

WINGS



THINGS

GREAT PLAINS WING - COMMEMORATIVE AIR FORCE

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2nd Quarter 2023

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Photo: From the Web



A Navy of One . . .

Shortly before midnight on July 18, 1943, U-134, a Type VIIC U-boat surfaced near the Florida coast. The U-134 was in position to intercept two Allied merchant ships nearby, but the crew needed to vent carbon dioxide and take in fresh air of the Florida coast before attacking.

“Lest We Forget”

The U-134 was commanded by Oberleutnant Hans-Günther Brosin and was conducting her 7th War Patrol.

Blimp K-74 was patrolling nearby, Assigned to lighter-than-air patrol squadron twenty-one (ZP-21), K-74 was based at Naval Air Station Richmond, Fla, Commanded by Lt. Nelson Grills, USNR, the K-74 initially spotted the surfaced U-boat on radar, then emerged from cloud cover and made visual contact.

The German submarine was on a direct course for the nearby merchant ships, and Grills was afraid that if he didn't attack immediately, they would be sunk by the U-boat. (In spite of direct orders that Blimps were not to engage U-boats on the surface). Grills radioed to another blimp that he was pressing the attack.



A crew member of K-28, U.S. Navy Airship Squadron 24 (ZP-24), spots a ship during a patrol

A K-class blimp was typically armed with two depth charges or depth bombs, and a .50-cal. machine gun mounted in the nose of the blimp's gondola.

K-74 initiated a bombing run at 250 feet of altitude and the gondola gunner opened fire with his M-2 .50 Caliber machine gun.....



Manning the Ma Deuce

In the 1930s, several classes of airships were built for both the US Army and the US Navy. The Army operated airships between the wars, but the program was cancelled in 1937 and the last two airships transferred to the Navy.

Airships had been used in WWI for anti-submarine patrol and convoy escort with success, and the Navy pressed the 10 existing blimps into ASW service immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack. Initially, 4 airships were assigned to the Atlantic Fleet and 3 to the Pacific, with the remaining 3 assigned to training.

During the course of the War, 154 more airships were built, formed into Airship Squadrons and subsequently into Airship Wings. The most numerous of the models were the K-Class.

K-Class blimps had a crew of 9 or 10, consisting of a Command Pilot, two Co-pilots, a Navigator Pilot, Airship Rigger, an Ordnance-man, two Mechanics, and two Radiomen.

The K-Ships were about 252 feet long and 60 feet in diameter. They were powered by 2 Pratt and Whitney R-1340-AN-2 radials of 425hp each, giving a cruising speed of 58mph, an endurance of 26 hours and a range of 2,205 miles. The useful lift was 7,770lb.

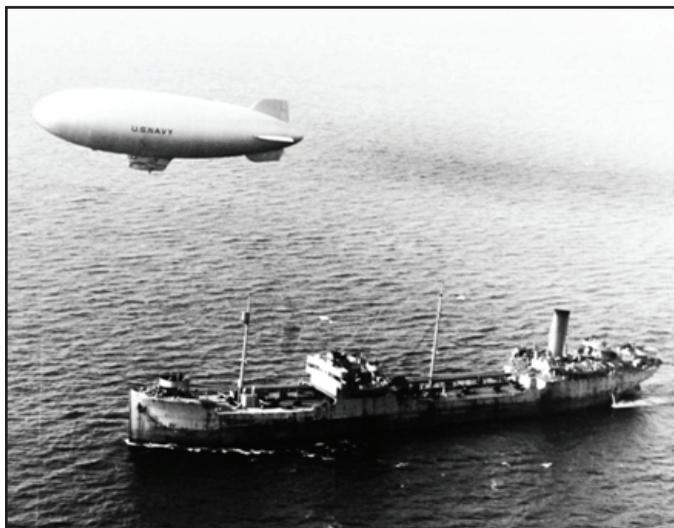
A number of detection devices were carried. K-Class ships had Radar, Magnetic Anomaly Detection, and Sonobuoys all available, as well as being an excellent platform for visual observation.

Armament was 2 x 250 lb. Depth Charges or Depth Bombs with a capability added later to carry acoustic torpedoes.



In operation, the Blimp was tasked with finding submarines and reporting their location. In WWI they had been so effective in Convoy Escort by being able to spot the source of a torpedo track and directing escorts to the firing sub, that common knowledge was that no submarine would attack a convoy escorted by a blimp.

Around 89,000 ships were protected in convoys and individually by airship escort and only one, the tanker *Persephone* was sunk while being escorted. In contrast, over 500 ships without airship escort were sunk near the US coast by U-boats.

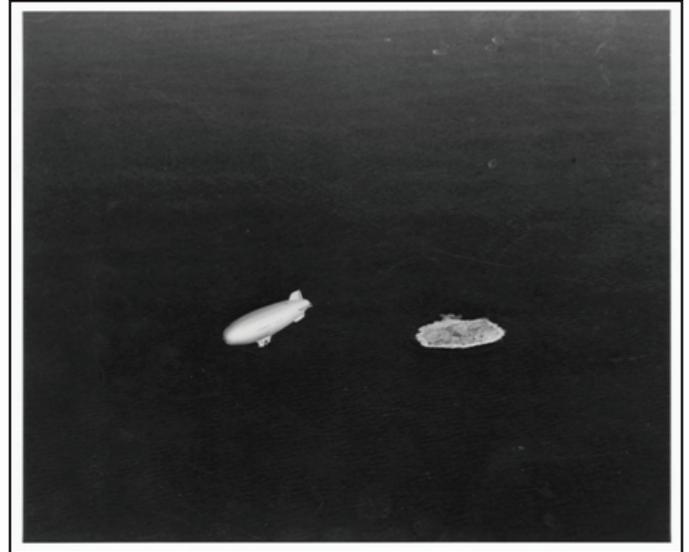


U.S. Navy blimp, K-28, escorting SS Paulsboro, US merchant ship, in the Atlantic, January 27, 1944. (NARA RG 80-G-208873)

Airships also performed rescue duties by dropping rafts and supplies to survivors of U-boat attacks and by directing rescue aircraft to survivors in the water.

During the War, Airships flew about 36,000 sorties totaling about 412,000 flight hours. 72 members of the Navy's

lighter-than-air forces were lost in action, with one in combat and most from Operational accidents and weather.



After sighting a suspicious oil slick, the commander of the airship maneuvered over the end of the oil slick trail and dropped a depth charge. (NASM-2A07676)

From 1942–1944, airship military personnel grew from 430 to 12,400 and approximately 1,400 airship pilots and 3,000 support crew were formally trained in the military airship crew training programs.

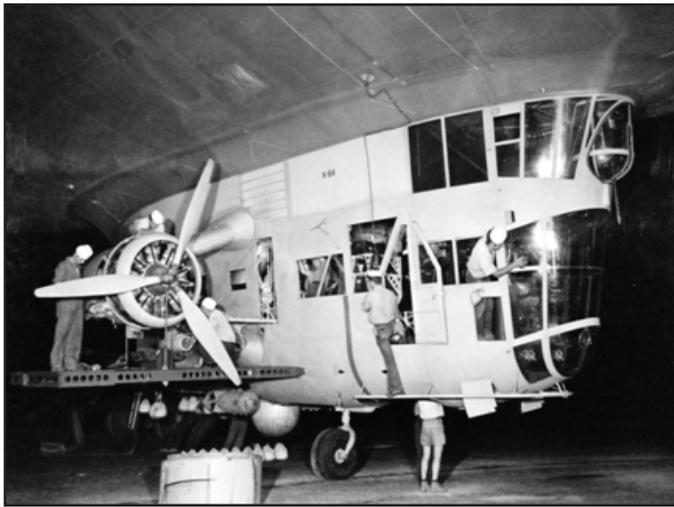
Blimps did not escape the Navy's penchant for alphabet soup aircraft designations. So, "Lighter Than Air, Non-Rigid, Patrol" became ZNP, with the airship class tacked on at the end, resulting in ZNP-K for the K-ships.

Early in the War, the few airships in service were formed into Airship Patrol Groups, one on the Atlantic Coast at Lakehurst, New Jersey, designated ZP-12 and one at Moffet Field in California, designated ZP-32.



As the organization expanded, the 'ZP' designation became reused to designate an Airship Squadron, eventually composed of 8 ships.

In January, 1942 Airship Squadrons were grouped under Fleet Airship Wings, FASW-30 and FASW-31 respectively on the East and West Coasts. In July, 1943, the FASWs were re-designated as Fleet Airships Pacific (FASP) and Fleet Airships Atlantic (FASL), placing Fleet Airship Wings under those fleet commands.



The 10 crew members of K-Ships served in vital anti-submarine roles during WWII in the Atlantic. Ground crew are shown here preparing a K-ship before a patrol. (NARA RG 80-G-55200)

By the end of the War there were 5 FASWs.

FASW One was based in Lakehurst, NJ, with 4 Airship Squadrons in such diverse locations as NAS Weeksville, in Elisabeth City, NC, NAS Glynco in Georgia, NAS Lakehurst, in New Jersey, NAS Weymouth in Massachusetts with auxiliary fields in Brunswick, Maine, Bar Harbor, Maine, and Yarmouth, Massachusetts, NAS Halifax in Nova Scotia and NAS Argentia in Newfoundland.

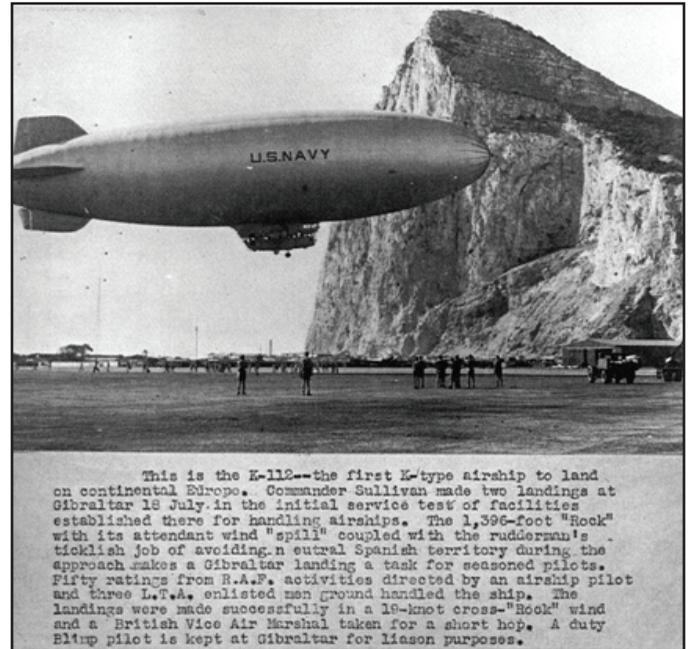
FASW Two was based in Richmond, Florida with patrol responsibilities in the Caribbean, Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. Other FASW Two bases were Houma, Louisiana, NAS Hitchcock, Texas. FASW Two's auxiliary bases were in Key West, Florida and Brownsville, Texas.

FASW Three Patrolled the Pacific Coast and was based at Moffet Field in California, NAS Santa Ana in Tustin California and NAS Tillamook, in Oregon. Auxiliary fields were in California at Del Mar, Lompoc, Watsonville and Eureka and in Shelton and Quillayute, Washington.

FASW Four was based in Brazil, with main bases at Sao Luiz, and Maceió. FASW Four Auxiliary fields were all at various locations in Brazil, at Amapá, Igarape Assu, Fortaleza, Fernando de Noronha, Recife, Pitanaga Field, Caravellas, Vitoria, and finally at Santa Cruz, Rio de Janeiro, operating from the hangar originally built for the Graf Zeppelin.

FASW Five was based in Trinidad with auxiliary fields at British Guiana, and Paramaribo, Suriname.

On 1 June 1944, two K-class blimps of ZP-14 completed the first transatlantic crossing by non-rigid airships. One 16 hour leg from South Weymouth, Naval Station Argentia, Newfoundland, another 22 hour leg to Lajes Field on Terceira Island in the Azores, then a final leg of 20 hours to Craw Field in Port Lyautey (Kenitra), French Morocco were required to complete the flight.



The first pair of K-ships were followed by four more, later in June. These six blimps initially conducted nighttime anti-submarine warfare operations using magnetic anomaly detection to locate U-boats in the relatively shallow waters around the Straits of Gibraltar.

Later, ZP-14 K-ships conducted minespotting and minesweeping operations in key Mediterranean ports and various escort missions including that of the convoy carrying Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill to the Yalta Conference in early 1945. In late April 1945,

The five FASWs which operated during WWII were all disestablished by January 1946.

The last operational Navy "KShip"—K-43—was retired from service in March, 1959.

...U-134 returned fire as K-74 made her attack run. The depth charges did not release properly and U-134 was able to dive and escape.

K-74 was not so lucky, having taken damage in one engine and to the gas bag, causing a loss of buoyancy. The airship slowly lost altitude until it settled into the water.

The crew bailed out and was located by a Grumman JRF amphibian in the morning, which located the crew and directed surface ships to the area to rescue them. USS

Dahlgren and submarine chaser USS SC-657 arrived on the scene shortly after and completed the rescue of K-74s Crew. Unfortunately, one crewman, Isadore Stessel, was attacked by a shark and killed, shortly before the crew was rescued.

K-74 remained afloat for eight hours, however, and U-134 pulled part of the wreckage aboard for photographs and evaluation.



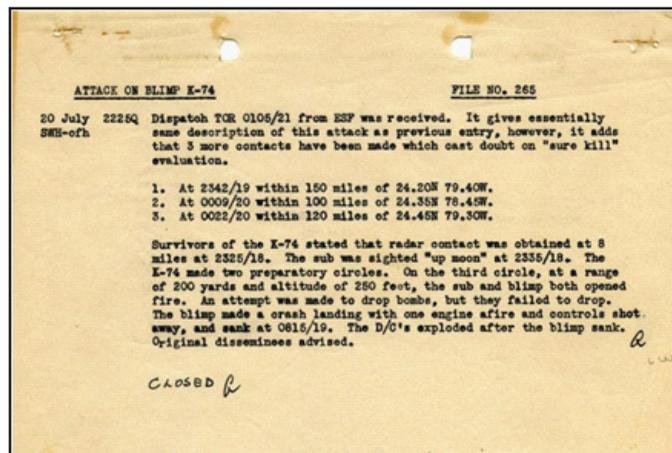
A model of a Type VII C U-boat

The U-134 left the area, only reporting minor damage caused by gunfire from the K-74. It continued its patrol until U-134 was sunk on 27 August 1943 in the Bay of Biscay, north of Cape Ortegal at by depth charges from the British frigate HMS Rother. All 48 men on board died. U-134 had passed the images of K-74 to another U-boat prior to being sunk. The United States Navy was unaware K-74 had been boarded until the photographs were discovered in 1958.



U-134 under attack by aircraft of VP-201, 8 July 1943; she survived this assault

Initially, Grills faced official disapproval since he had violated standing orders in attacking the submarine, but this changed after the squadron commander interviewed them at length. It wasn't until 1961, however, that Grills received the Distinguished Flying Cross and his crew Navy Commendation Medals, after German records revealed that K-74 had damaged the U-boat.



A page from the Combat Report for K-74 and U-134.

K-74 was the only blimp downed by enemy action in World War II and Stessel the only crewmember killed by enemy action. Stessel's family members did not receive his Purple Heart until 54 years after he died at sea.

The last World War II contribution of K-ships in the Atlantic occurred shortly after the war ended. On May 14, 1945, the captain of U-858 surrendered to the U.S. Navy. A K-ship helped escort the submarine into port, marking the end of anti-submarine warfare duties for K-ships in the battle of the Atlantic.



A US flag flies over the captured U-858 as it receives a K-ship escort to Lewes, Delaware. (NARA RG 80-G-K-14619)

Great Plains Wing
 COMMEMORATIVE AIR FORCE
 Council Bluff Iowa Airport
 16803 McCandless Road
 Council Bluffs, Iowa 51503

2023 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

APRIL

April 1-3 Sun 'N Fun Fly-In Lakeland Linder Regional
 Airport - Lakeland, FL

April 15 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

MAY

May 20 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

May 20 GPW Anniversary Banquet GPW Hangar

JUNE

June 17 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

JULY

July 15 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

July 24-30 EAA Airventure 2023 Whittman Regional
 Airport - Oshkosh, WI

AUGUST

Aug. 5 GPW Open House & Fly-in/Walk-in Pancake
 Breakfast - GPW Hangar

Breakfast 8:00 - 11:00 AM

Open House 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM

Aug. 19 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

Aug. 19-20 Kansas City Airshow New Century Air
 Center - Gardner, KS

Aug. 26-27 Lincoln NE Airshow Lincoln Airport
 Lincoln, NE

SEPTEMBER

Sept. 16 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

OCTOBER

Oct. 21 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

NOVEMBER

Nov. 18 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

DECEMBER

Dec. 16 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

MONTHLY EVENTS

*Council Bluffs Airport - Great Plains Wing hosts a
 monthly cookout on the 3rd Wednesday of each month
 from April to October - 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.*

*York, NE Airport: EAA Chapter 1055 hosts a fly-in
 breakfast on the 1st Saturday of each month
 from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m.(free-will offering)*

*Crete, NE Airport: EAA Chapter 569 hosts a fly in
 breakfast on the 3rd Sat. of every month
 from 8 to 10 a.m.*

*If you would like to put a event on this calendar,
 please send an email with the necessary information to
 Terry Helphrey at terry.helphrey@outlook.com*