

All material © Marcus Rauchfuß, 2010

Marcus Rauchfuß asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

The early morning mists still lingered in the streets of Ravensburg. It was not yet six o'clock when a car, a rarity in this rural part of the Kingdom of Württemberg, stopped at one of the bigger houses along the market square. Some of the townspeople, disturbed by the noise of a high-powered steam engine piercing the silence, opened their windows and peered out curiously.

The driver got out, a young man wearing the blue uniform of the Imperial German Zeppelin Corps. Checking the address against his notes, he walked up to the door and knocked.

A stout, middle-aged woman opened.

“Good morning, Madam.” he saluted smartly. “I am Lieutenant Friedemann Renner, 3rd Air Fleet. Is this the house of Captain Albrecht von Kober?”

“It is Lieutenant, would you like to come in for a moment? Young Mr von Kober will be with you in a moment.”

Renner entered. “Thank you, Madam.”

The woman indicated a cushioned chair. “Please take a seat, would you like some tea or coffee?”

“Oh no, thank you.” He sat down. “I'd much rather be ready to go as soon as the captain is.”

“As you wish, Herr Lieutenant, I shall inform young Mr von Kober you have arrived.”

Young Mr von Kober... Lieutenant Renner thought. So this woman had very likely been employed by the von Kober family all her life and probably makes a distinction between the captain and his father, maybe even his grandfather.

He took in a few details of the room. There was another cushioned chair, just like the one he was sitting on, and a small table to match. This was all the furniture the room contained. On the table sat a small electric lamp, a rather uncommon object. Most houses still used candles or gas for lighting. His thoughts were interrupted when Captain von Kober entered through the door the woman had left.

Renner got up, “Captain von Kober.” Both men saluted.

“Lieutenant Renner, thank you for being so kind and picking me up at home. Admiral von Köpitz must be really eager to see me. How long have you been a member of his staff?”

“Exactly three months next week.” Renner smiled. “I feel rather privileged, I have to say.”

“Well I guess a post on the staff of one of the Empire's most respected admirals surely is an excellent start for a military career.”

“I guess it is, Sir. Right then, where is your luggage?”

“Don't bother, Lieutenant, you just go outside and start the car, I get the suitcases out myself.”

The ride to the base of the 3rd Imperial Air Fleet at Friedrichshafen was quick. The two officers passed the time talking about their experiences in the 3rd Air Fleet, von Kober having served under Admiral von Köpitz' command two years before. Just over an hour after they left Ravensburg, the zeppelins moored at the pylons anchored in Lake Constance appeared on the horizon. Twenty minutes later the military Diesel Type II motorcar stopped at the checkpoint of Lake Constance Zeppelin Base on the outskirts of Friedrichshafen.

The guard on duty, recognizing Lieutenant Renner, lifted the boom-barrier, saluted and waved them through.

Inside the base, plenty of personnel were already milling about and motorised cargo carts drove towards the moored zeppelins.

Friedrichshafen was a large base. It could theoretically service twenty zeppelins quite easily. The nominal strength of the base was only twelve craft, though, two squadrons. The remaining vessels of 3rd Air Fleet were usually on patrol along the southern Franco-German border, with additional airfields in Karlsruhe, Freiburg and Baden-Baden. Colmar served as a forward base, while Metz was manned by members of the Bavarian Air Corps. These patrols were simple routine these days. Except for the mutual mistrust there was little tension between the German Empire and the Second French Empire. The German zeppelin patrols and their counterparts in French airships had developed a rather friendly understanding. It was not uncommon to exchange salutes and greetings via Morse code at Christmas time.

Having arrived rather early with still one hour to go until the meeting with the admiral, Captain von Kober used the time to get his luggage into his quarters. Just like earlier this morning, he did it himself, puzzling the young private who came to help him. Ten minutes to eight he walked over to Admiral von Köpitz' headquarters, where he was greeted by Lieutenant Renner who led him into the Admiral's office.

“Ah, good morning my dear Captain von Kober. Thank you, Lieutenant, that would be all.” Renner left, closing the door behind him.

“Do take a seat.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Admiral von Köpitz was a big man, standing more than six feet tall. He had also been one of the best pilots of his day. An engagement with air-pirates over the Yellow Sea had left him with a stiff leg and forced him, as he put it, to accept a staff position which eventually led to his command of 3rd Air Fleet.

“How long have you been a captain now?”

“Six weeks as of today. I got my promotion 1st of February.”

“From your record I see you were quite skilled in field-testing new equipment for our zeppelins. Vice-Admiral Jansen was full of praise when we met.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“In fact, Jansen has suggested you to be in charge of a very special project.”

“The new zeppelin class.” von Kober's eyes gleamed.

“Well, it is not a class yet, Captain, just one vessel.”

“Therefor all the secrecy and no mention of why I was being summoned to Friedrichshafen.”

“Exactly, Captain. Lieutenant Renner?”

The young officer came back in.

“Sir?”

“Get the Diesel, we shall introduce the captain to our latest marvel.”

She was beautiful. The hull, more than 130 meters long, gleamed silvery in the morning sun. The craft was of a sleeker design than other zeppelins of comparable size, giving her a more streamlined look. The gondola, too, appeared far less bulky and almost fragile. This zeppelin conveyed an impression of graceful speed given shape. Von Kober walked down its length, mesmerised, then something at the craft's stern caught his eye.

“What is behind this hatch, or is this just an additional emergency exit? It does not look like the door of a weapon bay to me.”

“Behind this, my dear captain” explained the admiral “is one thing we are truly proud of. I am not too firm on the details but the chief engineer, Lieutenant Gruson, should be here any minute. He will give you a tour of the *Württemberg*.”

“Where is he now?”

“Warehouse II, I presume, checking the crates we received this morning.”

About ten minutes later another Diesel arrived at the *Württemberg*. The man who got out looked somewhat familiar.

“Good morning Engineer Gruson.” The admiral almost strode towards the man, despite his stiff leg, looking like a proud father. “This is Captain von Kober.”

Engineer Gruson saluted both officers. “Good morning Admiral, good morning Captain.” He narrowed his eyes. “We have met before, Captain von Kober, haven't we.”

“Yes, I believe so. It was most likely at the Imperial Aeronautical Research Facility in Berlin, I presume.”

“Yes, most likely.”

This was all that could be said about that. Von Kober had a rather definite idea now, where and when he had met the engineer, but the nature of the project prohibited public mention.

“Very well gentlemen, now Gruson, if you would be so kind and give the captain a tour of the Württemberg, he is most interested in some of her defining technical features.”

The tour of the Württemberg took well into the afternoon with a short interruption for lunch, which was brought over from the main mess hall. The chamber behind the hatch which had caught Captain von Kober's attention housed a Tesla battery array. The hatch was both used for access and to extend an antenna to catch lightning, the electricity of which would be stored in the batteries. The technology had been tested during a thunderstorm on top of the Feldberg in the Black Forest. Theoretically, the Württemberg could run on steam and electrical power, although so far, the batteries were only an emergency back-up in case of fuel shortage.

Considering that the boilers were fired by multifuel engines, as Gruson later explained, this could only mean that the Württemberg was configured for extended cruises over the ocean.

The hull material, too, had some new qualities, apart from being more resilient to fire, it was laced with wire to channel the energy of lightning strikes towards the Tesla batteries. The wires did not connect yet, this would only be done after the Tesla array had been tested during flight. After an explanation of those exterior details they entered the zeppelin via the cargo bay. Captain von Kober noted its unusual size for a military craft and the configuration of mounts along the walls.

“These, Captain,” the engineer indicated the mounts “are spaces for additional equipment. The Württemberg is basically a platform for testing some of our latest hardware. There is still more to come, I assure you. We have decided on using modules for easier transport, installation and removal. It is a pretty novel concept but it will serve us well, I'm sure.”

Further inside, work on the zeppelin was not yet finished. There were a number of gaps in the instrument panels of the cockpit and a large section of the bow skeleton was still missing.

“Here,” Gruson explained “a retractable turret will be installed. The turret is currently constructed and tested in Jena. It may be that the maiden cruise of the Württemberg will have to be done without it.”

“When will that be?”

“Well, the remaining work will be finished this week, Sunday at the latest. We will take her over Lake Constance and possibly into the Alps but from what I know, the real first cruise is due to start April 1st. Admiral von Köpitz wanted everything finished as soon as possible, this is the earliest possible date. Now, let's take a look at the crew quarters, you are in for a treat.”

The quarters turned out to be quite spacious and almost luxurious. Each officer had a small cabin to himself, two non-commissioned officers shared one cabin and four enlisted men shared bunks in their, again rather large, cabins. There was a communal mess area, a separate cabin which served as the officers' off-duty room, a map room, the doctor's duty area, a kitchen with some automated appliances, a storage area, and a cabin the captain could not really place. It contained two cubic machines of some sort or another he had not seen before.

“This Captain,” Gruson went on to explain “is the laundry area. The left machine is an automated washer for clothing and the right is a dryer. It has already been tested and works perfectly.

Unfortunately, constructing these machines is quite expensive, so only the very rich can afford them. However, they are ideal for zeppelins and uboats and other small craft. Their inventor, Louis Goldberg, an American, saw this potential and offered them to the Zeppelin Corps High Command, and now they are here. It was remarkably easy to obtain them. The Württemberg is our first craft to be equipped with them.”

At first Captain von Kober thought the automated laundry machine and the dryer an utterly ridiculous idea; on second thought, it made perfect sense. All the clothing of the crew would normally be washed by hand if you did not want to risk lice or worse. This would either need valuable time of the crew members or require one or two additional crew members who saw to washing the uniforms and other textiles. By installing an automated laundry device, you effectively freed up time for the crew to perform other duties and cut crew requirements. This also meant the

zeppelin would have to take fewer provisions and would thus be lighter or have more room for other things. A very good invention indeed.

The tour continued to the boiler room. It housed four massive boilers, each one in a separate, bulkhead-shielded section. If one should blow up due to accident or enemy action, damage to the rest of the boiler room would be minimal. The engines could accept everything from oil to damp wood but were optimized for mineral carbon briquettes. The steam exhausts were fitted with the regular tubes which directed the steam towards the condensation tanks to minimize water loss. Fuelling the boiler was automatised. A steam-pressure regulated mechanism would feed fuel into the boiler until a certain level of pressure was reached. If the pressure dropped, more fuel would automatically be added. This system was simple and reliable and meant that at any given time two machinists could easily service all four engines. If necessary, one would suffice.

“What's this device?” Captain von Kober knocked on the brass case of a box-shaped object attached to the boiler, he had noticed it on all four of them.

“Oh, this is another new piece of technology. It's an Abbe compressor. It's originally a device to increase the power of automobile-mounted engines but we adapted it for use on zeppelins. Our preliminary tests were quite promising. They should increase top-speed and acceleration of the Württemberg quite significantly.”

Albrecht von Kober grinned, this zeppelin sounded like a lot of fun.

“I forgot to mention,” said Lieutenant Gruson when they were walking back to the cargo bay, “the Württemberg will be fitted with two standard medium turrets. We are not going to send her out unarmed.”

“That would be the 150 mm Mauser double-barrel breech-loader.”

“Exactly.”

“Two turrets, that's not much.”

“Yes, Captain, but the Württemberg is an experimental craft. She is not a full-fledged war zeppelin. Nothing like the *Hohenzollern* class or the *Rhein* class. Besides, she is very fast. She can outrun everything she can't outgun.”

“I take your word for it...”

Admiral von Köpitz glanced out of the officer's club window facing Lake Constance. The afternoon sun reflected off the hulls of the assembled zeppelins in the distance, bathing the room in silvery-red light.

“So, Captain, what do you think of the Württemberg so far?”

“She seems to be a very fine ship, the most advanced in the fleet, I presume.”

“That's correct.” The admiral took a sip of his cognac. “Some of the technology the Württemberg carries has not been installed on any other zeppelin or other German craft. There is more to come, Engineer Gruson told you. I think it is a very good opportunity. We need a man with your track record for a craft like her.”

“So you are offering me the command of the Württemberg?”

“LZ-X1 Württemberg, to be exact. The first experimental zeppelin of our Air Navy. Yes, Captain, I am.”

Von Kober smiled. “Just one more thing I would like to know, Admiral.”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Assuming I take command, where would the first mission take me?”

“Well, it would be a very long range mission. It would take you to the Pacific Pole of Inaccessibility. The point of the high seas furthest removed from any point of dry land, and back. I have to warn you, though. The first week or two will be aerial photography of certain important areas between here and the Bosphorus. After that, however, it is India and the open Pacific.”

“Count me in, Admiral.”

Two cognac glasses chimed.