The Rambling Blimp

The day that airship K-60 began its memorable flight, fog blotted out the Naval Air Station at Hitchcock, Texas, near Galveston. At 5:43 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 5, 1943, the blimp's twin engines roared to full power. K-60, with Lt. Clayton Janecky in command, rose into the murk.

On instruments she headed east, angling slowly to cruising altitude. Nazi U-boats were still lurking in the Gulf of Mexico, taking potshots at tankers. K-60's job that miserable, cold morning was antisubmarine patrol of 14,000 feet. The disposable items were flipped overboard. Tools went first, then ammunition, then galley equipment. The fog bank parted, and they could see desolate, marshy land below. The airship kept falling.

"Drop a bomb!" Janecky shouted.

It is believed the bomb hit somewhere in Louisiana, but K-60 rose to 4,000 feet and stayed there. At daylight Monday, when the fog became patchy, Janecky started one engine; the airship skidded down through the broken cover.

They came to a town identified as Kosciusko by a sign on a lumber shed. Janecky thought he was in either Texas or Oklahoma. He was in Attala County, Miss. The commander gave his copilot, Ensign John Kennedy, the choice of jumping with a parachute from 2,500 feet or dropping into a plowed field on a low pass. Kennedy's mission was to summon help to dock the airship for fueling. He preferred to drop on a low pass, landing in thick mud.

He hitched a ride into town and soon collected a large crowd. Here was Kosciusko's chance to help the war effort. Stores closed. Schools let out. So many people crowded into the muddy field that most of them had to be forced out to make room for the landing crew and the blimp.

K-60 was brought to rest. Her tanks loaded with gasoline and she was hoisted again. She flew to the Army Air Field at Columbus, Miss., where Lt. Janecky and his men were relieved by a fresh crew.

The Navy didn't reveal the name of the replacement crew. By this time, the errant poofey-bag was in great disfavor at Hitchcock and Washington.

K-60 headed for Houma, also fogged in. At 11:30 a.m. the crew sighted a beacon and assumed it came from the Houma airfield. After an hour of circling, K-60 slid through a hole in the clouds to find that the "beacon" was actually a light on a radio tower north of Kenner on Lake Pontchartrain.

The best method of reaching Houma seemed to be the highway. The K-60 slipped under the 200-foot highway. The ceiling kept dropping lower. By the time the airship was five miles from Houma, visibility was zero.

Then, out of the night came an automobile with bright tail lights. K-60 followed that car, riding at altitudes of 15 to 100 feet, rocking along behind the car. It was very hard to follow. The driver remains unknown, but is probably the only motorist ever to be tailed by a blimp. Since his rearview mirror gave him occasional glimpses of the huge silver bag with flashing lights roaring down upon him, his erratic driving is excusable.

At 2:15 a.m., Tuesday, there came a sharp dip in the highway and a slight turn to the left. High tension wires, tall trees, felled Suddenly. The blimp's tail wheel was caught in the wires. The airship sailed over the trees, the torn power lines spiraling around the road with great flashes and sparks.

The car took off and was not sighted again. Houma was blacked out. K-60 neared the dark city and narrowly missed the water tower. The mayor commanded the Navy to "Get that damn blimp away from here!" K-60 fled.

About noon Tuesday, after a total of 54 hours, she was led docilely into the hangar at Hitchcock. But the Navy has ways of solving problems like her. Soon afterward she and her original crew were transferred to Jamaica.

-Submitted by Theodore Taylor
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