



Home Port for Sky Cruisers  
1931-1935

*The U.S.S. Macon is  
prepared for its first  
flight from the Sunny-  
vale Naval Air Station  
on October 26, 1933.*

## A Royal Welcome for a Sky-Queen

Despite a veil of fog that had settled on the San Francisco Peninsula, it was a carnival-like scene near the Mountain View-Sunnyvale border in the early hours of May 13, 1932.

More than 100,000 people — enough to fill Stanford Stadium — packed the bayside fields where they huddled in cars or sat on bleachers set up by concessionaires.

Vendors sold hot dogs, sandwiches and pies. Sixty-five state troopers were called in to handle the traffic on the still-uncompleted Bayshore Freeway where cars inched ahead four abreast en route to the site.

The crowd assembled by the bay to greet a Navy ship that was due to dock any time that morning. But this new 'aircraft carrier' would not be arriving by water.

Suddenly, about 7 a.m. the USS Akron silently dropped ghostlike out of the clouds. The silver dirigible stretched two and a half times the length of a football field across the sky.

The crowd cheered.

"It was a never-to-be-forgotten sight ...," noted one old Palo Alto Times story.

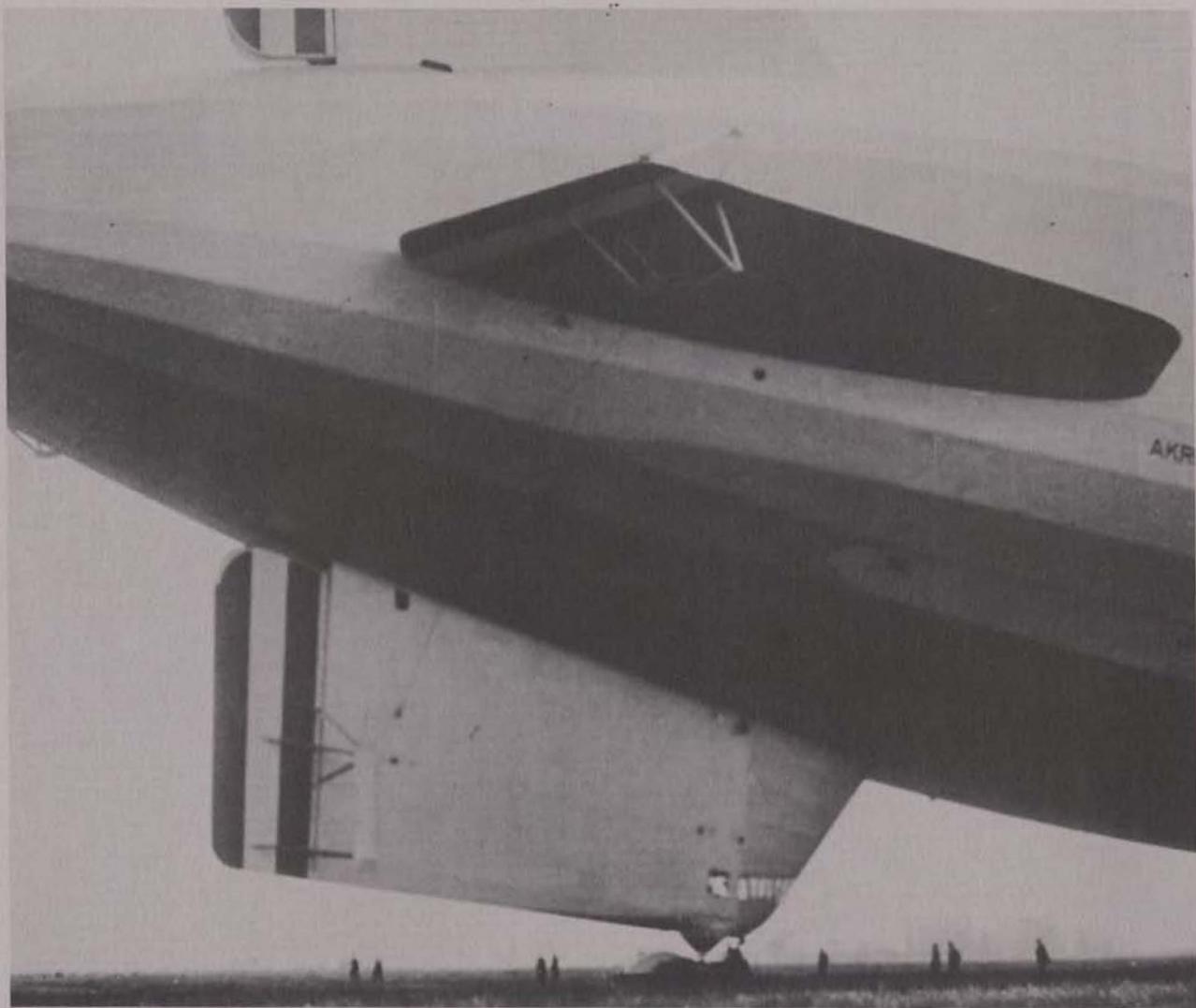
As the Akron hovered above the crowd, it passed over the skeleton of a giant dirigible hangar under construction nearby.

The towering hangar marked the site of what one day would be Sunnyvale Naval Air Station and later Moffett Field, a hard-won trophy for the Bay Area that offered jobs, national prestige and hope for Depression-weary residents.

Although this was the first and last time the Akron would visit the base, its sister ship, the Macon, would be a common sight in Bay Area skies between 1933 and 1935.

As brief as it was, the era of the sky cruisers left its mark on the Peninsula. And when motorists today pass by the giant hangar that still stands at Moffett Field along the still-crowded Bayshore Freeway, they get an idea of the size of the 'air monster' that once flew over Peninsula rooftops and found shelter in such a den.

For those who were there, it was a never-to-be-forgotten time.



*The U.S.S. Akron visits the site of the future Sunnyvale Naval Air Station.*

## "I See an Airbase"—The Purchase of 1,000 Acres by the Bay

About ten years before the celebrated arrival of the Akron that day, the U.S. Navy made its move to enter the lighter-than-air craft era.

Germany had found success in using giant airships for scouting in World War I, and the U.S. did not want to be left behind.

At first the Navy had just two rigid dirigibles, the USS Shenandoah and the USS Los Angeles.

Modeled closely after a German zeppelin that had been forced down over France during the war, the Shenandoah was assembled in 1923 at Lakehurst, N.J.

The Los Angeles, completed in 1924, was constructed in Germany by the Zeppelin Company as part of war reparations and delivered to the United States on an agreement that it would not be used for military purposes.

But the Shenandoah's career was shortlived. The cigar-shaped craft was torn apart in a severe thunderstorm over Ohio in September, 1925, marking a major setback for the program.

That year, the allies lifted a ban prohibiting Germany from constructing its own airships, and the Zeppelin

Company built the famous Graf Zeppelin. The luxury airship, one of the few ever used for commercial transportation, drew international attention by circling the globe in 1929.

But with the demise of the Shenandoah, military personnel in the U.S. were less convinced about the future of dirigibles.

"When I first came in contact with rigid airships, I couldn't see anything to them," said Rear Admiral William A. Moffett, chief of the Navy's bureau of Aeronautics in 1926. But once persuaded by his officers, he became a strong advocate. "It is a noteworthy thing that every officer who has anything to do with these ships... is in favor of them and thinks they will be of great value to the Navy."

In 1926 the Navy announced that it was going to build two new airships, both larger and stronger than the Shenandoah. They would become the Macon and the Akron.

With the announcement of the new ships, the Navy began its search for a place on the West Coast to base one of the dirigibles. Early indications were that top Navy officials were favoring San Diego, at a base called Camp Kearny.

But when Northern California residents heard about the search, local communities began working together

like never before to bring it to the Bay Area. San Francisco Mayor James T. Rolph made a public appeal for property large enough for a Naval base.

During the search, a young real estate agent named Laura Thane Whipple, of Niles across the bay, came upon the Sunnyvale-Mountain View site.

Whipple, one of only a handful of women realtors in those days, discovered that the 1,700-acre Ynigo Ranch on the banks of the South Bay might be available. Accompanied by her mother, she paid the site a visit.

Although apprehensive at first, Whipple was convinced when she got there. According to her mother, Whipple just gazed endlessly at the spread of broccoli, cauliflower and hay fields.

When asked what she saw, Whipple responded, "an air base."

Whipple recruited the help of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce and the San Jose Mercury Herald. The San Francisco Chronicle and the Chamber of Commerce also joined in the drive. Soon just about all of the Peninsula communities were part of a regional campaign that would not be equaled until 1937 when cities came together in a similar fashion to build the Golden Gate Bridge.

In an attempt to better their chances for receiving the base, Santa Clara, San Mateo, San Francisco and Alameda counties set up a financing program. San Francisco raised \$330,000, while Santa Clara County communities contributed most of the remaining \$100,000 to buy the land. Other cities made small donations, such as the \$15,000 given by Palo Alto.

The communities eventually purchased 1000 acres of the bayside land for \$476,066 and turned around and offered it to the Navy for \$1-

In its search for a base, the Navy checked out dozens of West Coast locations, but narrowed its selection to two, Camp Kearny and the Mountain View-Sunnyvale site.

The warm climate, favorable wind currents and the regional effort by the Bay Area communities all worked in favor of the Northern-California location.

But the competition was fierce. Reports of the ongoing contest were in the newspaper almost daily. San Diego officials began to discount the Sunnyvale site as being too foggy.

But among those seeming to side with the Sunnyvale base was Rear Admiral Moffett, head of the Navy's selection committee.

"During a tour of inspection of the Sunnyvale field, Moffett is said to have paid particular attention to the channel of the south shore port, which runs up to the edge of the airbase," said a Palo Alto Times story of the day. According to the story, the Navy was considering dredging the channel to accommodate aircraft carriers and other Navy ships.

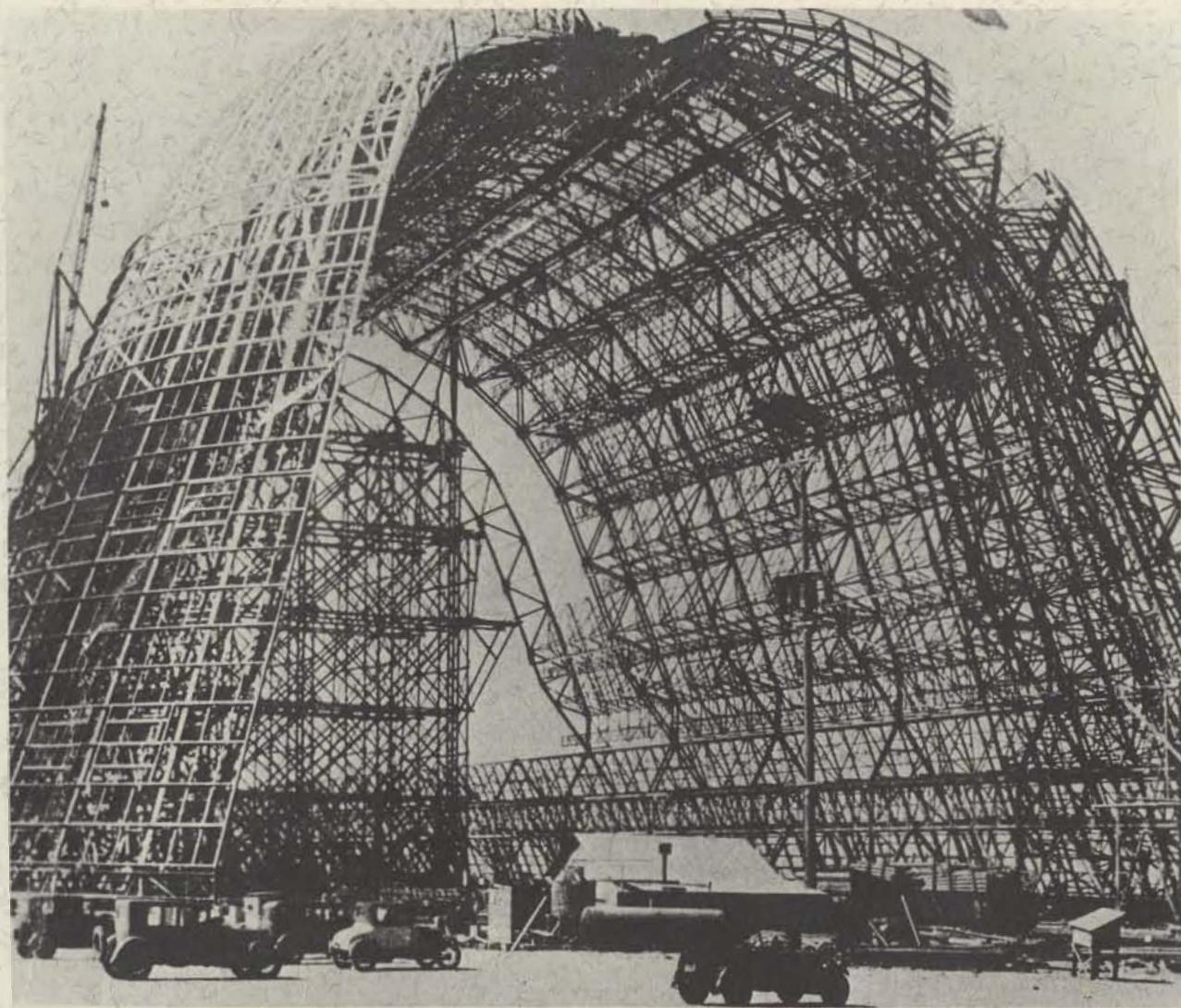
On Dec. 12, 1930, the news arrived from back East. The new dirigible base would be built in Sunnyvale.

The news prompted a quick and joyous celebration throughout the Bay Area. Schools and banks closed. A victory parade of cats wound its way along the Peninsula. Fire whistles blew and sirens rang.

Two months later, President Herbert Hoover signed the bill that authorized the Navy to accept the Sunnyvale property for \$1 and appropriated \$5 million for construction on the base to begin as soon as possible.

Noted a San Francisco Chronicle editorial: "What has been done with Sunnyvale is an example of what Northern and Central California can do when they play the game."

This game, the Bay Area won.



*Hangar Number 1 under construction in 1932.*

## Construction—“Set the Watches and Pipe Down”

Newspapers and Naval officers tried often in vain to explain to residents how massive a hangar would be constructed at the air base. But there were few comparisons to be made at that time.

The hangar, 211 feet high, would be taller than all the buildings in the South Bay but one, the Bank of America tower in San Jose. For the width and girth of the airship shelter with its massive “orange peel” doors, there was no parallel.

“Visualize the roofing over three city blocks 16 stories high with structural steel frame and you will have some idea of the size of the hangar,” said Lt. Comm. Edward L. Marshall of the Navy in 1931. “It will cover something more than eight acres of ground.”

The base also would be equipped with a massive nine-story mooring mast that would basically grab the giant airship by the nose and lead it in and out of the hangar.

The mooring mast ran on tracks

and functioned and looked very much like the space shuttle loading docks that would come five decades later.

For the Peninsula, the arrival of the base was a boon in bad times. It meant an average of 500 construction jobs a month at a time when jobs were hard to come by.

It would provide a boost to the local economy through the 500 or so people housed at the base and it would bring national attention to a growing, but still-fledgling area by the bay.



*Hangar Number 1, home base of the U.S.S. Macon, seen above.*

# San Jose Mercury Herald

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NO. 135.

### Reader Interest

World, national, state, county, local, social, club, church, school, sports, business, politics.  
All News Worth Printing

## Lindy Identifies Slain Babe As Mighty Man Hunt Launched

Body Cremated After Sorrowing Father Lays Family's Last Doubts.

Relentless Search for Criminals Under Way Spurred on by President.

By FRANCIS A. JAMIESON.  
Copyright, 1932, by The Associated Press.

**HOPEWELL, N. J., May 13**—The picture of a father standing alone before the broken body of his slain son, a mother's wail in grief and a president calling for action inspired the mightiest law enforcement agencies of the nation tonight to catch the murderers of Baby Lindbergh.

Meanwhile the wide-flung man hunters were equipped with the growing belief that the criminals who stole the infant March 1 sought ransom after they had killed him.

### COVERALLS MISSING.

The focal point of this school of thought was the little white coverall sleeping suit the child wore on the night of the kidnapping. This was missing when the father's body was found in a skeleton was stumbled upon in a woods by a near truckman yesterday less than five miles from the Lindbergh home.

And a garment purporting to be this same sleeping suit was the "token" by which Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh and his 72-year-old agent Dr. John F. Condon, were brought to pay \$50,000 ransom in the murky darkness of a New York City cemetery.

### ROSSER GRILLED.

That no possible trail to the apprehension of the criminals was being overlooked was seen in a police statement that two investigators spent the day in southern New Jersey with John Hughes Curtis going over the ground the Norfolk, Va., intermediary had covered for the past 40 days. The closest examination was given a statement from him regarding information which he obtained and which seemed so important at the time that Colonel Lindbergh was with him on a boat off Cape May, N. J., when the baby's body was discovered.

## Ransom Letter Gave Secret Key To Abductors

By The Associated Press.  
NEW YORK, May 13—The New York American published today what it said it had learned from reliable sources was the text of the ransom note left by the kidnapers of the Lindbergh baby.

It read as follows:  
"Dear sir—Have \$50,000 ready. \$25,000 in \$20 bills, \$15,000 in \$10 bills, and \$10,000 in \$5 bills. Have them in two packages. Four days we will inform you to redeem the money.  
"We warn you for making anything public or for notifying the police. The child is in our care."  
"Identification for letters are signaturs. Answer three fold. (1-2-3-4). Two rings in blue ink, with center ring of red. A blue ink line of the blue circles on the outer edge of the red. A hole on the outer edge of each dark circle and one in the centre of the red."  
"Don't publish this letter."

## Hoover Orders Relentless Hunt For Baby Killers

"Case Never to Be Forgotten Until Criminals Brought to Justice."

By The Associated Press.  
WASHINGTON, May 13—A man hunt second to none in the nation's history, a search that will not end until the murderers of little Charles Augustus Lindbergh Jr. have paid in kind was ordered in vehement words today by President Hoover.

"I have directed the law enforcement agencies and the several secret services of the federal government to make the kidnaping and murder of the Lindbergh baby a live and never-to-be-forgotten case never to be relaxed until these criminals are unshakably brought to justice, the first executive said.

### AGENTS TAKE FIELD.

The federal government does not have police authority in such crimes but its agencies will be un-

## GIANT ALCOHOL PLANT SEIZED NEAR SAN JUAN

Six Men Jailed in Raid by Sheriff Emig Deputies and Federal Agents.

Shipping by a network of warning signals, a posse of deputies from Sheriff William J. Emig's office and federal prohibition agents crashed into a huge alcohol plant on a ranch several miles east of San Juan yesterday, arrested six men and seized a large quantity of mash, alcohol and supplies. Although outside the county, Emig had been requested by the federal officers to aid them in the raid.

The plant, according to Assistant Prohibition Commissioner Thomas Goodstein, was in excess of \$35,000 and was probably one of the main sources of supply of alcohol for the county. It had a capacity of 800 gallons of 100-proof alcohol every 24 hours, according to the officer.

### TWO SAN JOSE MEN JAILED.

Those under arrest, all booked at the county jail for violation of the national prohibition act and held in lieu of \$2,500 bail each, are:

Joe Sealstone, 21 901 Vine street, San Jose; Joseph Carni, 22, 1274 Palm street, San Jose; Tony Porro, 28, San Francisco; John Marino, 50, Farmington; Nick Conini, 40, Eureka; and Sam Berney, 39, Los Angeles.

### TUNNEL ESCAPE FOILED.

When the raiders smashed their way into the structure housing the still, three men attempted to escape by way of a tunnel which led from the still, 400 feet under ground, emerging in a pile of brush. Several of the men took stations around the side of brush. Goodstein took a flashlight and crawled into the exit of the tunnel, moving toward the still. Seeing his light, the fugitive trio turned back and stepped out of the tunnel. In the liquor plant into the arms of officers stationed there.

### SEIZED WITH TRUCK.

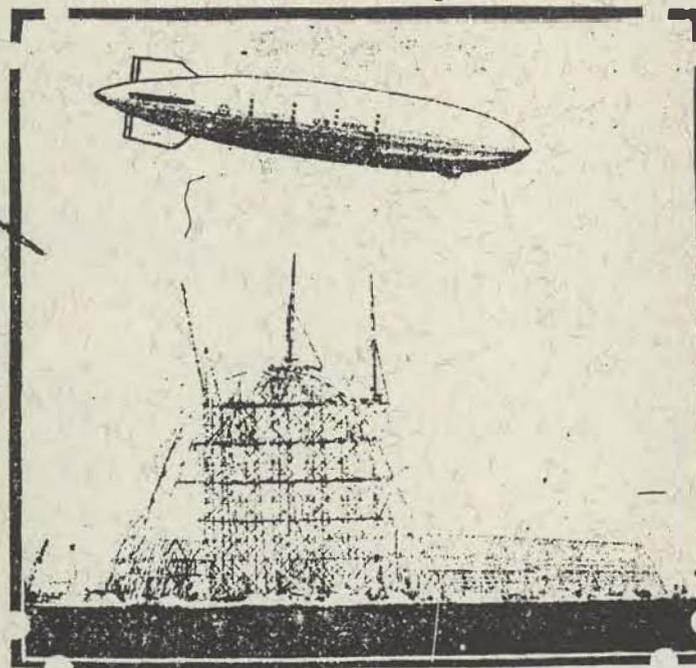
Joe Sealstone was arrested at the wheel of a truck loaded with 72 five-gallon cans of alcohol which raiders saw came from the plant. Deputy Sheriffs Ed. Lowell and John Moore, who with Under Sheriff Earle Hamilton accompanied the federal agents were stationed on the road near Sargent Station. A federal man watched the road in San Juan, and when the truck drove through on its way north, telephoned the deputies.

As the truck how into view, they jumped in their car. Sealstone put his hands on the wheel and was taken to the county jail.

Plant Pests New to

## 100,000 Greet Akron As She Docks At Sunnyvale; Program Today Marks Historic Event

### Home Port For Sky Cruisers



U. S. S. Akron just before mooring, pictured hovering over framework of giant hangar, the future home of the navy's air cruisers at the Sunnyvale base.—Mercury Herald Photo.

## Principals Of 'Honor Slaying' Arrive In S. F.

By The Associated Press.  
SAN FRANCISCO, May 13—With the case delayed since the arrival of

## AKRON WELCOME CEREMONY TODAY

With a crowd of operators forecast at somewhere 200,000 in attendance, officers and men of the U. S. S. Akron will be formally welcomed by central California during early day scheduled at the Sunnyvale air station at 3 o'clock this afternoon.

## U. S.-Paris Flier Saved From Sea By Atlantic Hero

By CAPTAIN GEORGE FRIED, Commander of the liner President Roosevelt.

Epochal Flight Ends at 7:07 P. M.: Extra Caution Bailed Morning Landing.

Commander Lauds Behavior of Craft: Says Base Ideal in Every Respect.

The U. S. S. Akron, the navy's pride and the world's largest airship, moored on Santa Clara valley soil at 7:07 o'clock last evening. A crowd of more than 100,000 saw her landing from adjoining roads. Hundreds more viewed it from surrounding houses.

The historic arrival, making Uncle Sam's west coast airship base at Sunnyvale an operating reality, will be celebrated with impressive ceremony at 3 o'clock this afternoon at the air station.

First sighted over the air field at exactly 7 o'clock yesterday morning—she had cruised high over the field unmarked at 12:45 o'clock during the night of vigil before—the Akron did not land in attempt covering three hours yesterday morning because of the determined caution of her skipper, Lieut. Commander Charles E. Rosendahl. The 12-hour delay in landing was no fault of either field or airship, he explained.

### Pictures on Pages 2-12

"A perfect mooring," Rosendahl declared, with praise for all connected with the epochal occasion, as he stepped down the gangway from the control car.

"A splendid ship," he added as he looked affectionately at the mountaintop bulk of his command as she swung above him in her mooring circle. "She met every test encountered on her trip from Lakehurst and surpassed every severe condition superbly."

"An excellent field," he continued as his weather-narrowed eyes took in the span of the 300-foot steel arches of the airship dock, a building just beyond the mooring mast. "My belief that this field is the best on the coast for airship operations is unshaken," said the expert whose recommendations aided the establishment of the air center in this valley.

### UNFORGETTABLE PICTURES.

Two impressive pictures will remain stamped forever upon the

"It means also that industries allied to aviation will spring up like mushrooms, each bringing its own payroll," the San Jose Mercury Herald noted prophetically in 1931.

"It means in short that San Jose and the bay region are on the threshold of the most glorious era of prosperity in their history."

But the one problem Peninsulans were quick to recognize was traffic.

Said the San Francisco Chronicle in 1931:

"Naturally all California will want to see the first airship that arrives and every tourist will want to visit it later. The Bayshore highway between San Francisco and San Jose, when finished, passes the site. The auto traffic is expected to far exceed the traffic at a football game at Palo Alto."

As a result, many public officials pledged to have the highway completed by the time the dirigible base was finished, and it was.

Work on the giant hangar was under way in 1932 when the recently completed Akron, based in Lakehurst, N.J., arrived on the Peninsula on its cross-country journey.

Nearly a year later, the Akron made its final flight.

On April 4, 1933, the 'sky-queen' got caught in heavy storm winds and crashed off the Atlantic coast, killing

73 of the 76 officers and crew aboard.

Among the lost was Admiral William Moffett.

Eight days later, thousands crowded onto the Sunnyvale base and, despite the pall that still surrounded the demise of the Akron, the Sunnyvale Naval Air Station was commissioned.

"The air base is the result of the finest cooperation of the bay region," said State Public Works Director Earl Lee Kelly, speaking for the gov-

ernor. "The citizens of the peninsula are to be congratulated ..."

Acting Commanding Officer M.J. Walker followed by giving the famous orders to Deputy Officer Lt. D.M. Mackey, "Enter in the log that the Sunnyvale station is placed in commission at 11:30 a.m. Set the watches and pipe down."

A few days later, the landing field at the base was given its official name. Moffett Air Field now awaited the Macon.

**Eugene Calande**, 77, of Mountain View, an engine crewman aboard the Akron in Lakehurst, N.J., from 1930-33:

"That was a terrific era. I would like to see it come back.

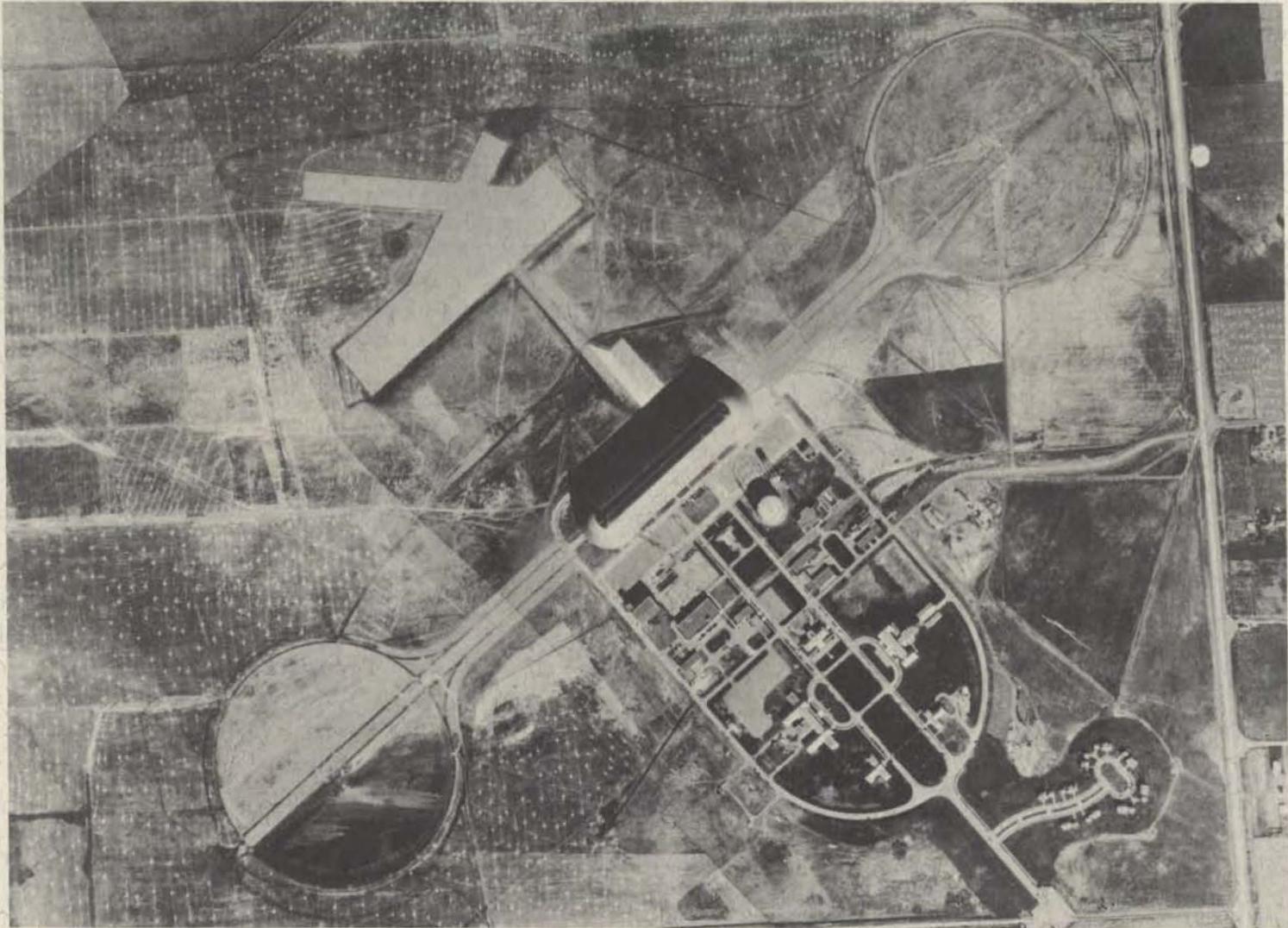
It was the greatest thing in the world. Every time you took off there were 200 to 300 people there, and every time you landed, it was the same thing. It was quite a sight.

They (Akron and Macon) were scouts for the Pacific Fleet. If you sent a plane out scouting it could only stay out there for a short time. The Akron could stay out there 72 hours.

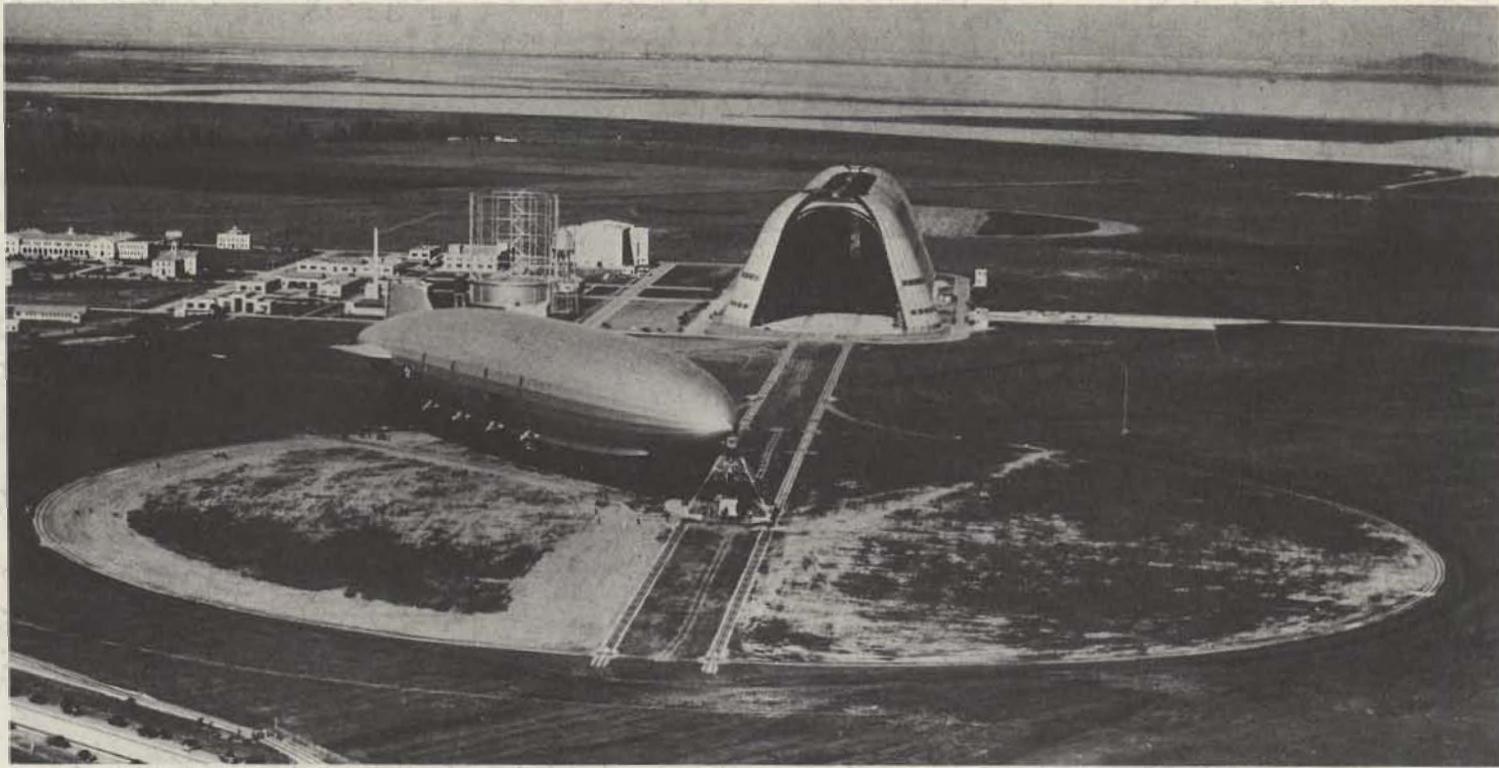
(When the Akron crashed, Calande had his day off.)

"I went to bed and right after midnight the storm woke me up and that's when she crashed. Nobody would believe it.

The streets at Moffett Field were all named after people who were killed in the crash. A lot of people don't realize that."



*Aerial view of the Sunnyvale Naval Air Station.*

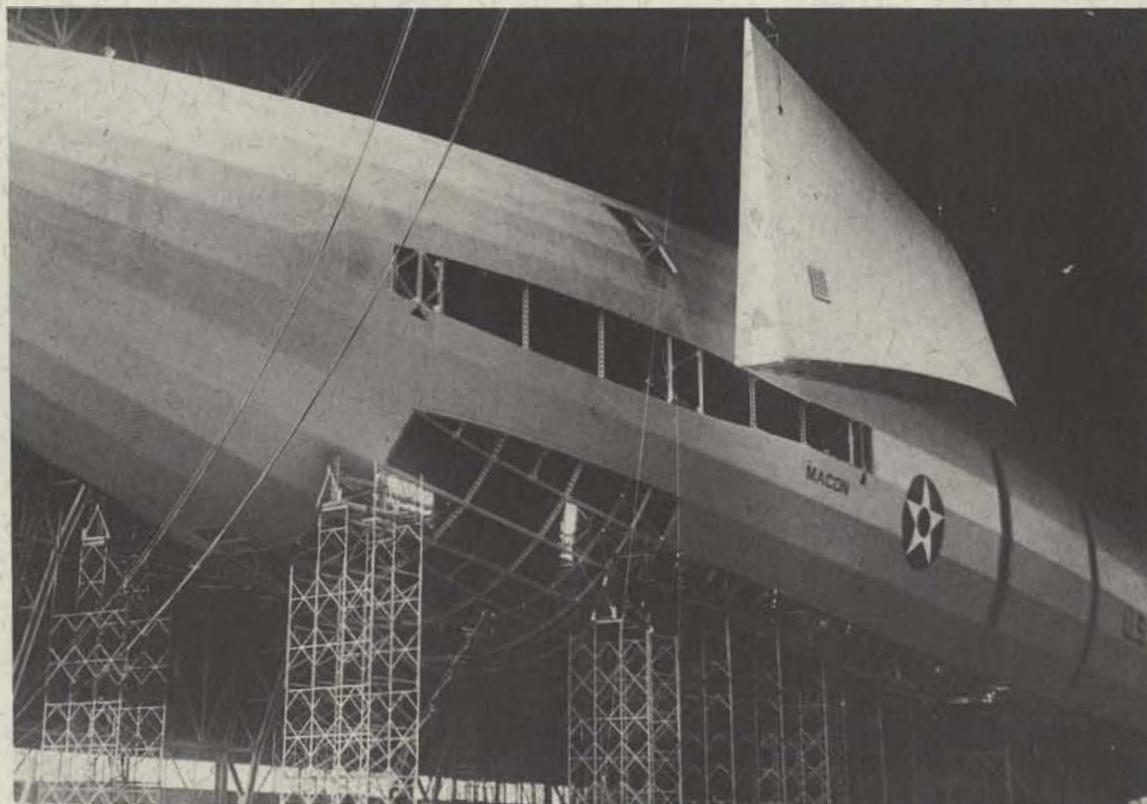


*U.S.S. Macon on mast.*

**What's in a Name?** *The original name of the air base was supposed to be the Mountain View-Sunnyvale Naval Air Station, given that the base was located in both communities. In fact most of the base actually sits in Mountain View.*

*But Naval officials in Washington, D.C. feared that the "mountain" in the title would create more safety concerns among Congressional leaders already jittery about the lighter-than-air craft program.*

*In the end, the Mountain View portion was left off in favor of just 'Sunnyvale,' which gave East Coast officials an image of vast wide-open areas, with plenty of room for massive airships.*



*U.S.S. Macon under construction at the  
Goudyear Zeppelin Company plant in Akron, Ohio.*

**Andrew Hingberger**, 81, of Mountain View, a member of the Macon's fuel crew. He was on board the Macon on its maiden flight to the West Coast and remembers well the day it arrived in Mountain View.

*"The Bayshore highway was packed. On every flight, in or out, Bayshore was packed all the time. Cameras were going all the time. We were probably the most photographed thing around. There were a lot of box cameras then.*

*While in flight you rolled. It's more or less like being on a ship at sea. You rolled but it was nothing like being on a small boat. If you had a little storm you pitched a bit.*

*It was just a tremendous period, but at that time we thought nothing of it."*

## The Macon

On April 21, 1933, the Macon, \$2.5 million in the making, left Akron, Ohio on its maiden voyage.

The entire craft, 785 feet long, was nearly twice as large as the famous Graf Zeppelin.

Known officially as ZRS-5, the Macon was more modern and slightly faster than its sister ship, the Akron, ZRS-4, with a top speed of about 87 miles per hour.

To the bewilderment of some, the craft was named the Macon, after the largest city in the Georgia district of Rep. Carl Vinson, chairman of the House Committee on Naval Affairs.

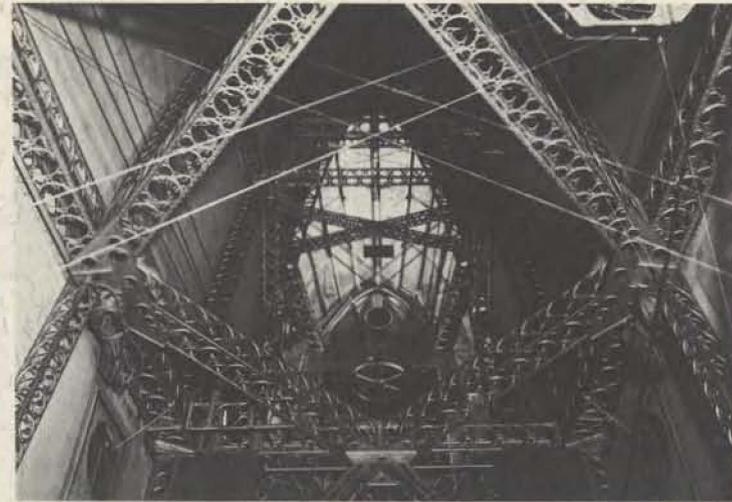


Tail control station.

To those on the East Coast, the naming was considered a politically prudent move.

The rigid airship was the product of the Goodyear-Zeppelin Co., a business jointly owned by the Zeppelin Company of Germany and the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company.

Unlike the blimps made famous by Goodyear today, the Macon had a hollow steel hull with three interior keels. The intent of the strong spine was to prevent the type of hull collapse that occurred when the small Shenandoah was torn in two eight years earlier.



View inside tail assembly looking down into control station.

From the outside it looked and functioned much like a helium balloon. But on the inside, the ship was an open cavern of girders, cables and catwalks with few places where crewmen could not go.

Before 1925, many lighter-than-air craft operated on hydrogen. But the flammability of the gas proved to be very dangerous.

The Macon and Akron were kept aloft by non-burning helium, contained in 12 large gelatin-latex cells inside the craft. The ship carried a large supply of additional helium and navigators were able to set the craft's altitude by releasing or increasing the gas.

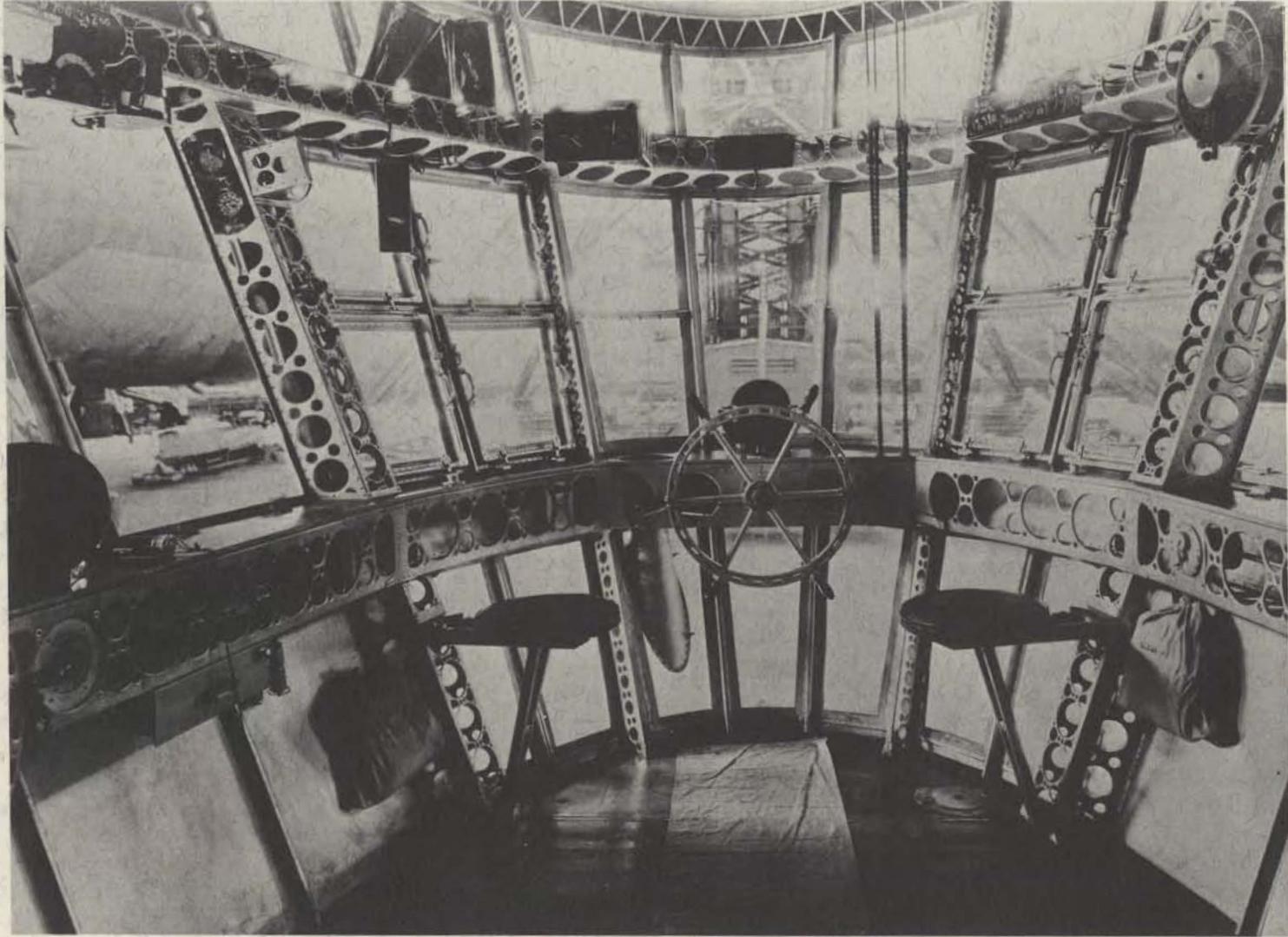
Inside the hull, the ship had eight large 560-horsepower engines driving

outside propellers, one of the craft's few noisy operations. The propellers could be pointed up or down to control the ship during take-offs and landings.

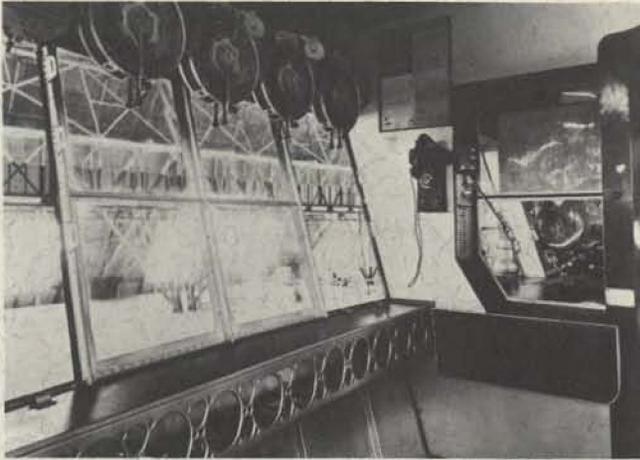
The Macon had accommodations for 100 officers, including sleeping berths, a large messroom, a galley and other chambers.

The ship also offered panoramic views of the countryside from observation platforms at both the nose and the tail of the ship.

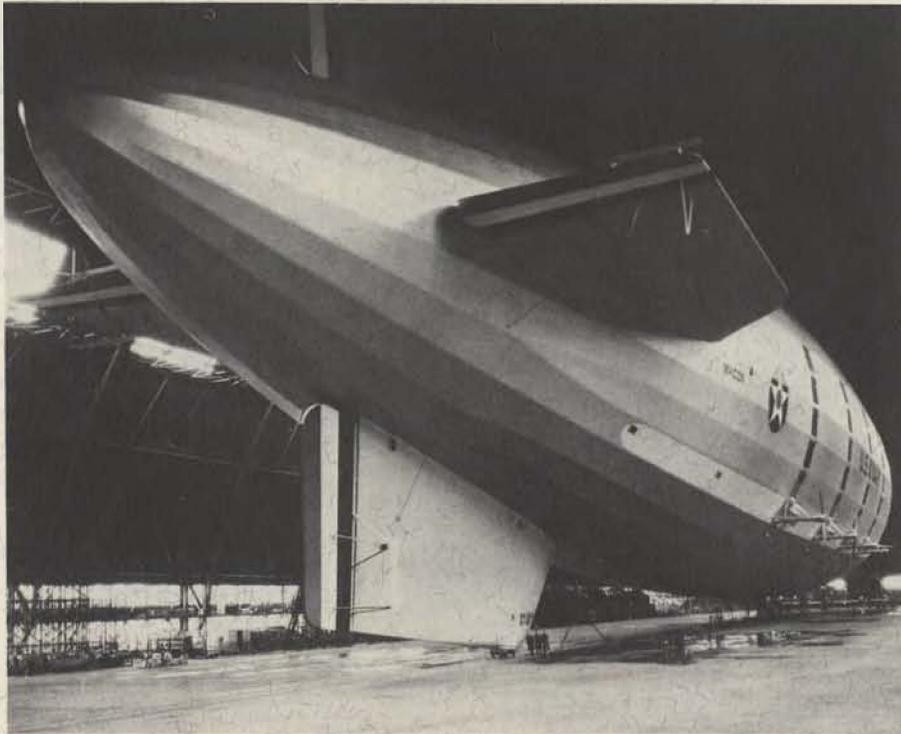
Although rigid airships were never used commercially in the United States, the key advantages to such a mode of transportation were said to be its smooth, silent motion and its speed in long distance journeys. In short, people did not get seasick on dirigibles.



*The "Helm" in the forward control platform.*



Inside the forward control platform looking aft. Note circular engine telegraph signals similar to those used on a ship.



The completed Macon in the Goodyear Zeppelin Company hangar in Akron, Ohio on April 18, 1933, three days before its maiden voyage.

**Anthony Quartuccio**, 66, of San Jose, retired NASA-Ames Research employee and artist:

"I have always been a lover of the dirigible era. It was as much a part of my life at that time as the astronauts are now.

I saw the Akron being built in 1932 when we were living in Akron, Ohio. I was 10 years old.

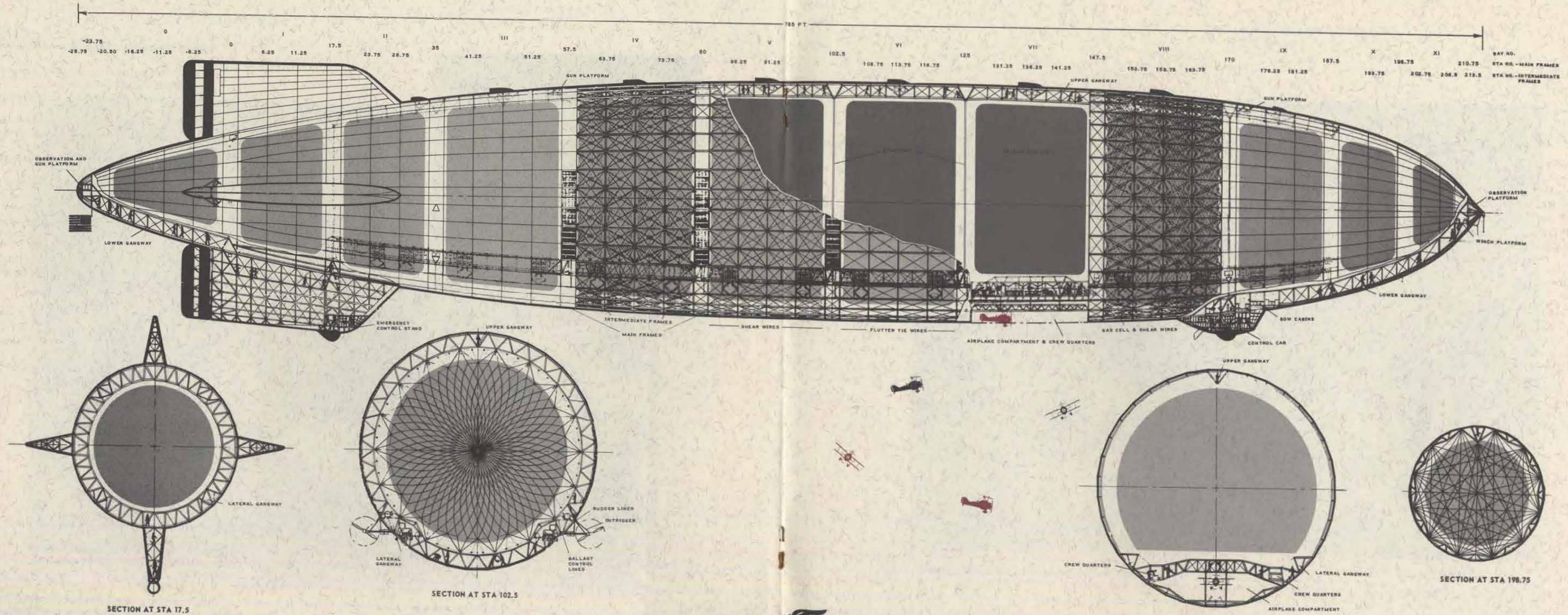
My father, some cousins and I went to the airport there where the Akron had its maiden flight. I looked inside the hangar and I could see the Macon being built. I could see all of its ribs.

When I was a little kid, it was the fad to make little dirigibles out of balloons.

The little airplanes (Sparrowhawks) that the Macon carried, they used to make models of those too. I had a model of the Macon made of rubber. It was three-feet long. They used to have all kinds of souvenirs.

When I came to California in 1936 the first thing I wanted to do was see the giant hangar at Moffett Field. It was right after the (Macon) crash and it was still fresh in my mind.

Being a young kid at the time I was very interested. I was sad when it crashed, you know. It was big news. It was like the space shuttle when it exploded."

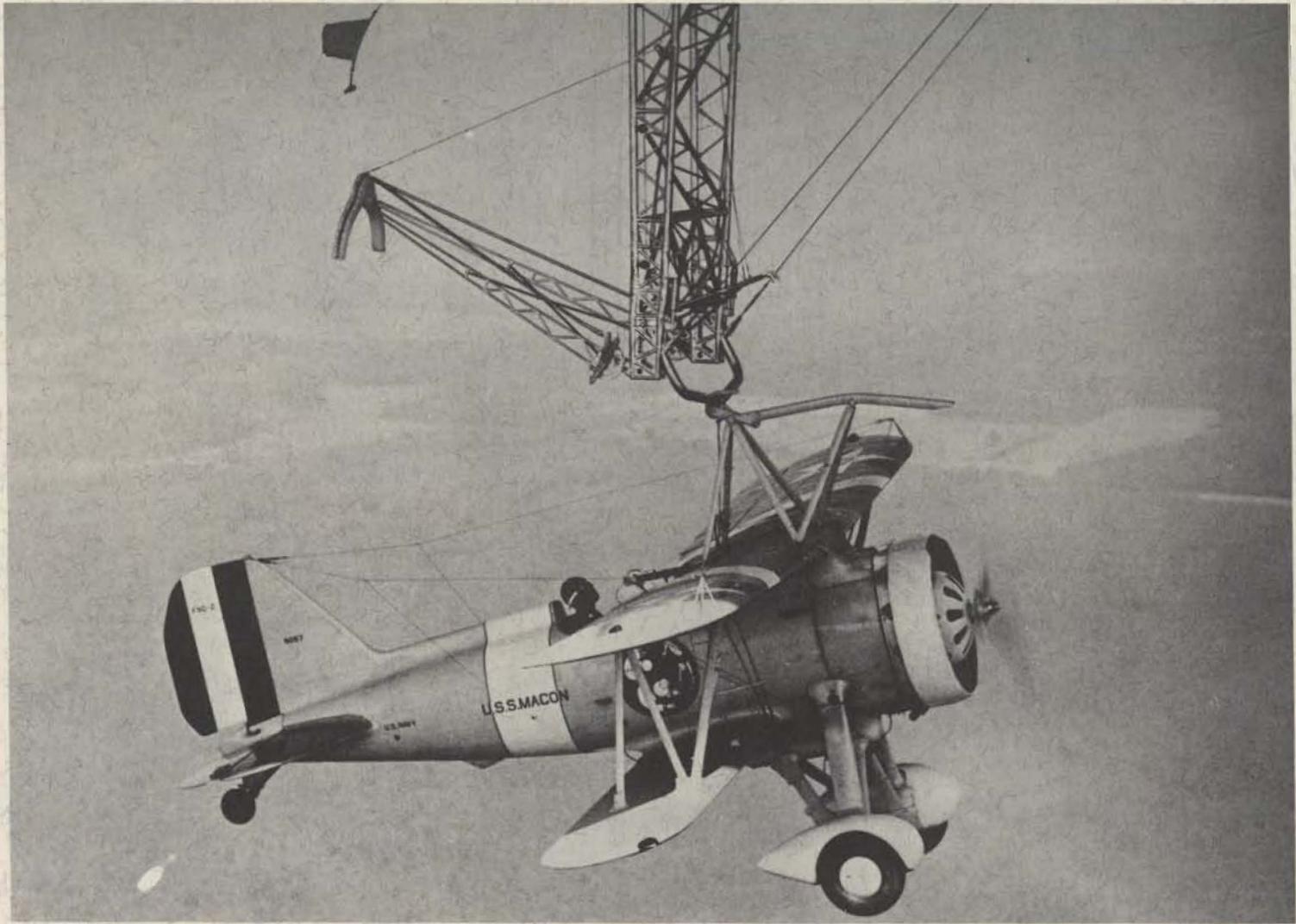


U.S.S. AKRON—Built by The Goodyear Zeppelin Corporation - 1931



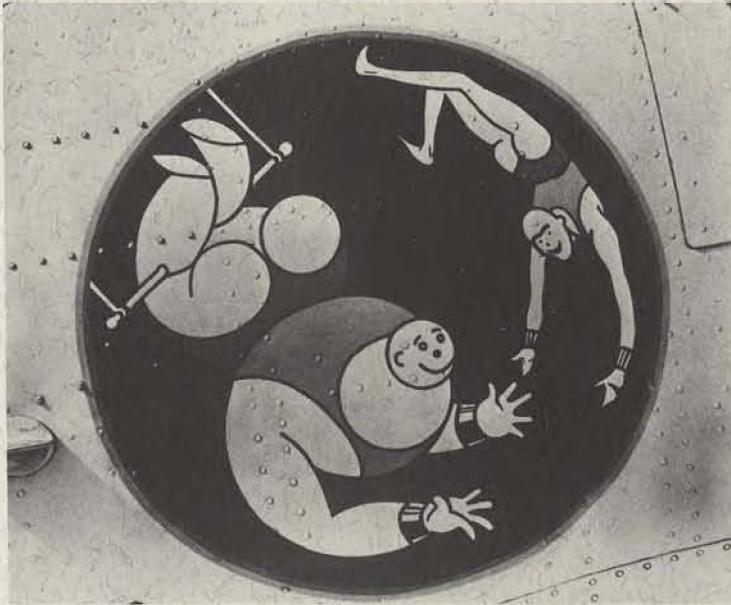
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*A Sparrowhawk fighter plane on the "trapeze" of the U.S.S. Macon.*

## The Men on the Flying Trapeze



The squadron insignia for the "men on the flying trapeze."

Unlike other dirigibles of the time, the airship was so massive that it also carried its own protection—five Sparrowhawk fighter planes which were launched and retrieved via a trapeze in the aircraft's belly.

The airplanes would be lowered and released through a T-shaped door via the trapeze and a harness attached to the fuselage.

Retrieving the planes, however, was a much more difficult process.

Like a performing air stunt, the pilots had to equal their speed to that of the ship and "catch" the trapeze with a hook on top of the plane.

Despite the difficulty of the maneuver, the pilots, known as the "Men on the Flying Trapeze," had a flawless record on both the Akron and the Macon.

But the heavy airplanes also were often among the first items to go when the ships needed lightening.

On its way home from its Sunnyvale trip, the Akron had to release two of its airplanes over Arizona to allow it enough buoyancy to get over the

mountains. The two pilots, being without compasses, were forced to follow railroad tracks all the way back to Lakehurst.

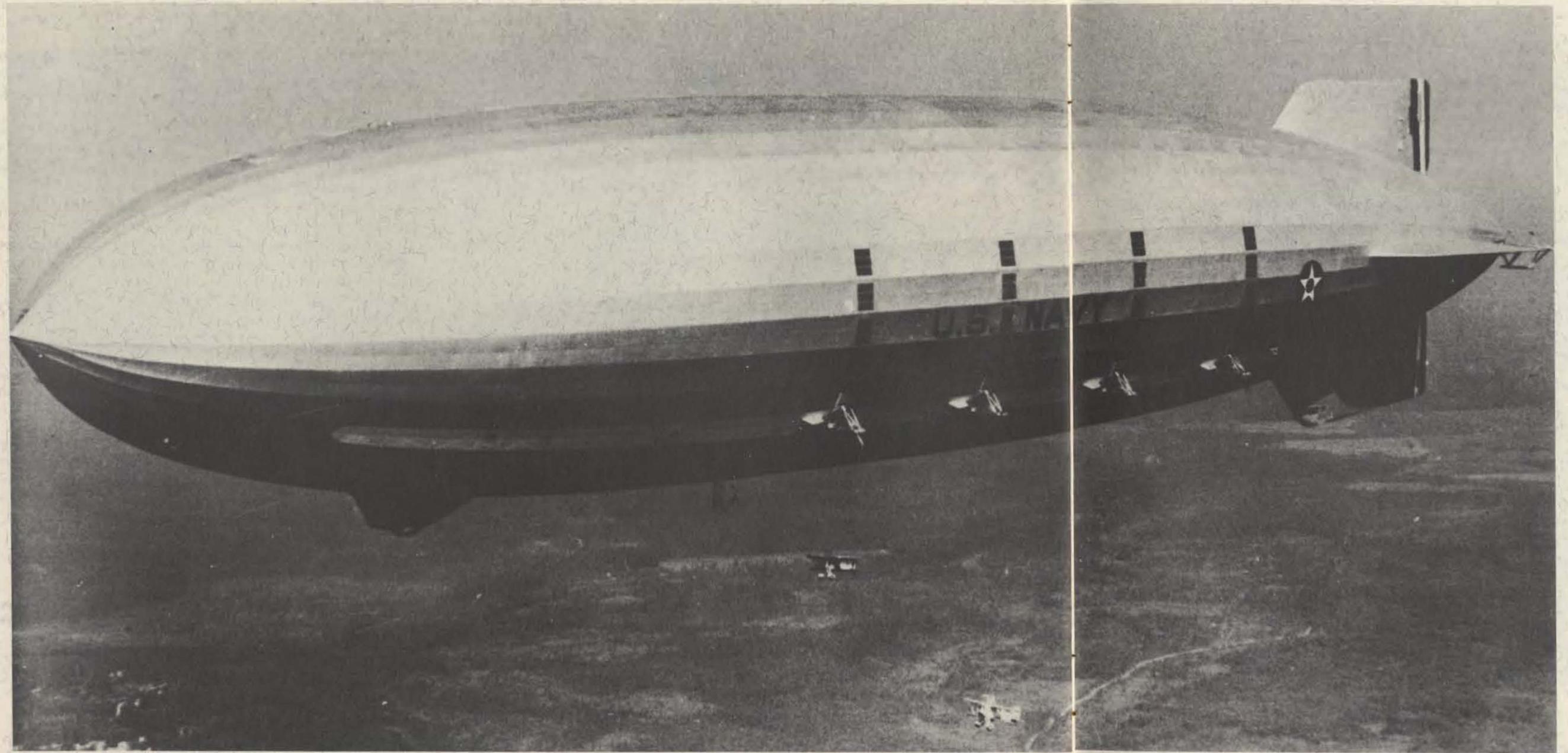
The Macon and Akron were built to be the chief scouts for the Pacific Fleet, providing long-range reconnaissance in days long before radar. In addition to providing protection for the 'aircraft carrier of the sky,' the Sparrowhawks were the ships' main eyes.

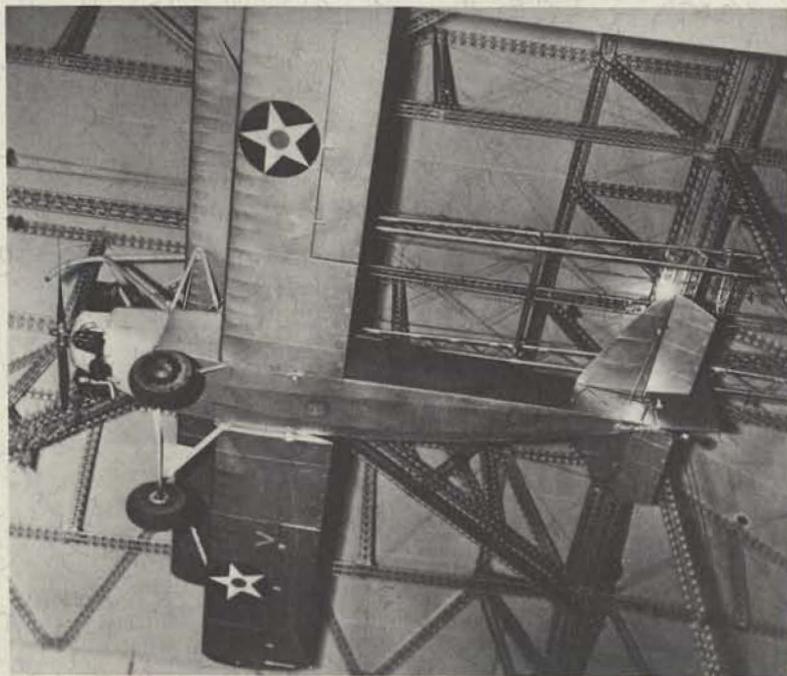
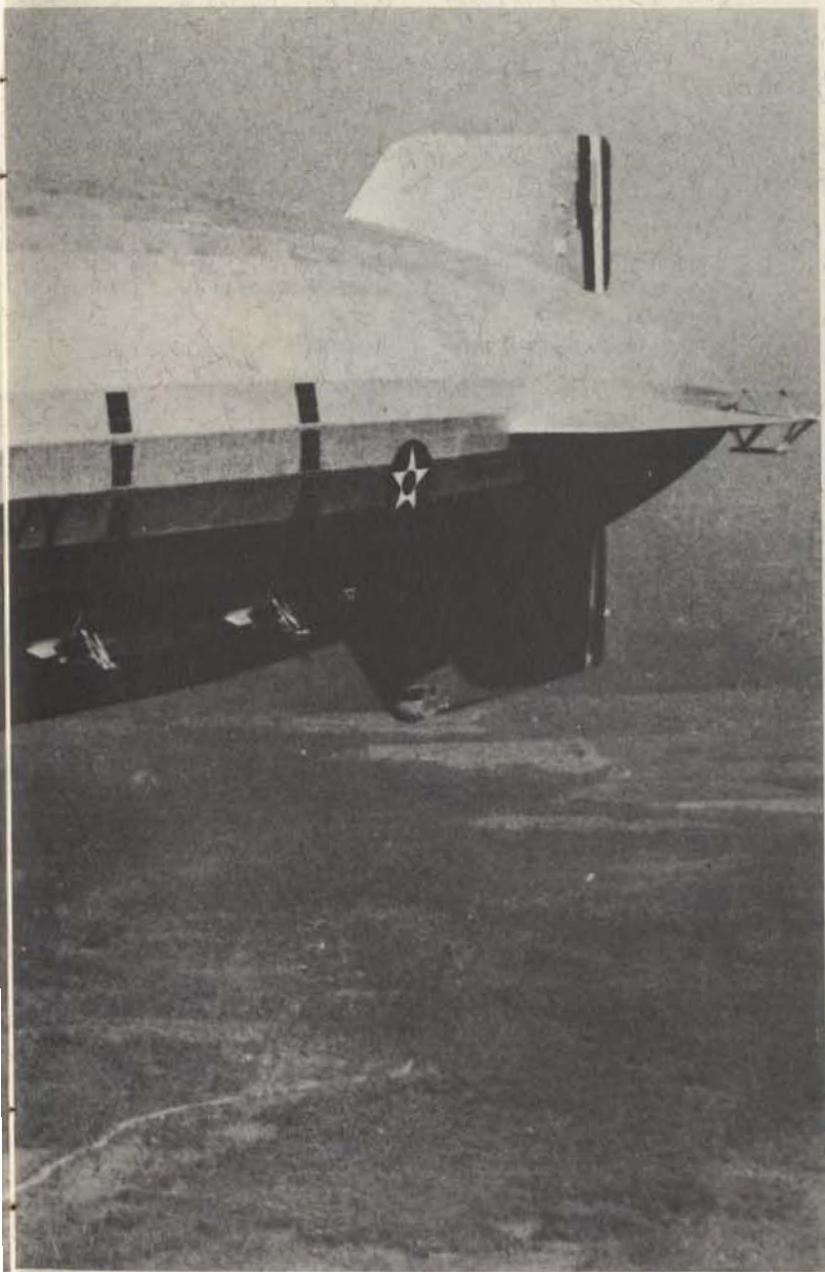
**A "Spy" on Board** The ship came equipped with another scouting oddity known as a "spy" car. The small telephone booth-like compartment was lowered from the airship on a cable about 1,000 feet or to a point below cloud cover.

The crewman inside the spy car would then telephone back to the main control room relaying navigational information.

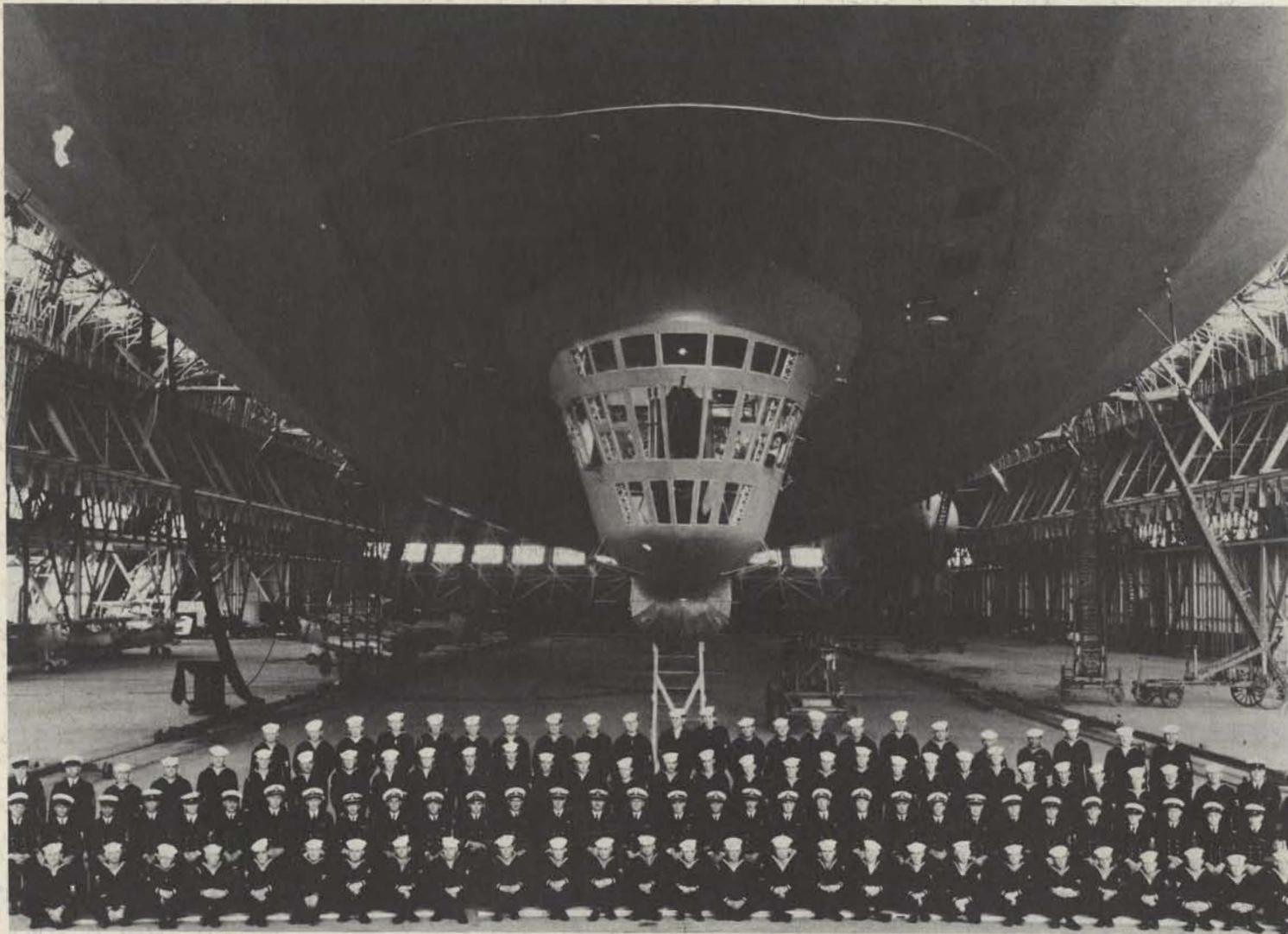
The car acted as sort of a reverse periscope.

*U.S.S. Macon with two Sparrowhawk fighter planes. Note "trapeze" hanging out from under the airship. Planes were released and retrieved with the "trapeze". The U.S.S. Macon had a complement of five Sparrowhawk fighter planes.*

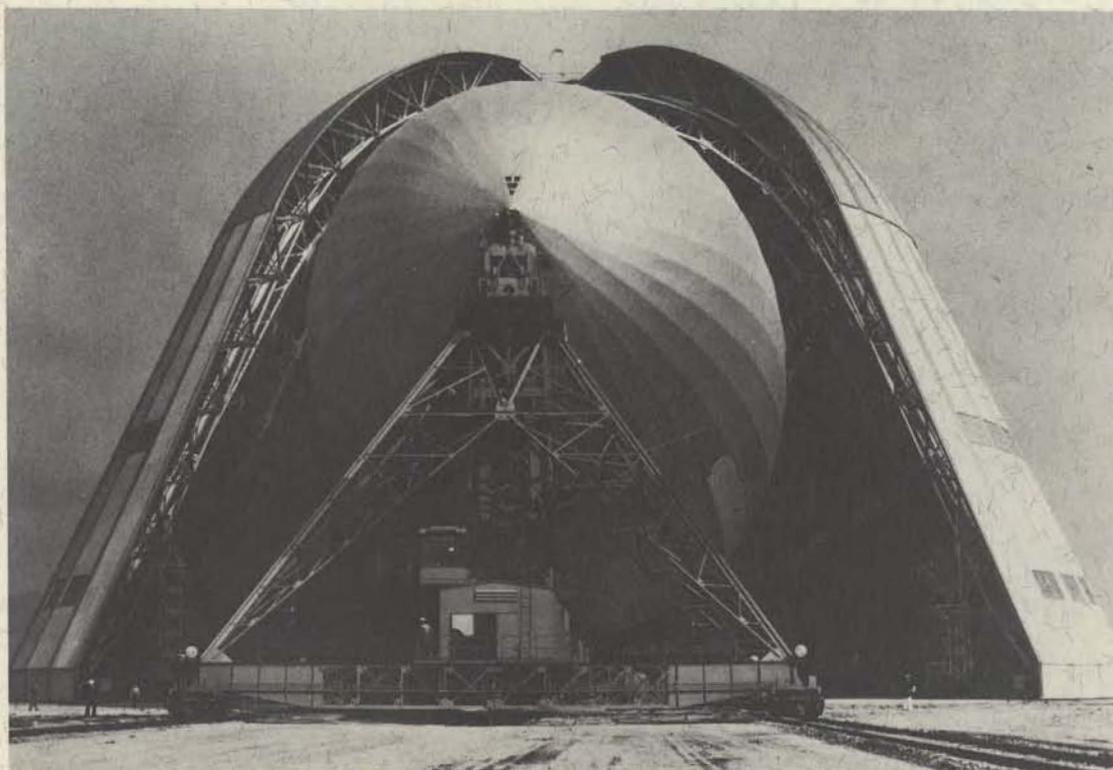




*A Sparrowhawk in its "hangar"  
inside the U.S.S. Macon.*



*The officers and crew with the Macon inside Hangar 1. Note person peeking out of the window in the forward platform. Also note Sparrowhawk planes in left background and training blimp in right background.*



*The U.S.S. Macon emerges from Hangar 1  
at Moffett Air Field.*

### **The Eyes of the Pacific Fleet**

With nearly as much fanfare as marked the arrival of the Akron, the Macon cruised into the skies over Mountain View on Oct. 16, 1933 and docked without difficulty at its new home.

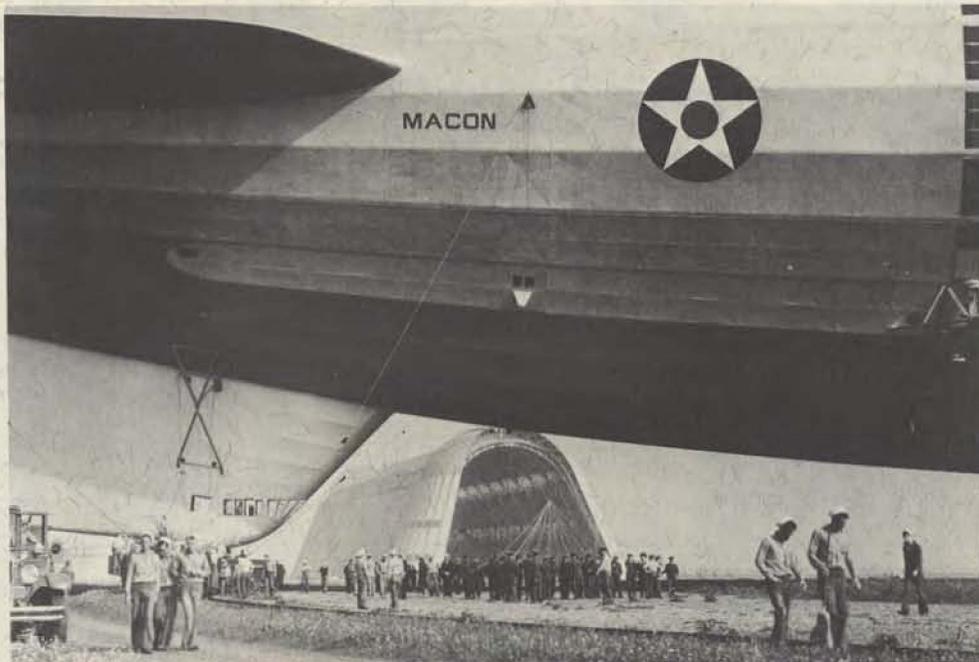
"The new 785-foot air giant . . . was free from the oil smudges that marred the Akron's appearance on its arrival here and seemed as silvery as if she had just taken to the air," said a Palo Alto Times account.

During the next 16 months, the Macon became a familiar and popular sight on the Peninsula, never failing to draw large crowds whenever it took off or landed.

But there was much expected of this aircraft. A total of \$5 million had been spent on the construction of the Macon and Akron at a time when the country was in the middle of the Great Depression. People in and out of

*Attaching the tail assembly to  
the landing platform during  
landing operations.*





*U.S.S. Macon during landing operations.*

the military wanted results.

The Macon had the added pressure of going into service following the crash of the Akron, which had a mistake-filled record before its demise.

In its first of two maneuvers with the Pacific Fleet, the Akron had been assigned to spot the enemy fleet. Her first day over the Georgia coast, the Akron, with 12 lookouts scanning the horizon, sailed right over the fleet without seeing it.

The enemy ships, however, had the Akron in sight for 20 minutes.

That same year, while attempting to dock at Camp Kearny in San Diego, the Akron suddenly rose in the air

taking with it three men who were still clutching the mooring lines. Two of them fell to their deaths while the third eventually was brought to safety.

Almost immediately after arriving in Sunnyvale, the Macon was sent on maneuvers in the Pacific, but it was an inauspicious debut. The ship was "shot down" twice in the first eight hours.

Wrote Rear Admiral Ernest King, Moffett's successor as head of the Bureau of Aeronautics, in 1933:

"This is to be a critical year for airships. We have only one airship. We must not be reckless, but if airships are to justify themselves, the Macon has got to show more than she has shown."

In 1934, Lt. Commander Herbert Wiley, one of three survivors of the Akron crash, took command of the Macon.

He quickly developed and improved the ship's long-range detection and scouting system and was determined to prove the Macon's value.

To test the new scouting methods, the Macon left Moffett Field in July 1934 in an attempt to locate the cruiser Houston carrying President Roosevelt through the Panama Canal en route to Honolulu.

Using only newspaper accounts of the president's departure time as a guide, Macon raced 3,500 miles to a spot in the vast Pacific Ocean where Wiley had determined they could find the Houston.

They did.

Aboard the cruiser, crewmen were shocked to see two scouting airplanes come out of nowhere and circle the ship. Minutes later the Macon dramatically descended from the clouded sky and dispatched a plane that dropped bundles of the previous day's newspapers from San Francisco onto the Houston.

The Fleet's admirals were not amused. Said Admiral Stanley, chief of naval operations later: "We considered it a publicity stunt and that he (Wiley) had no business doing it."

The president, however, was tickled. The stunt showed that the Macon was capable of the kind of scouting that Moffett had intended.

# SAN FRANCISCO EXTRA

**RAINFALL COMPARISONS**

	Last	Year	to
Hours	Date	Date	
San Fran.	11	15.39	14.89
Sacramento	12	10.83	11.30
Redding	7	20.41	22.33
Yreka	13	24.28	24.11
Stockton	7	17.4	8.81
San Antonio	30	14.09	7.11
San Diego	30	12.48	6.23



## San Francisco Chronicle

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FOUNDED 1865—VOL. CXLVI, NO. 29 CCC\* SAN FRANCISCO, CAL., WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1935 DAILY 5 CENTS, SUNDAY 10 CENTS: DAILY AND SUNDAY PER NORTH E.L.F.

# MACON SUNK

## 81 MEN SAVED; TWO MISSING

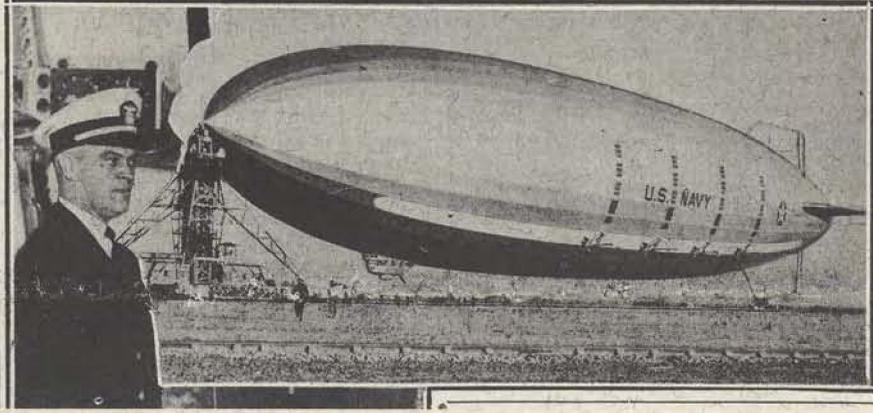
**Navy Cruisers Pick Up Survivors After Airship Hits Sea Off Point Sur**

**Explosion on Huge Dirigible Reported Just Before SOS Call Sent; Eye Witness Tells How Craft Ripped Open**

By ROYCE BRIER

The great dirigible Macon went to her grave in the sea last night off Point Sur, 100 miles south of San Francisco. Two are missing from a crew of 83, and 81 were res-

SHIP LOST, ITS CHIEF SAVED



**Abyssinia Defies Italy**

(Copyright, 1935, by Associated Press)  
ROME, Feb. 12 (P) — Ethiopia's diplomatic envoy to Rome announced tonight Ethiopia would not pay a cent to Italy as indemnity, that the African empire had one million men available to fight Italy, that no foreign power was expected as an ally, and that "Ethiopia does not need one."

This statement was made directly to the Associated Press.  
(Continued on Page 5, Col. 3)

**CARPET**

## The Day the Macon Did Not Come Back

During a flight toward maneuvers in the Caribbean Sea in 1934, the Macon ran into a heavy crosswind over Texas, causing two girders to buckle in the rudder and two tail fins to be damaged.

All of the fins needed replacing, according to the Goodyear-Zeppelin Company. But rather than take the much-needed ship out of commission, Navy officials decided to do the repair work piecemeal.

When the Macon left Moffett Field on Feb. 11, 1935 to go on maneuvers off the Southern California coast, the repair work was not quite completed.

It would be the ship's eighth maneuver with the Pacific Fleet and its 54th and final flight.

The next day the ship was returning after a successful mission when it encountered storm winds off Point Sur, south of Monterey. Suddenly, a mighty crosswind struck the ship with such force that the upper fins of the previously damaged tail were completely severed, sending shards of metal into the rear gas cells.

In the control car, few realized what had happened until suddenly the steering wheel went slack and the navigators felt the tail drop.

Wiley ordered the dumping of ballast and fuel. Crewmen hurried about the ship discharging anything they could to lighten the tail. Off-duty personnel were ordered to the nose to help bring that end down.

With its motors still running, the ship sailed skywards, rising from 1,600 feet to nearly 5,000 feet where it reached its "pressure point," the altitude where helium automatically began discharging. The ship was doomed.

The Macon slowly began to fall. After staying at his post to radio SOS

repeatedly, the radioman jumped from the ship before it reached the water, and was killed.

Moments later the ship settled gently into the water, and the crew, clad in life jackets and prepared with life rafts, dove into the water safely.

The water was relatively warm and ships were quickly on the scene to pull the men out.

One man went back to the ship in an attempt to retrieve his belongings, and never returned. But in all, 81 of the 83 men aboard the Macon survived the crash, including "lucky" Wiley.

**George Weldy, 81, flight engineer aboard the Akron and the Macon:**

*"The engines were all made in Germany. They were really marine engines for boats, adapted to the dirigibles. They were directly reversible engines like those on a locomotive. They were very, very dependable.*

*I put the Macon in commission, back in Akron in May, 1931.*

*It was just about time for the Macon to be test flown when the Akron crashed.*

*When I heard about it, I was in a hotel in Akron. I felt really bad. I had some very good friends on board. I never got over it. I think about them every now and then.*

*If you got forward of the engine there was no noise at all while in flight. It was quiet up there and on long flights you didn't stop at all.*

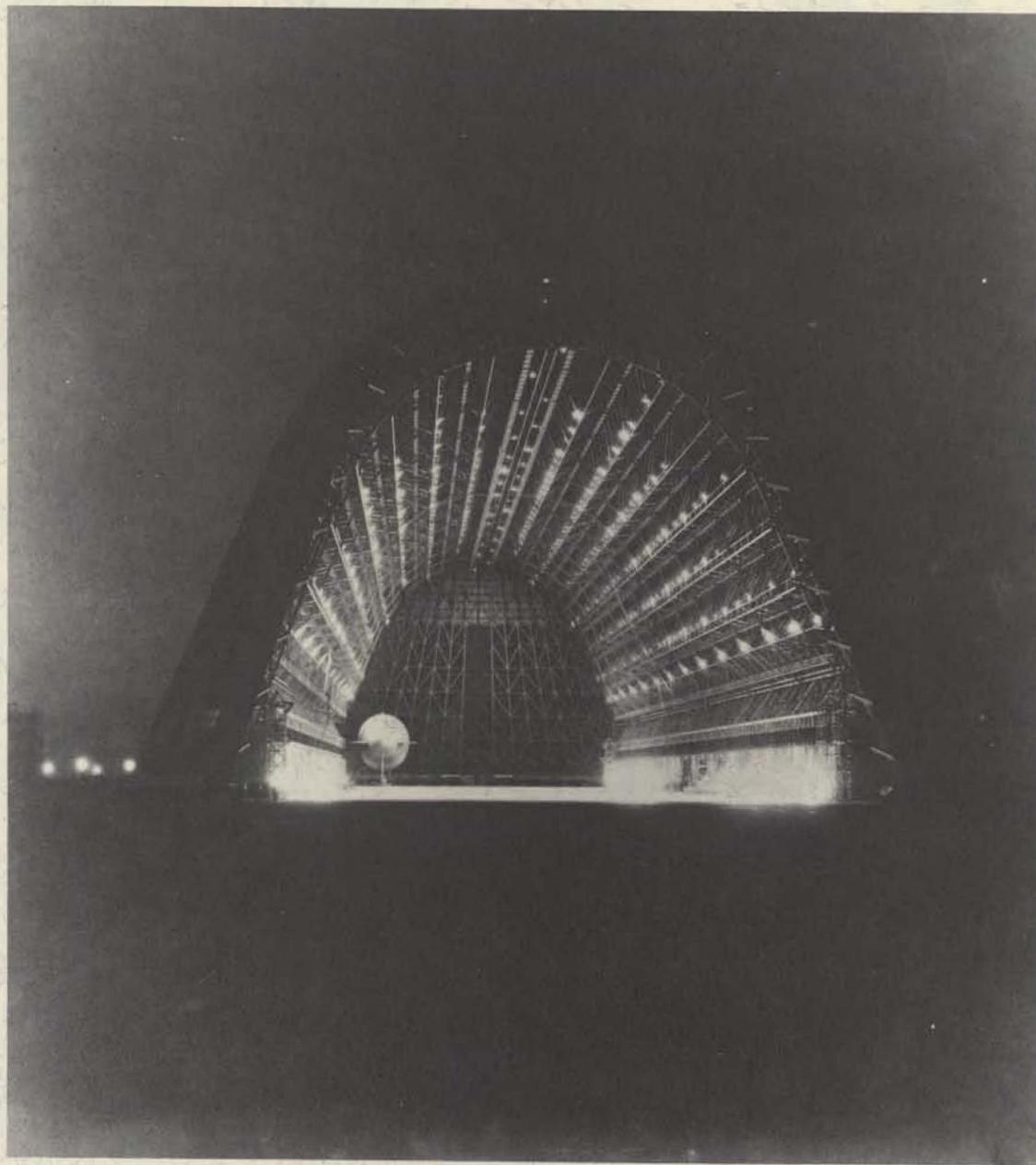
*They had some real small planes that used to come up every day to bring mail and milk and stuff like that.*

*For the Macon, I only missed two flights. The first one was the flight here. (He drove to California).*

*The second was the day it went down. That was the day our engine was due for an overhaul. When we had it overhauled one of the crews usually stayed on the ground, and it was my turn to miss the flight.*

*It was the only time I saw the Macon in the air, and I didn't see it come back. We waited all afternoon and it didn't come back. That was another sad day.*

*Hangar 1, February 12, 1935,  
the night the U.S.S. Macon did  
not come home. The training  
blimp assumes the role of an  
orphan.*



## Epilogue:

**L**ighter Than Air! After the crash, the Macon settled slowly in the water, tail-first.

Some sailors caught in the interior of the ship, made their way to the observation platform at the nose where they cut through the ship's lining. But they found they were still too high up to jump to the water.

While waiting for the craft to sink to a point low enough to allow them to jump, the Navy men noticed as they shouted among themselves that their voices were becoming higher and more child-like.

They quickly realized it was the helium being released.

As anyone who has ever sucked on a helium balloon knows, helium affects the vocal chords.

According to those at the crash scene, the last men to jump from the Macon were laughing so hard they seemed delirious.

A commission set up to determine the cause of the crash blamed it on the Navy's refusal to repair the Macon's tail damage right away.

But because of the disastrous record of airships, the pressure was on President Roosevelt to abandon the lighter-than-air craft program. Roosevelt responded by setting up a commission to examine whether there was a future for airships.

The commission, headed by Stanford Professor William F. Durand concluded that airships had been set to do tasks for which they were not built and that they had not been given enough of an opportunity to prove their value.

The debate was unsettled, however. While many in the Navy wanted more emphasis on heavier-than-air craft, others still backed the dirigibles.

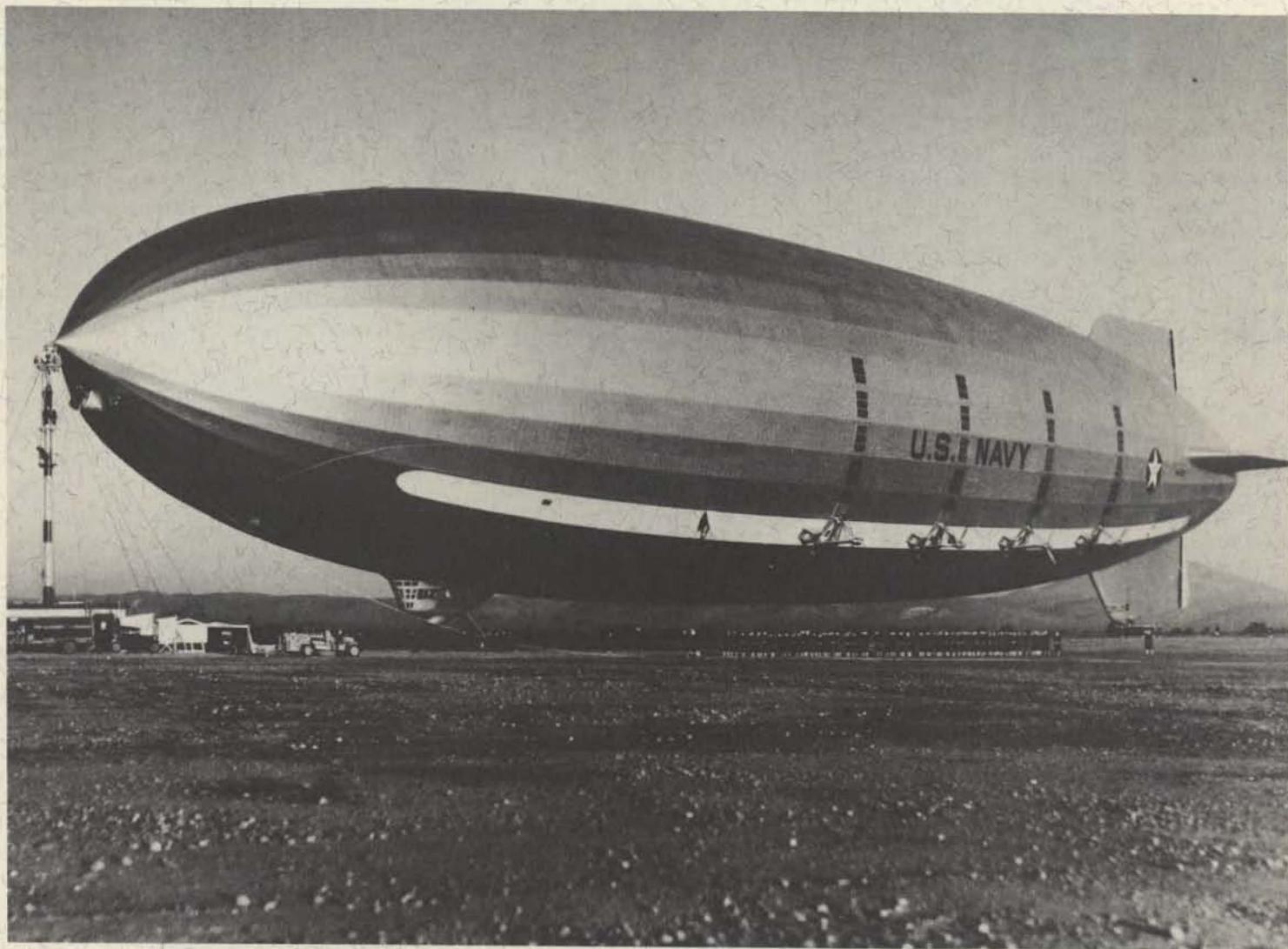
The Navy at one point made plans for a rigid airship that would be nearly 40 percent larger than the Macon with a hangar capable of carrying nine dive bombers.

In 1937, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Charles Edison, son of Thomas A. Edison, scanned the interior of the giant hangar at Moffett Field and told his subordinates that lighter-than-air craft should be given another chance.

"What if the Wright Brothers had stopped after building three or four airplanes? Where would aviation be today?" he asked.

But, ironically, aviation would be the destiny of Moffett Field.

The Macon was the nation's last rigid dirigible.



## The Man Behind the Name— Moffett Field



Rear Admiral William A. Moffett was one of the few friends lighter-than-air craft had among military leaders.

The "aircraft-carriers of the sky" captured the imagination of civilians and legislators, garnering enough government support to finance the construction of the Akron, Macon and the Sunnyvale Naval Air Station.

But with the airships' poor safety history, many high-ranking Navy officers had yet to be convinced.

As chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, Moffett was certain rigid airships would prove their worth, particularly in long-range missions at sea. But the Akron and Macon were never given that chance. Instead they were kept primarily to coastside tactical exercises for which they were not suited.

As a captain, Moffett commanded a battleship and won a Medal of Honor at Vera Cruz. In 1921, he was picked to head the newly created aeronautics bureau.

In that job, he presided over the board created to select the West Coast base for the Macon. Although apprehensive at first about having a Northern California location, Moffett was quickly sold on the Sunnyvale site.

Moffett drove the first rivet in the construction of the Akron in November 1929 and paid frequent visits to the Bay Area during the construction of the field.

But as much as he enjoyed planning air bases and building airships, his greatest pleasure was riding in them.

In a sudden change of plans, Moffett in 1933 decided to join the Akron on its ill-fated trip off the New Jersey coast. Moffett was aboard as an observer, just nine months away from retirement.

When he felt the airship lurch during the storm, Moffett left his cabin and made his way to the control car. He apparently was not able to get out.

His body was one of the few recovered from the submerged wreckage and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

His sons, Rear Admiral William A. Moffett, Jr. and Lt. George Moffett were both on hand in 1983 for the 50th anniversary celebration of Moffett Field.

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Home Port for Sky Cruisers

This project started out as a history of Moffett Field from its inception through its use during World War II as a Naval Air Station for a large squadron of blimps that patrolled our Coast during the war. The photographic archives of Moffett Field are so rich and vast that the scope of the project was reviewed. The result was a focus on only a four-year period and one of the great, albeit unsuccessful, experiments in the strange new approach to lighter-than-air vehicles... the dirigibles.

We are greatly indebted to Wally Cuneen for his introduction to the senior personnel at Moffett Field. Our gratitude and appreciation are also owed to the following persons:

Rear Admiral Phillip D. Smith, Commander, Patrol Wings, U.S. Pacific Fleet, which is headquartered at Moffett Field was most encouraging, as was his successor, Rear Admiral Jesse J. Hernandez.

Mr. John R. Shackleton, Public Affairs Officer, went to great lengths to accommodate our needs.

The photographs throughout come to us from the files of Moffett Naval Air Station and the Times Tribune, successor to the Palo Alto Times. Also providing photographs and help with information was Richard Sailer, Manager, Airship Public Relations, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in Akron, Ohio.

In addition to those interviewed in the text, we thank Henry M. Plymire of Willits, California.

Our special thanks to Paul Gullixson, who performed the task of re-searching and writing of this piece and who spent a considerable amount of time developing and honing the manuscript as well as researching the photographs.

And finally, our thanks for the usual outstanding design and production job by Paige Johnson.

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