

# When Richmond NAS Ruled the Skies

By Cesar A. Becerra with Alan Crockwell

**D**uring recent years, many anniversaries of World War II battles have been commemorated. One important battlefield, however, has often been overlooked. It was kept secret from the American public during the war.

At the beginning of the war, German submarines virtually controlled the waters along the Eastern Coast of the United States. To counteract the menace of the U-boats, the Navy established a chain of Lighter-than-Air (LTA) blimp bases along the Coast. Fleet Airship Wing One was located in Lakehurst, New Jersey, with bases in Massachusetts, North Carolina and Georgia. Fleet Airship Wing Two was headquartered at Richmond, Florida, using 15 blimps to patrol the Caribbean. The Florida base also had outlying airship fields in Louisiana and Jamaica.

Construction on the 2,107-acre Richmond base began in April 1942, at a cost of about \$13 million. By March 1943, construction crews completed the first and most significant structure on the base, Blimp Hangar Number 1. The hangar measured 16.5 stories high, 1,000 feet in length and 300 feet in width. Richmond Naval Air Station became the proud owners of what

was considered, at that time, the largest wooden structure in the world. The last of the four concrete support towers that remain on the site today is still by far the tallest structure in south Dade County.

In World War II, Navy blimps flew 50,000 missions over the Atlantic, Pacific and Mediterranean. During these missions, only one blimp was ever lost to hostile action, and it happened in Florida. A K-74 blimp, under the command of Lt.

German raider U-134, orders were given to drop two depth charges. The releases to the weapons were opened only halfway. The depth charges, however, failed to drop.

At such a distance, this was a fatal error and the sub's deck guns scored directly on the blimp. As the submarine dived for safety, the injured blimp, with nonflammable helium hissing from its sides, settled into the Florida straits.

In the melee, a crew member threw the life raft into the sea but failed to hold onto its line. As the empty life raft floated away in the darkness, the crew scrambled onto the slowly deflating gas bag. The crew's nine survivors were rescued the next day.

In mid-September 1945, a design engineer's worst enemy bore down on South Florida. An approaching hurricane was ready to test how well the hangars and other base structures were constructed only three years earlier. Naval aircraft from Key West, Homestead, Chapman Field, and Opa-locka com-

peted for space along with the blimps and private vehicles inside the base's three hangars. In total, 160 military aircraft, 153 civilian planes and 25 Navy K-Blimps (11 dismantled) were enclosed in the three hangars when 94 mph winds hit the base at 5 p.m. on Sept. 14.

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Nelson Grills and an inexperienced crew, was cruising off the Florida Keys and encountered a sub near a convoy of ships.

Just after midnight on July 18, 1943, the blimp quickly bore down on the sub at 65 mph. At an altitude of 250 feet and directly over the



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Slowly, as the flurry of the storm ripped tarpaper off the roofs of the structures, Navy personnel ordered all 'hatches' tightly battened, despite warnings that the storm's tremendous pressure could cause the structure to burst.

At 5:30 p.m., the roof of Hangar Number 1 blew off, causing its now-loosened beams to join the falling debris below. The intricate automatic sprinkler system was immediately triggered. Naval personnel feared an electrical blaze could be ignited.

Fifteen minutes later, all three hangars were ablaze, with the strong winds fueling the inferno. Attempts at putting out the fire were deemed impossible. Fire crews remember water pressure suddenly dropping, only to discover that the blaze had surrounded them and the ring of fire had burned through their hoses.

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After the war, University of Miami administrators, noticing the future flood of servicemen seeking higher education, decided to transform the base into a remote campus focusing on agricultural and scientific research. The Navy complied with a 50-year lease that allowed the university to use the site with the condition that the facilities would revert to a military base in times of war.

Classes opened in November 1946, but the student body considered the site too remote. During the 1960s, several tenants used the site, including government agencies, University of Miami researchers and the Gold Coast Railroad Museum. In the 1980s, the southern portion of the property was used for Miami's famous cageless Metrozoo.

Today, the area has come full cir-

cle. With donations from the railroad museum and private individuals, the Naval Air Ship Richmond blimp exhibit is in its final construction stages. The exhibit, which is in place but not yet open to the public, features WW II and Florida history memorabilia. Copies of the base's newspaper, original war hero uniforms, letters and other memorabilia are part of this display. The base also features a full military train and hospital car. Future expansion of the base's exhibits are in the planning stages. The Grand Opening of the blimp exhibit is scheduled for Columbus Day weekend, October 1997—which is also the 222nd anniversary of the U.S. Navy. For more information or updates on the exhibit or base, call the Gold Coast Railroad Museum at (305) 253-0063. 🐾