

1993

Blimps and U-Boats: U.S. Navy Airships in the Battle of the Atlantic

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Recommended Citation

Mahncke, Frank C. and Vaeth, J. Gordon (1993) "Blimps and U-Boats: U.S. Navy Airships in the Battle of the Atlantic," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 4 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss4/18>

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144 Naval War College Review

Vaeth, J. Gordon. *Blimps and U-Boats: U.S. Navy Airships in the Battle of the Atlantic*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 205pp. \$34.95

Blimps—those great charming gas bags in the sky—are said to have been named from the sound made when someone flicked a finger against the side of one: *blimp!* Even if only apocryphal, the anecdote suits the subject.

Before the Second World War the U.S. Navy had some experience with both blimps and their larger cousins the airships, but little enthusiasm was generated. Blimps suffered in the shadow of the airships such as the *Macon*, *Akron*, and *Shenandoah*. However, because blimps had no internal frame and therefore could better endure ugly weather than the rigid airships, they ultimately proved to be far less disaster-prone.

When the U-boat campaign Operation *Paukenschlag* (Drumbeat) opened along the Atlantic coast in early 1942, only one squadron of blimps, stationed at Lakehurst, New Jersey, was available for antisubmarine patrol and convoy escort. It was initially equipped with machine guns and depth charges, but its armament gradually improved as the war progressed, to include radar, magnetic anomaly detection, and sonobuoys.

By the end of 1943, the blimps were patrolling out of bases from Maine to Brazil, and in 1944 blimp squadrons flew across the Atlantic (making the first ever transatlantic flight by blimps) to North Africa and southern Europe. By the end of the

war, eleven antisubmarine blimp squadrons were operating in the western Atlantic and in the Mediterranean.

Although blimps dropped depth charges on many promising contacts, there is no firm evidence to suggest that blimps alone sank any German submarines (sunken submarines are rarely able to point a finger at their predators). However, the author does cite direct evidence that the presence of a blimp over a convoy often discouraged submarine attacks. One blimp, the *K-74*, was lost in a running gun battle with the *U-134*.

In addition to classic antisubmarine warfare, blimps performed many varied and valuable services by capitalizing on their endurance and ability almost to hover. Before the advent of the helicopter, blimps were splendid rescue platforms that located and saved many torpedoed seamen and downed aircrew in the Atlantic theater. In Europe blimps proved useful as mine-spotting platforms.

J. Gordon Vaeth was an air intelligence officer with blimps during the war. He has provided a comprehensive history of the development and use of blimps during the zenith of their service in the Navy. He offers a wealth of specific operational detail, along with some splendid anecdotes.

Perhaps due to a lack of platform sponsorship in the Navy's warfare community structure, blimps have not found a place in the modern Navy. While they can perform a number of aeronautically interesting things, there is no single one that they

do uniquely, no mission or role that cannot also be performed by an existing platform—such as patrol aircraft, that can cover more area faster, or helicopters, that can hover better.

Whatever the reason, the departure of blimps from the naval scene is regrettable, for a blimp is a delightful thing. Flying on the principles of Archimedes rather than Bernoulli, they are graceful creatures that never fail to draw the eye, delight the imagination, and stir the heart.

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George, James L. *The U.S. Navy in the 1990s: Alternatives for Action*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 246pp. \$18.95

"You've got to air creative ideas, no matter how controversial. You've got to innovate. You've got to see old and new problems with a fresh view, and a steady eye on the process of learning the lessons of the past, be it recent or further back, for the fleet that will sail into the future." This provocative quote is from the address of the former Secretary of the Navy, J. Lawrence Garrett III, to the 1990 Sea Power Forum. James L. George does exactly what Garrett called for—he airs creative ideas, no matter how controversial.

James George is an internationally known analyst of naval affairs and arms control, a former member of both the legislative and executive branches of government in the field of national

security affairs, and a widely respected author. He has a *cachet* that many in the profession can never hope to obtain—respectability and a platform from which to espouse ideas that would be considered heretical from a lesser source.

George disparages the current and projected Navy building program as "less of the same," and he waves a red flag at the current Navy leadership. He refers to the current period as a new "interwar period," one which lacks the leadership that led in the past to Navy brilliance. Using the past as an analytical guide, the author demonstrates that although from many perspectives the three previous interwar periods (between World Wars I and II, World War II and the Korean War, and from the Vietnam War to the Reagan buildup) were perceived as disastrous for the Navy, they were actually times of progress and imagination in which the seeds of naval success in the next war were sown by imaginative mavericks who challenged traditional naval parochialism.

Acting precisely as did the mavericks he cites, George uses two central themes to illustrate the crossroads at which the Navy is poised. First, he discusses the lack of coherent and realistic mission analysis (a strategist's term known to military planners as force planning), which he insists is the basis for everything else. George shows that in the radically altered international environment in which the Navy must operate, the strategic patterns of the past simply do