

Historical Ramblings

Memories of a WWII Blimp Pilot

After the completion of a blimp base at Santa Ana in October 1942, the Navy realized an additional base was needed to provide adequate patrols of the coast north of Los Angeles. They chose the Lompoc Airport, leasing a total of 65 acres from the City and private individuals. Construction began in December, 1942. When commissioned on August 8, 1943, the base featured a 500 x 1000-ft. asphalt mat, two mooring masts, and barracks for 25 officers and 72 enlisted men.

The last Navy blimp departed Lompoc on September 25, 1945 and the station placed on caretaker status. Lompoc remained on the Navy's books for another year, then returned to civilian control, once again becoming Lompoc's airport. The former blimp base and airport property is now the location of Lompoc High School and the Lompoc Shopping Center.

Correspondence was recently received from 82 year old Joe Dymkowski, a blimp pilot stationed at the Lompoc site. He shared some memories with us:

“During WWII, I was a Naval Aviator (blimp pilot) in Airship Squadron 31 based in Santa Ana, which was our home base. There were two outlying bases, one in Lompoc, the other in Del Mar. Each had two blimps. There were 3 flight crews plus supporting ground personnel, with a total of ten pilots. My squadron patrolled the area from the Mexican border to just below San Simeon.

In WWII the blimps escorted 89,000 ships and never lost one. They were K class blimps and were more than 250 feet long and about 80 feet high. The gondola was over 40 feet long and included bunks, reclining seats, radio, mechanics, navigation stations and a galley. There was a 40-caliber machine gun in the nose of the gondola in a compartment above the cockpit and a 30-caliber gun in the rear. We carried 4 depth charges weighing a total of about 1000 pounds. With a full load of fuel for long missions, we were actually heavier-than-air. To take off, we went down the runway like a plane until reaching airspeed to lift off. On returning, we tried to come home 200-300 pounds heavy, landing like a plane. We didn't have reverse pitch props or brakes, so we had to land at a low speed so the ground crew could stop us. If we came home light, landing could be tricky.

As I recall, there were high-tension wires on two or three sides of the base in Lompoc. There was also a trailer park at one end. *Editor's Note: Five days after the base was commissioned, ground crews were maneuvering an airship for launch. As the blimp's tail pendants approached the high voltage power lines, 11,000 volts arced through the ship, electrocuting four ground crewmen and severely burning a fifth.*

Once I let a less experienced pilot try to make a landing. He was coming in too fast and too low. He released the long lines too soon. I could hear them slapping on the rooftops. Then the lines wrapped around the wires and we put the lights out in part of Lompoc. We went around and I made the landing.

One time I was making the takeoff and one of the two engines started to sputter. Being heavy, the blimp didn't have enough power with one engine to lift off. I ordered the sailor in the Bombay to release the depth charges to lighten the ship. Apparently, one of the charges tumbled and struck the gondola in the rear. A blue spark lighted the area. I thought a charge had exploded and I waited for the impact, but nothing happened. We came around and landed the blimp to assess the damage. Only one panel was bent with some missing rivets.

The plan was to get rid of the depth charges and repair the damage in Lompoc. There would be no report and no one would know about the incident - we thought. The charges were reinstalled and we took off. I radioed Santa Ana for permission to practice bombing. With permission granted, I dumped the charges into the ocean. Upon returning to the base there was a message for me. The Commanding Officer of our squadron wanted to see Dymkowski in Santa Ana! Apparently someone reported the incident to the main base.

After discussing the incident with the captain in Santa Ana, he told me to take a few days off at the beach. I spent 3-4 days at the beach in Balboa. When I was ready to return, the captain gave me two shotguns and ammunition to take to Lompoc for off duty recreation. We shot blackbirds - probably starlings - and plucked and barbecued them.

As I remember, there was a report that a Japanese submarine may be in the area. Many times we'd go searching for Japanese ships, which were suspected of approaching the west coast that Naval Intelligence lost track of. I think I flew for three consecutive days as a co pilot. I felt so lousy that at times I wished we'd find the submarine and get shot down!"