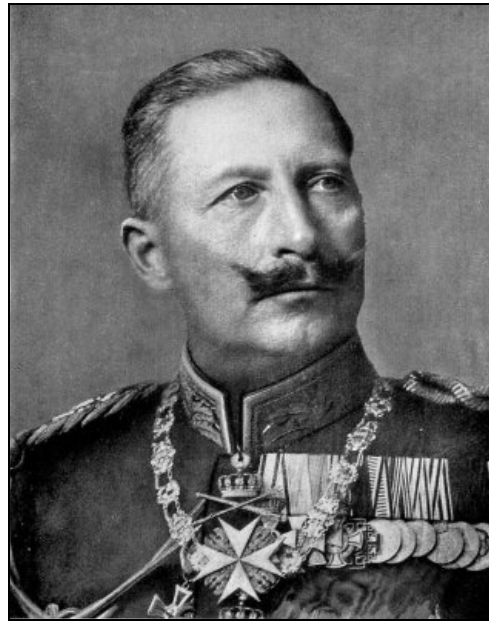


Attempts to Kill The Kaiser From the Air

By Steve Suddaby



It is a little-known fact that the British and French governments made a concerted effort during the Great War to kill Kaiser Wilhelm II using aerial bombardment. These attempts began in 1915 and British accounts indicate that on more than one occasion they missed him by only hours.

One of the most thrilling accounts of these abortive attempts can be found in Marthe (Cnockaert) McKenna's 1934 autobiography, *I Was A Spy!* McKenna was a young Belgian woman during the war who worked in the German-run hospital in Roulers while she spied for the British Secret Service. In July 1915 she noticed an almost frantic German effort to spruce up everything in Roulers—issuing new uniforms, polishing everything that wouldn't move, etc. A message from her British handlers soon made everything clear: the Kaiser was due to visit Roulers to review troops and they wanted the date and time so he could be attacked from the air. McKenna was eventually able to wheedle the information from an amorous German colonel in Brussels and escape with both it and her virtue. This was all for naught, however—the Kaiser's 24 July 1915 visit was cancelled at the last minute because the British had been bombing Roulers too often in the weeks leading up to the event.¹



Starting in 1915, the French conducted bombing raids against three German army headquarters where the Kaiser's presence had been reported. The most important of these was their General Headquarters in Mézières. According to René Martel, in his history of French aerial bombardment, the Germans had completely taken over this town on the Meuse River, knocking down the walls between buildings so they could freely use one-quarter of it as a headquarters complex. The Kaiser had been there and at other headquarters in Charleville (France) and Thielt (Belgium), but reportedly never returned to Mézières after the first raid there. The French bombers also paid the same attention to Crown Prince Rupprecht's headquarters at Stenay and Martel tells us that the prince avoided it throughout 1915. These raids apparently concerned the Germans greatly – there is at least one recorded case of a fighter pilot being pulled off the front lines for a month specifically to provide aerial protection for a headquarters.²

Left: Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria.

The French were not the only ones to make the Kaiser feel unwelcome in the army headquarters at Thielt. The historian Sir J.A. Hammerton stated that British airmen attacked there on 1

November 1915 and that “*the Kaiser narrowly escaped death from the 32 bombs thrown on the building in which he met his generals*”.

The search for opportunities to strike the Kaiser ranged far beyond the Western Front. Capt Thomas Piper, R.A.F., of Melbourne mentioned in his autobiography a night raid in 1917 against Gallipoli town because of intelligence reports that the Kaiser was there on a tour of the Middle East. Eight machines took off from Mudros on the Aegean island of Lemnos in the face of a gale. Piper's Henri Farman was carrying two 112 lb bombs. None of the aircraft was able to reach the objective and two did not return at all, their crews having been taken prisoner. A.F. Marlowe, RNAS, recorded in his diary an only-slightly-more-successful attempt to bomb the Kaiser in Chanak, Turkey on 18 October 1917. This raid, also flying out of Mudros in terrible weather, was conducted at dawn by two Henri Farmans and several DH4s. This time some of the aircraft did reach the target and dropped some bombs, but they never ascertained “*whether he had actually stayed the night and enjoyed our little party for him*”.³



Kaiser Wilhelm II, pictured during a state visit to Turkey.

There were at least two other times when the Kaiser narrowly escaped death from British bombs, but these apparently were not planned.⁴ Both of these events involved No. 55 Squadron, the most capable unit in Britain's Independent Force.⁵ This squadron's DeHavilland DH4s attacked the Mannheim rail station on Christmas Eve 1917 and, according to press accounts from Switzerland, missed the Kaiser's train by only an hour. On 17 May 1918, the same unit bombed the rail station at Metz-Sablon. There was a crowd there waiting for some high official and a number of soldiers were killed and wounded. The official was the Kaiser, of course, but the excellent German air defense system provided ample warning and his train was stopped at Thionville, where he took cover.⁶

The feelings of the participants in these attempted regicides are incredibly divergent. The Belgian nurse McKenna saw this as an opportunity to pay back the Kaiser and Germany for their rape and trampling of her native country. Aviators Piper and Marlowe, on the contrary, saw these raids as hare-brained schemes formulated by high-ranking officers who never left the safety of their warm .

Curiously, though His Majesty's Government made an effort to kill Kaiser Wilhelm, the “All-Highest” had different feelings about his royal British cousins. The Kaiser was a significant impediment to the German Navy's and Army's plans to bomb London from Zeppelins because of his desire to spare residential areas, historical monuments, and particularly royal palaces. He didn't lift the restrictions on striking large sections of London until late July 1915 and even then forbade bombing historical buildings and palaces.

This writer is aware of accusations of only one other attempted aerial attack on a head of state during the Great War. There were comments in some press accounts that a German air raid on Dunkerque on 13 January 1915 was intended to kill French President Poincaré. In response to questions during a 1971 interview in America, however, Andre Hug, one of the German pilots, said they had no knowledge that he was there and no instructions to kill him.

NOTES

1. Marthe McKenna, *I Was a Spy!*, Foreword by Winston S. Churchill, The Queensway Library 1934, pp.136-167. The date of the aborted visit is not specified in the book but is inferred from the context. McKenna was eventually caught by the Germans but was spared the firing squad because her work in the hospital with wounded German soldiers had been recognized with a medal from the King of Württemberg. She married an Englishman after the war.
2. Greg VanWyngarden, *Early German Aces of World War 1*, Osprey Publishing Ltd 2006, p.82. Ltn. Josef Jacobs was assigned to fly protection for the GHQ at Charleville for one month starting around the end of July 1916.
3. The similarities between the accounts of Piper and Marlowe, not all of which are described above, indicate that we cannot rule out that they were describing the same raid or perhaps raids that occurred only a few hours apart. I consider this a possibility even though Gallipoli town is on the peninsula and Chanak is across the Straits on the Turkish mainland.
4. My conclusion that these were unplanned attacks is because the Kaiser was not mentioned in any of three sources that routinely listed the intended objectives of 55 Squadron's raids: Miller's squadron history; the Official History's table of Independent Force raids; and Capt. O.L. Beater's very detailed diary.
5. Among the IF squadrons, No. 55 caused the highest number of casualties and the greatest amount of property damage per 1000 lbs of bombs dropped. See Steve Suddaby, *Britain's Independent Force: The Rest of the Story...*, Over the Front, League of WWI Aviation Historians, Vol.18, No.3, Fall 2003, p.230.
6. Edgar Middleton, *The Great War in the Air*, Vol.IV, The Waverley Book Co. 1920, p.231. This source incorrectly lists the date as 7 May instead of 17 May. See Suddaby, *op.cit.*, pp.224-6 for a discussion of the German air defense system.

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3. Capt. T.H. Piper, *Tom Piper: R.N.A.S. Observer*, The '14-'18 Journal, The Australian Society of WWI Aero Historians, 1994, pp. 45-6.
4. P.G. Cooksley, *The War Diary of a Naval Airman 1915-1918: Captain Augustine Francis Marlowe*, Cross & Cockade International, Vol.21, No.2, Summer 1990, p.68.
5. Leonard Miller, *The Chronicles of 55 Squadron*, The Naval and Military Press 2004, pp.54-5.
6. H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Appendices*, The Imperial War Museum 1997, Appendix XIII, pp.42-84.
7. Don R. Neate, *The Diaries of Captain Orlando Lennox Beater, DFC, 55 Squadron*, Cross & Cockade International, Vol. 33, No.1, Spring 2002, pp.3-18 (Part 1, 14NOV1917 – 8FEB1918); and Vol. 33, No.2, Summer 2002, pp.69-80 (Part 2, 9FEB1918 – 3JUL1918).
8. Dr. Douglas H. Robinson, *The Zeppelin in Combat*, University of Washington Press 1980, pp. 49, 55-6, 67-9, 95-6.
9. Dr. Andre Hug, (Noel C. Shirley, ed.), *Carrier Pigeon Flieger: The WWI Experiences of Dr. Andre Hug*, Cross & Cockade Journal (US), Vol.13, No.4, Winter 1972, p.312.



Left: French President Raymond Poincaré.

Below: Poincaré (centre, in the dark jacket) touring Verdun.

