



VOL. IV

BLIMP K101 PASSES OVER
VATICAN CITY, ROME

BLIMP PRON 14 OVERSEAS

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BLIMPON 14 IN ITALY

This is Vol. IV of the "BLIMPON 14 OVERSEAS" historical series which began when Blimp Squadron 14 arrived in the Mediterranean theater in May of 1944. Like the other three volumes, it records pictorially the story of how Blimpson officers and men flew, lived and spent their recreational time.

This volume covers the period 1 March 1945 to 1 June 1945.

During this period, the war in Europe came to an end, and the mission of airships in the Mediterranean was changed from patrolling the Strait of Gibraltar to Mine plotting and spotting work in all Mediterranean ports and shipping lanes. This involved a shift of most of the airships from Port Lyautey, French Morocco, to locations in France and Italy. As this is written, the major aspects of this change are being made.

The advance base in Cagliari, Sardinia, was closed in April, and a new advance base opened in Pisa, Italy, early in May a few days after Genoa had been liberated. During the final days of May, plans were laid for the establishment of another base near Venice, Italy, and for one somewhere in Grecian waters.

The initial operations in Italy took place during the first week in March when an airship was based on Littorio field on the outskirts of Rome. This issue starts with the story of that short, swift operation.

Pisa, Italy
27 May 1945

Lt. (jg) R. C. Kline,
A2 U.S.N.R.,
Photographic Officer



After operating from bases in Africa, France and Sardinia, Blimpron 14 during March 1945 moved to the Italian mainland for a 1-week operation. Blimp K-101 was based on Littorio field, "Mussolini's private airport" in Rome which lay in a crook of the Tiber river. (shown above). From here during period 3-7 March, this airship aided in locating wreck of USS SWERVE, minesweep sunk off Anzio beach head. Blimp's MAD gear was used. The airship also plotted mine-free channel to the wreck so that salvage operations could be carried out. The use of the airship for this mission was requested by Commander Minron 7, command with which Cagliari detachment operated. Three of the four crews based at Cagliari carried out this initial operation on the Italian mainland.

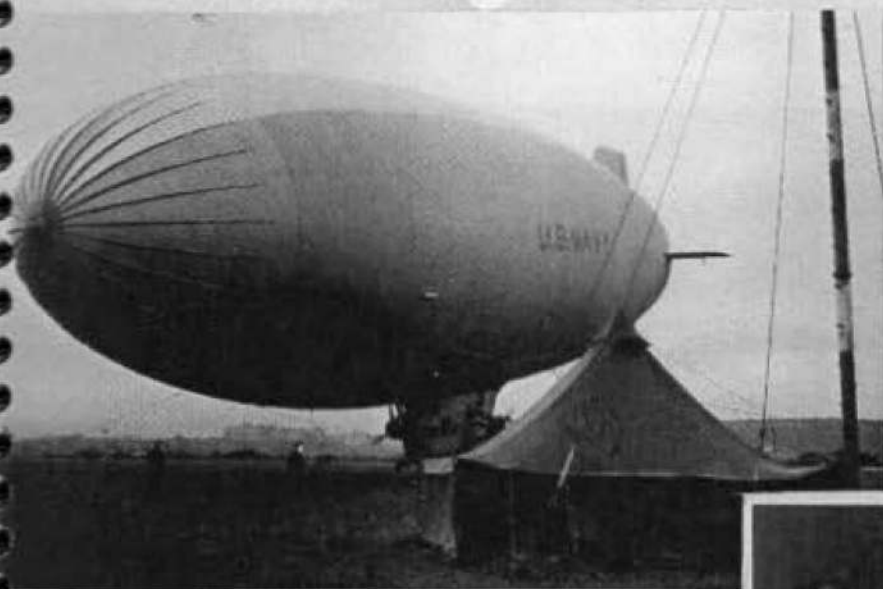
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The detachment owed much to Lt. Col. Douglas Koeney, commanding officer of Littorio field which was operated by Mediterranean Air Transport Service. He is shown at right in photo top left. He provided labor, crane, concrete pillars from bombed out hangars and flew photographer in Stinson making possible cover photograph for this volume. The pillars were used as mast anchors (top right). Officers and men lived in bombed out hangar on edge of field (lower left). This stick mast was dismantled at Bizerte, Tunisia, 300 miles south of Rome, flown to Littorio and erected--all within 24 hours. The entire operation required only 6 days--swiftest move made up to that time by Blimpron 14 detachment. On the request of Col. Koeney men in flight crews tore down a shell of a building on the field which was a menace to personnel. (lower right).



Officers and men lived in stalls in bombed out hangar (lower right). Both officers and men messed with the army on the field. They collected many souvenirs on their short stay in Rome. The army strung a field telephone to the tent beneath the mast a few minutes after mast had been erected. As few as 10 or 12 persons--all experienced flight crew officers and men-- took the airship off in no-wind conditions at Rome (top left). Commander Sullivan (3rd from left in top right photo) directed Rome operation. Others with him are Col. Keeney and naval officers from the Rome naval establishment who were aboard the airship on the last day of the operation. Minesweeps with which the airship worked in locating the sunken ship tied up along Anzio beach (lower left). Commander Minron 7 was dropped on this beach from the blimp in a touch and go landing after completion of one day's operations. This made unnecessary 40-mile jeep ride from Littorio to Anzio.



Each of the three crews taking part in Rome operation had an opportunity to tour Rome. Col. Koonoy provided transportation and driver and Red Cross guides pointed out the sights. (lower center) Film for cameras could be got; a flight radio man bought a roll of "reconditioned" film from peddler in Coliseum for 250 lire (\$2.50) (right). On their tours, crews visited Vatican, St. Paul's church (left), Coliseum (upper center); the Protestant cemetery where Keats and Shelley are buried (lower center). The Rome operation was complete success, swiftly and efficiently carried out with little interruption in Sardinia operations. The nest was dismantled and stored in Rome when the operation ended on 7 March and crews returned to Sardinia. All units taking part in operation received praise from Commander Eighth Fleet who declared the operation "an example of operations aggressively and efficiently performed."

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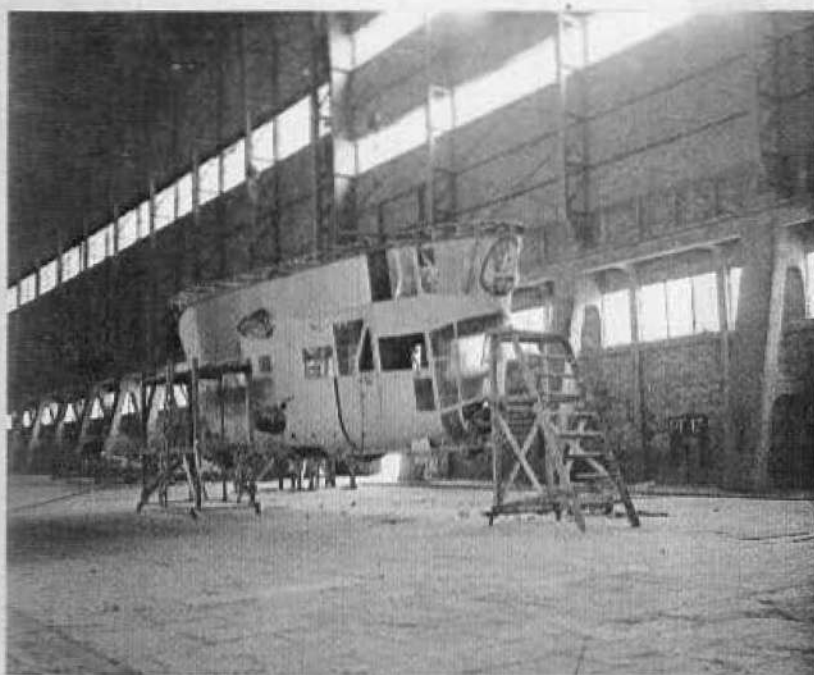
Operations at the Cagliari detachment ended during the first week in April after the successful clearing of mines in Cagliari bay. During this operation which started in December 1944, all of the problems of joint operations between blimp and minesweep were met and solved. Usual procedure was for an officer from one of the minesweeps to be aboard the airship as liaison officer. In photo top left such an officer confers with airship pilot on day's operation. Minesweep officers were enthusiastic about use of blimps in this role, one of them declaring that on at least two occasions he owed his life to the presence of a blimp overhead which prevented his vessel from passing over moored mine. Loud speaker was little used with sweeps. Radio was used instead. But in cases where vessels had no radio, it proved invaluable (lower right). It was used to aid British to locate best site for radio range at Cagliari.



When the Cagliari detachment was closed, officers and men left behind a mess which they had set up a few weeks before (lower right). For most of the period, they ate with British units based at Cagliari. Officers had obtained Magnavox radio for their lounge (lower left). The mess was turned over to an U. S. Army communications unit. Chief Kinsley assembled enough gear from tail-wheel of German bomber on the field to make an emergency wheel for the airship (top right). This was not completed at time detachment was closed. Turnbuckles (top left) were taken from German planes for possible emergency use on the airship. In his report on Cagliari operation, commander of YMS unit participating wrote, "A blimp is invaluable in clearance sweeps of shallow fields. On at least two occasions ships were saved from probable mining by warnings from the blimp."



At the Cuers detachment, where 3 crews remained, sporadic mine-sweeping continued. For a short time in May, the airship worked with United States sweeps. At other times the detachment worked with French craft. Photographic missions were flown for British and United States governments. However, major project at Cuers during the period was preparations for the re-erection of the K-123 which had been ripped accidentally on the Port Lyautoy field in January. The car was trucked from Port Lyautoy to Casa Blanca, taken by vessel from Casa to Marseilles and by truck from Marseilles to Cuers. The 60-mile trip in southern France required two days of tree trimming, wire lifting and trailer juggling to get the car through the narrow streets of villages and over sinuous mountain roads. The operation is pictured above. Seabee units aided.



Work on re-erection of the K-123 was delayed until after 1 June because of the slow delivery of erection gear. A ground cloth was among items which had not arrived by 1 June. The car was suspended in the Cuers hangar (top left) and preparations for the actual erection work were made by setting up shops with gear obtained from a PT-boat base at Gulf Juan which was closed during April. Gear obtained from this base included generators, power tools, ice machines, heat packs, ambulance, fuel truck. After receiving this gear, the Cuers detachment had 35 pieces of transportation. A stick mast was set up near Cannes (lower right) to serve as emergency port. Up until 1 June it had not been necessary to use it. HTA units operating from the field mounted a wind sock atop it when an airship did not show up for several weeks after it had been set up.



Radios obtained from PT base were set up in recreation room for officers (lower left) and men (top right). A library of about 500 volumes and many recordings were also obtained and placed in the men's recreation center. The officers lounge was located in villa originally occupied by blimpson officers at Cuers. The two United States technicians from Goodyear Aircraft, who were to erect the K-123, are shown in lower photo (with back to wall and reading magazine). The villa was greatly improved over condition it was in when officers first moved in in September 1944. Showers were installed, a water system set up and the galley improved. Twenty officers lived in this villa and another 3/4 mile away, which were occupied under reverse lend-lease arrangements. Men's quarters, too, were improved with showers and laundry facilities being set up.



GI's from Fifth Army watch Blimp K-101 pass over famed leaning tower of Pisa in northern Italy during May 1945. For story of Blimp 14 operations at Pisa, see Page 11.



On 28 April 1945, the British flag officer of northern Italy based at Leghorn requested an airship to aid in clearance of Genoa waters. On 4 May, the K-101 arrived from Cuers, France, at Pisa airfield which was 50 miles south of Genoa. The Pisa airfield (above) was "home of the Thunderbolts", a fighter field which was still operational when the airship arrived. The mast was located in a hay field near the field's single runway. Concrete pillars from bombed out buildings again were used to anchor mast. Fighters and B17's can be seen parked on field in above photograph. Army officers here were most helpful in the establishment of this blimp facility. Three crews were sent from Port Lyautey to establish this detachment which became Advance Base No. 3. Sweeping operations began on 5 May.



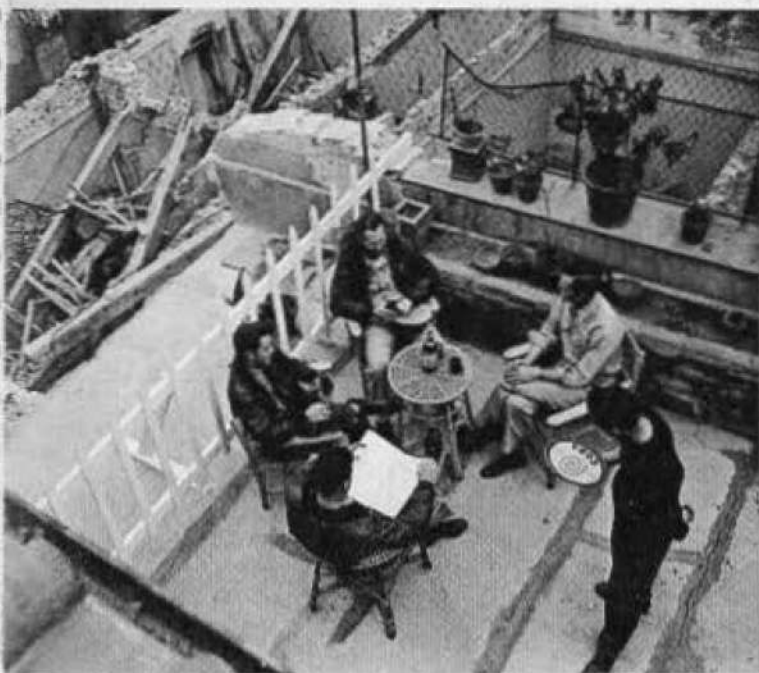
The K-101, which was dubbed "Minnie the Miner" a few days after "her" arrival in Pisa, was emblazoned with appropriate insignia by an Army sergeant (top left). An Army home-bound task force of B-17 bombers moved onto Pisa field a week after the airship arrived. These had been stripped of armament and were used to fly Fifth Army men on the first leg of their journey to the United States (lower right). Officers from British minesweeps flew aboard the airship as liaison officers (lower left). Plots of minefields made by the airship checked closely with charts which Germans surrendered of the fields in the Genoa waters. The field (top right) was about a mile from the famed leaning tower and the town where Blimpson personnel lived.



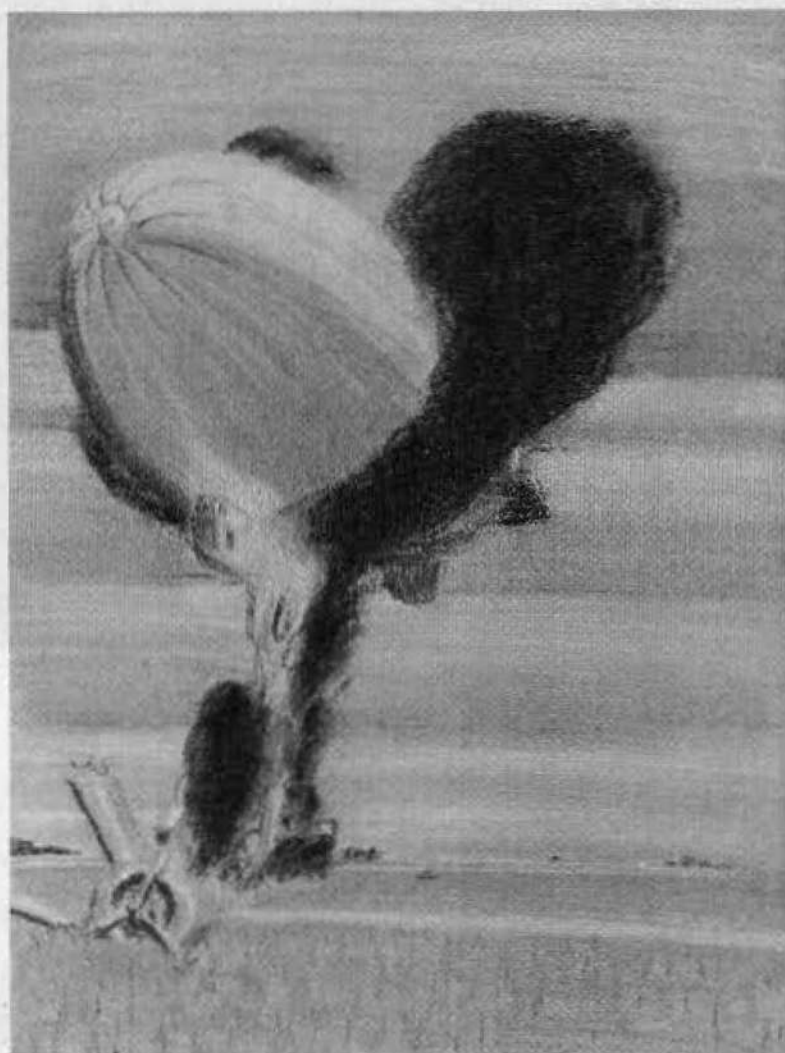
The few craters on the blimp field (top left) were filled in by Army engineers. The stand of timothy on the field was cut by Italians with hand scythes and stacked in shocks to be hauled away (lower photos). Italian civilians liked the airship for reasons of their own (1) it was spraying for mosquitos (they saw it dump fuel) and (2) Some Germans in prisoner of war enclosures were terrified by it; they tried to dig foxholes when it came over. First job for the airship at Pisa was to aid in cutting of channels into Genoa. Part of this harbor is shown in photograph at top right. The British officer in charge of operation after his first flight said the blimp was "almost a miracle" for minesweeping work.



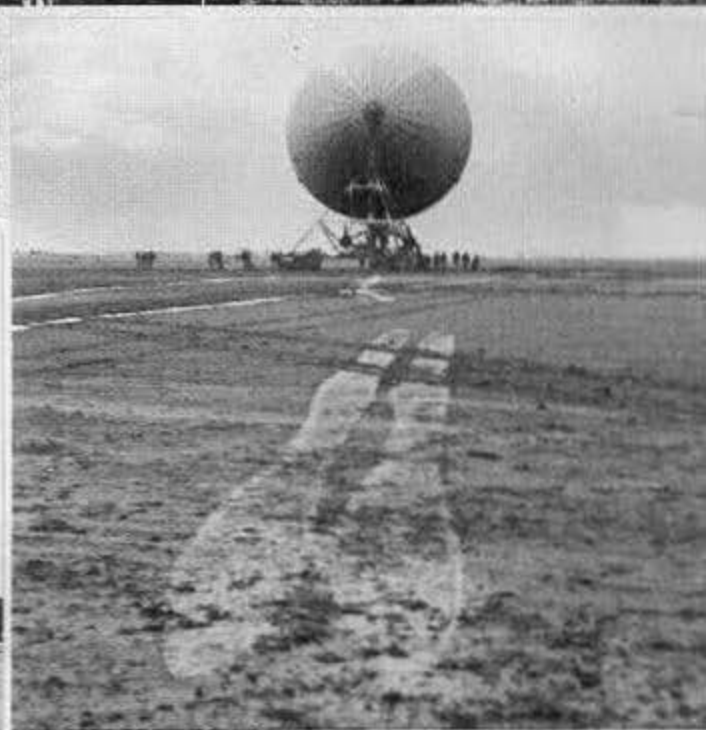
Officers and men ate in army mess with Air Force Ground Depot No. 6 personnel. For both officers and men this was located in a University building (top left) which had been built in "Era Fascisti XIV". Men lived in former chemical laboratory (top center). Parts of Pisa had been demolished by fighting which had raged across the Arno river (lower photo). The army strung a telephone to the mast on Pisa field which sped operations. The detachment also had a duty shack on the field which was little used since it was removed from the mast. On liberty crews visited Leghorn, Florence and took flights in B17's over southern Germany. Since Pisa was only 4 hours flight time from Cuers, most maintenance work was performed on the ship in France.



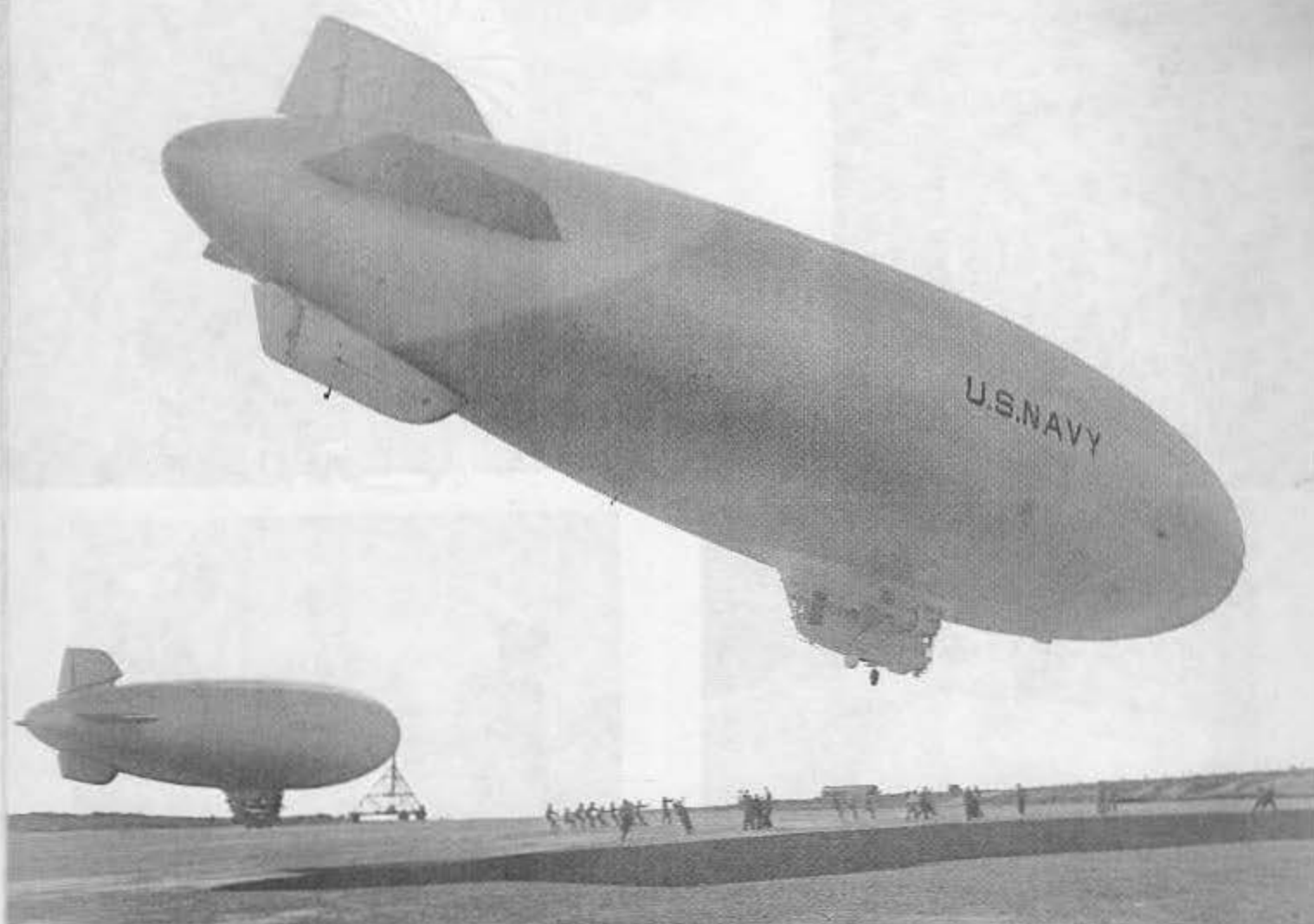
Officers at Pisa lived in top floor of bombed out Albergo (hotel) Victoria. The rear portion of the hotel was smashed by gunfire (top left). Blimpson officers fashioned a "navy bar" over which to dispense their meager supply of liquor. (top right). Their quarters were luxuriously comfortable except for lack of water and the climb up four flights of stairs (lower left). Front of hotel is shown in lower right. Maid who was paid from reverse lend lease funds cleaned their quarters. B17 squadron later moved in on lower floors of the hotel. Army personnel showed great interest in the airship on Pisa airfield and there was a long waiting list for "a ride".



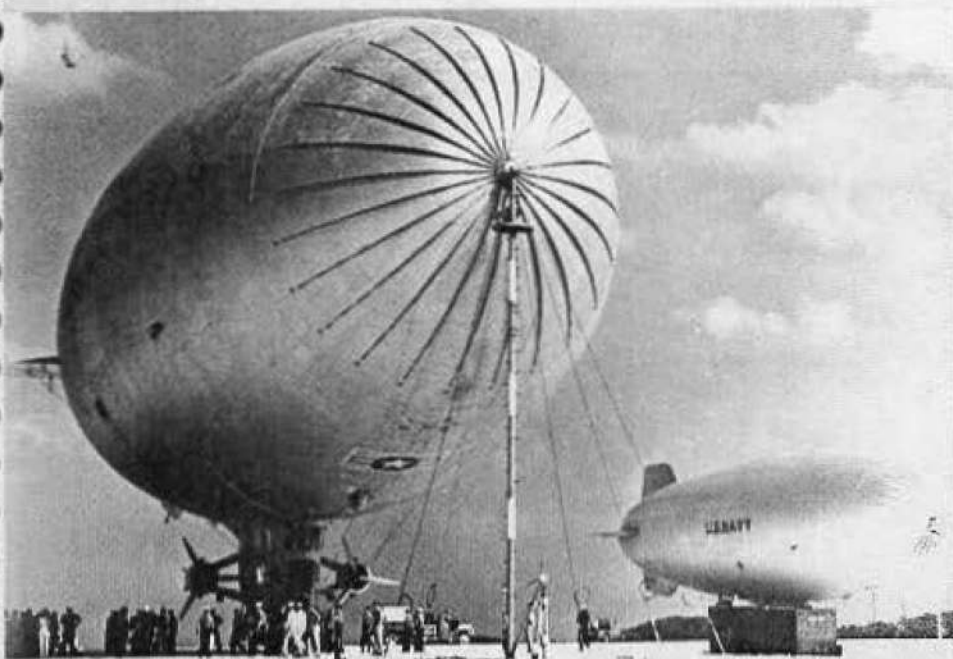
At Port Lyautey, the most frightening spectacle during March-June period was the loss of the K-109 which was caught in powerful up-draft on Field No. 2, torn from the mast and completely destroyed 26 March 1945. The two enlisted men who were on pressure watch at the time said the winds were so violent that they lifted the mast off the ground as the ship kited to a vertical position. After kiting, the ship was slapped to the ground; the mast tipped over and the plexiglass in nose of ship was smashed and outriggers on starboard engine broken loose. When ship bounced into air, men valved it back to ground and jumped from about 30 feet. As ship hit engine dropped off and it burst into flames. Donald Davis, AMTC, who was on ship made the above sketch. Here ship has risen for second time.



The fire consumed the K-109 in about 2 minutes (top). Twisted base girders on mast indicate violence of wind (lower left). Mast on which K-130 was moored on same field was dragged 225 yards. Skid marks (lower right) indicate that wheels of this mast left ground. Officer and 2 men jumped from this ship when they saw K-109 blow away. Only damage to K-130 was cracked radar hat, bent propellers. Violence of wind was largely unexplained--highest wind recorded by aerology 1 mile away was 35 knots.



The K-114 and K-89 arrived in Port Lyautey on 1 May from the States as replacements for the K-123 and K-109. Ferry route used for original six ships was not used. Bermuda, instead of New Foundland, was first stop. Blimpron 14 crews picked up the two ships in the Azores which had been flown from Lakehurst, N.J. to Weeksville, N.C. to Bermuda to the Azores by crews from the States. The 1881-mile hop from Bermuda to Azores was longest ever made by K-type airships. At takeoff from Bermuda each ship carried 1365 gallons of fuel. The flight was made in 29 1/2 hours--making average ground speed just over 60 knots. Above, the K-89 lands at Port Lyautey. Prevailing easterly winds between Azores and Africa slowed average ground speed to 44 knots for this leg.

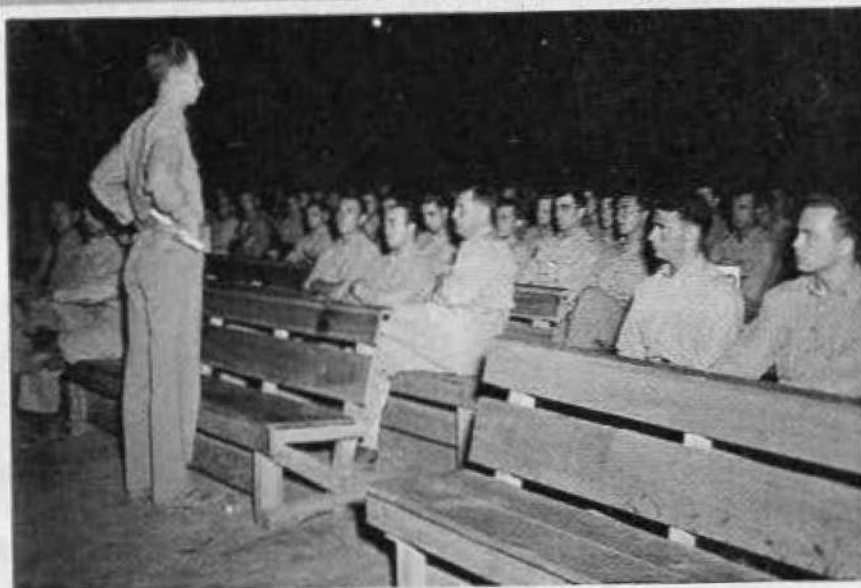
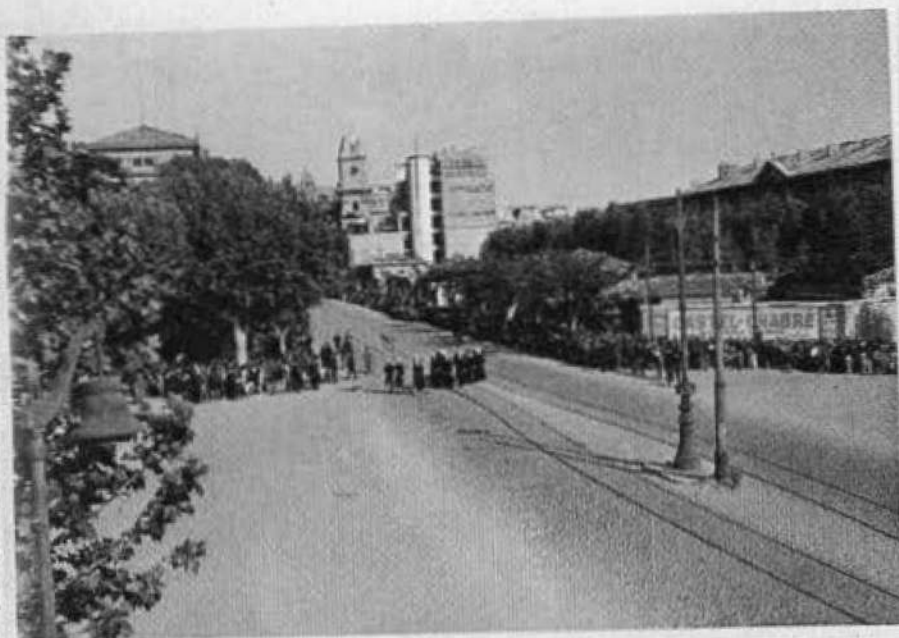


The K-89 and K-114 are shown (top left) during their stopover on Kindley field in Bermuda for fuel. Their next stop was the Azores. Final anti-submarine operations performed by Blimpron 14 airships in the approaches to the Strait of Gibraltar centered around searching for "Schnorckeling" U-boats. Photo top right was taken from airship training with Italian submarine fitted with dummy "Schnorckel". On liberty, crews based at Port Lyautey visited Roman ruins at Volubilis (lower left). To reduce risk of injury which riggers working atop airships on Port Lyautey field faced, airship was rigged with special safety line along top of bag (lower right). When ship kited 45 degrees once, this line saved rigger from injury or death.

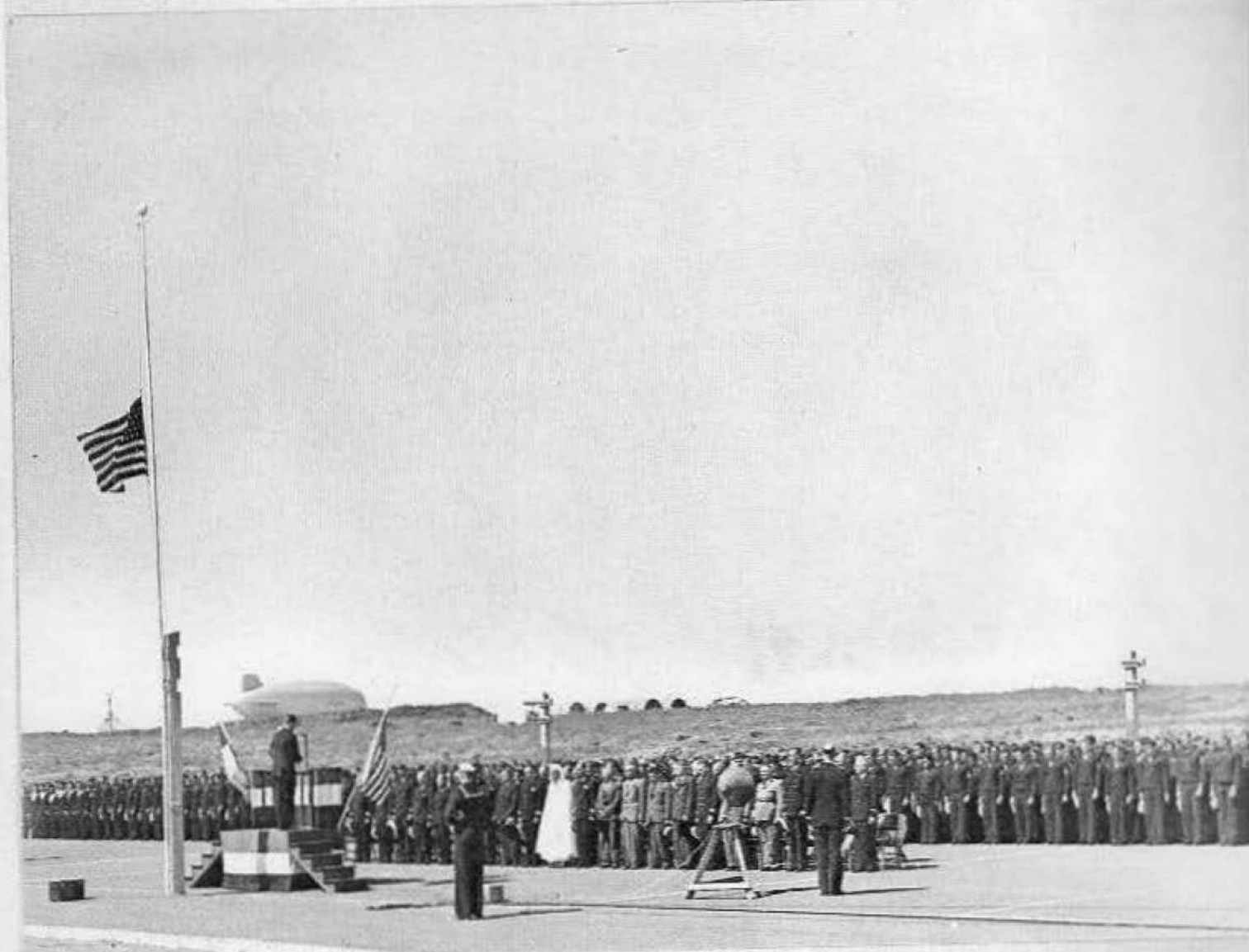


On 7 June, ZP14, marked its first anniversary overseas. Samuel Rennicks, baker attached to squadron, provided the cake which was cut by Chief Rigger W. F. Melanson as Capt. Rixey and squadron watched. A special issue of "THE BAG" news sheet issued thrice weekly on back of flight list (to conserve paper) was printed as souvenir of the occasion (right).





VE- Day celebration at all Blimpron 14 detachments was restrained. At Port Lyautey, Capt. Rizy spoke briefly to squadron personnel at the beginning of an official two-day celebration (lower photo). The Cuers detachment represented the United States in a special parade through the streets of Toulon (upper right). Flight crew members in Pisa read about the surrender of Germany in the "The Stars and Stripes" (top left). As part of the VE celebration in French Morocco, a Port Lyautey airship flew over Casa Blanca, Rabat and Meknes streaming "LA VICTOIRE" banner.



All units of Fleet Air Wing 15 gathered at Port Lyantey for a memorial service for Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt in April. French units and Morrocan representatives also attended.

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