



# THE SILVER

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

**UN**spoiled, as we were in The Twenties, by mass-media and TV's instant image, we had a capacity to get genuinely excited about things. In today's deplorable jargon, the expression would be "turned on."

Fresh in our minds were the exploits of the German zeppelins over France and England. Their Maybach engines droned them through the skies with their cargoes of lethal eggs, and they did some damage. Early on, they came in low and were easy marks for ground fire. When they took to higher altitudes, the Allied airmen, especially the British fliers in Camels and Sopwiths, shot them down with bombs or machine guns, their hydrogen making bright arcs as they came to earth or plopped into the Channel and North Sea. Long before the first big war was over, the Germans gave up the airship as an attack weapon.

But when the Allies were dividing the spoils after that war, they wanted what was left of the German zeppelin fleet. At least seven of the big ships were destroyed by German saboteurs before they could be delivered. Most of these were destined for the United States. England, France and Italy each got two zepps and Japan one. When our share was wrecked, the Germans agreed to build a large "non-military" airship for delivery to our Navy.

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Meantime, the Navy approved construction of the first rigid American airship. Her components were made at the naval aircraft factory at Philadelphia and she was put together in a brand new \$3,000,000 hangar at Lakehurst, in the flat pine barrens of mid-New Jersey.

Our first dirigible was ZR-1 and the whole country read with great interest about the construction of the ship, frame by frame. The hydrogen-inflated zeppelins had proved to be as flammable and explosive as so many cigars filled with firecrackers. Our first airship, although built to basic zeppelin lines, would rely on non-explosive helium to give it lift.

When the big ship was ready, it took seven days to inflate her gas bags. Early in September, 1923, she made her first tentative flight. Then, while we all cheered and felt proud, the ship made other flights — to Philadelphia, Washington and even as far away as St. Louis. On October 10, Mrs. Edwin Denby, wife of the Secretary of the Navy, christened her *Shenandoah*. Someone else called her *Daughter of the Stars* and the nickname stuck.

She was the nation's pride and joy and everyone wanted to see her. Her promised appearance over the Brockton Fair didn't come off and the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* asked Mr. Denby to send her over New England and, specifically, over Providence, during the Armistice Day parade. The Navy ordered the flight and for many days, these newspapers gave daily reports about the airship, its flight plan and ETA. The weather, when the time came,

failed to cooperate and the flight was off.

**T**HEN ON NOVEMBER 20, which happened to be a delightfully sunny Tuesday, Rhode Island got its first look at a zeppelin. It was the biggest thing around here since Lief Ericson built the Old Stone Mill, since Adrian Block gave his name to Block Island, since the Chepachet elephant went wild, since shots were fired in anger at Acote's Hill in the Dorr War.

That morning, at Lakehurst, the *Shenandoah's* skipper, Commander F. R. McCrary, at 0652, gave the order "Up ship." The ground crew let the lines go and the big dirigible, driven by five six-cylinder 300 h.p. Packard engines, went slowly skyward into the northeast.

*Shenandoah* was over Newport at 10:40 where the skipper of the Naval Training Station had his boots, in dress whites, deployed over the parade ground in a formation spelling N-E-W-P-O-R-T. All the school children in Newport were let out to look aloft in wonder.

So it went . . . Fall River, New Bedford, and then back west. The *Journal-Bulletin* had arranged with the pumping station at the old Hope Street reservoir, the Narragansett Electric, Providence Gas and American Enamel, to sound their whistles as *Shenandoah* approached the city. The engineers, when the time came, simply tied down their whistle cords until the steam ran down.

The roofs of the Biltmore, Turks

Head, Hospital Trust and the old Industrial Trust buildings were filled with capacity audiences. Exchange Place was jammed.

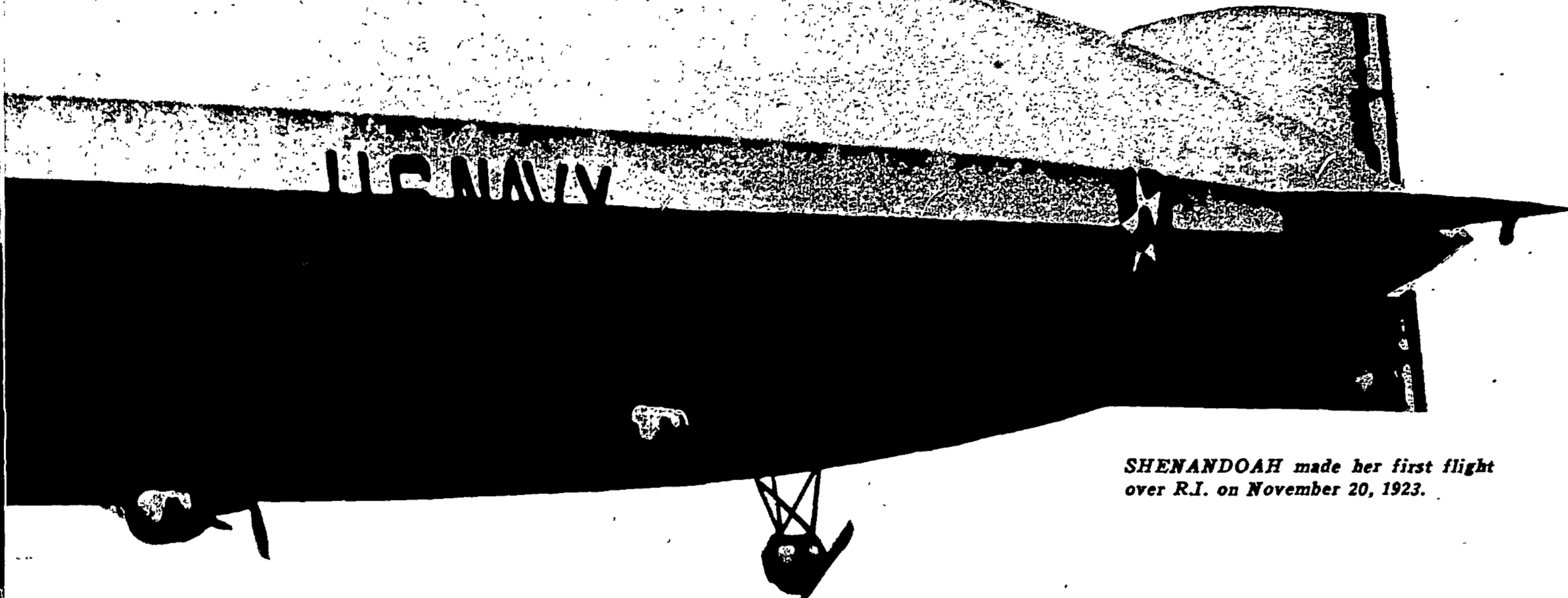
**A**LOFT WENT a *Journal-Bulletin* plane, undoubtedly an open cockpit job, piloted by Leonard Curtis with "our special photographer" Gordon A. Burnham riding-camera. I can't dig up a trace of either man. They flew a thousand feet or more above the beautiful silver cigar in an atmosphere which was clear and close to zero degrees. In spite of the cold, Mr. Burnham got some beautiful shots which were printed in large size in our papers. Such were the vagaries of our news library, however, that I can't find any trace of the original photographs either.

When *Shenandoah* came in from the east, she apparently was first sighted at Kettle Point, East Providence, where the tanker *W. L. Steed* sounded its whistle. As the airship soared up river over the East Side, the harbor clamor was taken up by towboats *Gaspee*, *James P. McGurl* and *Carrie A. Ramsey*. *Mohawk* of the Providence Line, *Lexington* of the Colonial Line, *Tennessee* of the Bay State Line and *Tuscon* of Merchants & Miners at India Street joined the din. The newspapers called it "the greatest welcome ever."

Such was the interest in the airship that the telephone system for a couple of hours was virtually useless. People were calling the *Journal-Bulletin*, the other newspapers, the police, anyone,



## TALES OF THE TWENTIES



*SHENANDOAH made her first flight over R.I. on November 20, 1923.*

# PERFECTOS

wanting to know when *Shenandoah* would be here.

The airship circled the city and then went off to Pawtucket, Woonsocket and Boston. On her way home, she passed over Springfield, Hartford and New York City. She was back at Lakehurst at 8:45 p.m., where she gave the ground crew a bad time because there was a stiff cross wind blowing. It wasn't until 11:45 that they got her into the big hangar.

*Shenandoah* was the lead story in the *Journal* next morning. Such was the journalistic hyperbole of the day that our reporter, in his lead paragraph, called the airship "the navy's great

gray shark, wolf of the sea sky."

The papers ran "Facts About . . ." boxes, giving readers the *Shenandoah* biography and dimensions. Among other things, the box said that if the airship had been grounded in Westminster Street (a physical impossibility because she was too big around) she would have stretched from Dorrance to Mathewson. She could have gotten into Exchange Place where her nose would have touched City Hall, her tail fins the Federal Building, and she would have filled the Mall from side to side.

We had seen our first zeppelin. We all had cricks in the back of our necks

but we wanted more. And more we were to get.

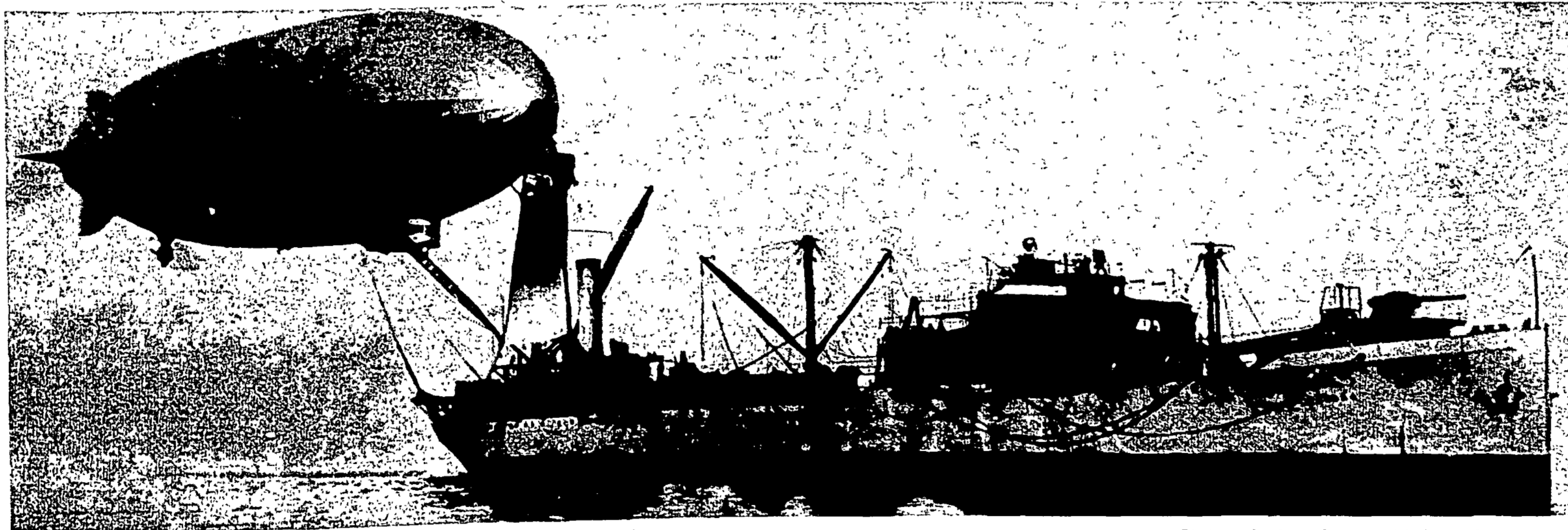
**T**HE NEXT TIME *Shenandoah* came to Rhode Island, she would rack up a first in aviation history. Although I didn't know that then, I had a front seat.

The patent winch on the fore peak of the yacht I was working on during August, 1924, got out of kilter. She was a Herreshoff boat, the yawl *Quakeress*, and sailed out of Jamestown. To get the winch fixed, we went up to Bristol and, as luck would have it, the job was

done on Friday, August 8, late in the morning.

The breeze was making up from the southwest and we tacked out of Bristol and started down the east side of Prudence. There was the strangest looking Navy oiler we'd ever seen. Her top hamper forward had been pruned low and aft was a strange triangular steel tower. The base splayed out from port to starboard rail and at the top of the pyramid the structure went straight up for many more feet. Later, I learned that the curious looking rig was 151 feet high.

We tacked in under the oiler's stern. She was the *USS Patoka*, virtually dead  
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*LOS ANGELES* snugged up to the mooring mast on *USS Patoka*.

Photographs from the Journal-Bulletin News Library

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# Today's blimp is small potatoes

in the water in mid-channel on the line, roughly, between Homestead on Prudence and the old coal mine on the Portsmouth shore.

It was a pleasant sailing day, we weren't in any hurry, and we stood off and on to the south. In mid-afternoon, *Shenandoah* came north from Newport, circled *Patoka* two or three times, and then went up toward Fall River. Our skipper, Thomas B. Potter, said "Let's see what all this is about," so we slacked off and went north and cruised around the strange looking oiler.

Late in the afternoon, *Shenandoah* came down from the direction of Providence and made big circles around *Patoka*. The Narragansett Bay southwesterly dropped off, as it usually does, to a zephyr about 6:30 p.m. and the airship started to home in on the oiler. Three lines were dropped and one of them, heavier than the others, was made fast — as far as we could see — to another cable at the top of the *Patoka's* mast. Then the oiler winched the airship down while the crew hauled on the other two lines from the deck. At about 1900, *Shenandoah's* nose snugged up to the mooring mast and was secured. The airship's crew came out through the nose and down the mast.

Next day, in the paper, we read that we had been close witnesses to the mooring of an airship to a floating mooring mast for the first time ever.

*Patoka* headed south and anchored midway between Melville and the training station, the airship swinging at her stern. *Shenandoah* was supposed to hang around and make other practice landings but on Saturday, there were storm warnings so she cut loose about 3 p.m., went out to sea to avoid the line squalls, was over Lakehurst at 3:30 Sunday morning, and safe in hangar two hours later.

Running up the center of the *Patoka's* triangular mast was a 12-inch tube through which the mother ship could fuel and water the airships. Much of the special electrical gear in *Shenandoah* had been devised by a Brown University professor, the late Arthur E. Watson.

What the Navy and, especially, the *Shenandoah's* skipper, Commander Zachary Lansdowne, had their eyes on in 1924 was a trip over the North Pole. ZR-1 flew over Rhode Island several times during the summer of 1925, sometimes hooking up to *Patoka*.

Commander Lansdowne came from the Middle West and knew all about line storms and tornadoes. The Navy had ordered a mid-western flight late in the summer and the commander had managed to delay it. Finally, the Navy said go.

The first leg of the flight would be to St. Louis, then up to Minneapolis where there was a state fair, and then to Detroit where the *Daughter of the Stars* would hook up to a mooring mast built by Henry Ford at his own expense. Henry was nuts about dirigibles.

*Shenandoah* heard the words "Up ship" from Lansdowne on the morning of September 2, As dawn approached next morning, the airship was over

Ohio, surrounded by lightning storms and air turbulence. Many farmers southeast of Zanesville watched in frightened wonder — they'd never seen a dirigible — as the great ship broke into three pieces. The men in the hull section free-ballooned it to earth. Fourteen men, including Zachary Lansdowne, were killed. Forty-three survived.

That was the end of our first Zepp.

**WE NEVER SAW ZR-2.** (ZR was Navy for "zeppelin rigid.") She was a British-built monster which broke up and crashed during a trial flight in England. Some referred to her as *The Flying Lemon*.

ZR-3 was another matter. Built by Germany for our Navy as part of the war reparations, the airship was 670 feet long and her interior accommodations for the crew were luxurious as compared with those in *Shenandoah*, whose people had to do with coffee and sandwiches. From the galley of ZR-3 came multi-course meals, piping hot.

*Shenandoah* was hooked to a mooring mast in San Diego, California, when ZR-3 left Germany for its flight to the States on October 12, 1924, with Germany's foremost airshipman, Dr. Hugo Eckener, aboard. Three days later, after an uneventful crossing, the airship played its searchlights on Boston Common, droned on over Providence and down the Sound to New York. The country was getting airship daffy by that point and the Navy's new zeppelin got a loud welcome. Soon, she was tethered at Lakehurst and taken into the hangar which was so big it could house ZR-1 and ZR-3 at the same time.

ZR-3 became our new darling of the skies. Mrs. Calvin Coolidge christened her *Los Angeles*, breaking a bottle of water from the River Jordan against the airship while doves of peace were released from the hull.

Time and again, *Los Angeles* in The Twenties flew over Providence and Rhode Island, frequently mooring on the *Patoka's* mast at Newport. On one of her visits, she brought along a Navy football team which was to play in Newport.

Whenever she came, we all looked up.

*Los Angeles*, like short-lived *Shenandoah*, was a sky advertisement for Uncle Sam. Invariably, her flights, even those not involving Rhode Island, made page one. The Navy used her, experimentally, as a launching craft for fighting planes.

In 1932, she was decommissioned at Lakehurst after 331 flights and thousands of hours in the air. Later, she was dismantled.

**T**ODAY'S Rhode Islanders, except those who are old enough to remember, look up in awe when, occasionally, a Goodyear blimp flies over. Pretty small potatoes. □



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