

# THE EARLIEST PICTURE POSTCARD TAKEN ONBOARD A ZEPPELIN

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**T**HE ILLUSTRATED PICTURE POSTCARD, which I bought recently with other zeppelin cards, looked inconspicuous and was not did not attract any attention. A view of the Rhine Falls at Schaffhausen - my God, how many of such images exist? Only weeks later, I took a closer look at the card and what I saw was pretty impressive.



The picture shows a clear impression «Rheinfall, Aufnahme v. Luftschiff, 29. VI. 08, L. Dürr» (transl.: Rhine Fall, photo taken from the airship 29 June 08 L. Dürr.) The sign «L. Dürr» could only be one of engineer Ludwig Dürr. Upon closer examination of the address side, the surprise was complete. I had in front of me an autographic card by Ludwig Dürr from 30 July 1908 addressed to a priest E. Rieger at Bräunisheim near Amstetten (Wurttemberg, Germany). Dürr thanks Rieger for a letter and congratulations. A quick research in my extensive fund of the history of aeronautics and then it was clear to me that this is indeed the signature of Ludwig Dürr.

The experts in the field know that Ludwig Dürr was one of the closest associates of Count Zeppelin, he was indeed Count Zeppelin's right-hand man. Already in January 1899, Dürr became partner in the Stuttgart construction office of Count Zeppelin. After completing his last semester and successfully passing his final examination of his mechanical engineering degree program in late 1899, Dürr continued his work for Count Zeppelin at Friedrichshafen. There he gained vital experience with the assembly of the first airship LZ-1, which at that time was led by chief engineer Kübler. Following Kübler's retirement, Dürr took over as chief designer responsible for the technical development and construction of all other zeppelin airships. As technical director he played a significant role in the Luftschiffbau Zeppelin company. Dürr developed a large number of inventions and innovations. He became also known as a textbook author for his essay *25 Jahre Zeppelin-Luftschiffbau* (transl.: 25 years Zeppelin-Luftschiffbau company) published in 1924 at the VDI-Verlag, Berlin.

But Ludwig Dürr was not only the man on the drawing board and the person responsible for construction of airships, he was also extremely interested in the practical side of aeronautics. On numerous zeppelin flights before the first world war, Ludwig Dürr flew as helmsman or was even ordered by Count Zeppelin as zeppelin commander. This gave him the opportunity to test the new airship designs in practice and to draw conclusions for further technical improvements. It is absolutely justifiably to say that Ludwig Dürr wrote aviation history!

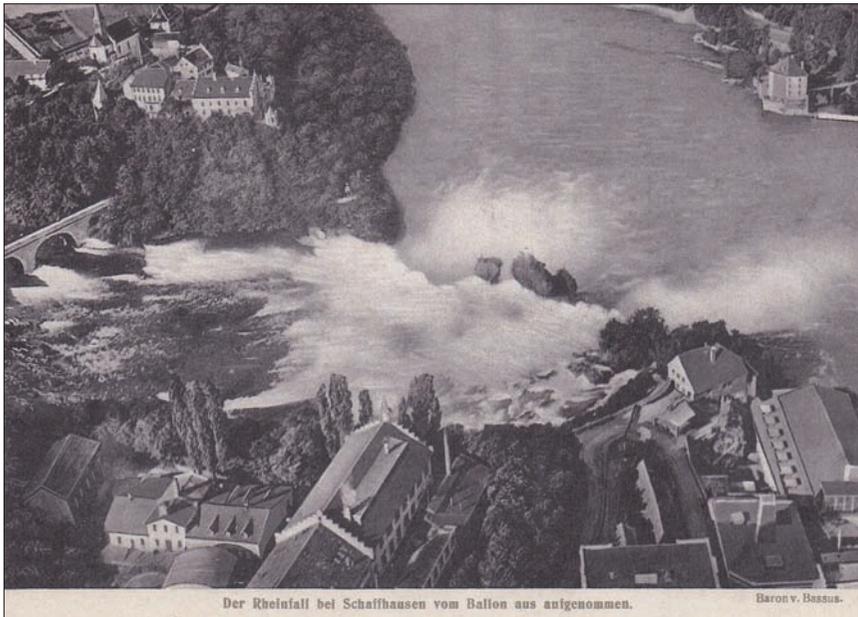


Ludwig Dürr Postcard from 30 July 1908.

## PIONEER I

And here I have a personal postcard of this famous aviation pioneer with his full signature from the early days of zeppelin history. It seems to me that this is a rarity, especially since contemporary eyewitness described Dürr as a modest and more reserved man. At least in the early years, Dürr did not emerge as someone writing much. By the way, this was quite unlike his boss Count Zeppelin, of which there are so many documents with his signature, which of course are highly sought after by collectors.

So far so good - but what does it has to do with the photograph of the Rhine Falls at Schaffhausen? The imprint «Rheinfall Aufnahme v. Luftschiff 29. VI. 08» seems to be incorrect. LZ-4 was flying on that day, this was a test flight which led the airship over Lake Constance to Romanshorn, Immenstaad, Constance and back. From Constance it is still almost 50 miles to the Rhine Falls of Schaffhausen. Count Zeppelin first trip to Schaffhausen with his new fourth airship happened first two days later, on 1 July. This was the famous Swiss Flight. On both trips, Ludwig Dürr was aboard as elevation helmsman. Aboard during the Swiss Flight was Professor Dr. Hergesell who made on this occasion a number of aerial shots from the zeppelin. I am not aware of a Hergesell photo of the Rhine Fall. Hergesell later published several of them in a small, richly illustrated booklet. He edited this booklet together with Dr. Hugo Eckener and Baron von Bassus. This publication deals with the voyages of zeppelin airship LZ-4 until its crash and destruction in Echterdingen.<sup>1</sup>



Der Rheinfall bei Schaffhausen vom Ballon aus aufgenommen.

Baron v. Bassus.

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On page 12 of this booklet is a photo taken from board the airship depicting the Rhine Falls of Schaffhausen. The image is credited to Baron von Bassus. Bassus was commanding LZ-4 on the test flight on 29 June, but he was not aboard on the long Swiss Flight on 1 July.<sup>2</sup> The 5th and 6th test flights of LZ-4 on 3 and 14 July were limited to the area of Lake Constance. During the ascent on 15 July, the airship collided with the balloon shed, the flight had to be abandoned. It was only in the morning of the 4 August 1908 at the 24-hour endurance flight when LZ-4 ran a second time over the Rhine Falls. This flight is well known as it ended in the disaster at Echterdingen.<sup>3</sup> During this flight, Baron von Bassus was active as a photographer, it is likely that the Bassus photo of the Rhine Falls of Schaffhausen was taken on the trip on 4/5 August 1908.<sup>4</sup>

What conclusions can be drawn from all this? On the one hand, that probably Ludwig Dürr has simply confused the date on his photo postcard. This happened probably in the bustle of those days and the preparation and successful performance of the 24-hour trip of LZ-4. On the other hand that the image of the Rhine Falls on the Dürr card could only have been taken on the flight on 1 July. The postcard was mailed on 30 July, this was before the Echterdingen trip. And in addition, Dürr photographed the Rhine Falls from a much larger distance than Baron Bassus.

It is questionable if Ludwig Dürr took the photo of the Rhine Falls. Dürr had an important function onboard, he was elevation helmsman. The photo was probably taken but Privy Dr. Hergesell or any other crew member, who knows. It is easily conceivable that the photos and negatives of this trip were made available to Ludwig Dürr on loan. He himself or a professional photographer then produced this photo postcard.

Why this long digression? Well, it could be that this is the first postcard made of a photo taken from board an airship - and that would be important both for the history of aeronautics as well as the history of photography. In this respect, the present postcard from Ludwig Dürr is a real rarity. To the best of my knowledge there are no earlier photo postcards based on photos taken from board an airship. If you have any other information, please contact the author. ■

Notes:

- 1) *Graf Zeppelins Fernfahrten Schilderungen in Wort und Bild von Geheimen Regierungsrat Professor Dr. Hergesell Baron C. von Bassus und Dr. Hugo Eckener, offizielles Album aus dem Lager des Grafen mit Originalaufnahmen der Mitfahrenden*, Graphische Kunstanstalt E. Schreiber G.M.B.H. Stuttgart (hereafter: *Graf Zeppelins Fernfahrten*)
- 2) Lutz Tittel, *Die Fahrten des LZ-4 1908*, Friedrichshafen 1983, page 18 and following.
- 3) *Ibid.*, pages 22 and following.
- 4) *Graf Zeppelins Fernfahrten*, page 12 and page 22 and following.