

Up in the Air - The Final Voyage of the "C-5"

by Adam M. Grohman

Lieutenant Little and his band of tenders from the cruiser *U.S.S. Chicago* worked diligently to prepare the airship. Though specific orders had not yet been delivered, the C-5 was not going to be making the Quidi Vidi airfield anything more than a temporary stop. But without a hanger, the C-5 had to remain on the airfield and was, therefore, at the mercy of the elements, connected to the ground only by the ardent efforts of the lieutenant and the rest of the ground crew. The wind, in the early afternoon, began to increase, and while engineers meticulously worked on the dirigible's two engines, tenders began to feel and witness the power of the increased wind speed. The tending lines attended to by the line handlers and the various anchors of the airship strained under the intense pull of the dirigible. The gusts of wind, which now were in upwards of forty miles an hour, began to whip the dirigible around, sending the occasional tender to the ground. The dirigible also began to show signs of stress as the wind attempted to launch her into the heavens.

Aboard the airship, Little and two engineers, Lt. Preston and Chief Machinist Mate J.J. Crampton, kept a vigil on the deteriorating conditions and took several measures to limit the possibility of losing the ship. As the 100 tenders from the *U.S.S. Chicago* fought the bucking balloon, Little ordered that some of the envelope's gas be released. The wind began to tear away at the envelope's canvas and her bow plates were ripped from their stanchions. Lt. Little realized that the airship had no intention of remaining bound to earth. He ordered the two engineers who had been working on the two engines to go "over the side" and he reached up to pull the ripcord of the envelope.¹ By deflating the envelope, Little reasoned, the airship would slowly descend to the earth. But as he pulled on the last lifeline of the airship, it parted. As the bitter end of the line dangled above his head, the airship lurched upward. Little, twenty-five feet from the ground, made several other attempts to reach the ripcord line but was unsuccessful. The airship continued to rise.

Unable to start the engines because the engineers had loosened the propellers, Little was faced with only one choice. He had to abandon ship. Leaping with one of the loosened tending lines in his hand, Little landed hard on the cold landing field. With a pained expression due to an injury to his ankle, Little looked up and saw the C-5 slowly drifting into the afternoon sky. The C-5, crewless and partially deflated, quickly ascended on its un-

planned voyage into the heavens.

The United States Navy had a long tradition in the utilization of new technology in its efforts to meet the requirements of its ever-expanding list of missions and duties. One of the areas of specialization was in the service's aerial squadron, which utilized lighter-than-air technology. After the conclusion of World War I, the U.S. Navy continued to build, experiment, utilize, and expand its floating fleet of "ships" to assist in various duties, including anti-submarine warfare, reconnaissance, and coastal patrols.

One of the newest dirigible designs in 1919 was the C-5 of the C-class. The C-5 was a twin-engine non-rigid dirigible with an envelope length of 192 feet and a 41' 9-inch diameter. With an envelope displacement of

what she can do in regard to distance and how she will operate under varying weather conditions." As word was received of the upcoming voyage in the cloud from New York to Newfoundland, unofficial word and "scuttlebutt" fed a swirl of speculation that the C-5, if successful in the first leg of her trip to Newfoundland, would then set off on a second leg across the Atlantic.

The ability for a dirigible to make the transatlantic flight remained "up in the air" at the time and a race to garner the laurels of the achievement remained a paramount quest for both the Americans and their British "rivals." As the C-5 remained in her huge hanger in Montauk, New York, awaiting favorable weather conditions across the Atlantic, the British were engaged in the construction of

two monster airships that they hoped would win the prize before the Americans could complete the voyage. The R-33 and R-34, 665 feet in length and powered by five engines capable of achieving 1,250 horsepower, providing for a maximum speed of 80 miles an hour, were the British answer to the problems posed by the transatlantic challenge. But in the transatlantic airship race, it was not the length of the airship that mattered, but rather who successfully completed the voyage first. On May 13, it appeared that the C-5, a small "balloon" in comparison with the cigar ships of the British, was



The "C-7" airship sistership to the "C-5" airship.

178,000 cubic feet, the C-5 was able to attain a maximum height of 8,000 feet. Powered through the air by two 123 horsepower engines, she was able to maintain a speed of 50 miles an hour under optimum conditions, which provided her an endurance of ten hours. The small, but powerful engines utilized approximately 10 gallons of fuel an hour and were able to draw upon 250 gallon capacity tanks. Suspended by guide wires beneath the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company manufactured envelope was a forty-foot "carriage" constructed by the Burgess Company of Marblehead, Massachusetts, a subsidiary of Curtiss-Wright Aviation. The carriage was outfitted with lit controls, which permitted use both during day and night operations, a set of wireless equipment, a six-inch Aldis searchlight, and enough room to accommodate the six-man crew of naval aviators.

On May 12, 1919 the U.S. Navy Department issued a statement that the C-5 was ready to "start from the naval air station at Montauk Point, N.Y. for St. John's, Newfoundland." The purpose of the voyage, according to U.S. Navy officials, was to "see

on the cusp of capturing the coveted laurels.

On May 14, with the speculation of a possible transatlantic run still bounding about, the C-5 was prepared for her voyage to St. John's, Newfoundland. At seven that morning, Lieutenant Commander E.W. Coil, the airship's skipper, emerged from the naval station's wireless building and with a smile on his face, began waving a sheet of paper in his hand. The time, the men at the naval air station realized, had come for the C-5 to lift off. Chief Machinist Mates T.L. Moorman and S.H. Blackburn immediately started the airship's engines and the "gobs", or ground tenders, manned their stations beneath the balloon. Supplies were placed aboard including "ten thermos bottles of coffee and drinking water, ten pounds of chocolate, a box of sandwiches, and enough whiskey to constitute the craft as a seagoing ship," and the crew of six donned their fur-lined leather flying suits. The aviators, ready for their voyage northward, boarded the airship, and soon the C-5, her silver-skinned envelope shining in the early morning rays of sun, was in the final stages of

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