commander of Airship L54 gives an account of the raid from the German perspective. [Published 1931 in translation]

NOTE From 1864 to 1920 the Danish area "Sønderjylland", including the city Tønder, was part of Germany.

Suddenly a shadow passed over our house, a few yards above the roof, absurdly low. It was an aeroplane with the colours of the Entente in a circle. A British aeroplane! In a moment the anti-aircraft batteries began to bark. The Englishman dropped if anything a little bit lower and made straight for the airship shed. He was already there. Then he climbed a bit. There was more buzzing overhead and something else approached. Over my head another shadow passed, a second aeroplane! By that time the first was over the shed, exactly above it. My heart was in my mouth. In a terrible straight column,

lit up with flames, the smoke rose skyward from the shed. Gruesomely beautiful it was, this giant flame of sacrifice in which our L54 and L60 perished.

The Englishman went round in a circle and then attacked the smaller shed in which the captive balloon was berthed. Heavens, it was cheek by jowl with the railway line on which there was a whole train of petrol wagons! At the same moment, about 300 yards away, a third aeroplane came into view. It remained where it was. Evidently it had been ordered to take photographs.

In the centre of the aerodrome, in front of their hutments, the seamen were standing with nothing on but their undergarments, or half naked, and firing with their rifles as hard as they could. They might just as well not have been there. The Englishmen continued circling round without climbing an inch higher. The pilots could be seen quite plainly; they were waving in a most friendly manner to our men although, being equipped for attacking troops, they could easily have opened fire with their machine guns.

I was cycling like mad to the aerodrome when suddenly a terrible thought flashed through my mind. The heavy bombs were still in the shed! Fortunately Schiller, who lived in one of the huts, had also thought of this danger at once. Taking no notice of the enemy airmen, he ran with a couple of plucky fellows into the burning shed. They had all put on something to protect their mouths against the stifling fumes of the fire, and together they dragged the bombs, some of which were already hot, out of the shed.

Then one of the English airmen lost a wheel from his undercarriage. We all saw it. Surely his machine must be damaged! He came down quite low. He was landing! We ran like mad to the spot where he was landing, only to see we were mistaken. Like his colleagues he had quite rightly flown so low to avoid the anti-aircraft batteries that it was quite useless for the latter to fire. The next moment he was flying under the Tondern high-tension wires and away. Then one of the high-tension wires snapped; he had evidently struck it with the top centre section; but nevertheless he flew straight toward the anti-aircraft battery which lay to the north-west. Then he vanished in the direction of the Danish frontier. Then I stood facing the burnt-out wreck of my ship. I had watched many ships perish, but this was the first time I saw my own destroyed.