

TIME

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National Affairs: Death of a Gas Bag

Designed for long-range detection of attacking aircraft, the huge (403 ft.) ZPG-3W U.S. Navy blimp made an ideal rescue ship. Its slow cruising speed (30-60 knots) and low operating altitude (under 500 ft.) provided an almost perfect platform for the giant (40 ft., 12,000 lbs.) radar antenna rotating inside the helium-filled gas bag. Its great endurance (up to 95 hours without refueling) promised ample range as it beat to seaward off the New Jersey shore one day last week in search of a racing sloop, overdue on a Bermuda-to-Long Island run.

The big gas bag caught the eye of Fisherman Frank Mikuletzky as it nosed toward the fishing boat Doris May III. Suddenly, Mikuletzky shouted as the ZPG gently folded and dropped "like a sagging banana." Aboard the blimp, Crewman Antonio Contreras, 22, heard a blast, felt the airship nose over, and seconds later was fighting his way free into the water. Only two of his mates survived the unexplained crash with him. One crewman died after being pulled from the sea; 17 others drowned in their double-decked gondola under 15 fathoms. Later, the missing sloop was spotted by planes and a submarine. It was in no trouble at all.

Full Circle. Ironically, the big non-rigid blimp was designed as an answer to the sudden death that had plagued the larger, rigid, lighter-than-air ships of the 1920s and '30s. The French Dixmude disappeared over the Mediterranean in 1923; the U.S. Navy's 680-ft. Shenandoah broke up in a storm over Ohio in 1925; the 785-ft. Akron splashed into the Atlantic in 1933; and her sister ship Macon was ditched in the Pacific in 1935. Then, on May 6, 1937, the biggest dirigible of all, the hydrogen-filled German Hindenburg, blew up and burned at Lakehurst, NJ. For a while the world all but gave up lighter-than-air craft. Later, using its almost limitless supply of nonflammable helium to keep the ships aloft, the U.S. began to concentrate on non-rigid blimps. With their flexible, rubberized skins, they seemed to ride through rough weather far more safely than their rigid predecessors. They became a valuable link in the chain of anti-sub and early-warning defense units that ring the U.S. coast.

The ZPG-3W crash brought the argument full circle. Vice Admiral Charles E. Rosendahl, U.S.N. (ret.), a survivor of the Shenandoah crash but still the champion of the big, rigid ships, hastened to accuse the Navy of "questionable wisdom" in building oversized, non-compartmented blimps, suggested that with modern construction methods rigid airships would be far safer. Blimp men were equally quick to defend their ships. Even though he still could not explain the crash, Captain Frederick N. Klein Jr., commanding officer of Fleet Airship Wing One (which includes the three remaining ZPGs, along with some smaller blimps), insisted: "I still think we have the safest vehicle that flies." The big gas bags, which have weathered many a storm before, are still so useful that they would almost surely weather the new one.