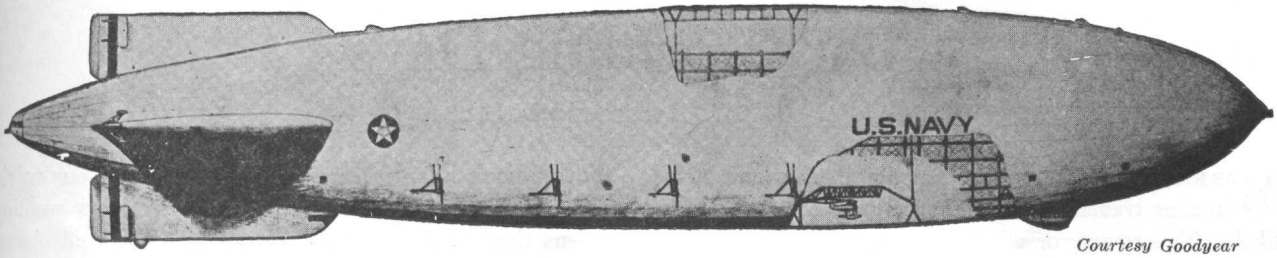


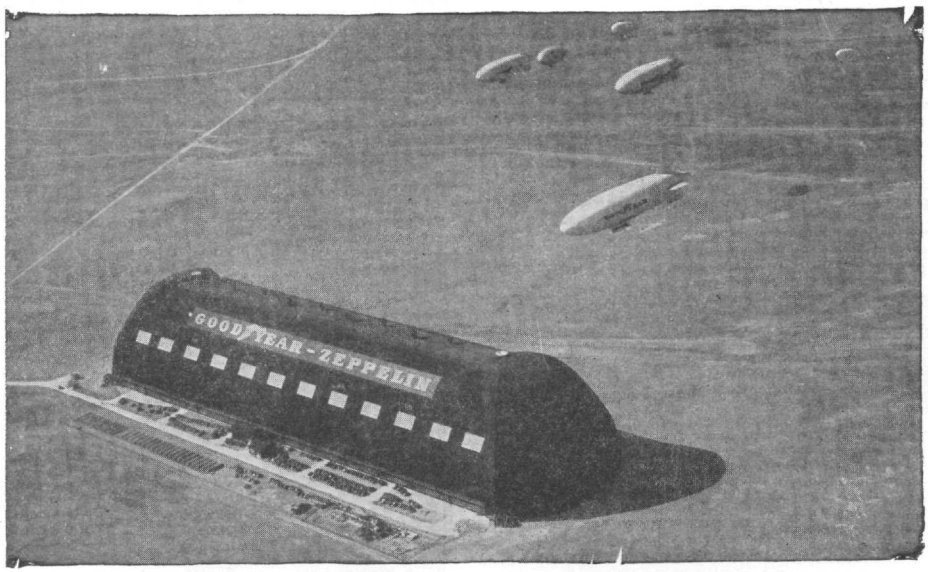
Courtesy Goodyear

Experiences With The U. S. S. Akron

By G. E. Branch, E.E. 3

At the end of the spring quarter, 1931, I was fortunate enough to be assigned to active duty in the regular Navy at the Goodyear Zeppelin Dock, at Akron, Ohio, acting in the capacity of radio operator.

Transmitters and receivers were installed in one of the buildings near the dock for communication with the ship. Unfortunately, governmental restrictions will not permit a detailed description of the apparatus used, either at the ground radio station or the ship's installation; but in passing it is permissible to say that the most modern and efficient sets yet devised for communication with craft lighter than air were used.



Courtesy Goodyear

The Dock at Akron

The high-powered, government-owned radio station at Bellevue, District of Columbia, transmits several times daily in dots and dashes and by means of cipher, also in code, a detailed weather map of the United States and surrounding territory. It was one of our duties to copy this cipher on a typewriter at a speed of thirty to thirty-five words per minute. One word of this cipher stood for the barometric pressure, inches of rain, temperature, and any other information necessary to complete an accurate weather map. Upon completion of this cipher, requiring about two hours, the papers were given to expert Naval weather men who deciphered the unintelligible words and transferred the information obtained to a large blank map of the United States and vicinity. By knowing the various pressure areas throughout the country, the weather men could predict fairly accurately the weather for several days ahead.

Why all this elucidation regarding weather maps? Simply because the weather is the most vital thing necessary for the proper and efficient handling of a gigantic ship the size of the *Akron*. The captain and officers of the ship were constantly watching the maps to determine the time when conditions were favorable for a flight. Perhaps the reader will recall the hurricane which swept through San Domingo last summer? Luckily, I was on duty at the ground radio station when first news of the disaster came in via the radio station at Bellevue. It certainly was a thrill to copy information concerning a major event of the world for that day before anyone else knew about it. Incidentally, the Navy weather men had been shaking their heads for several days at this self-same hurricane, the map indicating that the disturbance was headed for the coast somewhere in the vicinity of San Domingo. Warnings from Bellevue to the inhabitants had been issued for hours before the storm struck; these warnings were instrumental in saving many lives and much property loss.

Since the title of this story permits me to freely digress from any hard and fast subject, I will relate the story of the crash of the *Shenandoah*, told to me by one of the radio officers on the *Akron* who was aboard the *Shenandoah* when she crashed in southern Ohio a few years ago. It seems that he was having an early cup of coffee in the radio room when the wind first struck the ship. He was thrown violently against a bulkhead (wall), his

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(Continued from Page 3)

head struck some metallic object and left him in a dazed condition. It will be remembered that the ship broke in two; the radio room was completely crushed by the wind, the forward portion of the ship was hurled at a break-neck speed towards the earth. The size and structure of what was left of the forward part of the ship prevented it from falling like a rock, but he said he knew that it was falling and plenty fast! Badly hurt though he was, he was conscious that various bars, beams, and other wreckage had battered and bruised his body cruelly. One dur-aluminin beam had pierced the flesh just in front of the ligament connecting the heel to the upper portion of the leg, hanging him face downward in mid-air! If the beam had broken it meant certain death, to remain intact meant dangling like a spitted roast upon a fire, producing the most excruciating torture. For approximately five minutes he hung in this position, until finally his face and shoulders began dragging in the brush and small trees. Then the wreck crashed, and he lost consciousness. While he was telling this part of the story, his eyes indicated that his mind was reminiscing over experiences horrible to relate. After a long period in the hospital, he finally recovered sufficiently to return to active duty, and is now serving as radio officer on board the *Akron*.

The newspapermen were constantly endeavoring to obtain information concerning the date set for the initial test flight of the *Akron*. Indeed, the skipper and officers themselves did not know when the ship was to take off on her first flight, simply because they had to wait upon ideal conditions of that all-important factor, the weather. Finally the day for the great event came. Everything was put in readiness to test her air-worthiness. The ground crew was given detailed instructions in order to prevent any damage to the ship as she was being moved from the hangar.

Ah! She was moving! What was happening? Her tail was going down. Great clusters of newspaper photographers taking pictures directly beneath the tail of the ship suddenly were disagreeably surprised when several tons of ballast in the form of water was released from the aft end. Photographers and cameras alike were knocked down and subjected to a thorough drenching. Shortly thereafter, the ship slowly rose from the place of her birth. With motors roaring, she majestically sailed out of sight.

The work of the personnel at the ground radio station had just begun; we were to keep in communication with the *Akron* at all times. Messages flashed back and forth at a high rate of speed; everything was working perfectly. The exultation of the crew was expressed in one of the messages received. There is. of course, a certain amount of doubt connected with the actual practical working of a theoretical idea. The crew was shouldering a five million dollar responsibility which had many new ideas incorporated within its silvery sides.

After having communicated with the ship for about an hour, we were somewhat surprised that our calls were not answered. For approximately ten minutes we at the ground station had not heard one dot from the *Akron*. We were beginning to wonder if something had gone wrong with the radio sets aboard. After calling repeatedly for five minutes more we resolved to play a waiting game; but it was very disconcerting even to have the thought that something had gone amiss aboard the ship. Suddenly a terrific crackling came from the headphones I was wearing; a signal of such intensity that it lit the tubes in the receiver brighter when the transmitting station key was depressed. To our utter amazement the ship had silently crept up in the semi-darkness and was lazily floating within several hundred feet of our receiving antenna. The radio-men aboard had started transmitting at that particular time and with the high-powered set they were using, their signal nearly knocked me out of my chair. We were much relieved to know that everything was all right. When asked why they had been silent for so long the officer in charge of radio aboard the ship notified us that they had been listening for the radio stations at Washington and Great Lakes. In answer to their inquiry regarding weather conditions at ground level, we replied with complete information.

By this time it was pitch dark and considerable difficulty was encountered in maneuvering the ship in position for a landing. The ground crew finally managed to secure several of the lines dangling from the ship; and shortly the pride of the Navy was moored in her huge hangar, after the completion of a highly satisfactory initial flight.