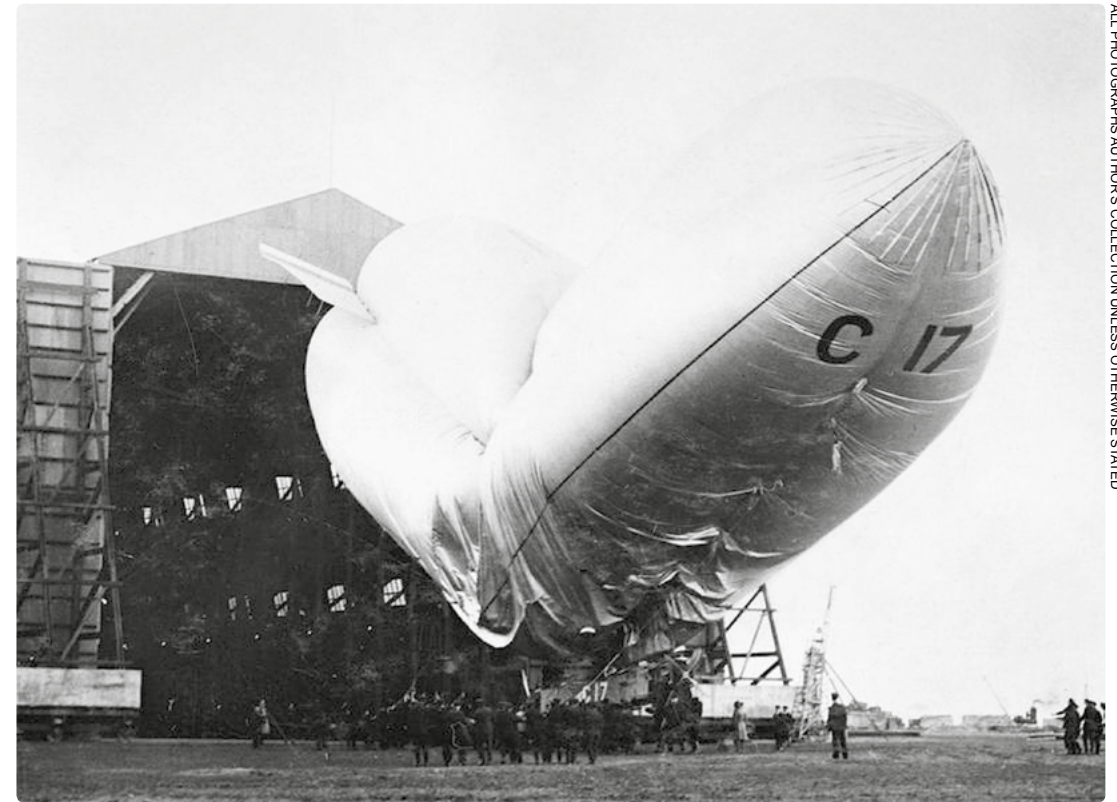
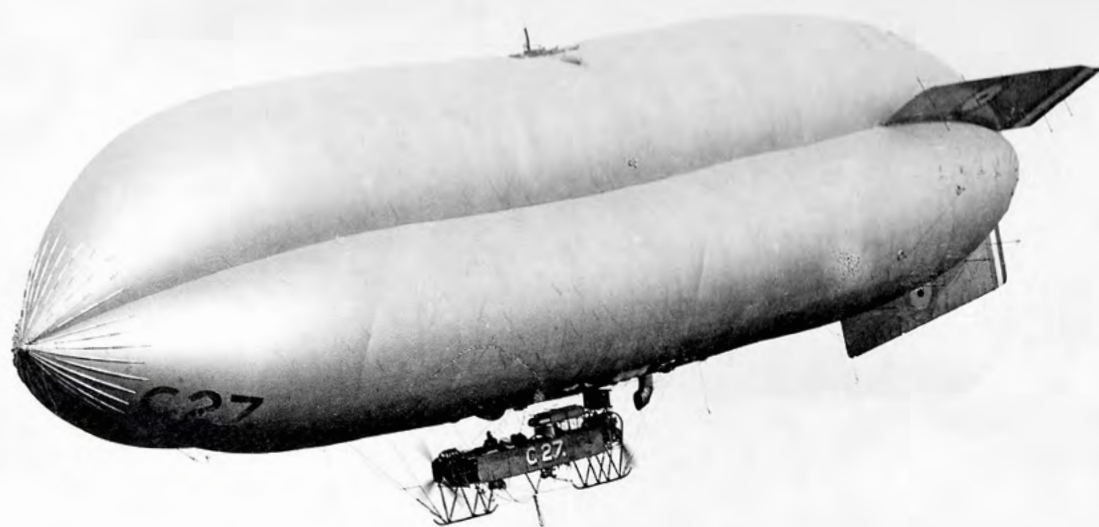


# The PULHAM COASTALS



Royal Naval Air Service airship operations in Norfolk, 1916-17

On the morning of April 21, 1917, Coastal airship C 17 took off from Royal Naval Airship Station Pulham in Norfolk for what was intended to be a routine anti-submarine patrol over the North Sea. The airship and its crew of five were never seen again. It was typical of the perilous work undertaken by the Pulham Coastals, as **BRIAN J. TURPIN MRAeS** relates



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**P**ULHAM AIRSHIP STATION, near the rural village of Pulham St Mary, 15 miles (24km) south of Norwich, was one of a chain of stations set up around the coast of the British Isles in support of a rapidly expanding fleet of aircraft and surface vessels brought together to confront the growing menace of the German U-boat.

On February 4, 1915, the German government announced its intention to begin unrestricted submarine warfare, declaring that the waters around Great Britain and Ireland, including the whole of the English Channel, would be in the War Zone. From February 18 that year, every merchant ship met with in the War Zone would be destroyed. This action was, in effect, a reprisal measure for the blockade of all German seaports by the Royal Navy, which had started as soon as war was declared in August 1914.

### The Kaiser's submarines

Although in 1915 the German submarine fleet was too small to have a major effect on the British war effort, by 1917 the situation had changed dramatically and was becoming serious. On February 1, 1917, Germany began unrestricted submarine warfare in earnest, changing tactics

**ABOVE** Coastal airship HMA C 17 at RNAS Pulham on November 15, 1916, two and a half months after its arrival at the Norfolk air station. While experiments were being conducted with a new type of grapnel, the trail rope fouled the propeller, which then pierced and burst the envelope. The latter lost gas rapidly, resulting in C 17's rather disconsolate appearance here; but the ship was housed without further damage.

from surface attack by gunfire to submerged attacks with torpedoes. The gross tonnage of British, Allied and neutral vessels being sunk began to rise steeply, from 298,000 tons in January to 468,000 tons in February, 500,000 tons in March and 849,000 tons in April. By this time, one ship in four destined for the British Isles was being sunk and food reserves for the nation were calculated at only six weeks. The German Naval Staff estimated that if British shipping could be reduced at the rate of 600,000 tons per month, and if this rate could be maintained for five months, Great Britain would be forced into submission.

At the beginning of the war the Airship Section of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) had only a handful of non-rigid airships, which had been used initially to help protect the British Expeditionary Force as it crossed the Channel to France. After that they made a few coastal patrols but it was not until the German declaration of

**OPPOSITE PAGE** The third of the Coastals to arrive at Pulham, C 27 is seen here with an envelope of revised design. Initially, the air-blower tube was fitted just aft of the forward powerplant to provide air for the internal ballonets in order to maintain the pressure in the envelope, but here it has been moved aft of the rear powerplant.