

LIGHTER-THAN-AIR



RESERVISTS

By Jim Burridge

During WW II, lighter-than-air (LTA) craft were key components in the war against the German U-boat, flying critical convoy escort and antisubmarine warfare (ASW) patrol missions. After war's end, blimps continued to serve in ASW and other roles, and in 1949 eight new reserve LTA patrol squadrons (ZP) were established. ZP-651 was based at NAS Akron, Ohio; ZPs 751, 752 and 753 at NAS Lakehurst, N.J.; ZP-871 at NAS Oakland, Calif.; ZP-911 at NAS Squantum, Mass.; and ZPs 951 and 952 at MCAF Santa Ana, Calif. These reserve ZP squadrons were even more unusual than their lighter-than-air brethren, as revealed by a closer look at ZP-911.

Part of Reserve Air Wing (RAW) 91, VP-911's location at Squantum posed one major challenge to the squadron: the station had no blimp hangar, so no blimps could be permanently kept there. Nearby Naval Air Reserve Training Unit (NARTU) South Weymouth, Mass., had been built in 1942 specifically as an airship base and had hosted ZP-11 and Airship Utility Squadron 1 during WW II, but it was put into caretaker status at the end of the war. In order to operate blimps from the hangar-less base, ZP-911 borrowed K-type airships from three sister squadrons on board NAS Lakehurst. Transport Squadrons 911 or 912 flew ZP-911 crews to Lakehurst, and the crews ferried the airships back to Squantum for the reservists' weekend flying duties. Weather permitting, the crew returned the blimps to Lakehurst late Sunday and were flown back to Squantum. Since the blimps were moored outdoors at night, blimp watches had to be stood all night long—an unenviable assignment in the Massachusetts winters.



Opposite, NARTU Lakehurst's K-93 at NAS Squantum, Mass., circa 1949–1953. Above, the business end of a K-type airship moored to a mast.

Most of the reservists' weekend flying was dedicated to maintaining basic flying skills, but ZP-911 crews occasionally got to practice their ASW mission against submarines from New London, Conn. Paul LeBlanc, a WW II Pacific veteran who served with ZP-911 from 1949 until 1953, recalls that they considered it a good day's hunting if they got hits from 6 or 7 sonobuoys out of 10 dropped.

While the K-type airship could carry depth charges and acoustic torpedoes, ordnance delivery was restricted to the annual active duty training, which was usually held at Lakehurst or at NAS Glynco, Ga., home of the Naval Airship Training Unit. In 1954, however, ZP-911 took three

airships from Lakehurst and deployed to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for its annual active duty period. Active duty maintenance personnel assigned to NARTU Lakehurst went along to maintain the blimps.

The reserve air wing was basically an administrative concept rather than an operational one; even the fighter and attack squadrons didn't train with each other. On rare occasions there were large exercises which involved squadrons from several reserve air wings. An example was Operation Swordfish, a

1953 coastal defense exercise involving 53 aircraft from RAW-91 and comparable numbers from other reserve air wings—RAW-83 in New York, -86 in Norfolk, Va., and -93 in Willow Grove, Pa. The scenario involved the approach of a nuclear-armed enemy carrier task force off the New Jersey coast, and ZP-911 played both an airborne early warning and an ASW role in the exercise.

In December 1953 Squantum was closed and RAW-91 moved to South Weymouth. This didn't



however, because the blimp hangars there were completely taken up by airships from the Naval Air Development Unit and Airship Early Warning Squadron 1. ZP-911 was forced to continue to borrow airships from Lakehurst.

The drawdown of the Navy airship program began in 1957, and ZP-911 was disestablished in 1959. ZP-911 members were absorbed by RAW-91's other flying squadrons and by the airship staff. Lakehurst's three reserve ZP squadrons, the providers of ZP-911's airships, were also disestablished in 1959. The last operational airship in the U.S. Navy was deflated at Lakehurst in

closed in September 1997, a commercial airship made a flyby as part of the closure ceremony, commemorating the blimp's unique role in Naval Aviation history.

Jim Burridge is a civilian career intelligence officer currently assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency. He is collecting data for a history of operations at Squantum and South Weymouth from 1949-1968 and would like to hear from anyone who served with *Roughneck* Air Wing 11 (operated at both the Naval Air Development Unit). He may be reached at jburr@verizon.com.

The author thanks ZP-911 veterans Paul LeBlanc and Leo Lazo for their help with this article; William Althoff for providing the photo of Navy airship operations in his definitive book *Sky Ships: A History of the Airship in the United States Navy*; and to Cdr. Peter Morsky, USNVR (Ret.), for his loan of the Squantum photograph.

The ZP-911 reconnaissance airship was built for the airborne early warning role and was capable of long periods on station. The height-finding radar pod atop the airship was connected to the control car by an 85-foot vertical tunnel, which provided personnel access to the top.



