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First Blitz

Neil Hanson

About the Book

Far from the killing fields of France, a little-known battle was fought in the skies over London that nearly altered the course of the First World War, and with it the history of the twentieth century itself. The margin between survival and total destruction came down to less than one hour.

In four years, the Luftwaffe's England squadron had moved from crude canvas-and-wire light aircraft to four-engined giants as big as anything that flew in World War Two. This, combined with the development of a revolutionary incendiary bomb, gave Germany the chance to raze London to the ground. It was a chance that they came within an ace of taking …

'The 1940s bombing raids over London have taken such a powerful grip upon our imagination that the existence of an earlier Blitz, in World War I, will come to many readers as a complete surprise. Yet as Neil Hanson demonstrates in this gripping and well-researched book, it was in many ways more terrifying' *Daily Mail*

'Clearly and engagingly written, his book puts more academic historians to shame by discovering a big subject, investigating it thoroughly and drawing bold but far-reaching conclusions from it' *Sunday Telegraph*

FIRST BLITZ

The Secret German Plan to Raze London
to the Ground in 1918

NEIL HANSON

CORGI BOOKS

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For Lynn, Jack and Drew, who make everything worthwhile

Praise for Neil Hanson's *First Blitz:*

'The 1940s bombing raids over London have taken such a powerful grip upon our imagination that the existence of an earlier Blitz, in World War I, will come to many readers as a complete surprise. Yet as Neil Hanson … demonstrates in this gripping and well-researched book, it was in may ways more terrifying' *Daily Mail*

'Neil Hanson is that rare beast – a popular historian who never talks down to his readers. Clearly and engagingly written, his book puts more academic historians to shame by discovering a big subject, investigating it thoroughly and drawing bold but far-reaching conclusions from it' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Using first-hand witnesses plus government war records, Hanson draws a powerful picture of the impact of these first air raids' *Time Out*

'History invariably falls into two categories: academic and narrative … To marry the two is a rare art – and it is an art Neil Hanson has mastered … This is a compelling story compellingly told … Gripping' *Navy News*

'Hanson gives a compelling picture of the city's frantic state' *Times Literary Supplement*

'Hanson's book is a fascinating and compelling tale of the idiosyncrasies of an almost forgotten age' *Big Issue*

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Neil Hanson is the author of four acclaimed works of narrative history: *The Custom of the Sea, The Dreadful Judgement, The Confident Hope of a Miracle* and *The Unknown Soldier*. He lives in Yorkshire with his family.

Also by Neil Hanson

THE CUSTOM OF THE SEA
THE DREADFUL JUDGEMENT
THE CONFIDENT HOPE OF A MIRACLE
THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

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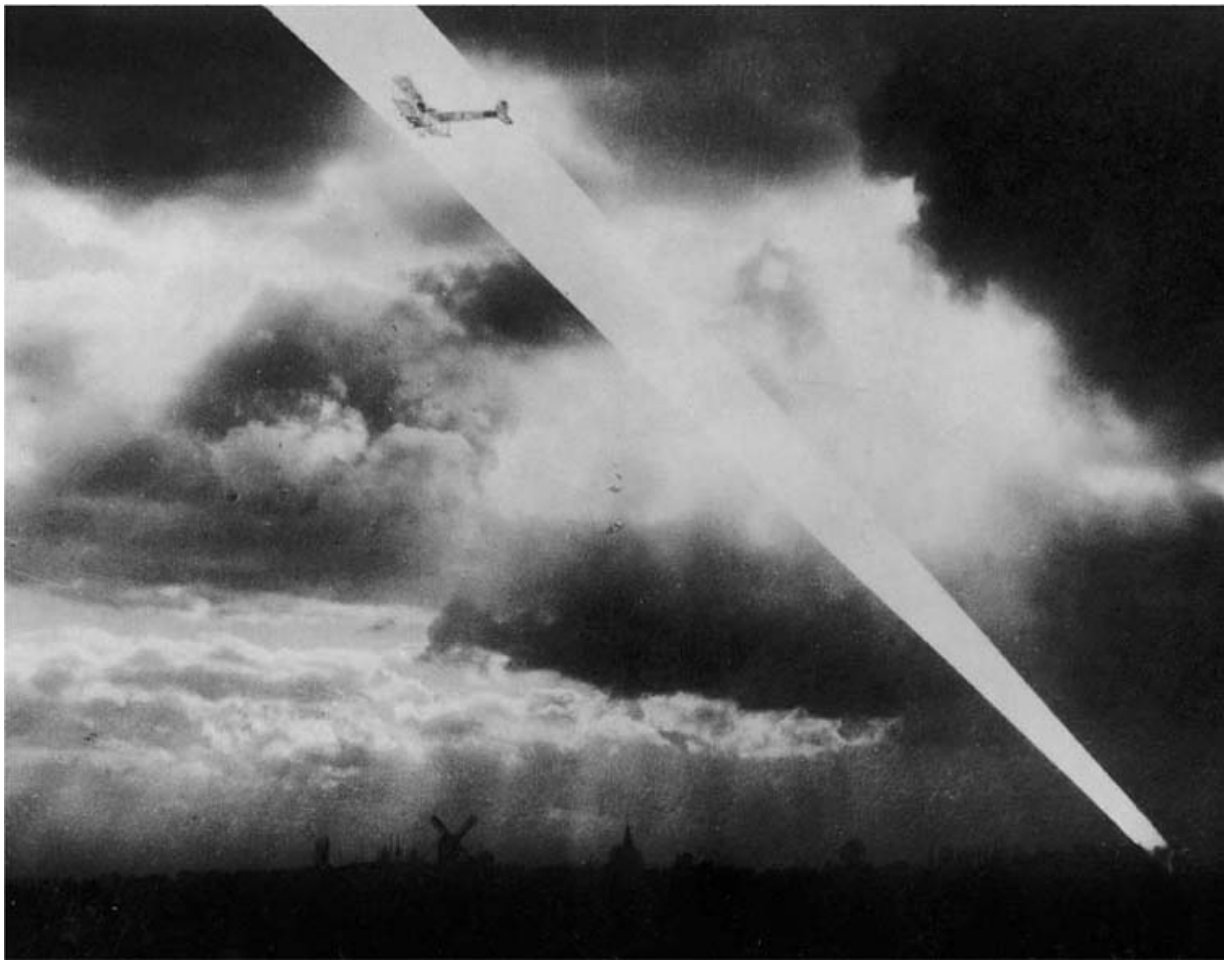


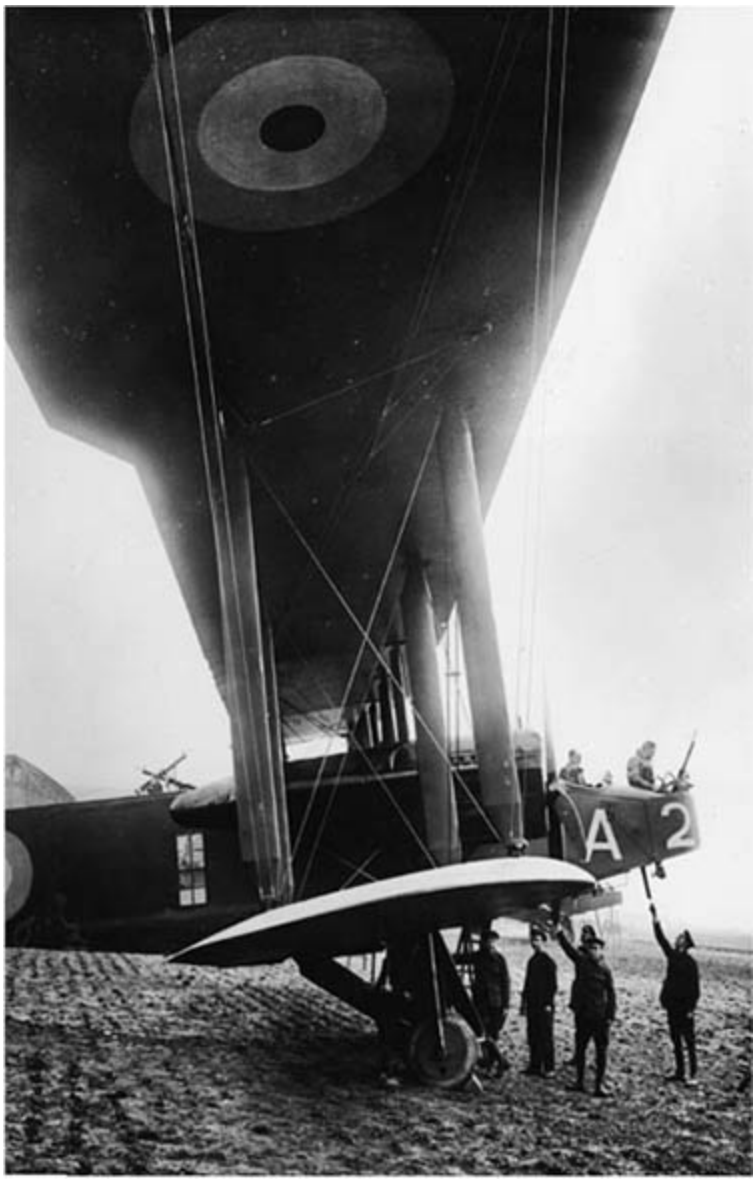
Fliege nach England,
England wird abgebrannt.

Fly to England,
England shall be burned down.

German children's song

'In comparison, the fire of Rome would have seemed a minuscule, match-box affair.'

Diary of Major Wilhelm Siegert, 1918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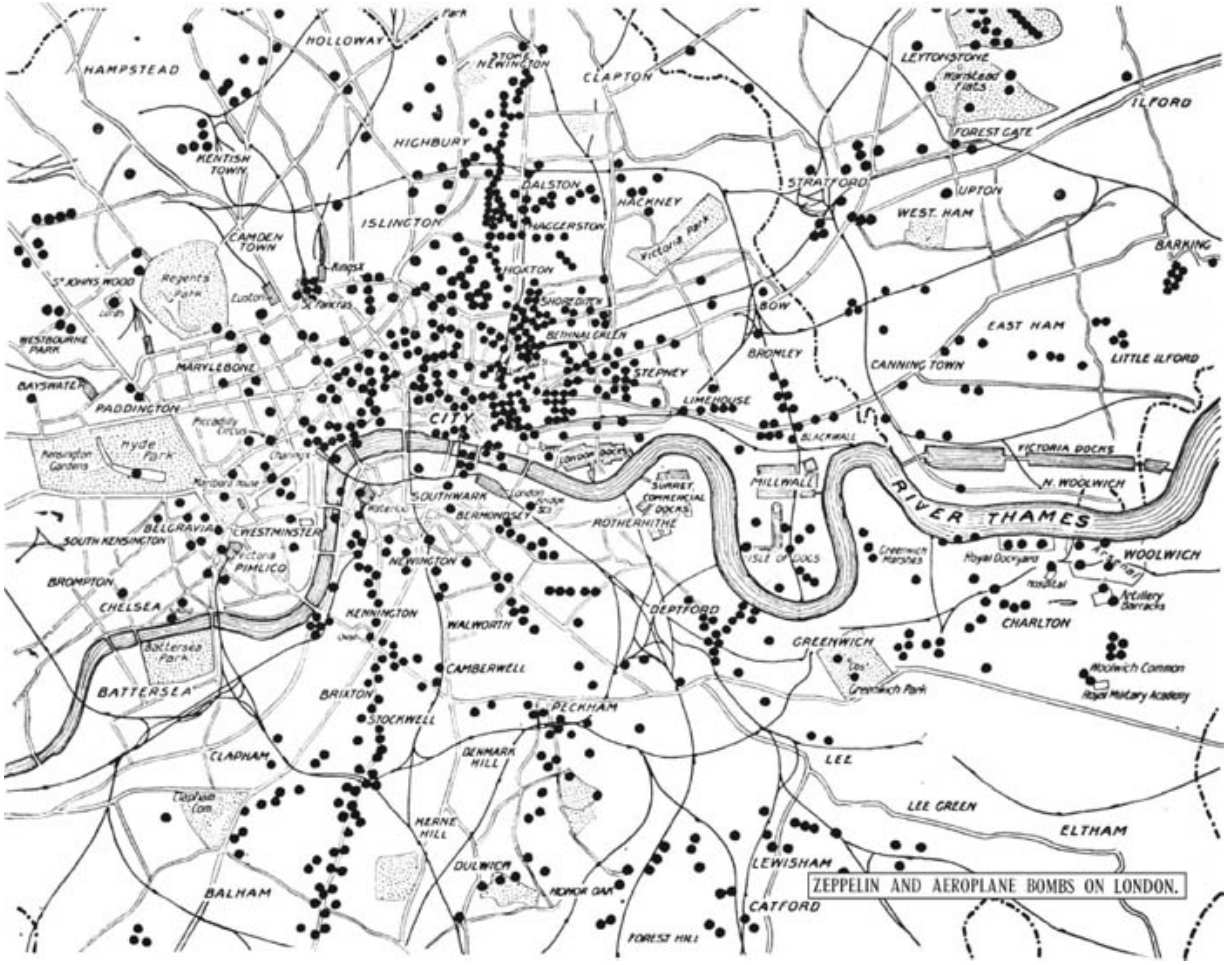

ZEPPELIN AND AEROPLANE BOMBS ON LONDON.

CHAPTER 1
THE FIRST BLOWS

On Christmas Eve 1914, whatever might have been taking place across the Channel, Britons continued to enjoy a sense of domestic security, based on the inviolability of their island, that had been undisturbed for centuries. All that was about to change for ever.

At 10.45 that morning, local auctioneer and valuer Tommy Terson was in his garden in the shadow of one of the symbols of that inviolability, Dover Castle. As he was stooping to pick the sprouts for his Christmas dinner, he heard a loud droning sound. Looking up, he saw a dark shape emerging from the clouds drifting over the Channel. A German seaplane had dropped two bombs into the sea near the Admiralty Pier in Dover three days earlier, but this was the first aircraft that Tommy had ever seen.

He watched in amazement as it approached at an almost incomprehensible speed – fifty miles an hour – and passed directly overhead. He was still staring upwards, open-mouthed, when his garden erupted in a cloud of dust, smoke and flying metal. When he picked himself up, unhurt but for a few cuts and bruises, he saw a still-smoking crater, ten feet by four, where his vegetable patch had been. The windows of the surrounding houses had been shattered and Terson's neighbour had been blown out of the tree where he had been cutting holly for Christmas decorations. He also suffered only minor injuries, but the damage to the national psyche was rather more substantial. For the first time ever, the mainland of Britain had been subjected to an attack from the skies, its civilian population deliberately targeted.

Aircraft technology was in its infancy: it was only eleven years since the Wright Brothers' first flight and just five since Louis Blériot had made the first airborne crossing of the Channel. The German Friedrichshafen FF 29 seaplane

that carried out the raid on Dover was a canvas-and-wire biplane so crude it 'might almost be compared to the archaeopteryx of prehistoric days'. It was operating at the absolute limit of its fifty-mile range, and so tight were the weight limits to get it airborne at all, even the four 2kg bombs it carried were a serious strain on its capacity. The pilot, Leutnant Karl Caspar, had nothing with which to defend himself other than the Mauser pistol he wore at his belt; but that would have caused him few concerns, for virtually every serviceable British military aircraft was with the British Expeditionary Force in France. Untroubled by any fighter or anti-aircraft gun, Caspar swung his aircraft around and disappeared back into the clouds drifting up the Channel.

The next day, Christmas Day, as most Britons were settling down to their festive meal, there was another, even more sinister attack. At 12.20 that afternoon the gun-crew of the Barton's Point anti-aircraft battery near Sheerness in Kent heard an aircraft approaching from the east. Five minutes later a German seaplane was spotted, flying at an altitude of 7,000 feet. Barton's Point and several other gun-batteries opened fire, but they recorded no hits. The gunners at Beacon Hill, Sheppey, were so overexcited by this first opportunity to engage an enemy that all they contrived to shoot down were their own telephone wires.

Oberleutnant Stephan Prondzynski flew on, following the Thames past Gravesend, Tilbury, Dartford and Erith, before spotting a Vickers 'Gunbus' aircraft rising to intercept him. He could count himself very unfortunate to have happened upon the sole Home Defence aircraft in Britain at the time that could be described as a fighter, and he was forced to turn and fly back towards the coast as the Gunbus began firing bursts at him from its Maxim machine-gun.

As he climbed to escape the ponderous Gunbus, Prondzynski dumped his bombs on the thirteenth-century ragstone-and-flint village church of Cliffe, on the low chalk bluff of the Hoo peninsula, where a Christmas wedding was in progress. 'We heard a noise like someone banging carpets against the walls of the church … The happy couple and the guests made an undignified rush for the carriages and home. Bombs had been dropping; we could not partake of the wedding breakfast because some of the guests fainted.' Their discomfiture would have been of far less concern to the Government than the knowledge that when he turned back the German raider had been within five miles of Woolwich Arsenal and the start of London's sprawling docklands. The implication was clear: the nation's vital industries and the capital itself were now within range of German bombs.

The French authorities were already aware that Paris, only sixty miles from the front lines, was a target for German bombers. On 13 August 1914, just ten days after Germany's declaration of war with France, a Taube aeroplane had dropped two or three small bombs on the Quai de Valmy in Paris – the first ever attack on a capital city by an aircraft. It also dropped a leaflet that read 'Parisians, attention! This is the greeting of a German aircraft.' In a second raid on 30 August, five bombs fell on Paris, killing three civilians, and in a further attack a few days later another German pilot, Hauptmann Keller, dropped six 10kg bombs on the Gare de l'Est. 'Undisturbed by defensive fire and aircraft, I could let myself go and be enchanted completely by the sight of the capital in the autumn sun' – a strangely poetic description of the city he was doing his best to destroy. Afternoon raids became such a regular event during the following months that Parisians would 'assemble along the River Seine or another good

viewing place to watch for the arrival of the German plane, which became known as *les cinq heures du Taube*.'

The civilized world's attitude to the bombing of cities far removed from the front lines of a conflict had been expressed in resolutions passed by Peace Conferences held at The Hague in 1899 and 1907, and was reiterated at a further conference after the First World War was over. 'Aerial bombardment is legitimate only when it is directed against a military objective, i.e. an objective whereof the total or partial destruction would constitute an obvious military advantage for the belligerent … Aerial bombardment for the purpose of terrorising the civilian population, of destroying or damaging private property not of a military character, or of injuring non-combatants, is prohibited.'

Military commanders were often less concerned with niceties of legitimacy and morality than their political masters, and one of the first significant theorists of air power, the Italian General Giulio Douhet, took a more pragmatic stance on the question of bombing cities. 'The complete destruction of the objective has moral and material effects … we need only envision what would go on among the civilian population of congested cities once the enemy announced that he would bomb such centres relentlessly, making no distinction between military and non-military objectives.'

The bombing of cities and civilian populations was also entirely in keeping with the German General Staff's belief in unlimited warfare and *Schrecklichkeit* – acts of 'frightfulness', what might now be called 'shock and awe' – that would sap an enemy's will to resist, an attitude encapsulated in a document published in 1902, *Kriegsbrauche im Landkriege* (The Custom of War in Land Warfare). It stated that 'The conduct of war allows any belligerent state to employ any means which will facilitate

the accomplishment of the aim of war … A war waged with energy cannot be directed solely against the combatants of the hostile state and the positions which they defend, but will and *should* equally endeavour to destroy the collective intellectual and material resources of the enemy. Humanitarian considerations, such as would protect individuals or their property, can only be regarded in so far as the nature and the object of war will allow.' Not only the 'fortresses, but also every town and village which may be an impediment to military progress … may be besieged, bombarded, stormed and destroyed if the enemy defends them, and in some cases if he only occupies them'.

When war was declared, the German Minister in Stockholm, Franz von Reichenau, expressed the hope 'with all his heart' that German airships and aircraft would drop bombs on England until the 'vulgar huckster souls' and 'cowardly assassins' had forgotten 'even how to do sums'. Admiral Paul Behncke, the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, was equally bellicose and sent a memo to his superior, Admiral Hugo von Pohl, urging the bombing of London. The target was uniquely vulnerable. One of the most densely populated cities in the world, London was not merely the political and administrative hub of Britain and the Empire, and the headquarters of its military establishment, it was the nation's principal manufacturing and warehousing site, its prime seaport, the nexus of its railway system, and the home of a banking and insurance system that covered the world.

The celebrated German air ace Max Boelcke might complain that the main result of bombing a city was likely to be 'the death of an old woman', but the commander of the Zeppelin fleet, Korvettenkapitän Peter Strasser, probably spoke for the majority of German pilots when he remarked, 'if what we do is frightful, then may frightfulness be Germany's salvation'. Admiral von Tirpitz claimed that

he was 'not in favour of the evil policy … of "frightfulness"' and called 'the indiscriminate dropping of bombs … repulsive when they kill and maim children and old women', but he then added that 'if one could set fire to London in thirty places, then what in a small way is odious would retire before something fine and powerful. All that flies and creeps should be concentrated on that city.' It was the first expression of a secret strategy that was to be employed to bring Britain to its knees: *Der Feuerplan* (The Fire Plan) – 'England shall be destroyed by fire'. Air-dropped incendiary bombs would create firestorms engulfing entire districts of London, creating mass panic and popular unrest that would 'render it doubtful that the war can continue' and force the British Government to sue for peace.

It was ironic that the target of this first airborne 'blitz' was to be Britain, the only country at the 1899 Peace Conference at The Hague whose representative had refused to sign an agreement prohibiting 'the dropping of projectiles or explosives from balloons or other airships'. Britain's Lord Wolseley had argued that dropping bombs would 'confer an enormous advantage on a power like Britain that possessed only a small army' and that British prowess in science and industry should not be undermined by prohibitions imposed by less successful nations. Although Britain did sign the amended declaration produced eight years later, at The Hague Peace Conference in 1907, Germany did not, and German scientific and industrial prowess would now be used to put Britain to the test.

In the face of this new and potentially overwhelming threat, Britain's air defences were almost non-existent. As early as 1908, a group of British aircraft manufacturers had been rebuffed by the War Office when they attempted to promote the military virtues of aircraft. Colonel J. E. B.

Seely, Parliamentary Private Secretary to Minister for War Viscount Haldane, explained, 'we do not consider that aeroplanes will be of any possible use for war purposes'. Although Lord Montagu of Beaulieu warned in 1911 that air-raids would be 'more nerve-shattering and would do more to shake the confidence of a people than a definite threat on sea or land' and called for 'an adequate air force' to be constructed, his words went unheeded.

The reluctance of the War Office and the Admiralty to embrace military aviation was heightened by a fear that by so doing they would undermine the Navy, Britain's traditional defensive system and the underpinning of her imperial power. 'We stood to gain nothing by forcing a means of warfare which tended to reduce the value of our insular position and the protection of our sea power.' Lest anyone still be in any doubt, Sir William Nicholson, Chief of the General Staff from 1908 to 1912, spelled it out in even more explicit terms: aviation was a 'useless and expensive fad advocated by a few individuals whose ideas are unworthy of attention'.

Pre-war literature had predicted the combat role of aircraft and airships, and the targeting of civilian populations through bombing raids, and fears of air attack were fanned by the 1911 release of a film showing a city viewed from the control car of a Zeppelin. 'What strikes the viewer even today is the massive and menacing shadow of the airship cast upon the defenceless buildings below.' Widely seen in Britain, the film provoked an 'airship panic' and was probably one of the prime causes of the rash of bogus 'sightings' of Zeppelins hovering over ports, cities and military installations that continued throughout the pre-war years.

In the event of war, it was widely assumed that 'terrorraids' would cause mass panic and a collapse of civilian morale. British forces could already testify to the

efficacy of terror bombardment, albeit using ships' guns rather than bombs, having shelled Alexandria 'from sunrise to sunset' in 1882. During the night, the city was 'transformed into a sea of fire' and reduced to 'rubble and ash', though perfidious Albion claimed that the Egyptians had burned their own city to cover their retreat.

Of all the First World War combatants, only Italy, France and Bulgaria (which, allying itself with Germany, declared war on Serbia on 12 October 1915) had any prior experience of the military use of aircraft. From the very start the use of air-dropped bombs was indiscriminate, attacking civilian as well as military targets. 'The floodgates of blood and lust' were thrown open and what followed 'was not war. It was butchery.' The first man to drop a bomb from an aeroplane was an Italian, Lieutenant Giulio Cavotti, during the colonial war in Libya, when on 1 November 1911 he released the first of four 2kg projectiles on the oasis of Tagiura, near Tripoli. Another Italian pilot became the first to use an incendiary bomb during the same conflict.

The following year, 1912, France sent six aircraft on 'police actions' in Morocco. Knowing the inaccuracy of their bomb-aiming, the pilots deliberately chose 'large targets – villages, markets, grazing herds'. In 1913, Spain, which was to remain neutral in the First World War, also bombed its colonial possessions in Spanish Morocco, using German 'cartouche bombs' packed with ball bearings to spread their destructive impact to 'as many living targets as possible'. And during the war with Turkey in 1912–13 a small Bulgarian air force using mercenary pilots dropped leaflets on Adrianople (modern Edirne) ordering the city to surrender or 'be set on fire by aerial bombardment'; it was then attacked with 10kg bombs.

France and Germany were also pressing ahead with the development of their fledgling air forces. As early as 1910,

General Roques, France's first Director of Aviation, had proposed arming aircraft with machine-guns, and using *fléchettes* (steel darts), shells or bombs to attack and demoralize enemy troops – a plan adopted by Belgian forces after war broke out, when their aeroplanes bombed the advancing German troops with 'iron arrows'. The Germans described the attacks as 'aerial terrorism ... these crude weapons having the reputation to pass through a horse and his rider to kill both', a complaint that might have been justified had not German air-crews on the Eastern Front also been dropping steel *Fliegerpfeilen* (flyer's arrows).

Senior French officers had openly discussed carrying out bombing raids on German cities to terrify the civilian population. The French Army fitted aircraft with machine-guns and incendiary shells but tests of their effectiveness were inconclusive, and, like many of his British counterparts, the future Allied Supreme Commander General Ferdinand Foch was reported to have dismissed the whole idea of using aircraft as offensive weapons, describing their value thus: 'as an instrument of war, *c'est zéro*'. He may also have been influenced by their safety record: two hundred French 'aviation deaths' were recorded in 1913 alone. Another French officer said that arming aircraft smacked 'more of Jules Verne than of reality' and could only distract pilots from their primary task.

In Germany there were visionary officers, such as Major Wilhelm Siegert, who foresaw aircraft being used in aerial combat, strategic and tactical bombing and ground-attack roles, and the first Chief of the German Air Staff, General Max von Wever, who proposed the construction of a heavy bomber fleet; but he died in an air crash soon afterwards, and others who saw the role of aircraft as primarily tactical took his place. By early 1914 the German General Staff had

not advanced beyond considering arming some planes with machine-guns.

However, with the development of the Zeppelin – its inventor, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, had been hailed by the Kaiser as 'the greatest German of the twentieth century' before its first decade was even over – Germany had a clear lead in airship technology. Many in the military, including Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the German General Staff, believed that it could help them launch a devastating and potentially decisive strike against the Allies. Speaking in 1912, von Moltke claimed that the Zeppelin was a weapon 'far superior to all similar ones of our opponents and cannot be imitated in the foreseeable future if we work energetically to perfect it. Its speediest development as a weapon is required to enable us at the beginning of a war to strike a first and telling blow whose practical and moral effect could be quite extraordinary.'

By 1912, the pace of development overseas, particularly in France and Germany, could no longer be ignored in Britain. The military potential of aircraft was being nightly demonstrated in 'aerial war-games' at Hendon featuring 'bombing, aerial flights and even night-flying with the aid of huge searchlights', and in April of that year Colonel Seely, by now promoted to Under-Secretary of State for War, announced the creation of the Royal Flying Corps.

The planning of the new corps was meticulous in every aspect except one crucial area. The RFC would include a pilot training establishment: the Central Flying School; a production and development facility: the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough; a reserve section and two active service units: the Military and Naval Wings. However, there was to be no unified command structure; the Military Wing of the new Royal Flying Corps would be controlled by the War Office, and the Naval Wing by the Admiralty. Since the two perpetually feuding bodies could not even agree on the

types of aircraft they should build nor the roles that they would fulfil, it was a flaw that would hamper the RFC throughout its brief existence.

The unfortunate Colonel Seely was deputed to chair the Air Committee, set up in July 1912 to coordinate the activities of the two wings of the RFC, but Prime Minister Asquith gave him no effective executive power and the refusal of the Admiralty in particular to collaborate with its rival ensured the committee's perpetual impotence. It met with less and less regularity, and though never formally abolished, eventually it ceased to meet at all.

Brigadier General David Henderson, commander of the Military Wing, was one of Britain's earliest and oldest military pilots, having learned to fly in 1911 at the age of forty-nine, but his failure to comprehend the aerial threat that now faced his country was revealed by his comment that Germany would not bomb 'undefended towns … no enemy would risk the odium such action would involve'. The War Office insisted that the vast majority of the RFC's aircraft would be required only for aerial reconnaissance and target-spotting for the ground troops of the British Expeditionary Force, and even that role was dismissed by the future British Commander-in-Chief General Douglas Haig, who told an audience of officers in 1914, 'I hope none of you gentlemen is so foolish as to think that aeroplanes will be able to be usefully employed for reconnaissance purposes in the air. There is only one way for a commander to get information by reconnaissance, and that is by the use of cavalry.' Given that Haig's forces had been thrashed at the 1912 Army manoeuvres by General Grierson's troops who had 'made full use of aerial reconnaissance' to defeat him, it was an extraordinarily blinkered statement.

The slow BE two-seater aircraft produced by the Royal Aircraft Factory were adequate – just – for reconnaissance, indeed a lack of speed was held to be essential for it; in

1913 Henderson had ordered the Royal Aircraft Factory not to produce any engines exceeding 100 horsepower. One 'air expert' made the even more bizarre claim that aircraft would be useless for bombing until machines capable of travelling even more slowly were developed. His view was shared by many others at the time, and as a result the RFC went to war 'equipped with machines that were too slow to catch the enemy (and would have been unable to hurt them even if they could have caught them), that could not attack Zeppelins, and that were incapable of manoeuvring out of trouble if attacked by enemy machines or ground fire'.

Unofficial attempts by pilots to improve their or their aircraft's fighting capacity were also likely to fall foul of the prejudices of hidebound senior officers. In August 1914, as the country went to war, Louis Strange of the RFC's 5 Squadron was ordered to remove the Lewis gun he had mounted on his biplane, and pilots were actively discouraged from aerobatics such as rolls, loops, dives and spins – the very essence of fighter tactics that might bring victory in combat or save their lives when targeted themselves, but which were dismissed by the commander of the Military Wing as 'merely cheap selfishness' bringing 'discredit'.

While insisting on the primacy of the reconnaissance role, the War Office was also simultaneously claiming sole responsibility for the air defence of the United Kingdom, for which BE two-seaters were virtually useless. As Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, acerbically noted, 'When asked how they proposed to discharge this duty, they admitted that they had not got the machines and could not get the money.' Nor did they have any engines: partly as a result of Henderson's strictures, not a single British aero engine of suitable quality was being produced and the RFC was dependent on France for supplies. The shortage of pilots was even more critical. As Seely revealed with