

Examples of the French "M" and "R" types, improvements over the older German "sausages", were imported and served as models for improved types. Even before our entry into the war, balloons of U. S. manufacture were being purchased by the Allies.

Beside the uses of observation balloons ashore, the French, British and Italians came up with a variety of uses for observation balloons and in this area the U. S. Navy followed suit.

Specifically, as to the U. S. Navy, the kite balloon appeared to hold promise as an elevated platform for spotting gunfire. The reliability of a wired telephone between observer and gunners had strong appeal. Later, when the submarine menace and convoying appeared and placed new values on an elevated observer that could "keep step" with vessels, the towed kite balloon, and the airship, or blimp, assumed larger importance and shipborne balloon installations became an active topic. Besides the application to small patrol vessels, kite balloon installations eventually were worked out for a number of combatant vessels and met with varying degrees of acceptance. Problems were involved, notably in the matter of winches and the logistic supply of the hydrogen gas for inflation. The balloons rode at the end of a 3/8" wire cable having a telephone wire core. Winches had to function smoothly for: (1) hauling down (at 400 ft/min), (2) paying out (1000 ft/min), and (3) holding the balloon while aloft. Three types of power were utilized--gas engines for shore stations and trucks, steam engines for destroyers, and electric motors mainly for battleships. The hydrogen gas was supplied from shore installations in steel flasks weighing about 125 pounds each and holding about 200 scf gas. Each flask was equipped with a special valve and each had to be connected up to a manifold for charging and discharge.

In 1915, shortly after the focusing of aviation training at Pensacola, the Navy placed orders for a floating dirigible shed, a hydrogen plant, and one or more free balloons. And in the same year the Navy's first dirigible was ordered. One or two kite balloons were also ordered.

When the systematic training of Naval aviators got underway, work was prescribed in free and kite balloons and airships, as well as work in seaplanes. Manuals and texts of that period invariably referred to both "light-

er-than-air" and "heavier-than-air" craft. Free balloon flights were regarded as basic to acquiring a "feel" of the air and for acquiring an appreciation for meteorology, a science then in an embryonic state. As the momentum of training personnel increased, facilities became crowded and parts of LTA training were shifted to Akron. Thereafter, the training of LTA and HTA students was pretty much segregated. Free balloon proficiency faded out of the HTA training syllabus but remained in the LTA syllabus.

The general situation that existed with regard to balloons just before U.S. entry into WW I is well outlined by the editorial comment from the May 1916, Vol.V No. 4 issue of FLYING. In the same issue there appeared articles captioned "Hundreds of Kite Balloons in the European War" and "Getting the Range of Artillery Fire" with a dozen photographs showing the scope of British, French and Italian operations.

"The Army and Navy of the United States have only a few aeroplanes, so it is hardly surprising to find that there are not any kite balloons in use. The Navy has been experimenting with only one--when it should have at least 50 in commission. The officers connected with aeronautics have been asking for funds with which to get kite balloons, but as we all know they have not received the funds. The Army needs kite balloons for use with the Coast and Field Artillery. Guns without 'eyes' are of no value. Owing to its simplicity and ease of operation, the kite balloon could be employed easily by the land and naval militia for maneuvers and general training".

It is worth noting that the obvious hazards involved in utilizing hydrogen as a "balloon gas" gave impetus to overtures from the British and led directly into the chain of events including the creation of an Army-Navy Helium Board, that initiated production, or extraction, of helium on a large scale. No helium reached the war zone but some 200,000 cu. ft. were on the docks awaiting shipment on Armistice Day.

As a matter of record, no convoy of troops or material crossed submarine-invested waters without escort and observation cover, and in this coverage, the kite balloon played a most useful role.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'BLIMP'

By Dr. A. D. Topping

The following paper was presented by Dr. Topping before the Central States Aero Historians Meeting in Dayton, Ohio in June 1963.

There are a surprising number of different ideas as to the origin of the word, "blimp" to describe a non-rigid airship. Most of them are based on nothing firmer than mere speculation. This does not keep them from being propounded with an air of authority. Take, for example, what Basil Clarke says in his recent book, *THE HISTORY OF AIRSHIPS* (1), "Around this time World War I) the name 'blimp' had become accepted for non-rigid ships. It was popularly believed that this was an abbreviation for 'bloody limp,' sometimes a singularly appropriate description. In fact, however, the origin of this name is far less romantic. The earlier non-rigids had been designated 'A-limp.' Their successors were called 'D-limp.' It was as simple as that." This is the most popular theory, and has been accepted by, for example, the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2); but all is not as simple as Mr. Clarke assures us.

First of all, the British seem not to have had a "Limp" designation, and second, they certainly did not have A and B types; and Clarke brings this story into a context about British airships. Ah, you say, but the Americans did have A and B classes of airships, and perhaps the word is of American origin. This theory was recently stated by Dan Kasperick in an article in the Navy magazine, *ALL HANDS* (3). He says "blimp" was originally a nickname for the American "B" class, limp balloon." Now, there was no American A-class of airships as such--all military aircraft, heavier or lighter-than-air, were designated with "A" until the appearance of the B-class airship in May, 1917. There was an American B airship--but there seems to be no record of any official designation of non-rigids as "limp". Further, according to the Oxford Dictionary (4), the first appearance of the word in print was in 1916, in England, a year before the first B-class airship.

There are some other variations of the limp-ship theory. One is that "blimp" is a contraction of "British limp," but this would surely require that the word

be of American origin, which it evidently is not. Another idea is that one day someone wrote down, "There are two classes of airships: A. Rigid, and B. Limp," and lo, a word was coined. With the exception that no one seems ever to have called pressure airships limp-- (after all, when they are limp they are not flyable), the only thing against this is its air of vague implausibility.

Well, what do the professional etymologists say? Eric Partridge, in his book *ORIGINS* (5), says the word was "Coined (?), in 1915, by Horace Shortt (sic): prob. a blend of 'bloody + limp'." Clarke mentioned this theory, and it is indeed plausible. Oswald and Eustace Short were balloon builders who turned to airplanes and were then joined by their brother Horace, who would seem to have been a strictly hard-structure man. As such, it is easy to imagine him referring to "those bloody limp airships." Partridge was familiar with the Oxford (4), which cites a 1918 reference as follows: "Nobody in the R.N.A.S. ever called them anything but 'blimps,' an onomatopoeic name invented by that genius for apposite nomenclature, Horace Shortt" (sic). But this does not agree with Partridge, for what is onomatopoeic about "bloody"? *WEESTER'S NEW WORLD DICTIONARY OF THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE* (6), another of the better etymological sources, says the word is of "echoic coinage," which supports the Oxford version.

Joseph T. Shipley's *DICTIONARY OF WORD ORIGINS* (7) has this: "H. L. Mencken credits the word to a man standing near the aircraft designer Horace Short, in 1914. They were trying to think of a name for the craft when Short called for a blunch ('a drink halfway between breakfast and lunch')--whereupon the officer nearby said: 'Call it a blimp!'" But Shipley himself favors the A-limp, B-limp story.

Possibly the most unlikely theory of all is to be found in Fraser and Gibbons' *SOLDIER AND SAILOR WORDS AND PHRASES* (8): "The name was probably suggested by the corpulent, stumpy shape of the 'Blimp.'" Were Fraser and Gibbons not writing in 1925, several years before David Low created the character of Colonel Blimp, one would suppose that they had somehow got the whole thing upside down. As it is, the suggestion simply seems baseless.

Our etymologists, then, do not agree as to the probable origin of "blimp", but there seems to be a strong suspicion that Horace Short had something to do with it.

The true solution to the mystery is to be found in a considerable correspondence on the subject published in the British magazine, *THE AEROPLANE*, between 20 July and 30 Nov., 1951 (9). The controversy was apparently begun by Henri Hegener, who thought a version given by Geoffrey Dorman in a then new book, *FIFTY YEARS FLY-PAST* (a version that, as we will see, was due to British air historian C. G. Grey), was unlikely, and offered the following: "The blimp, being a non-rigid airship, was officially called 'B-type limp ship,' 'B' standing for B. E. aeroplane fuselage, which was used on the first blimps as a car. B and limp were contracted into blimp, and the name was born." To this, Dorman snorted that non-rigids had never been called limp, officially or unofficially, and cited Grey as authority for his story.

Meanwhile Grey wrote a long letter beginning with the story of Cdr. Neville Usborne and Lt. de Courcy Ireland, who had the idea of suspending an airplane beneath a balloon while waiting for the feared Zeppelins to show up on a raid, whereupon they would release the plane, start the engine by diving, and pursue the Zeppelin. On an early trial of the idea, the forward catches released or gave way and the airplane hung down almost vertically. Then the after slip went and Ireland, the pilot, was thrown out and killed. The airplane went into a spin and Usborne was killed when it hit the ground. According to Grey, this nevertheless led to the idea of suspending only the airplane fuselage under

a gas-bag. The result operated as a small airship except that control surfaces had to be added to the gas-bag also. Then, says Grey, "One of these quaint things was cruising around Port Victoria, Isle of Grain, and the Swale and over the Isle of Sheppey. Horace Short and a bunch of R.N.A.S. officers were standing on top of the slope in front of the sheds at Eastchurch when it hove into sight. Horace, who had a talent for inventing onomatopoeic words which by sound suggested the thing they described, said, 'Look at that blimp!' One of the officers said, 'Why a blimp?' And Horace answered, 'What else could you call it?'"

Grey says he heard this from one of the R.N.A.S. officers only a few days after it happened. This is as close to a first-hand report as we have found so far, but, as Lord Ventry soon pointed out, Grey's chronology is rather confused. The SS-1, which was the first airship with a B.E.2c fuselage for a car, made its first flight March 8, 1915; while the API, in which Usborne and Ireland were killed, first flew August 12, 1915, and their fatal accident occurred February 21, 1916. Reliable historians such as Davy (10), Magoun and Hodgins (11), and Vivian (12) apparently agree that the SS (for Submarine Scout) airships were first to be called blimps, however.

The last important contribution in *THE AEROPLANE* is signed only "Ex-Captain of SS-12," and gives the following: "The word was unconsciously coined for its present use by Lt. A. D. Cunningham, R.N. (now Air Commodore, Ret'd), at about noon on Sunday, December 5, 1915. His Majesty's Airship, SS-12 was lying in 'A' shed at Capel. 'A' shed, having been built too low in the roof, had been modified by lowering the floor by means of a long deep concreted channel, wide enough for the car (a 'Farman Pusher' or alternately, a B.E.-2c fuselage with skids) to pass along. Thus passersby at the old floor level would find the bulged flanks of the envelope at a convenient height for flipping--playfully or for gauging tautness.

"It was the solemn hour of Sunday morning Commanding Officer's Inspection of the Airship Station. Cunningham, ordinarily given to gaiety only at the appropriate times, on approaching the steps down into the channel to inspect captain, cox'n, crew, and car of SS-12, gave the taut gasbag a flip with his thumb and--smiling with amused delight as though he had taken a liberty with a leviathan--imitated the sound of his flip with a chuckled onomatopoeic: 'Blimp!' Then he straightened his face--and so did the midshipman commanding SS-12--the first airship to be called Blimp. The young officer repeated the tale in the mess before lunch and the word thereafter passed into the language."

Since the young midshipman and "Ex-Captain of SS-12" are transparently the same person, here at last is a first-hand account. Furthermore, it is the first story to pin down the place and time. The captain of SS-12 in December, 1915, is now Air Marshal Sir Victor Goddard, KCB, who served with airships from March, 1915 to August, 1921 (13), (14)--according to Lord Ventry, "a very reliable person; I think his word can be accepted."

This does not mean that Horace Short did not say what C. G. Grey says he did. Probably Short had heard the word before, though it had presumably not yet gained wide currency. This would fit with Grey's recollection that Short's witticism came some time after the deaths of Usborne and Ireland, perhaps 3 or 4 months after Cunningham first spoke the word. The use of "blimp" by a well-known personality like Horace Short would, however, have given its usage significant impetus. This hypothesis also satisfies Hegener's original objection to Grey's story--that Short apparently had no real reason for calling the airship a blimp.

Cunningham to Goddard to the officers' mess to Horace Short--by this route, neither limp nor bloody, must have come this word that has so enriched the language of flight.

REFERENCES for THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'BLIMP':

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- (9) The Aeroplane, vol. 81, pp. 83, 141, 199, 280, 371, 479, 627, and 715, 1951.
- (10) Davy, M. J. B., AERONAUTICS: LIGHTER-THAN-AIR CRAFT, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1950, p. 50.
- (11) Magoun, F. A., and Hodgins, E., A HISTORY OF AIRCRAFT, New York: Whittlesey House, 1931, p. 155.
- (12) Vivian, E.C., A HISTORY OF AERONAUTICS, London: W. Collins Sons & Co., 1921, p. 363.
- (13) "The Equilibrator", WINGFOOT LIGHTER-THAN-AIR SOCIETY BULLETIN, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 5, Jan. 1962.
- (14) Booth, R. S., "The Usborne-Ireland Accident", WINGFOOT LIGHTER-THAN-AIR SOCIETY BULLETIN, vol. 9, no. 5, p. 9, March 1962.

YESTERDAYS TOMORROW

Those two words above can well stand for the future programs of the A.A.H.S. JOURNAL, programs I think each of you would like to hear more about. So, rather than making this a new editor's editorial, let us take a look together at what is being done and planned for the JOURNAL in the years just ahead.

The firmest policy we have is to cover all facets of aviation history--the early years, World War One, the Golden Years of the 1920s and '30s, World War Two and the Post War Years--and to cover both the military and non-military aspects. Our doing this depends on each Member spending a bit of his spare time preparing an article on that facet which he knows best, and through the years this has brought us many an admirable story on aviation history. It is still doing so, but we do need more stories of aircraft and events prior to World War II, and I would like to herewith tender a request to you, if you can prepare something on the earlier years of aviation, to write it and let us run it in a future issue.

Now, let's see into what company such an article will enter. For the Early Years, we will again be having in the JOURNAL a series of excellent sketches on Pioneer Airmen, written for us by Harold Morehouse. There is also in the works the story of a pioneer, touring mechanic, and the story of a man's early glider and flight experiments in New England.

For the World War One era, there will be the continuing series of photo pages prepared so expertly for us by Peter M. Bowers. There will also be stories of U. S. Aero Squadrons in action with the histories of the 12th and 90th Aero Squadrons currently being readied. There will also be new studies of such famous aircraft types as the Spad VII.

Moving into the Golden Years, we find articles being developed for a number of famous aircraft such as the Waco F, the Lockheed Air Express, the Lockheed Orion, the Northrop Gamma series, the Travelair bi-planes, and the Boeing 247. There are also articles coming along on lesser known planes such as the Bell Airacuda and the Vought-Sikorsky VS-44. And for the LTA man there'll be the story of the Dixmude and other airships. Some of the famous racing planes of the '30s will be treated in a new photo series being prepared for us by one of the top air racing experts.

Spanning the Golden Years and more, there will be stories about the airplanes built by the Martin Company,

the history of Delta Air Lines, the history of Western Airlines, and the history and development of Army Air Corps and Army Air Force cargo planes. There will also be a special article on the history and development of AAC and AAF organizations and units, from 1919 to 1945, designed to clarify for the first time an area that is cloudy to almost all of us.

For the WW II period, the JOURNAL will soon be running--The Eagle Squadrons in World War II (Spring 1964), The Markings and History of the 9th Air Force in England (Summer 1964), The Inside Story of the 313th Wing (B-29s), The Full History of the 318th Fighter Group, The Story of the 491st Bomb Group (B-24s of the 8th Air Force) and Kavieng Mission (P-38s in the Pacific).

Covering the Post War Years, will be stories on the Fire Fighting Planes, the Borate Bombers; the Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star series; the Post-War National Air Races and accounts of several modern aircraft.

In the Summer 1963 issue we introduced a new feature on photo studies of particular aircraft, using rare and not-before published photos. This series will continue with studies of such planes as the Curtiss A-8 and A-12 Shrike, the Grumman Guardian, Keystone Bombers, the Curtiss F11C series, the North American Mustang and the Seversky P-35, with other studies being prepared.

Two new features will make their appearance in the upcoming Spring 1964 JOURNAL. One will cover Flying Experiences where an individual will tell what it was like to fly a certain type of plane at a particular time, with principal attention being given to his own reactions and feelings about the subject. Another new feature will take us on trips to Famous Old Airfields, including photos of the aircraft that used them, and tell the history of the fields.

There are other stories coming along, too, for the JOURNAL, some of which I am deeply excited about, but it is still too early to talk about them here. I can say, however, that emphasis in the JOURNAL will continue to be on more, better and larger illustrating photos and that we plan to run two, high quality three-views with every issue. We are also meeting good success in finding new artists to grace the popular Artist's Corner.

That, then, is our program as we begin the JOURNAL's ninth year. It portends a future in which we will continue to dig deeply into the history of American aviation to bring to light the great stories still untold.

KENN C. RUST

JANUARY IS MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL TIME