

# Christmas Eve 1914 Bombing Remembered

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**A**eroplane Raid at Dover, so ran the headline of an article that appeared in The Times on 26th December 1914. "The threatened German air raid has to some extent become an accomplished fact. On Christmas Eve an aeroplane appeared over Dover and dropped a bomb in the garden of a local resident and then, pursued by British aircraft, was forced to beat a hasty retreat to its base in Belgium. Only a few people actually saw the bomb drop at Dover one of them was a son of Mr Martyn Mowll, the solicitor. He states that he was talking to a friend on Taswell Hill when he heard a whirring sound and looking up saw an object falling in the garden at the rear of St James's Rectory with smoke following in its trail. He did not see the aeroplane which was probably hidden in the clouds. Immediately the bomb hit the ground there was a terrible explosion and the earth shot up to a great height covering him although he was standing 25 yards away. The Rev T. B. Watkins and his family were out but the cook at the rectory was covered with falling glass. Luckily she was not injured. At the house of Mr Bradley JP several windows were broken and the concussion extinguished the gas stoves in the greenhouse. The aeroplane was of the

Taube pattern, all who saw it said that in appearance it was like a big seagull. It successfully evaded observation practically until the time the bomb was thrown. This was due to the fact that it was flying extremely high and there was a fair amount of cloud over the Channel."

The archives of The Spectator for 2 January 1915 under the heading "News of the Week" state *"The first German aeroplanes which have visited us since the beginning of war appeared on Thursday and Friday of last week. On Thursday week, about eleven o'clock in the morning, an aeroplane circled over Dover and dropped a bomb, which fell in a garden and did very little damage. British aircraft started up from the ground in pursuit, but the German aeroplane disappeared in the mist over the sea, after having been visible for only a few seconds."*

In his magisterial book "Catastrophe" describing the events that led up to the outbreak of World War One Sir Max Hastings writing of events in late 1914 included the event in Dover on Christmas Eve. *"By the winter of 1914, all the belligerents save the British had staged at least modest raids on each other's accessible cities... the*



Lt Prondzynski



Friedrichshafen FF29 floatplane

*Germans helped their enemies celebrate Christmas Eve by mounting the first air attack on British soil - a biplane dropped a small bomb on Dover. This did no harm but the auguries were plain: a new kind of campaign against civilian populations had become possible and no moral scruples would impede its prosecution as soon as means permitted... little more than a decade after man's first powered flight the blitz era was already at hand".*

To commemorate the 1914 event, of national and international importance as well as being of local significance, Dover Town Council led by the Right Worshipful the Town Mayor, Councillor Mrs Pam Brivio, organised a short memorial service on Christmas Eve 2014, the centenary of the event, in Taswell Street adjacent to the blue plaque erected by the Dover Society. Prayers were led by the Mayor's Honorary Chaplain, the Town Mayor read a scripture extract and flowers were laid at the site by both the Town Mayor and Dover Society Chairman Derek Leach OBE. They were joined at the ceremony by Freeman of Dover Graham Tutthill and Dick McCarthy plus members of the public. The event was covered by the press and was recorded by the BBC. The service order's information page described how on Christmas Eve one hundred years earlier the first bomb to fall on British soil from a plane hit the ground in our town at the very spot of the commemoration or close nearby. The Germans had offered a prize for the first German airman to bomb Dover or Britain. On 21st December at about 1pm two bombs were dropped into the sea just off the Admiralty Pier but three days later Lieutenant Alfred von Prondzynski of the German

army and an aeronautical engineer, in a pre-war small float plane Friedrichshafen FF29, unarmed except for a small bomb load, was to claim the prize and make history at the same time.

At about 10.45 - 11am on 24th December 1914 the plane in which Alfred von Prondzynski was flying was seen over the town. Leaning over the side of his plane Lieutenant Prondzynski may have seen below him Dover Castle and Dover's naval harbour. Having held the bomb in place between his knees he lifted it with his hands, held it over the side of his plane and let it fall. At the beginning of the World War One planes had no such things as bombsights, their crews relying on the naked eye to drop their bombs by hand.

The bomb did not hit its probable intended target on the hill but landed in the garden of a Mr T A Terson making a crater some four to five feet deep. The blast from the impact caused damage to the Rectory of New St James's church, (where the current St James's surgery is located), by smashing windows and Mr James Banks, a gardener, was knocked out of a tree he was in the process of pruning and was slightly injured. Mr Banks was reported as saying after the event "I was up a tree cutting branches for



Christmas decoration when I heard the whirr of an aeroplane. Immediately afterwards I saw a blinding light and heard a very loud explosion. The tree was struck by something above me and I was thrown to the ground on to some evergreen beneath. I ran to the house and afterwards went to Mr Terson's garden to the place where the bomb fell". The location was at the end of Leyburne Road where it adjoined Taswell Street.

By his action Lieutenant Prondzynski became the first in the history of warfare to drop a bomb from a plane on Britain. Later in the war he was seriously wounded and died in 1932 of his wounds. In World War 1 aerial warfare was very much a psychological weapon rather than a practical one but the war encouraged the use of the aeroplane in conflict and while not playing a fundamental role in the war it was very much the beginning of a new element in warfare. By the end of the war 184 bombs had fallen on the town from enemy aircraft as well as 23 shells from enemy ships. 113 air-raids, in which 23 people including 3 children were killed and 71 people including 12 children were injured, were recorded within the Borough of Dover.

Prior to the service I had the pleasure of making contact with the grandson of Alfred von Prondzynski, Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, who is currently the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. Due to distance and professional constraints he was unable to attend the ceremony but kindly provided a statement for the commemoration, the text of which follows:

"I never knew my grandfather, as he died in 1932, over 20 years before I was born. But my grandmother occasionally told us about him. He was an ardent royalist and a strong

supporter of the Kaiser, but also an Anglophile - he spent a number of childhood holidays in Brighton. He spoke good English. I do not know how he felt about his military actions, including the bomb dropped on Dover, but by the end of the war he was tired and somewhat disillusioned, and he was seriously wounded on the last day of the War. He died ultimately of those wounds, as the metal alloy used to replace a bone later poisoned his blood.

"My father fought in the German army during World War II, spending much of the war in Russia. Sometime after the war we emigrated to Ireland, where my father became an active participant in events organised by the British Legion and where he made many friends who were British veterans. "War is terrible, but there is always some humanity to be found amongst the combatants, and peace is never unachievable. I pray that all those who have suffered in War, and all those who gave their lives, are remembered and honoured. I pray that we will never have to face war between our nations again."

Contrary to some reports, Ferdinand von Prondzynski tells us that his grandfather was not the pilot of the plane at the time of the bomb drop but was the person who did drop it. Whoever was the pilot or whatever the weather conditions were at the time (as reports vary) the moving ceremony on Christmas Eve 2014 flagged up a significant piece of British history in which Dover played the unwitting role of being the recipient of the first bomb to fall on British soil from an aeroplane - the first of so many that in both World Wars were to fall on the town and the country. The commemoration was yet another of a number successfully organised by Dover Town Council mindful of its civic responsibilities for such important events.