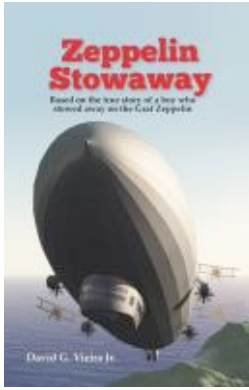


# Zeppelin Stowaway

Based on the true story of a boy who  
stowed away on the Graf Zeppelin



David G. Vieira Jr.



*Clarence stowed away on trains, ships, and crashed major sporting events. He was always on the move, until he sneaked aboard a Zeppelin to go on the most fantastic adventure of his life. However, he had to struggle to survive when a storm hit the airship and threatened to tear it apart over the ocean. This story is based on the true account of a teenager who stowed away on the Graf Zeppelin in 1928.*

# **Zeppelin Stowaway**

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**ZEPPELIN  
STOWAWAY**

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## Aboard the California

Saturday, February 18, 1928: 2:00 P.M.  
Leaving the San Francisco Bay

**T**here he is! Catch him! Don't let him get away!" yelled the security chief of the S.S. California steamship. Three security officers sprinted across the ship's deck in pursuit of a blond teenager running fast, hoping to escape them and hide below deck.

The passengers watched in amazement as one of the officers leaped and tackled the boy, bringing him down on the deck with a loud thump. He struggled, prompting the other two officers to pile on top of him as in a football game.

"Alright, alright," he yelled, "You got me. You don't have to kill me."

"Shut up, boy!" shouted one of the officers. "You're in big trouble." They dragged him kicking and squirming to the security chief.

"Let him stand up," said the chief.

Slowly he stood and glared at his captors.

"OK boy, talk. What's your name?"

"My name is Clarence!"

"Last name?"

"Terhune! Clarence Terhune, sir"

"And what are you doing on my ship, Mr. Terhune?"

DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.

"I'm sorry, sir! I didn't want to cause any trouble. But I couldn't resist coming aboard the largest ocean liner in the world."

"Without a ticket?" growled the chief.

"Well, sir, I'm only a golf caddy. I can't really afford a ride on such a fancy ship. But I am willing to work for my ticket. And I'm a real hard worker. Just give me a chance to show you what I can do."

"Mr. Terhune, do you see any golf courses on this ship?"

"No sir, I don't, but I have experience as a deckhand."

"No, Mr. Terhune, I can't trust a person like you. You are going to the brig to think hard about your mischief. Men, take him away and lock him up."

"Yes sir, with pleasure," answered one of the officers with a grin.

"Please sir," Clarence begged. "Don't send me to the brig! I can be useful around here."

"I am not going to reward you with work, Mr. Terhune. You're going the brig."

The security officers whisked Clarence below deck and shoved him into the brig. He stumbled into the cell and landed on top of one of the cots. An officer slammed the cell door and locked him inside. Clarence stood up and looked at them with a nervous smile.

"Let's see if you smile like that after the judge sends you to jail," growled the officer who had pushed him into the cell.

ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY



Clarence did not respond. He just sat on the cot and held his face in his hand.

“Yeah boy, you think hard about it because there’s no escaping this brig.”

The men went back on deck, and left Clarence alone with his thoughts. He wondered why things went wrong this time! This was supposed to have been his biggest stowaway score. Ship captains he encountered on previous trips were always angry when they caught him, but they eventually treated him well and made him work for his passage. This was the first time they had thrown him in the brig. How was he going to escape this mess? If the captain decided to press

*DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.*

charges, he might have to do jail time and he had no money to hire a lawyer.

He stood and looked around. The room had two cells with two cots, washbasins and toilets. There was no porthole since the brig was below the waterline. He examined the cell bars and door and they seemed totally secure. Feeling completely helpless, he stretched on the cot and covered his eyes with his hands to shield them from the glow of the bulb dangling from the ceiling. He decided there was nothing to do but wait.

Suddenly, the door swung open and a tall man stepped in holding a covered tray. Pulling a keychain from his pocket, he unlocked Clarence's cell while balancing the tray with his left hand.

"Hey kid, I got you some chow," the man announced with a thick New York accent.

"Gee, thanks," said Clarence, "I thought I was going to starve in here."

The man placed the tray on Clarence's cot, smiled and said, "Dig in." He dragged a chair from the far side of the room, turned it around and sat, draping his arms over its back to watch Clarence eat.

Clarence studied him suspiciously. He didn't appear much older than himself. He was over six feet tall, and had black hair, bushy eyebrows, and a tattoo on his left arm. He looked Italian but Clarence couldn't be sure.

"When I heard the guards say we had a stowaway caddy, I volunteered to come down and bring the food. I bet



ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY

they would be pretty mad if they found out I brought you the passengers' food."

Surprised, Clarence uncovered his tray to find a scrumptious meal: roasted Maryland turkey with old-fashioned stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a bowl of tutti-frutti ice cream and wafers for desert.

"Swell!" exclaimed Clarence. "Why are you being nice? You like caddies?"

"Yeah, I used to work as a caddy myself some years back and also got into trouble at school. Besides, I hate the miserable food they serve the crew on this ship. It's my way of making things even."

"I like even!" Clarence mumbled with his mouth full of turkey.

"I'm Joe, but you can call me Big Joe. That's what everybody calls me."

"I'm Clarence but everyone calls me St. Louis."

"Pleased to meet you, St. Louis," said Joe, shaking his hand.

"I had some adventures when I was younger till I joined the Merchant Marines. Why did you stow away? Just for the adventure?"

"Yeah, for the adventure! I started when I was 14, sneaking on trains and crashing sporting events. Now I can't stop. I even keep score, like a sport. Each time I stow away, I have to board a more modern ship than the one before, especially if it's on its maiden voyage."

Joe chuckled and remarked, "That's funny! I never thought of stowing away as a sport."

DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.

“Take this ship, for example,” Clarence continued. “It’s a brand new ship on its maiden voyage coming from New York. It’s the largest and most modern passenger ship built so far. Its 600 feet long and can carry over 740 passengers. And most important, it’s the first completely electric ship. It has turbo-electric propulsion, heat, air conditioning and elevators. I just had to come aboard and see for myself.”

“I can tell you did your homework, alright.

“I always do my homework. Preparation is everything.”

“I guess you’re right. So, what sporting events have you crashed?”

“The first time was in ‘23 to watch the horse Zev win the Kentucky Derby. It was terrific! When the race was over, I sneaked on a train and headed straight for the Indy-500 speedway to see the amazing Tommy Milton take the cup. After that success, I knew I had found my calling.”

“You are something else!” Joe chuckled.

Well, the next year I stowed away on a freight train and went back to the Kentucky Derby to see Black Gold wear the roses. But what really impressed me was watching the Tunney and Dempsey fights.

“Really? You saw those fights?”

“Yep,” said Clarence, looking sheepish. I saw Gene Tunney beat Jack Dempsey in Philadelphia and take the heavyweight title, and then win again the following year in Chicago.”

## ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY

Big Joe whistled. "Those were the fights of the century. Only the privileged few got to go. Everyone else had to listen on the radio, like I did."

"Well, I enjoy sports, but now I really want to see the world."

"Ok, how many ships have you been on so far?"

"This is my third. My first was in September, last year. I stowed away on the S.S. Alameda in Seattle and went to Nome, Alaska. Two months later I boarded the S.S. Malolo on its maiden voyage sailing from San Francisco to Honolulu and spent a week visiting Hawaii.

Big Joe could only shake his head. "I can understand going to Hawaii, but Nome, Alaska? That place is almost at the North Pole. Why did you go there?"

"I'm a great fan of Jack London and wanted to see all the places he wrote about. He crossed America and Canada as a hobo and panned for gold in Alaska during the Klondike gold rush. When I read "The Call of the Wild," I just had to get to Nome. I went to Hawaii for the same reason."

"Kid, I know you enjoy these adventures, but you can't live this way the rest of your life! You should think about going back to school or getting a regular job, as I did. I had some adventures. I was even kicked out for skipping school, but now I'm a respected able seaman with the Merchant Marines."

"And lose my freedom?" replied Clarence.

"You already lost your freedom, kid. Things won't always work out as you think. Now you're in the brig and will be facing some jail time for sure."

DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.

"You talk just like my sister."

"Your sister? How's that?"

"Back in St. Louis, when I lived with my older sister, Edna, and her husband, George, she was always yelling and complaining each time I traveled without telling her.

"Well, I can't blame her. How long would you stay away?"

"Several weeks. Sometimes two or three months."

"Wow! No wonder she was upset."

"What did you expect me to do? Tell her, 'Hey, Sis, I am going to spend a couple of months in Alaska.' She would've never let me out of the house."

"I guess not."

"After returning home from my trip to Hawaii, my sister carried on for days. She called me an irresponsible idiot and said I would end up in jail one day. Things like that. It was so bad I locked myself in my room. That's when I decided I had to get away and live on my own. I figured I could find a job as a golf caddy in San Francisco. So, I packed my bags and sneaked out the bedroom window one night. I did write her a goodbye note, though."

"What did it say?"

Clarence smiled. "It said 'Gone for good! Don't worry about me.'"

"So when I saw the news about the S.S. California coming to San Francisco, it was like dangling a steak in front of a starving dog. I couldn't resist coming aboard."

*ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY*

“And now you’re here in the brig. Your future doesn’t look good, kid. You’re about to get your first criminal record, and it may never end. Tell you what. If you promise to think about changing your life and getting a job, I’ll try to help you somehow.”

“Just let me out of here! Nobody has to know.”

“Can’t do that kid! But I’ll see what else I can do for you.”

“Thanks anyway,” said Clarence, disappointed.

When Big Joe left, Clarence slumped on the cot and buried his head under a gray wool blanket folded on top of the pillow. Suddenly, he heard keys unlocking the cell door. He pulled his head from the blanket and stared into the face of a mean-looking security officer.



# The Escape

Saturday, February 18, 1928: 6:30 P.M.  
Aboard the California

Clarence glanced at his watch and realized he had slept almost four hours.

"The captain wants to see you. Get up and follow me."

Clarence stood up and grabbed the bars of his cell to steady himself. Then he followed the man into a hallway where they climbed several flights of stairs to the bridge.

When they arrived, the captain was in the wheelhouse staring into the distance through a large glass window. He had a worried look on his face as he considered the thick curtain of fog that drifted ahead. He was dressed in a smart-looking dark blue uniform with a gold star and four gold stripes on the jacket's lower sleeves. His captain's cap sported the insignia of the Panama Pacific line.

"Captain!" announced the officer, "Here's the stowaway."

The captain looked Clarence up and down and finally said, "When the security chief said he caught a stowaway, I thought he meant a grown man. You're just a boy."

Clarence smiled sheepishly and said, "Sorry sir, this amazing ship was too tempting for me. I just had to see her. Everybody has been talking about this ship and her great

DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.

captain. That's why I had to come aboard. But if you give me a chance, I can work for my passage. You won't regret it."

"No!" said the captain. "I don't appreciate stowaways. Flattery won't help you either. As soon as we get to Los Angeles, I'll turn you over to the police and press charges. I'll have to make an example of you so other teenagers won't think they can get free rides on my ship."

He turned to the security officer and said, "John, take this boy back to the brig and make sure he doesn't escape."

"He's not going anywhere, Captain," replied the security officer. He motioned for Clarence to follow him.

Clarence was very discouraged and feared what was coming. He knew he would have to use his wits to escape. He was a master of improvisation and stealth and had gotten out of many tight spots before by quickly seizing any opportunity that came up. If he could, now was the time to do so again.

From the wheelhouse, they walked onto the upper deck and met another security officer. As the two officers talked, Clarence discreetly looked around. Two huge smokestacks towered over them, spewing billows of black smoke and white steam. Lots of air funnels were scattered around the deck like giant tubas. Each one was as tall as a person, rising above the floor with wide-open mouths sucking air into the vessel. On both sides of the ship, a line of lifeboats covered with tight gray canvases extended along the gunwales. Each boat hung between two J-shaped arms called davits which could be moved over the water to launch at sea. He noticed many large lifeboats that required at least two people to row, but farther



## ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY

down the deck he spotted a smaller boat that one person could row alone.

As the security officers chatted, a blanket of fog engulfed the ship, prompting the passengers on deck to go indoors. The fog was so thick Clarence could hardly see around him. Carefully, he took a small step backwards, then another. He stood there, staring intensely at the officers laughing about some juicy gossip. They never saw his move. By now, he could barely see them through the thick fog. Slowly he backed away, turned, and crossed the deck towards the lifeboats as fast as possible without making a sound. He placed a hand on the ship's railing and used it to guide him to the dinghy. Quickly, he pulled a corner of the canvas out from under the rope and made a space large enough to climb into the boat. His heart skipped a beat as he heard the security officers yelling for him to come back. He slipped inside, pushed the canvas back into place, and hoped for the best. It was a long shot but he had to try something.

"Hey boy, you better come back here! Don't get smart on me or you'll be in big trouble." As they stormed by the lifeboats, Clarence overheard one officer tell the other, "This brat is going to feel pain when I catch up with him."

Clarence lay still and tried to control his breathing to stay as quiet as possible. He heard the officer's footsteps move away from the lifeboats and rush downstairs to the lower deck assuming Clarence was headed for the ship's hold where he could hide in the cargo area. An hour later, he heard the security chief blare out his instructions.

DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.



“Search the lifeboats! He has to be in one of them.”

Security officers and deckhands scrambled to check the boats. Clarence waited in suspense, cringing at the thought of being found. Suddenly, the canvas of his boat was torn aside. He stared up in horror at his captor. To his great relief it was Big Joe.

The man peered inside pretending to look deeper within the boat and whispered, “Good luck kid! Think about what I said.” Clarence nodded, his eyes wide as saucers. Big Joe stood back and yelled, “No one’s here!” Then he pulled the canvas taught over the boat and under the ropes.

Clarence stayed in that hiding spot throughout the night until he glimpsed the faint morning light shine through a

## ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY

small tear in the canvas. His heart raced with the anticipation of escape.

Clarence peeked out and saw no one on deck. He climbed out, scanned the horizon, and made out the outline of the Los Angeles shore through breaks in the lifting fog. The ship had slowed down enough as it neared port to give him a chance to escape. Clarence turned the davit's crank one notch. He went to the other davit and cranked it one notch. By cranking each davit a notch at a time, he made the davit arms swing the boat over the water. His hands shook and he breathed heavily, afraid someone would catch him. Fortunately, no one came to the upper deck while he slowly worked the noisy davits forward. He scrambled back into the boat, pulled the canvas to one side, and plugged the drain hole. "Glad I remembered that!" he mumbled. Luckily, the davit arms on the smaller boats had cables going through a single pulley positioned over the center of the boat, so he was able to lower it by himself. Pulling the safety pin from the pulley, he lowered the boat swiftly and silently into the ocean. He unhitched the cables and dipped the oars into the water. As the giant wall of steel slid passed him, Clarence used the oars to keep the boat from capsizing in the ship's wake. His prior experience as a ship stowaway paid off. He had learned how to handle lifeboats when the captain of the S.S. Malolo put him to work as a deckhand on their trip to Hawaii.

Keeping land in sight, Clarence aimed for a beach south of the LA port. He wanted to get as far away from the ship as possible.

DAVID G. VIEIRA JR.

“Yes, yes, yes!” he shouted when the ship was out of earshot. “Woo-hoo!” he cried again, excited that he had managed to escape. But his enthusiasm was short lived. Suddenly he felt a strong wind and saw a massive rain front coming quickly from the left. He knew he was in trouble.

As the wind howled in his ears, dark clouds covered the morning sky. Then the rain poured on him like a waterfall. He reached for the canvas behind him and pulled it over his head to protect himself from the downpour. But it was precarious shelter and he shivered in the cold as the front side of his pants got drenched. As the waves rose dramatically, he became terrified of capsizing.

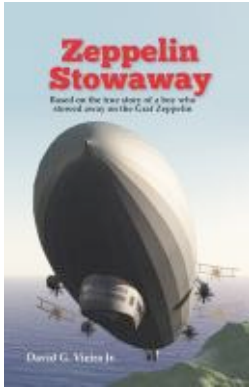
To his relief, at the crest of a wave he again spotted the faint outline of the beach. He had no idea how far it was, but continued rowing in that direction. He just hoped he had the strength to make it.

He fought the waves for some time, struggling to stay on course, riding up over the crests, down into the troughs, then up again until his arms ached so much he had to stop rowing. Fortunately for him, the storm subsided as quickly as it started. The clouds broke revealing a streak of sunshine barely visible above the horizon that lit up the ocean. Seeing the sun and some blue sky lifted his spirits, but he was too tired to continue rowing.

He faced the sunrise and wished he could fly. That would be his salvation. He imagined his body floating out of the boat and flying through the beautiful patch of clear sky all the way home. That would be wonderful but it wasn't reality.

## *ZEPPELIN STOWAWAY*

Then, suddenly, an ocean current started pushing the boat towards land. That gave him the courage he needed to begin rowing again. He rowed for what seemed an eternity until the boat caught a sandbank on the beach and jerked to a sudden stop. Dragging himself from the boat until he was safely out of water, he collapsed onto the sand. As he stared at the sky still wishing he could fly away, his mind drifted into the black sea of the unconscious world.



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