

# Dirigibles in Disrepute After *Macon's* Loss

*America's Disastrous Record With  
Lighter-Than-Air Craft*

*Leads Legislators to Look Askance  
on Further Experiments, but Aer-  
onauts Remain Unconvinced Their  
Type Is at Fault*



*Left, Lt. Comdr. Herbert V. Wiley, who regarded his air-cruiser, the U. S. S. *Macon* (center) as "a quick, long-range aerial scout," and, right, Dr. Hugo Eckener, veteran Zeppelin constructor and pilot*

**T**he Sunnyvale beacon flashed over the Santa Clara Valley through the night, vainly calling home America's last great dirigible, which lay at the bottom of the Pacific off lonely Point Sur.

The gaping hangar of the 1,000-acre, \$5,000,000 air-station at the foot of San Francisco Bay stood as a likely monument to experimentation in lighter-than-air craft.

Just before dark, the \$2,450,000 *Macon* had lurched crazily and inexplicably skyward, then had settled stern first into the sea. All but the chief radio operator and a Filipino mess-boy among the eighty-three officers and men aboard had taken to rubber life-boats and had been picked up by war-ships on maneuvers.

Despite this circumstance, official Washington, recalling the death of seventy-three men ordered to "stand by for a crash" on the sister-ship *Akron* less than two years ago, and heeding the world-wide outcry against a form of pioneering which had cost 350 lives in peace-time accidents, gave little hope to friends of dirigible development.

## President's Attitude

President Roosevelt said he would not recommend further expenditure for such projects at this time. Carl Vinson, Chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee, and whose home-city gave the *Macon*

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its name, heard the "death-knell" of air-ship construction which he had sponsored.

Even Ex-Representative Fred A. Britten of Illinois, who, when he was Chairman of the Committee had convinced Congress that it should build both the *Akron* and the *Macon*, admitted that he was wondering "if the cost isn't too great."

"Frankly," said Claude A. Swanson, Secretary of the Navy, "I do not know whether lighter-than-air craft justify expenses and accidents. We need other things worse, ships and air-planes, for instance."

In his last report, Rear Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, had urged that the Navy continue rigid air-ship development, and the tactical and strategic employment of dirigibles as active units of the Fleet. The General Board of the Navy had advocated construction of dirigibles smaller than the *Macon*.

### *Graf Zeppelin's Record*

Those who came to the defense of dirigibles pointed to the performance of the German *Graf Zeppelin*, under the command of Dr. Hugo Eckener. It will start its seventh season of ocean commercial use this spring, after having made sixty crossings of the South Atlantic, seven of the North Atlantic, and one of the Pacific. It has flown 1,025,271 miles. (The *Akron* and the *Macon* had each flown approximately 7,000 miles when they crashed.)

Germany is planning to send the recently completed *LZ-129*, which will accommodate fifty passengers, to America this summer.

America's twelve-year record has been disastrous. The spectacular destruction of the *Shenandoah* and of the *Akron*, and the grounding of the *Los Angeles* at Lakehurst last July after eight years of service, left only the *Macon* to demonstrate the practicability of the type.

Last year, on her way East to enter the Caribbean war-games, she twisted two ring-girders, and, due to changing atmospheric conditions, had trouble with helium. In her first engagement in the games she was theoretically destroyed by enemy bullets. In the second engagement, she burned out her bearings and limped back to Miami.

Nevertheless, Lt. Comdr. Herbert V. Wiley, U.S.N., the genial skipper of the *Los Angeles*, the *Akron* and the *Macon*, in turn, felt last November that the *Macon* had established her efficiency as "a quick, long-range aerial scout."

At Lakehurst, Lt. Comdr. Anton F. Heinen, U.S.N.R., recalling his previous defense of air-ships in *THE LITERARY DIGEST* (April 7, 1934), declared that, acknowledging the ordinary transportation risks, the accident to the *Macon* "does not change the real proven potentialities of air-ships either in commerce or for the national defense system, any more than the loss of the

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*Morro Castle* condemns the use of steamers in anybody's mind."

In London, *The Daily Telegraph* said: "Mankind never has been deterred by such accidents as that which happened to the *Macon*, but nothing is less probable than that nations will continue to build, at enormous cost, delicate air-ships, when every day is demonstrating that future travel through the air belongs to another type of craft."

As the usual investigations got under way, the *New York Post* declared: "Congress does not need to probe the *Macon* disaster. All Congress needs do is announce its refusal to condemn more American seamen to death—to declare that no more funds of American taxpayers will be squandered on these useless gas-bags."