

REMEMBERING THE AIRSHIP USS AKRON

By Jack Sullivan

Among the most familiar images to Americans was the crash of the *Hindenburg* zeppelin in Lakehurst, New Jersey, on May 6, 1937, killing 36 of the 97 people aboard (Fig. 1). It was not, however, the greatest airship disaster. That was

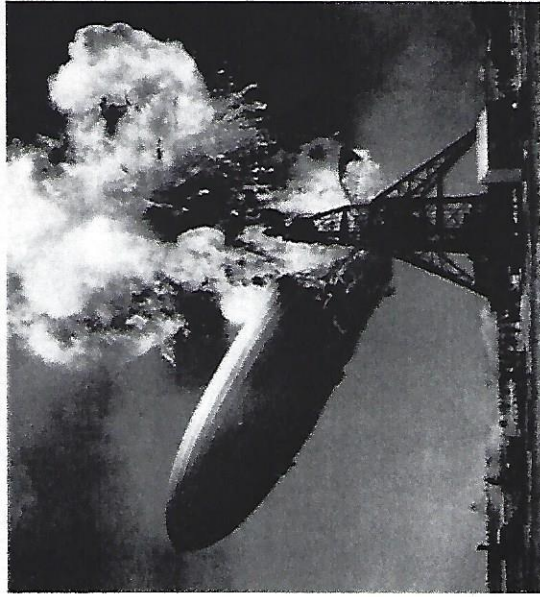


Figure 1

the destruction of the USS *Akron* in a storm off the New Jersey coast on April, killing 73 of the 76 crewmen and passengers aboard.

Representing the greatest loss of life in any airship crash, the accident is little remembered but memorabilia remains available to collectors.

In its heyday, the Navy's airship *Akron* was highly publicized resulting in a number of images and artifacts. The *Akron* and her sister ship the *Macon* were among the largest flying objects ever made. A photograph shows the interior of the huge Akron, Ohio, hangar where the airships were constructed (Fig. 2). Called the Goodyear Airdock, it was constructed in 1929 at an equivalent cost today of \$26.4 million. When it was built it was the largest structure in the world without interior supports. It encompassed 364,000 square feet of space, an area equal to eight football fields placed side by side.

It was there that the *Akron*, shown here under construction, was built (Fig. 3). The airship was 785 feet long and had a hull diameter of 133 feet and a height of 146 feet, six inches. The skeleton was formed of a new lightweight alloy called "Duralumin 17" (Fig. 4). Goodyear was very proud of the *Akron* issuing a postcard showing the airship protruding from its airdock (Fig. 5).

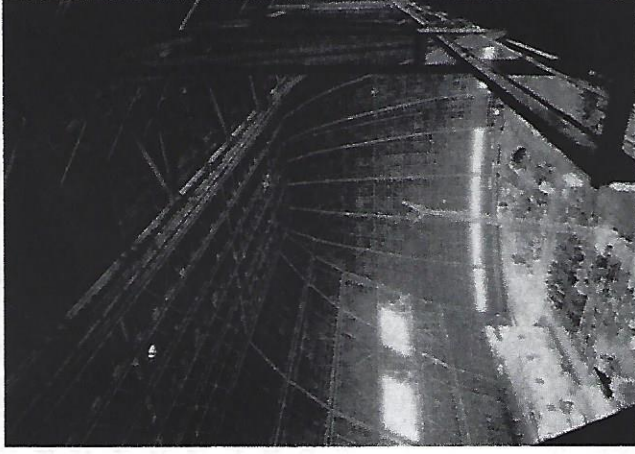


Figure 2

The city of Akron, indeed all of Ohio, was

proud of this helium-filled flying behemoth. A postcard depicts the airship flying over its skyline (Fig. 6). It was the world's first flying aircraft carrier, with the capacity for holding

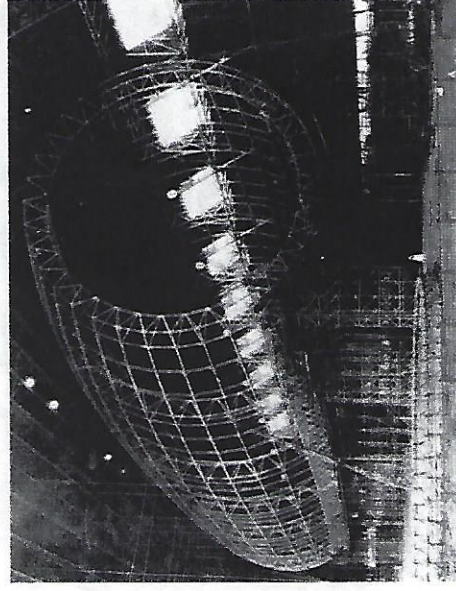


Figure 3

F9C *Sparrowhawk* fighter-reconnaissance planes in its belly (Fig. 7). Using a crude hooking system, the planes could be launched and recovered while the *Akron* was in flight.

immediately let go. Two of them plunged to their death, two others, although injured, were saved.

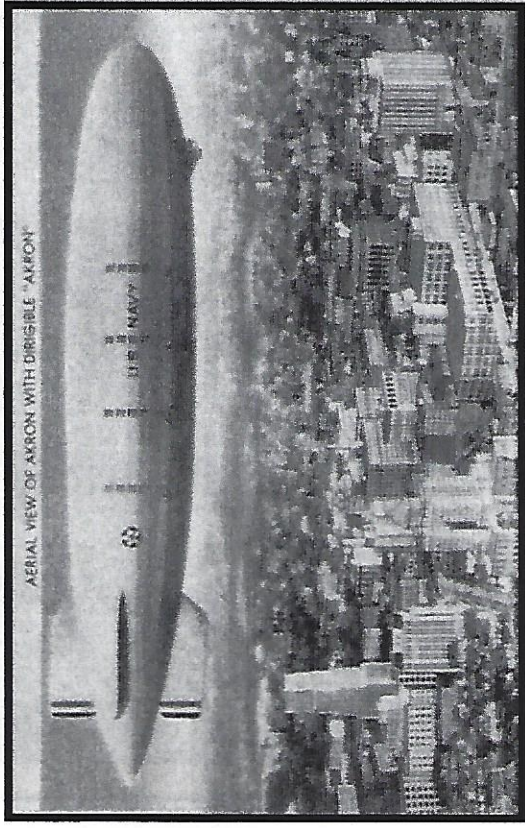


Figure 6

This was just a foretaste of what was to come. On the night of April 3, 1933 the *Akron* was on a routine operation along the Atlantic Coast when it encountered severe weather. Heavy winds struck its sides, causing the airship to plunge toward the ocean. Upon striking the water the *Akron* broke up rapidly and sank in the storm-tossed Atlantic. The crew had not been issued life jackets and the end had come so quickly that life rafts could not be deployed. The accident left 73 dead and only three survivors. President Roosevelt termed it "a national disaster." On Memorial Day 1933 the Navy Department issued a special "In Memoriam" cover (Fig. 9).

The loss of the *Akron* marked the beginning of the end for the airship in the U.S. Navy. When the *Macon* was damaged in a storm two years later and sank, the program ended. This time, however, the crew had been issued life jackets and 70 of the 72 aboard were rescued. Although today "Snoopy" may sail the MetLife blimp over the Superbowl, the use of manned airships for military purposes long has been over.

The *Akron's* first transcontinental flight in May 1932 was recognized with a special envelope marking the occasion (Fig. 8). Leaving from Lakehurst, it took more than 44 hours to reach San Diego. Since neither trained ground handlers nor

specialized mooring equipment were



Figure 4

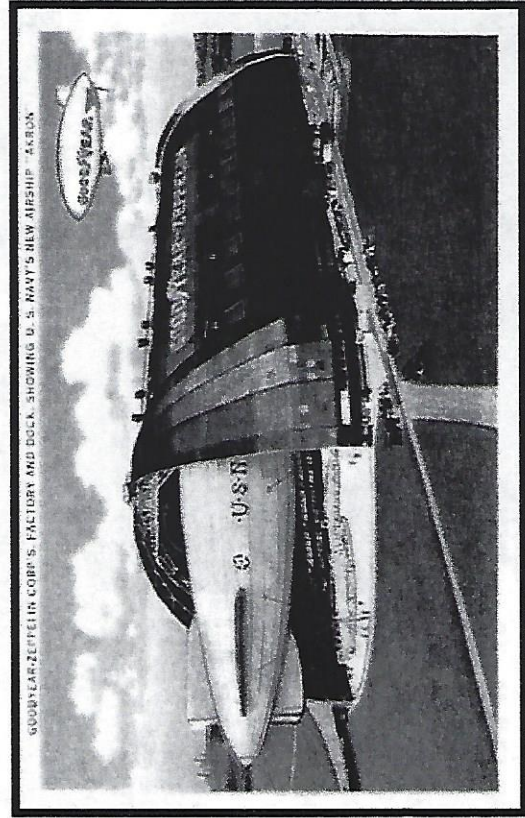


Figure 5

present at the site, the landing was a dicey proposition. During the descent, the helium gas was warmed by sunlight, increasing lift. A mooring cable had to be cut to avert a catastrophic nose-stand by the airship that then floated upward. Most of the mooring crew — largely "boot camp" seamen—released their lines although four did not



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

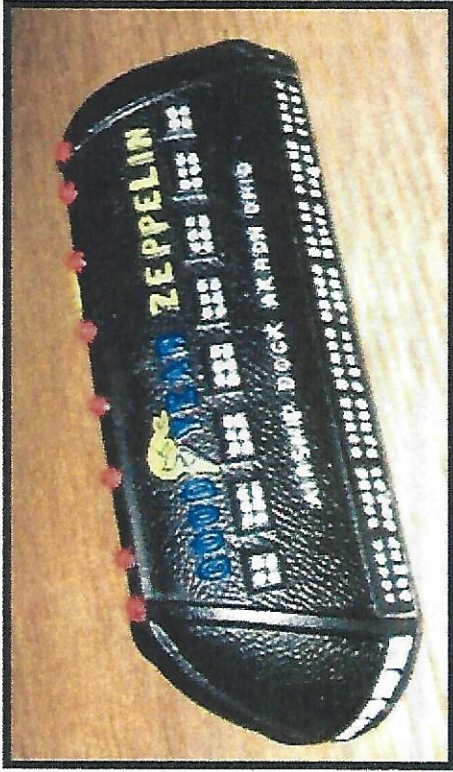


Figure 10

Other mementos of the Akron that may be of interest to collectors are paperweights and desk ornaments issued when the airship was still a matter of national pride. Goodyear used a blob of its Duraluminum 17 to fashion a replica of the Akron's dock that completely fails to convey the immensity of the structure (Fig. 10). Replicas of the giant balloon come up for sale from time to time, two of them shown here (Figs. 11, 12).



Figure 11

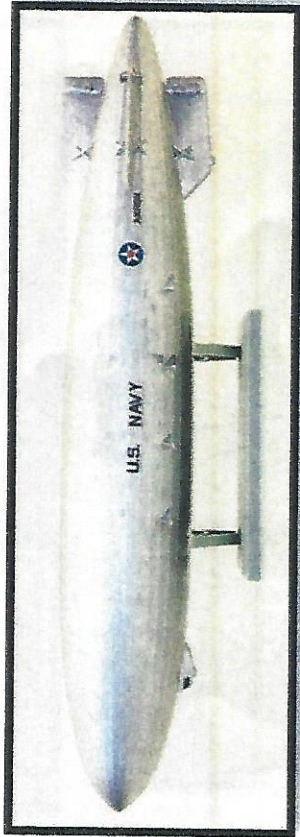


Figure 12

Illustrations:

- Fig. 1: Photo - The Hindenburg disaster
- Fig. 2: Photo - Interior of the air dock
- Fig. 3: Photo - USS Akron under construction
- Fig. 4: Metal airship souvenir
- Fig. 5: Postcard - Air dock
- Fig. 6: Postcard: Akron over Akron
- Fig. 7: Photo: Aircraft inside airship
- Fig. 8: Special mail cover
- Fig. 9: Memorial to lost air crew
- Fig. 10: Air dock paperweight
- Fig. 11: USS Akron replica #1
- Fig. 12: USS Akron replica #2