

## GRWW1c Letter about a Zeppelin raid

This is a letter written by William Colchester-Weymss to his friend the King of Siam. He writes about a Zeppelin air-raid and the moral questions that bombing of civilians raised.

(177)92 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 1916

Sir,

There is a question which off & on, has cropped up since the early days of the war, & of which I think we are likely to hear a good deal in the immediate future. That is, the question of reprisals: that is whether, when the enemy is guilty of acts, which are opposed to humanity, & infringe on accepted laws & rules dealing with warfare, it is right & lawful to pay them back in his own coin. It is a difficult problem to solve, & like many other important questions, there is something to be said on both sides.

The reason why it comes into my mind this evening, is because we had here in England last night the most extensive air raid that the Germans have yet attempted, and, though we have heard very little yet about it, the Zeppelins which made the attack seem to have been quite indiscriminate in the dropping of their bombs. They dropped them on Birmingham & all sorts of towns & villages round Birmingham & even a German could not assert, that they were fortified positions. I was being up

about 11 o'clock last night from the Head Police Station in the County of Cheltenham, to tell me that telephones had just come in from Birmingham & Wolverhampton that a fleet of Zeppelins had arrived & were dropping bombs in many places. Notice was immediately given to Gloucester, Cheltenham, Stroud and other centres of population in the County, to put out all lights in the towns, after sounding a "hoose", which is the prearranged signal for an air-ship raid. However as far as I have yet heard they did not come nearer than Birmingham, & we have not heard yet what damage they actually caused, or how many lives were lost. But most of the bombs seem to have fallen in places which could not be described as fortified places & the wildest stretch of imagination. If this is so, of course the action is barbarous in itself, & opposed to recognized laws of warfare, and is it right, in order to stop such action in future, to send on a group of air-ships to attack a corresponding number of populous & unfortified places in Germany

leaving the Germans know why we do it, & that a repetition of the act on their part will inevitably result in other towns in Germany having to pay the penalty.

On one side it is said "a la guerre comme a la guerre", when you are at war your one & sole object ought to be to win success, and to win that success as speedily as possible you may do things, many things perhaps, which a calm judgment would designate as wrong & immoral. This is the line upon which the Germans have acted since the beginning of the war, & a doctrine which could be applied to the acts of their ~~enemies~~ atrocities. It is a fairly clear doctrine, & there is very little doubt that is meant by it, when it is applied to any particular question. Then comes the further problem, whether those who think the action wrong in itself are prepared to justify similar action on our part in order to show the enemy that it is not worth his while to go on with such action & do to ensure its disuse. Others would say that assuming the original action to be wrong in itself, we have no right to follow the bad lead, that it is difficult enough now to get

nations at war to remember doctrines, which they themselves endorsed when they were considered at the Hague or some other convention during a period of peace; & that if both parties disregard these doctrines war will become more & more barbarous. Others would say there are no men & children being maimed & slaughtered, & the only way to stop it is retaliation in the same fashion. If it is the only way to stop it, and if it is likely to be effective, I think it is justifiable, & I think when next a Convention meets, at the Hague or elsewhere, it may fairly be asked to discuss this question, & to lay down as clearly as possible, the cases in which reprisals can be justified. But one would vainly hope that this war will be the last war, & that never again will so much misery, suffering, pain & loss be poured broadcast on the world. This is I am afraid a dream of utopia; & nations will fear again draw the sword, & regard it as the sole arbiter between nations when diplomacy has failed to take some precedence or dispute.

I am Sir  
Yours most obediently & sincerely  
Wm Colchester-Weymss

3rd February 1916

Sire,

There is a question which, off and on, has cropped up since the early days of the War and of which I think we are as likely to hear a good deal in the immediate future. That is, the question of reprisals, that is whether, when the enemy is guilty of acts, which are opposed to humanity and infringe on accepted laws and rules dealing with warfare, it is right and lawful to pay him back in his own coin. It is a difficult problem to solve and, like so many other important questions there is something to be said on both sides.

The reason why it comes into my mind this evening, is because we had here in England last night the most intensive air raid that the Germans have yet attempted and, though we have heard very little yet about it, the Zeppelins which made the attack seem to have been quite indiscriminate in the dropping of their bombs. They dropped them on Birmingham and all sorts of towns and villages round Birmingham when even a German could not assent that they were fortified positions.

I was rung up about 11 o'clock last night from the Head Police Station in the county at Cheltenham, to tell me that telephones had just come in from Birmingham and Wolverhampton that a fleet of Zeppelins had arrived and were dropping bombs in many places. Notice was immediately given to Gloucester, Cheltenham, Stroud and other centres of population in the County to put out all lights in the towns, after sounding a "hooter" which is the



prearranged signal for an airship raid. However as far as I have yet heard, they did not come nearer than Birmingham and we have not heard yet what damage they actually caused or how many lives were lost.

But most of the bombs seem to have fallen in places which could not be described as fortified places in the wildest stretch of imagination. If this is so of course the action is barbarous in itself and opposed to recognised laws of warfare, and is it right, in order to stop such action in future, to send over a group of airships to attack a corresponding number of populous and unfortified places in Germany, letting the Germans know why we do it and that a repetition of the act on their part will inevitably result in other towns in formally having to pay the penalty.

On one side it is said "*à la guerre comme à la guerre*"<sup>1</sup>; when you are at war, your one and sole object ought to be to win success and to win that success as speedily as possible, you may do things - many things perhaps - which a calm judgement would stigmatise as wrong and immoral. This is the line upon which the Germans have acted since the beginnings of the war, and a doctrine which could be applied to the whole of their atrocities. It is a fairly clear doctrine and there is very little doubt what is meant by it, when it is applied to any particular question.

Then comes the further problem; whether those who think that action wrong in itself are prepared to justify similar action on our part in order to show the enemy that it is not worth his while to

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<sup>1</sup> Literally "at war as at war" - a proverb implying that in time of crisis, all means are good for achieving one's goals; roughly 'all's fair in love and war', or 'the ends justify the means'.

go on with such action and so ensure its disuse. Others would say that, assuming the original action to be wrong in itself, we have no right to follow the bad lead, that it is difficult enough now to get nations at war to remember doctrines which they themselves endorsed when they were considered at the Hague, or some other convention during a period of peace, and that if both parties disregard these doctrines war will become more and more barbarous.

Others would say here are women and children being maimed and slaughtered and the only way to stop is to retaliate in the same fashion. If it is the only way to stop it and, if it is likely to be effective, I think it is justifiable and I think when next a Convention meets, at the Hague or elsewhere, it may fairly be asked to discuss this question and it laid down as clearly as possible the cases in which 'reprisals' can be justified. But one would gain hope that this war will be the last war and that never again will so much misery, suffering, pain and loss poured broad-cast over the world. This is I am afraid a dream of Utopia, and nations will I fear again draw the sword and regard it as the sole arbiter between nations when diplomacy has failed to settle some grievance or dispute.

I am Sir,

Yours most obediently and sincerely

Wm Colchester-Weymss