

Goodyear shows off beginnings of future airship fleet

By Katie Byard - Beacon Journal business writer

Construction begins at Wingfoot Lake on next generation of airships. Blimp replacements will be longer, skinnier, faster and more efficient

It resembled a giant Erector Set, and the men working on it looked as happy as kids with a new toy at Christmas.

But this was serious business, as the men at Goodyear's Wingfoot Lake hangar were literally building Goodyear's airship future: The first of three larger, faster airships that will replace the company's iconic blimp fleet.

"We are just at the dawn," of a new airship era, said Nancy Ray, Goodyear's director of global airship operations, on Friday morning at the hangar.

Behind her, a crew composed of German and American workers assembled a portion of the towering aluminum and carbon fiber internal frame of the airship that will be 246 feet long — 50 feet longer than a Goodyear blimp.

The workers tightened bolts and tension cables as media personnel looked on at a media-only open house.

"I've been in aviation my whole life and to have an opportunity to be a part of this has been amazing," Goodyear airship mechanic Tom Bradley said.

"We high-fived each other" when construction began March 10, Bradley said, motioning toward German mechanic Markus Draeger of German airship company ZLT Zeppelin Luftschifftechnik.

Nearly two years ago, Akron's Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. said it planned to replace its three-blimp U.S. fleet with the bigger semi-rigid airships — with an internal frame — to be jointly built by Goodyear and the German company.

Last September, German-made parts began arriving at the Wingfoot Lake hangar.

The internal frame is one of the significant features that will separate the new aircraft from Goodyear's fleet.

While purists will point out that blimps do not have internal frames, Goodyear officials plan to still call the semi-rigid airships "Goodyear blimps."

Ray said the new airship will be flying in 2014, carrying Goodyear's blue-and-gold logo over sports and other events. It will replace the Spirit of Goodyear, which is housed at the Wingfoot Lake hangar.

On Friday, the Spirit of Goodyear blimp was at one end of the hangar while the crew worked on the inside skeleton of its replacement at the other end.

Three of a kind

The plan is to have the second new-generation airship flying in 2016 and the third in 2018. Each of the modern zeppelins will be built at Wingfoot Lake, and each will cost about \$21 million, Goodyear has said. All three U.S.-based blimps were built by Goodyear and Lockheed Martin.

In addition to being longer, the new airships will be slightly shorter in height.

“It’s going to look long and skinny as compared to the kind of chubby one we have today,” Ray said.

The new crafts will have be powered by three 200-horsepower prop engines.

Two of the propellers pull the airship and one pushes at the tail; the current blimps are pushed by two engines mounted off the cabin, or gondola.

The propellers can be tilted up and down, or vectored, which allows the airship to take off and land in smaller spaces.

“We’re going to get a lot more speed, we’re going to be a lot more efficient,” Ray said, noting the lightweight materials being used to construct the frame.

Ray said the cruising speed of current blimps is around 30 miles per hour, but the cruising speed of the new airship will be about 50 to 55 miles per hour.

The blimp also will be quieter, and its gondola will hold more people — 12 instead of the current seven.

Goodyear officials say they haven’t decided what to name the new airship.

New technology

For now, the airship goes by the moniker Goodyear NT — NT stands for “new technology.”

The partnership between Goodyear and ZLT Zeppelin Luftschifftechnik is a return to the roots of Goodyear’s airship program. ZLT Zeppelin traces its lineage to the German company that Goodyear worked with in the 1920s to bring rigid airship technology to America.

That history has been hidden in plain sight for decades — the GZ in the current fleet of GZ-20A blimps stands for “Goodyear Zeppelin.”

Goodyear has built more than 300 lighter-than-air vehicles since 1917, including two rigid airships, the USS Macon and the USS Akron, built for the U.S. Navy in the 1930s.



Goodyear airship mechanic Tom Bradley (left) and Marcus Draeger, an airship mechanic with the German Zeppelin Corporation, work on a section of the interior frame as construction of the first of Goodyear's new fleet of airships, the Goodyear NT, begins at the Wingfoot Lake hangar on Friday, in Suffield Township. The Spirit of Goodyear blimp is in the background.

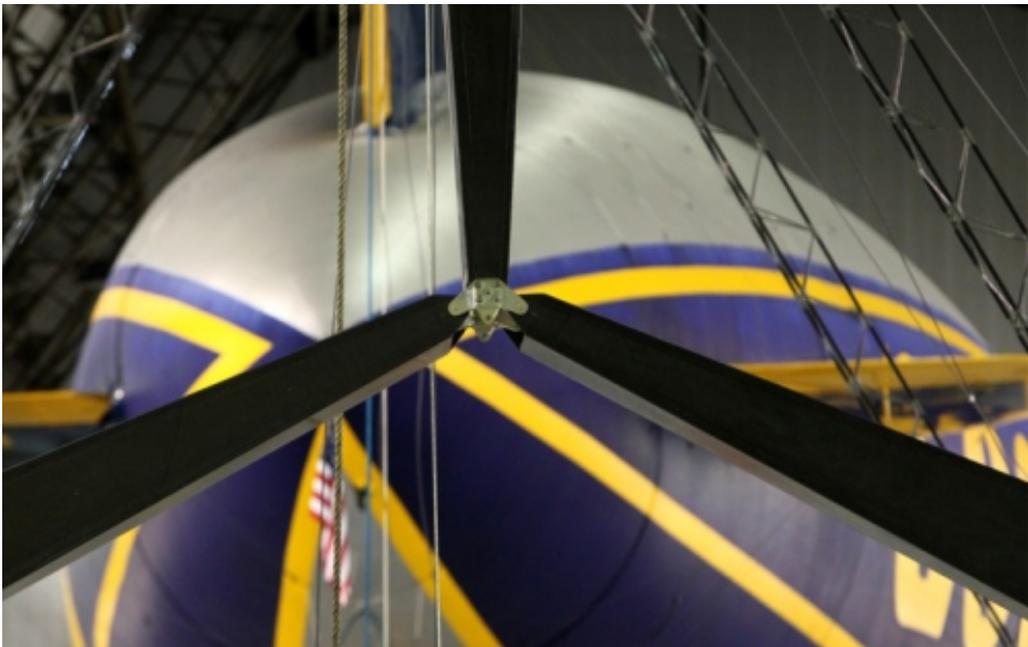
Goodyear airship mechanic Tom Bradley (left) and Marcus Draeger, an airship mechanic with the German Zeppelin Corporation, work on a section of the interior..



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Photos by Ed Suba Jr.



Cross sections that will be part of the interior frame wait to be installed. interior..



A close-up photo of one of the two sections that contains the fin attachments for the first Goodyear NT.



Goodyear airship mechanic Tom Bradley (left) and Marcus Draeger, an airship mechanic with the German Zeppelin Corporation, work on a section of the interior frame.



A model of Goodyear's new fleet of airships, the Goodyear NT, sits on a table as construction on the actual airship begins at the Wingfoot Lake hangar. The model is accurate as to how the airship will look but the color scheme will be different.