

The Hensley Affair

By CHARLES L. KELLER

In the very early morning hours of 2 July 1919, the British rigid airship R.34 rose from the fog-shrouded station at East Fortune in eastern Scotland. Pointing her nose west, she embarked on the first east-west trans-Atlantic crossing by air, landing four days later at Mineola, Long Island. On the tenth of July the airship took to the air again and repeated its feat by flying back to Great Britain.

Not too well known is the fact that there was one American aboard the R.34 during each crossing. On the east-west flight, Lt Zachary Lansdowne of the United States Navy, later to lose his life as Commanding Officer of the Navy's rigid airship U.S.S. Shenandoah, was aboard as a guest of the Air Ministry. On the eastbound flight, Col. William N. Hensley of the United States Army Air Service, was aboard. Although Lansdowne entered the public eye through his later exploits and untimely death aboard the Shenandoah, Hensley was destined to remain in the shadow of anonymity. This is not to suggest, however, that his activities were not interesting; quite to the contrary, when the R.34 left Long Island to return to England, Col. Hensley was embarking on one of the most unusual adventures in rigid airship history. After his arrival in Europe, the Colonel went into Germany and signed a contract with the Zeppelin Company for the construction of a rigid airship for the Army. This was in spite of the fact that the United States was still technically at war with Germany, the Zeppelin Company was forbidden to construct airships under the Peace Treaty, and, under a joint Army-Navy agreement, the construction and operation of rigid airships in the United States was exclusively a Navy responsibility.

The story of the Hensley airship actually began in 1916 when, upon Army recommendation, a Joint Army-Navy Airship Board was formed to design and construct a rigid airship. This was a result of recent impressive performances of the German Zeppelins in the war zones, and a desire to evaluate the airship as a weapon. The Airship Board, three Army and three Navy officers under the direction of the Chief Constructor, Admiral D. W. Taylor, proceeded at a painfully slow rate. All officers were serving on the board in addition to other duties and had a limited amount of time to offer. When the board was finally dissolved in 1918, it had completed an airship design, but had no intention of building it. The board recommended that the construction and operation of rigid airships be delegated to the Navy since the giant vessels required facilities not unlike those used for the construction and operation of surface vessels.

The recommendation of the board was accepted by both services. With the war effort in full swing, few officers of either service had time to worry about rigid airships and who should be responsible for them. But the Armistice brought with it thoughts of returning to peacetime commands and the ways and means of enhancing the scope and authority of such commands. In doing so, the Army began to reach for the rigid airship that had been given to the Navy less than a year before.

In April 1919, the Director of the Air Service asked the British Air Attache in Washington whether Great Britain would sell one of its latest rigid airships to the War Department. The suggestion was made that the anticipated trans-Atlantic flight of a British rigid airship that summer could in actuality be a delivery flight. Rumors of the War Department's inquiry soon reached the Navy where a great deal of concern was

raised. The Fiscal 1920 appropriations were in their final hearings and Admiral Taylor felt certain he was going to get the appropriation for the purchase of an airship abroad. Since only Germany and Great Britain had built such ships in the past, and Germany, as the former enemy, was no longer permitted to engage in airship construction, the Navy would have to negotiate with Great Britain. He feared "that some of these negotiations which we may have to undertake soon may be embarrassed by some action taken by the War Department, unknown to us." (1)

The Director of Naval Aviation, Captain T. T. Craven, contacted the War Department for an explanation of the rumors, reminding them of the earlier Airship Board decision. General Charles T. Menoher, Director of the Air Service, signed a letter denying that the Air Service had taken any action contrary to established policies, unless it might be "a request made to the British authorities for information as to whether or not they could supply a rigid airship for our uses, in case it were desired." The writer then complained, "No reply has yet been received to this." (2) And none ever was. It should be noted that a letter signed by the head of a department or bureau usually was written by someone in his command and presented for his signature. In this case, the writer was most likely Colonel Charles def. Chandler, Chief of Balloon and Airship Division, or Brig. General William Mitchell, Chief Training and Operations Officer, the latter embarking on his attempt to unify the air services.

Captain Craven's inquiry prompted Col. Chandler to write a request that the Airship Board's decisions be reconsidered. "It is now about 11 months since that action was taken and the War Department has received no information from the Navy Department indicating that the four airships to be built by the Navy under the terms of the Airship Board's recommendations are under construction, nor that the construction has even begun." (3) Surely Chandler did not expect the ponderous wheels of government to move with sufficient rapidity to allow the Navy to have actual construction underway in such a short time. The Navy traditionally requested Congressional permission before expending large sums of money for ship construction. Did the Colonel expect the Navy to initiate a large airship program without Congressional approval? Perhaps he did, for later events were to show him and his immediate superiors to have a disregard for the prior approval of that legislative body.

The Secretary of War then signed a request that the Airship Board decision be revoked so the Army could institute its own airship program, but it failed to meet the Secretary of the Navy's approval. The War Department was reminded that a step toward both departments conducting their independent programs would be indefensible before Congress or the American people. The fact that the Navy had embarked upon a rigid airship program was stressed; the establishment of the Lakehurst Naval Air Station was for that express purpose.

In May 1919, Col. Chandler, looking toward another source for a rigid airship, recommended the War Department take steps to secure one of the latest German rigid dirigibles for delivery to the United States. This was, no doubt, prompted by the early draft of the Peace Treaty's Air Clauses, particularly that article dealing with the distribution of Germany's war material among the Allies. At the cessation of hostilities, there were

15 Zeppelins in operation or ready for use. These would be shared by the Allied governments. But the Secretary of War disapproved Chandler's recommendation. It was, after all, a little early to begin enjoying the spoils of war which had not yet officially ended. Hence, in two separate attempts during the first half of 1919, the Army had failed to secure a rigid airship for itself.

Early in May, Col. Chandler had also recommended that the Air Service have a representative with the Military Attache in London to keep abreast of developments in British airship programs. For such duty, he recommended Col. William N. Hensley, Jr. The Chief of Staff approved Chandler's recommendation with the suggestion that Hensley might go abroad on the return flight of the British trans-Atlantic airship. In this manner was Col. Hensley designated as the War Department's observer on the R.34.

Hensley's instructions from the Director of the Air Service were to "acquire as much information as practicable concerning airships and airship stations in England." If he could make suitable arrangements with American authorities overseas, the Air Service had no objection to his securing information on airships in Germany, France and Italy. (4)

When the R.34 arrived at Pulham Airship Station on 13 July, Hensley reported to the London Military Attache. Arrangements were made with the Admiralty for him to visit all the British airship stations. For over a month he enjoyed almost unlimited access to the stations and ships, and took part in R.34's flight from Pulham to her home station, East Fortune. By the time his tours were completed, he had arranged to take rigid airship flight training. But other events interfered.

On the first of August Colonel Edward Davis, Military Attache at The Hague, was approached by a special delegate of the Zeppelin Company with an interesting proposal. An invitation was extended to Davis and any Army airship expert to visit Germany and inspect the latest model of Zeppelin. The airship was the L-72, ordered by the German Navy but still under construction at the time of the Armistice. Since the ship had not been delivered, it was claimed to be the private property of the Zeppelin Company and therefore not subject to seizure by the Allies under the terms of the Peace Treaty. This, of course, was not so, for the L-72 very clearly fell under the article defining military and naval aeronautical material. It included material which had been "designed for warlike purposes." But the Zeppelin Company representative had his own interpretation of the Treaty and wanted to sell this latest airship to the United States.

Davis' cabled report to Washington was referred to the Joint Army-Navy Board on Aeronautics--later the Aeronautical Board--for its consideration. The Board decided that action on the proposal was inadvisable since the Zeppelin Company was fostered by the German government. Therefore, the Board felt all Zeppelin property would be subject to disposition under the terms of the Peace Treaty. This decision was signed by Major General Charles T. Menoher, Chairman of the Board and Director of the Air Service. Yet, on 20 August, Colonel Hensley received cabled orders to report to The Hague "for the purpose of carrying out confidential instructions with reference to the original Zeppelin Airship Corporation." (5)

On the fifth of September Davis, Hensley and the Zeppelin representative, a Dr. Dumreicher, traveled to Berlin where they met with Zeppelin officials to discuss the disposition of the L-72. When Davis returned to The Hague, Hensley remained in Germany, having full access to the Zeppelin works and making flights on the Zeppelin Company's civilian dirigible Bodensee, flying between Friedrichshafen and Staaken (Berlin). Davis was enthusiastic in his report to Col. Chandler, although he recognized the need to make suitable arrangements with the Allies, "especially England and France." He recommended the "government cable instructions to

General Bliss in Paris to insist ... that we take possession of L-72 temporarily if not absolutely with privilege of flying to the United States as soon as practicable."

(6)

Curiously, on the very day Davis and Hensley went to Berlin, the Inter-Allied Aeronautical Commission of Control decided upon a distribution of the wartime Zeppelins, giving France and England the two largest ships, L-71 and L-72. The United States did not participate in the distribution due to its failure to ratify the Peace Treaty.

With the thought of taking possession of that newest of rigid airships, the imaginations of the two officers ran wild. Davis soon reported, "We have now tentative plans to fly airship L-72 from Berlin across Asia to Philippine Islands, thence across Pacific via Honolulu to the United States and afterwards back to Berlin if desired. This is an opportunity to promote science under American auspices." (7) But Col. Chandler in the United States was cool to such suggestions. He wanted to see L-72 in Air Service hands in order to acquire important engineering data. "The spectacular attempt to fly around the world with this airship," he wrote, "would mean a big risk of losing the technical information which we need so much." (8)

The War Department asked General Bliss, in Paris, to arrange for the Army to secure the airship. Davis and Hensley, eager to get matters under way, traveled to Paris to speak to the General in person. Their enthusiasm was still high, especially Hensley's, as he had been promised command of the ship by the Germans. But on the day the two officers were in Paris meeting with the General, the Supreme War Council approved the IAACC distribution of wartime Zeppelins, and France, given the first choice, took the L-72. If the Army still wanted her, they now had to buy her from France. That country was approached, but the proposal was coolly received. The L-72 acquisition was then dropped; something much better had come up.

After the Armistice the Zeppelin Company did not remain idle. Almost immediately plans for a small 20,000 cubic meter commercial airship were drafted. In 1919 two of them were built and the first, Bodensee, was placed in commercial service inside Germany. The real field for commercial rigid airships, however, was in trans-Atlantic service. Several large commercial airships were considered, and designs were drawn for one based on the big 100,000 cubic meter L-100 class naval airship ordered, but not built, very late in the war. While Col. Hensley was in Friedrichshafen he became aware of this design, and the Zeppelin Company offered to build two of them for the Air Service at a unit price of eight million marks. After the L-72 went to France, Hensley had Davis cable the offer for the bigger ships to Washington. In his description of the ships and an evaluation of their potential worth to the Air Service, Davis made a careful point of the very fact which had so disturbed the European Allies at the Peace Conference, the fact that caused commercial airships to be defined as those with less than 30,000 cubic meters displacement. Although the new big Zeppelin was a commercial airship on paper, Davis noted that it could "create useful peacetime service but be always available for war." (9)

Colonel Chandler immediately recommended Hensley be authorized to purchase one of the proposed airships. At the current exchange rate the dollar equivalent of eight million marks was a mere \$360,000. This was a bargain, especially after the recent Naval appropriation allowed \$2,000,000 for the purchase of a naval rigid airship abroad. On the 14th of October the Adjutant General's office advised Hensley that \$360,000 would be transferred to marks in Paris and be placed to his credit. He was further advised to make arrangements to secure the airship and receive an American crew for training. (10)

On the 30th of October Colonel Hensley and Alfred Colman, Director of the Zeppelin Company, met in Berlin and signed a "proposal", binding the German company for

a period of four weeks. In view of the devaluation of the mark and the order of one instead of two airships, the price rose to twelve million marks. In his report of the transaction, Hensley expressed his opinion that the Germans would lose money at this price, and the Air Service should offer a larger sum. The War Department was willing to accept the increased cost, but, not sharing Hensley's generosity, would go no higher. The new price was equivalent to a half million dollars. The additional funds were assigned to Hensley and he was designated as disbursing officer in connection with the purchase of the Zeppelin.

If every man must, in his lifetime, have one moment of glory, Hensley was certainly approaching his. He had received both funds and authorization to purchase the largest rigid airship in the world--twenty-five percent greater in displacement volume than the R.38 being purchased by the Navy in England. He had received training on the Bodensee and, so far, was not challenged in his assumed right to take command of the ship and fly it home. He asked Colonel Chandler to send a crew for training, listing the required skills of the 13 officers and 37 men he needed; five of the officers he requested by name.

In the middle of November Hensley moved his headquarters from The Hague to the Military Attache's office in Berne, Switzerland. On the 26th of November he and Alfred Colsman signed the formal contract. It specified that the airship have a gas volume of 100,000 cubic meters (3,532,000 cubic feet) carried in 16 gas bags, be 774 feet long and have a maximum diameter of 97 feet, 11 inches. With twelve 240 hp engines housed in 10 power cars, the ship would have a maximum speed of 87 miles per hour. The vessel would have complete accommodations for 12 passengers in addition to those for the officers, crew and cargo. Although it was forbidden to do so by Article 201 of the Peace Treaty, the Zeppelin Company presumably began work on the new ship, designated LZ-125. (The ZR-3, U.S.S. Los Angeles, built by the Zeppelin Company in 1922-24 for the U. S. Navy, with the consent of the Council of Ambassadors, carried the Works Number LZ-126.)

When he returned to Berne, Hensley found a very disappointing cable awaiting him. The Secretary of War had reconsidered the purchase of the airship and now directed the project be abandoned. Hensley replied that the contract had already been signed. He had, however, inserted a clause which stated the contract would not be in force until the date the state of war existing between the United States and Germany was declared ended. In view of this, he asked, could not the contract be carried out at that date? But the War Department was having no more of this affair. It ordered no expenditures should be made, for the allotment of funds was being cancelled.

On the first of December Hensley cabled the Zeppelin Company of the latest events, but gave no instructions. On the eighth he told them he was fighting the cancellation. On the fourteenth he advised the company to stop work for a fortnight, but this was accepted as advice of a personal nature. Finally, on the sixth of January, he arrived in Friedrichshafen and asked that the contract be rescinded and be replaced by an option at a higher price. At the end of January the Zeppelin Company presented him with a Motivation for Damages, but thought it better not to present the claim until the option terminated at the end of six months. Although the contract had been in force for only six weeks, the company claimed to have built a number of girders and a twin-engine power car. To be sure, the girders were seen by naval representatives who visited Friedrichshafen early in 1922, and the power car was used as a test bed for ZR-3 engine tests in 1924. But it is still not clear whether these parts were actually built during the period of the Hensley contract or whether they had been built near the end of the war in anticipation of the L-100 class of wartime airships.

With the Zeppelin airship out of the picture for the

time, Hensley reported to the Military Observer in Berlin and received orders to return to the United States. Although he did not bring a rigid airship home with him, his trip was not in vain, for he had written many reports on airships and airship activities he had seen abroad. He was much in demand as a speaker before both Army and Navy groups after his return. But he came back to the United States considerably embittered toward the Navy, for he blamed the entire cancellation upon the Navy and its refusal to rescind the early Airship Board decision as to rigid airship responsibilities. Although he did appear and speak before naval groups, he did so under protest.

Colonel Hensley considered the option to be his personal property since he was not told to ask for it, but there was little he could do with it. He reportedly tried to interest Henry Ford in purchasing it, but did so without success. As might have been expected, the option expired without further action.

The Hensley affair might have ended at that point had not Brig. General Mitchell, in his usual vociferous manner, mentioned it before a Senate Committee on Military Affairs. Although the Navy knew a little about the Hensley contract, this gave it a good reason to ask the Secretary of War for all details of the negotiations. The War Secretary, Newton D. Baker, explained the entire affair. The proposed acquisition of L-72 had met with his approval, and he had instructed General Bliss to take up the matter with the Peace Council. Actually, the General had not received the Secretary's orders by the time Davis and Hensley called upon him in Paris, and on that date the L-72 went to France. After the L-72 was dropped, the matter of the purchase of another large dirigible abroad was brought before the Secretary. He explained, "Under an erroneous assumption that the dirigible referred to at that time was one to be procured under conditions similar to those which would have brought about the purchase of the L-72, I permitted negotiations to be entered into. . . . When I became fully acquainted with the facts in the matter and realized that we were entering into negotiations with nationals of a country with which we were still at war, . . . I therefore promptly gave instructions to cancel the contract and to drop the matter entirely." (11)

While the Hensley airship was cancelled and the Hensley affair was closed as far as the Army was concerned, a small wake remained to be seen by those who knew the circumstances of the affair. Hensley himself returned to his regular rank of Major, later commanded Mitchell Air Field, not far from the Mineola landing field of the R.34, and, after nearly a decade of obscurity, passed away in 1929. The Army-Navy controversy over the rigid airship continued until the mid-twenties when General Mitchell was ushered out of the military scene.

Within the Zeppelin Company, the cancellation of the Hensley contract marked the end of Alfred Colsman as head of the company. In his place rose the legendary Dr. Hugo Eckener, whose name has become synonymous with Count Zeppelin's when rigid airships are mentioned. Early in 1921 the company attempted to obtain an execution of the contract, suggesting that it still might deliver an airship to the U. S. Army in lieu of an indemnity for breach of contract. While this action was little more than a token gesture, it did eventually result in the construction of the ZR-3, U.S.S. Los Angeles, for the U. S. Navy in 1922-24, and a renewed future for the company.

Today the Hensley affair is all but forgotten. A suggestion of it remains in Colsman's book, LUFTSCHIFF VORAUSS, written after his loss of power in the Zeppelin Company. The remarks of General Mitchell remain in the Congressional Hearings, and the full correspondence and contracts rest in the old and dusty files of the Army and Navy, hiding their story from all except those who would but seek and read.

See next page for reference list.

FOOTNOTES:

- ① Admiral Taylor to Captain Craven, 26 May 1919, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO files.
- ② General Menoher to Captain Craven, 3 June 1919, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO files.
- ③ Colonel Chandler to Chief Training and Operations Group, 11 June 1919, National Archives, Record Group 18, Central Decimal Files.
- ④ Director of Air Service to Colonel Hensley, 7 June 1919, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO files.
- ⑤ Colonel Hensley to Director of Air Service, 14 April 1920, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO files.
- ⑥ Colonel Davis to Milstaff, 15 Sept. 1919, National Archives, Record Group 18, Central Decimal Files.
- ⑦ Colonel Davis to Milstaff, 17 Sept. 1919, National Archives, Record Group 18, Central Decimal Files.
- ⑧ Colonel Chandler to Administrative Executive, 19 Sept. 1919, National Archives, Record Group 18, Central

Decimal Files.

⑨ Colonel Davis to Milstaff, 3 October 1919, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO files.

⑩ Adjutant General to Military Attache, The Hague, 14 October 1919, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO Files.

⑪ Newton D. Baker, Sec. War, to Secretary of Navy, 17 June 1920, National Archives, Record Group 72, CNO Files.

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Society Project Progresses

Since the announcement of the first Society Project in the Fall JOURNAL, the response and help have been almost overwhelming, and some great strides have been taken toward the final goal of a complete history of aircraft flown and operated by U. S. oil companies up to World War II. Several dozen Members have helped in one way or another, with photos of oil company planes or just notes on one such aircraft from their memories. The result is that some 180 oil company planes, out of a total number of over 300, have been identified. Of the 180, photos have come to light for over half.

Leadership of the Project is in the capable hands of Technical Editor, Walter M. Jefferies, Jr., and he is being assisted by the Editor and Mr. Joe Sorokin, JOURNAL Research Coordinator, who will handle the voluminous correspondence involved. When all aircraft operated by oil companies have been listed, the total information will be collated and arranged into a major article which will appear in the JOURNAL. Tables will list the aircraft of each company, and the different

types, in their company markings, will be illustrated.

But much more help is needed! Photos, data, little news items, magazine and book pictures that show the fleet numbers of such an aircraft can be a great help. If you know of anyone, pilot, mechanic, executive, office personnel, who was concerned with these planes and can let the Editor know of him, he can be contacted to further help the project. If you can't send some bit of information (such as from a publication or oil company house organ), it will be just as helpful if you can note the information down and send that.

An indication of progress can be seen below--a markings work sheet drawing of Texaco's No. 17 which the Editor sneaked off Walt Jefferies' drawing board one dark night. Besides text, tables and many photos, the final oil company article will contain a good number of completed renderings like the one into which this drawing will evolve. Complete success of the Project, however, depends on everyone giving whatever assistance he can. Can you help?

