



By Kirk Moore - Asbury Park (N.J.) Press
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The LEMV, for Long-Endurance Multi-Intelligence Vehicle, is taking shape in Hangar 6 here, while Blue Devil was inflated earlier this month in a World War II blimp hangar at Elizabeth City, N.C. Both are about the length of a football field, much bigger than the 180-foot Navy ship. But the newest airships would be dwarfed beside the giant rigid-hull airships of the 1930s like the Hindenburg, the German commercial airliner destroyed at Lakehurst when its flammable hydrogen gas cells ignited during a landing in

1937.

"You're probably talking about the Hindenburg being 37 to 39 times the volume of this airship," said Mark Kynett, the chief pilot with contractors Integrated System Solutions Inc. of California, Md., which manages the airship for the Navy.

Back then Americans had the advantage of using nonflammable helium for their airships, and the Navy ramped up its lighter-than-air program during World War II when blimps patrolled for submarines offshore. If a pilot from those days could board the MZ-3A, he would recognize the same basic controls of rudder pedals and elevator wheels.

"There's a lot of physical exertion in flying an airship, mainly in the legs," said Kynett, who flew Goodyear's blimps for 25 years before joining the Navy project. "We have the potential for being up 24 hours, but most of our missions are eight to 10 hours."

The Navy's old lighter-than-air flight program at the Lakehurst naval air station ran from 1921 to 1962, when the last Cold War-era generation of blimps were decommissioned.

At more than 400 feet long, those ZPG-3W ships were twice the size of the Navy's new airship, and carried radar systems as part of the national early-warning network to watch for Soviet bombers approaching coastal cities.

The airships carried crews of more than 20 men and logged long-range patrols that stayed in the air for as long as 58 hours.

"They were also known as M ships. The largest ships ever built by Goodyear," Jablonski said.

But the Navy aviation community was split internally over the continued use of lighter-than-air technology, which some saw as an obsolete drain on resources better spent on rapidly evolving high-performance aircraft.

The July 6, 1960, crash of a Lakehurst-based airship east of Long Beach Island killed 18 sailors, a loss that added pressure on the program. The Navy decommissioned its airship units on Oct. 31, 1961. On Aug. 31, 1962, the last two ZPG-3W ships made a ceremonial last flight over Lakehurst — the base log noted, "This flight terminates operation of non-rigid airships at Lakehurst," Steingold said.