

“The USS *Akron* Tragedy”

I just hung on. . . I saw the other fellows fall and it didn't make me feel any too good, but there was nothing I could do about it—ceptin' to hang on tighter. I wouldn't do it again for love or money.

--Navy Apprentice Seaman C. M. Cowart, May 12, 1932

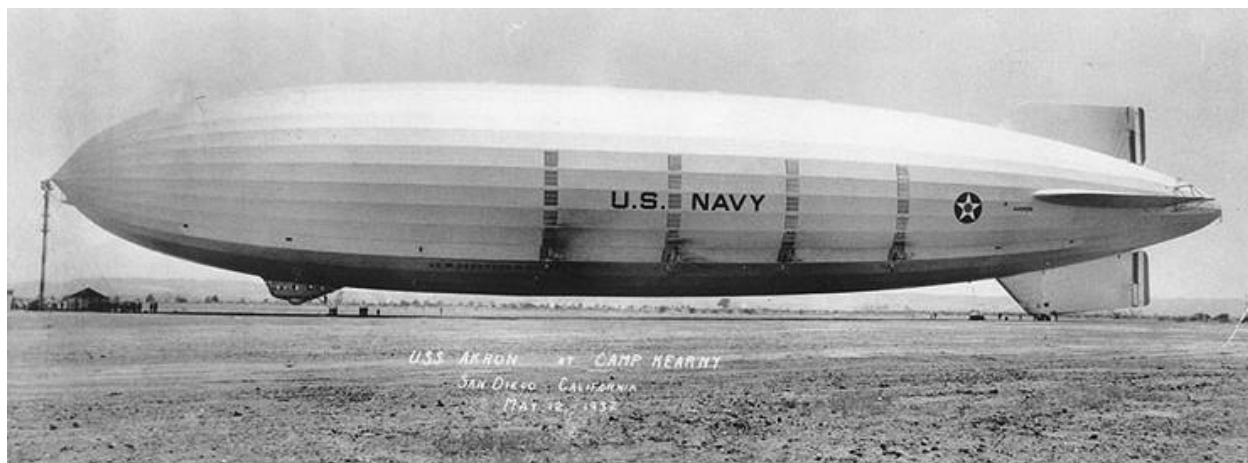
Since the early 1900s, the U.S. military had been fascinated with the potential of lighter-than-air aircraft. Between the world wars, U.S. Navy built several huge, helium-filled airships. But despite years of experience in airship construction, the dirigibles were risky to fly and often dangerous to land. San Diego would be the scene of a landing tragedy in May 1932.

The USS *Akron* was launched on August 8, 1931, after a christening by the president's wife, Mrs. Herbert Hoover, at the Goodyear-Zeppelin plant in Akron, Ohio. At 785 feet long and 152 feet tall, the steel-framed *Akron* was the biggest helium-filled airship ever built. Only the German-built, hydrogen-filled *Hindenburg* was larger.

Called the “Queen of the Skies,” the *Akron* was flying warship, protected by seven machine guns, and carrying a crew of 89 naval officers and men. Along with her sister ship, the USS *Macon*, the *Akron* was designed for reconnaissance--to be the “eyes” of the Pacific fleet.

The *Akron* was also built as a flying aircraft carrier. A remarkable inboard aircraft hanger carried two Sparrowhawk reconnaissance biplanes. The airplanes could be lowered from the dirigible by a “flying trapeze” and then launched into the sky.

In early May the *Akron* left its base at Lakehurst, New Jersey for an assignment in the Pacific. It was a difficult flight. Crossing west Texas the *Akron* encountered a vicious sandstorm that tossed the airship around and caused minor damage. After 77 hours of nonstop flying, the ship with her exhausted crew reached San Diego on Wednesday morning, May 11.



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

Fog covered the city, but as the *San Diego Union* noted, the dirigible presented an “inspiring spectacle” as it “bored its way through morning mist like gray gargantuan ghost.” Thousands of San Diegans gathered on the mesa at Camp Kearny to see the huge airship and witness the landing.

Approaching the parade field, the *Akron* lowered one of its Sparrowhawk biplanes on the metal trapeze. From fifteen feet below the ship, the pilot released a catch; the plane fell earthward then straightened out and flew away flawlessly. A second Sparrowhawk was then launched, carrying Lt. Scotty Peck who would supervise the landing of the dirigible from the ground.

The *Akron* crept through thick fog until it reached clear skies at 1200 feet. But the morning sun was expanding the helium, making the ship too buoyant. The captain, Lt. Commander Charles Rosendahl, ordered the propellers turned skyward to push the airship closer to the ground.

At 11:00 a.m. the 400-foot docking ropes were dropped to the ground between two landing crews of sailors. Lt. Peck shouted out instructions. Each man had to grab a trail rope and attach it to “spiders,” fixed ground lines with wooden toggles. A separate mooring cable dropped from the nose of the *Akron*, which was attached the mooring mast. A winch wound the mooring cable, pulling the airship down.

The *Akron* slowly descended while the landing crews fought to hold the dirigible in position. Unexpectedly, the tail rose up, threatening to stand the *Akron* on its nose. When the sharp angle suddenly released tons of water from ballast bags, the airship rose. The sailors released the trail ropes and the mooring cable was freed from the mast.

The sudden release surprised several men holding on to the mooring cable. As the *Akron* shot skyward, they clung desperately to the line. One man let go at fifteen feet, breaking his arm in the fall. But three other sailors still gripped the cable. Thousands of onlookers watched in horror as one man, then another fell from between 100 and 200 feet. Both sailors died instantly as they struck the ground.

Another sailor, Charles M. “Bud” Cowart, hung on. Straddling wooden toggles, he managed to tie himself in. “Will try to land man on tail rope,” was the message radioed to the ground by Rosendahl. But the captain knew the sailor could be dashed to death on the ground if the dirigible descended too quickly.

The airship headed out to sea and calmer air while the crew worked out a means of rescuing Cowart. Two thousand feet above the ocean, the 18-year-old seaman looked up at the airship two hundred feet above him and yelled, “When the hell are you going to land me?”

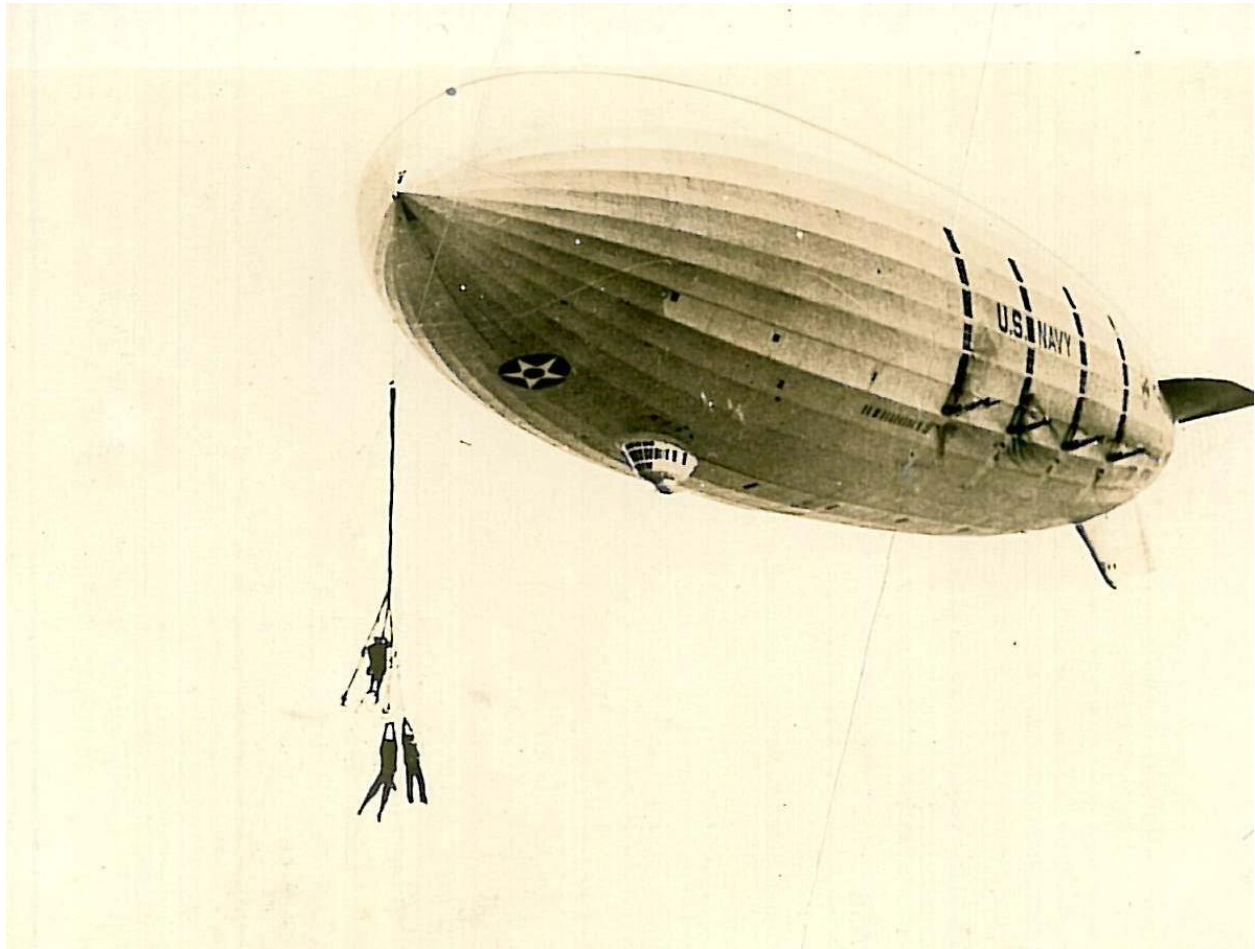
A sailor in a bosun’s chair was lowered from the *Akron* to tie a line on the swinging mooring cable that held Cowart. After dangling for nearly two hours, he was reeled in by a winch. Rosendahl radioed another message: “Cowart OK.”



“Bud” Cowart

The *Akron* landed successfully that evening. Seaman Bud Cowart was greeted as a hero. The deaths of the sailors on the ground were blamed by Rosendahl on the “peculiar atmospheric conditions.” A Naval court of inquiry would cite the inexperience of the landing crew as another cause of the accident.

Less than a year later the *Akron* crashed in a thunderstorm off the New Jersey coast. Seventy-three men died with only three saved. The *Akron*’s sister ship, the USS *Macon*—the last of the Navy’s helium airships--would visit San Diego frequently in the next two years, anchoring successfully at Camp Kearny. The *Macon* would also end in disaster, crashing in the ocean off Point Sur in February 1935, and bringing an end to the Navy’s big airship era.



Three sailors cling to the mooring cable as the *Akron* ascended, May 11, 1932.
San Diego Air & Space Museum

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