

AIR

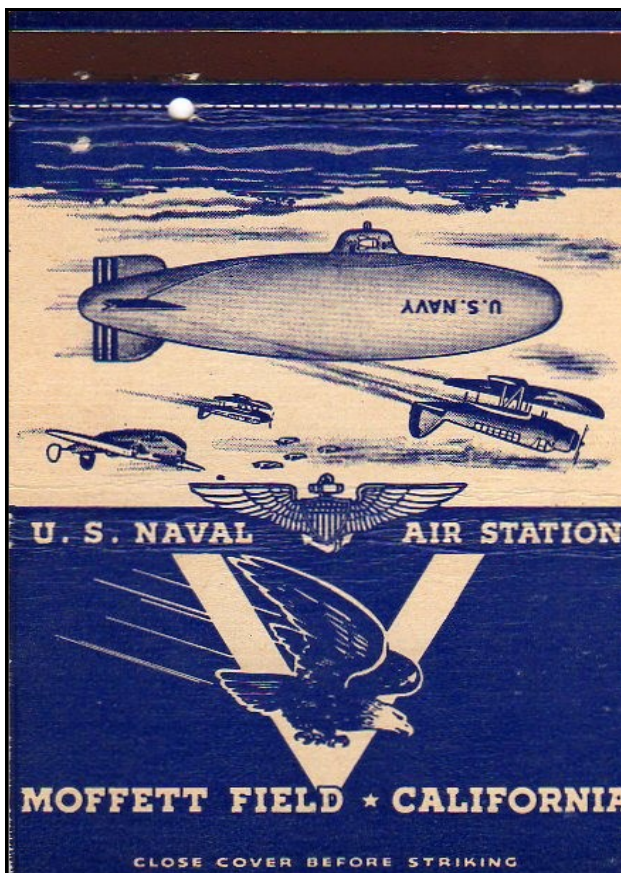


The relationship between the airship and the U.S. Military started at Lakehurst Naval Air Station, 65 miles south of New York City. Originally an ammunition and artillery test site, the U.S.S. Shenandoah began construction there in 1921. Later it provided service to the airships Los Angeles, Akron, Macon, Graf Zeppelin, and even the Hindenburg.

Eventually, Lakehurst became home for many operational units, including Airship Squadron Three (ZP-3) and Airship Squadron ZW-1, the first and only airborne early warning (AEW) airship squadron.

In 1941, however, the Lakehurst, NJ, site was the only lighter-than-air (LTA) station in existence, and with the approach of war in Europe, the United States began to take a serious look at its defensive capabilities. High on the list of priorities was anti-submarine patrolling of the coastal areas and harbors. At this time, the best vehicle for the job was the blimp. In the age before helicopters, the blimp had the capability to hover, fly slow for extended periods, and carry the sensors and armament to protect shipping off the coast.

On July 3, 1941, Congress passed a bill to authorize construction of facilities to house and support 48 airships. Weeksville, NC, was selected as the site because of its proximity to the large naval presence at Norfolk and because it was midway down the east coast of the United States, and airships operating from there could cover the Hampton Roads, Cape Hatteras area.



Construction was started on August 6, 1941, on what was to become Weeksville Naval Air Station. The original contract called for the construction of a steel hanger, helium storage and service, barracks for 228 men and 50 officers, power plant, landing mat, and a mobile mooring mast. Then, in July of 1942, an additional contract added a second all-wood hanger that, today, is still the largest wooden structure in the world. Additional housing and facilities were also added. Weeksville N.A.S. commenced operations on April 1, 1942.

At its completion, Weeksville covered 822 acres, had 10 miles of railroad tracks, hangar space for 12 Navy "K" ships, housing for 700 enlisted men and 150 officers, and cost over 6 million dollars. Airship squadron ZP-14 was established there on June 1, 1942.

These were the first K-ships. In World War II, they made 55,900 operations flights of totaling over

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550,000 flight hours. During the war, they escorted 89,000 surface ships. Not a single one of these surface ships was lost to enemy submarines. The submarines feared the presence of airships, despite the fact that there is no public record of an airship ever sinking an enemy submarine. One airship, K-74, was shot down in the Florida Straits in July, 1943, by a German U-boat when the airship flew over the sub and the depth charges failed to explode. During World War II, airships also conducted search and rescue operations, patrols, photography, and mine-laying.

These K-ships had a small radar, sonobouy receivers, magnetic detection equipment (MAD), contact bombs, depth charges, radios, and, towards the end of the war, homing torpedoes.

The K-ships were eventually supplanted by the Nan-ships, named for the fact that they were part of the “N” airship series in the list of lettered airships. The Nan-ships were much larger and required more ground handlers. Unlike the K-ship, whose flights were usually just day-long, the Nan-ships tended to stay out longer. The capabilities of the Nan-ship were a dramatic improvement over the earlier K-ship. It carried sonobouys, passive electronic counter measures (ECM), magnetic anomaly detector (MAD), and powerful radar that could spot garbage from ships floating miles away.

The beginning of the end of the airships was probably signaled by the the advent of the first nuclear-powered submarine, the U.S.S. Nautilus (SSN-571). It was the Nautilus that proved the airship obsolete as a sub-hunter. The Nautilus took part in naval exercises with an airship and a task force in the Atlantic some time after its launching in 1954. Its mission was to successfully simulate an attack on the task force, while the mission of the airship was to spot the sub and prevent the attack from happening.

The airship found that it could only detect the sub when it was nearby, and then it was too late. The Nautilus could travel, rise, and fire so fast that the airship could not possibly keep up. The Nautilus “sank” the carrier and several other ships in the task force. Naval warfare forever changed that day. The U.S. Navy, by the way, was the only service in World War II to employ airships.

Modern airships serve a number of functions today, mostly media-related, but they remain relative oddities in the sky, such as the Goodyear blimp at sports events.

