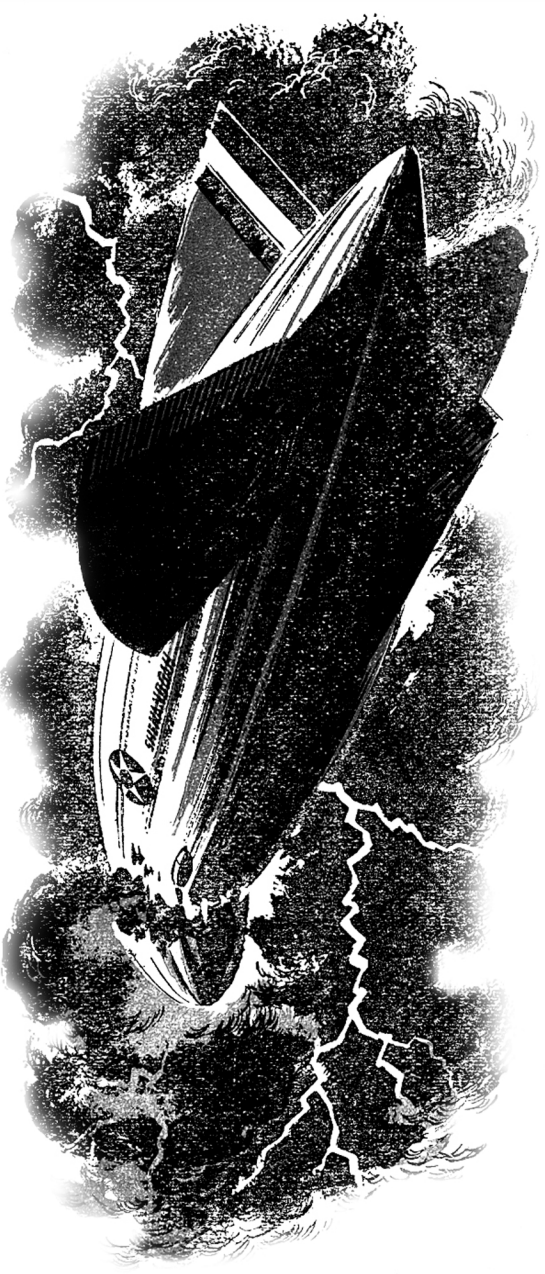
Coronet

In a storm over Ohio, it lost a furious battle with the elements

The Wreck of the "Shenandoah"



IN THE PREDAWN DARKNESS of September 3, 1925, the skies over eastern Ohio shuddered before the impact of an extraordinarily violent storm. A gale swirled across the vast heavens, churning updrafts of warm air from the earth into eddying struggles of pitiless ferocity. Squalls exploded from all directions, and amid the piercing shrieks of the wind lightning flashes lit up immense black masses of thunderheads.

There was turbulence below, too, but nothing to alarm the inhabitants: this was a normal September storm. In fact, the countryside slept through the disturbance, unaware until daylight that a terrible drama had been enacted in the skies.

In the center of the concentrated fury overhead, the U. S. Navy dirigible *Shenandoah* had fought—and lost—a prolonged and desperate battle with the elements. The "Lovely Daughter of the Skies," as her Indian name was translated, had been broken and crushed. Of 43 men aboard, 14 had perished, among them Lieut. Commdr. Zachary Lansdowne, commanding officer and brilliant lighter-than-air expert, whose forebodings of disaster

merely heightened the tragedy.

If the nation was stunned, the shock was hardly lessened by the knowledge that politics had been a factor in sending the *Shenandoah* to an untimely death. At the end of World War I, the Navy had developed an astonishing interest in rigid airships. Its first big dirigible was the German-built *Los Angeles*, acquired by the U.S. government in reparations.

In 1919, construction of the *Shenandoah* was begun at the Naval Air Station at Lakehurst, New Jersey. Completed in 1923 at a cost of $2,200,000, the Duraluminum craft was 680 feet long and 78 in diameter. Its gondola or control car was attached to the underside of the nose; its great gasbags were inflated with noninflammable helium.

In the next two years, the *Shenandoah* logged 740 air hours and 25,835 ground miles, including a flight to California and return by a southern route. Meanwhile the Navy was bombarded with requests to send a dirigible to the Midwest to fly over various cities and fairs. The Navy favored such a flight, hoping to please Midwesterners who, living inland, frequently objected to large Navy appropriations.

First, the *Los Angeles* was ordered to fly to Minneapolis in June, but en route she turned back because of engine trouble. Thereupon Lansdowne was ordered to prepare the *Shenandoah* for the flight. He wrote his superiors in Washington, recommending a delay until the danger of summer storms had passed. Lansdowne was almost morbidly aware of the perils of such a long flight at that time of year. However, he was called to Washington for consultation, and finally the September date was agreed upon.

On the afternoon of the 2nd, the *Shenandoah* floated at her mast in Lakehurst. At exactly 2:52 o'clock, the great silvery ship headed westward. It passed, with purring engines, over Philadelphia. Flight routine settled on the ship. At 9:30 P.M. the radioman noted Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, passing below "like a picture under a Christmas tree." From time to time he made entries:

"1:55 A.M.: Pass over Wheeling and cross the Ohio River, being greeted with whistles and bells . . . red flares set off on top of high hill.

"2:10 A.M.: . . . Lightning flashes ahead. . . .

"2:30 A.M.: Strike strong head winds and see storms both to northwest and southwest. Believe we can ride them without any trouble and bear straight westward.

"3:15 A.M.: Storm increases in intensity and ship pitches heavily.

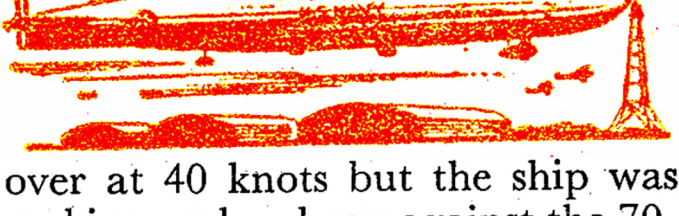
"3:50 A.M.: Storm worst we have

ever encountered to date. . . ."

IN THE CONTROL CAR, Lansdowne spotted a black thundercloud ahead and ordered the ship turned south. Standing beside him, Lieut. Commdr. Charles E. Rosendahl and the aerological officer, Lieut. J. B. Anderson, watched lightning dance in the sky. Then the moon broke palely through ragged clouds. The thunderhead lay behind as they again headed west, but the air grew rougher.

Sleep was out of the question as the big ship pitched and rolled, shooting nose down, then leaping upward or heeling over under blasts that made the giant frame vibrate. At 4:55 A.M., Lansdowne ordered the men in the gondola pit to the catwalk—the long narrow footpath which traversed the length of the dirigible—to help trim ship. The wind's violence had mounted, but Lansdowne was confident the *Shenandoah* could live through the strain.

At 5:20, the engines were turning



over at 40 knots but the ship was making no headway against the 70-mile-an-hour gale. Suddenly, Rudderman Everett P. Allen shouted that the ship was rising beyond control. Lansdowne knew that they had hit a line squall.

In eight minutes, the ship had soared from 1,800 to 3,150 feet. Again she rose, nose almost vertical. The men on the catwalk and in hammocks and berths hung on for their lives. At 3,300 feet the craft leveled off and dropped to 3,000.

Lansdowne ordered the valves opened to release helium. Again the ship lurched and started upwards. Men, clinging to the framework, could feel the girders trembling. In the control room, Anderson watched the altimeter pass the 6,000-foot mark. Their ceiling was 7,000. At that point the expanding gasbags would certainly break up the ship.

Mercifully, the *Shenandoah* leveled off under 7,000 feet. For two minutes she remained poised and almost motionless. The men relaxed.

Next moment the ship heeled to port and began plunging earthward dizzily to what seemed a certain crash. For three minutes they dived; then the nose came up. They had dropped 3,000 feet in three minutes. Lansdowne ordered Rosendahl aft to see if they were ready to slip the fuel tanks, and an instant later told Anderson to follow.

As they climbed into the hull, the

ship began spinning counterclockwise on its keel, then lifted its nose and shot upward. Girders groaned and wires snapped. Then came a crunching, sickening roar as the girders parted. The ship had broken in two. Another rending crash and the control car plunged earthwards, carrying Lansdowne and seven other men to death.

Rosendahl saw three men close by. Three others answered his shouts. With careful manipulation of the gas valves, they might save themselves by handling the broken foresection as a free balloon.

In the aft section, Lieut. Edgar W. Sheppard and an aviation rigger named Solar saw Rosendahl's section float upwards and away like an inverted cone. They themselves were falling. Sheppard turned to help a machinist's mate climb from the ladder of a power car. The supports suddenly snapped and the man dangled in mid-air. Sheppard pulled him aboard, but lost his own life a moment later when the girder to which he clung snapped, hurling him free of the ship.

Solar and John Hahn, the cook, scrambled towards the top of the framework. Another grinding roar and 80 feet of the section broke loose and started earthward. Four men in the power car died as they hit the ground; the others lived.

The rear section, 450 feet long, fell steadily but the helium gave it buoyancy and instead of striking the ground it was swept along over treetops. As the gas flowed out, it gradually lost its lift. The 19 men on board began dropping off. All escaped without serious injury.

Meanwhile, Rosendahl and the six others floated along in the 150-foot nose section, spinning slowly as the men valved gas to settle their share of the wreck. For ten miles they drifted, coming finally so close to the earth they could shout at farmers to grab the dangling cables. Two men seized the ropes but were dragged along.

The final act in the drama came when a neighbor telephoned Ernest Nichols, a farmer, that an airship was headed his way and the crew aboard wanted him to stop it. Nichols grabbed a line as the bag headed for his house. He took a cable turn on a fence post. The post came free. A stump was uprooted next. Then he got a turn on a tree and the big nose held fast—12 miles from the point where it had broken loose.

Within an hour the countryside was swarming with souvenir hunters who stripped the wreckage and made a holiday of the grim tragedy. Back in Lakehurst, Navy wives and

children heard the terrible news calmly. Then the Navy ordered an inquiry. The board's conclusions:

No blame could be attached to officers or crew, or to bad construction. The fault, said the board, lay with the weather.