

WW I German Airship Combat Operations Postal History

SYNOPSIS as of 28 May 2025

PURPOSE & SCOPE: This is a traditional postal history exhibit focused on the combat operations of the airships of the German Army, and the German Navy during the period 1913 through 1918, essentially WW I. The German Military Postal authorities developed a very distinctive, short duration system of inked cancels and embossed seals for a new military machine called the “Luftschiff”, or in English, “Airship”. These cancels and seals, unique to each ship, and a host of support organizations, chronicle an exciting, personal, often frightening story of Airship War in The Air.

TREATMENT: Section I begins with German pre-war propaganda postcards fueling unrealistic expectations among civilians and the military. Exhibit backdrop is the patriotic excitement, and detailed mobilization planning prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

Section II, through postally used items, displays the distinctive cancels and seals assigned to the four (4) different manufacturers of combat airships. It demonstrates that not all airships were Zeppelins. The exhibit widens to include postally used distinctive cancels and seals of the numerous support organizations required to launch, recover, and refuel these large beasts, as well as weather stations, construction, maintenance, and other units.

Sections II, IV, V. display covers of those Commercial Ships converted to Military use, and postal items associated in employing new or captures bases. The high losses caused by faulty equipment and tactics are summarized through postally processed covers and postcards.

Section VI and VI, beginning in 1915, demonstrate Germany developing new tactics of employment, supported by improved airship designs, and a significant expansion of the number of ships, personnel, support units, intensive training, and focused research in cutting edge technology. This resulted in extensive combat operations in all three fronts: Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans. Key covers and postcard document this expansion and improvement. The London Raids are covered, highlighting that this was a combined German Army, and Navy effort. The first ship to attack downtown London, LZ-38, was an Army ship. The first German ship shot down over England was Shutte-Lanz 11, an Army ship and not a Zeppelin! Also in the section are postal items from L-54 and 59, the ships of the astounding, but abortive one-way aerial resupply effort from Romania to German East Africa, a distance of 5,640 km.

Sections VII, and IX, chronicle, through postal covers and postcards, that the Army in 1917 abandoned airship operations, transferring all operational ships to the German Navy. A few months later, in 1918, the Germany Navy arrived at the same decision, dismantling all

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remaining ships, and many hangers. A few of the newest airships were transferred to the WW I victors as War Reparations.

IMPORTANCE. There is no single source in English, or in German which ties philately to these exciting exploits of Airship Combat in WW I. This exhibit documents the German Military Postal System creation of special inked cancels, and embossed seals to distinguish Soldiers and Sailors Mail from this cutting edge military technology weapons system.

KNOWLEDGE, STUDY, & RESEARCH. The knowledge of this period was once in the minds of the participants, long gone, and the associated written records are dispersed among a large body of material in two languages, German and English. Many German records were destroyed by Allied bombing during WW II. The physics of flight and the skills of the pilots, augmented by the general WW I histories is the best study starting point. Histories of WW I airship operations exist in both languages, the German sources being more balanced and in greater depth. The main study task is to bridge the various accounts of just a few philatelic resources, (referenced below) to synthesize a single, integrated view. The best first-person accounts are among the few surviving letters inside the covers, as well as meeting notes from a German Airships Members Association formed some years after WW I, and a few books published after the conflict.

Some of the significant research efforts were:

- Tying the locations by date to specific craft and support organizations.
- Identifying the mail transfer sites where military airship mail entered the civil system.
- Assembling a unified list of cancels by ships, by Front, by number over time.
- Identifying by ship cancels those lost in the initial, high-risk tactics.
- Identifying cancels and seals not contained in the references below.
- Identifying by name and position, covers of those young commanders who flourished on the great commercial Zeppelins of the interwar period.

RAIRTY & CONDITION: Letters/postcards were: written and addressed in a machine shop environment rich with petrol and lubricants; sent in wartime entirely by foot, horse, or train; handled and sorted many times. Finding clean, undamaged material is a daunting task. Much personal and official correspondence perished under allied bombings in WW II. Identification of significant material is covered on the Title Page.

REFERENCES:

“Michel Zeppelin Specialized Catalogue, 2003”, Schwanberger Verlag GMBH, Muenchen. Pp.37-65

“Zeppelin Post Katalog”, 22nd Edition, Sieger-Verlag, Wurttemberg. Pp.27-64.

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WW I GERMAN AIRSHIP COMBAT OPERATIONS

POSTAL HISTORY 1913 - 1918

PURPOSE

Demonstrate that the German Military and Civil Postal Systems, through short-lived unique cancels and seals tell a story of the heroic Air in The War, 1913 – 1918.

SUMMARY

Backdrop is the propaganda and mobilization prior to war. At the outbreak of war German Army and Navy execute costly deployments yielding few military gains. In 1915 both services develop new tactics and technical advances with increases in ships, personnel, support units, intensive training, and research in cutting edge technology. Airship combat operations expanded in all three fronts: Western, Eastern, and Balkan. With increasing losses, the Army abandoned airship operations in 1917, and the Navy followed in 1918, dismantling all ships, except for a few transferred to the victors as war reparations.

SIGNIFICANT ITEMS

Enlisted members with simple writing skills wrote postcards to loved ones. Officers' letters, less common, are shown by a **red border**.

Select bolder commanders, always in harm's way, perished before sending many letters; their correspondence has a **blue border**.

Ships with very short operational histories, and far fewer covers, are shown in a **purple border**

RESEARCH

The overriding research effort is to review a very diverse body of postal and military knowledge, both written and image, to synthesize a comprehensive description of an important and complex national effort by Imperial Germany in WW I. In doing so, and translating key sources from German to English, previously unrecorded cancels and seals have been documented. Personal research is shown in brackets {....}.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction. Unrealistic propaganda
- II. Select four (4) airship manufacturers and design military postal cancels and seals.
- III. Civil airships become military ships.
- IV. New bases built or captured.
- V. Initial costly high risk operations.
- VI. Technical improvements in airships, training, and tactics.
- VII. Operations expanded in all fronts: Western, Eastern, and Balkan.
- VIII. Army abandons operations in 1917, followed by Navy program closure 1918.
- IX. Ships to victors as reparations.

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