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## VINTAGE RADIO

# What Happened After the Rescue?

This month is the epilogue of Jack Irwin and the Airship *America* story. Here I want to extend the history by talking about what followed for Jack and others of the *America's* crew.

### The Lightning Jerker

In the November 1911 issue of the *Marconigraph* (a Marconi company employee magazine), Jack Irwin related his story about the Airship *America* and its rescue. He also commented on what happened next in his life. When he arrived in New York he found his services were in demand, not as a radio operator but in vaudeville. Surrounded by booking agents, he signed a 10 week contract at a "satisfactory salary." After that he signed with the Sullivan and Considine circuit [Sullivan and Considine operated a chain of vaudeville theaters in the US and Canada. — *Ed.*]. He commented, "I remained on the stage 8 months enjoying a tour of the United States and part of Canada, which seldom comes the way of a "lightning jerker." ("Lightning jerker" is early slang for telegraph operator or professional radio operator.)

"In July of this year I returned east and was offered the position of Marconi operator with Vaniman's new airship 'Akron,' in which he will again tempt the fates in an attempt to reach Europe by dirigible balloon. I promptly accepted, and am now assisting in its construction. The new airship will be 258 feet long; it will contain 400,000 cubic feet of hydrogen, and have a lifting capacity of 13 tons. It will have a total of 317 horsepower and will carry a 3 kW Marconi set of special construction."

### The Akron Flight in 1912

Melvin Vaniman had contacted the Goodyear Company and arranged for them to sponsor the new airship. Goodyear would manufacture the balloon portion, which would hold the hydrogen. At this point Walter Wellman was also involved. The huge hangar in Atlantic City would again be host to the team and house the airship as it was being constructed.

On the trial flight the crew of six contained three of the original 1910 crew, Melvin

Vaniman, Louis Loud and Jack Irwin. The three new crew members were Calvin Vaniman (Melvin's brother), George Riffard and Thomas Blottcher.

Newspaper reports hinted that all was not happy with the crew as there were disagreements between some of them. I gathered from some of the reports that they were critical of Vaniman as he seemed to be rushing the construction and testing.

On Tuesday, July 2, 1912 the *Akron* was brought out of the hangar with fire and police crews assisting, as in 1910. The crew had some major changes indicating the severity of the disagreements. They were Melvin Vaniman, skipper; Calvin Vaniman, steersman; George Bourtillion, electrician (and presumably also the wireless operator); Frederick Elmer, deckhand, and Walter Guest, deckhand.

The newspapers would report that all started well and the airship rose to above 1000 feet. Then a plume of black smoke appeared, the balloon exploded and the remains fell into about 10 feet of water. Rescue boats were soon on the scene but no survivors were found.

It was reported in one paper (reports vary) that Mrs Vaniman and the three other widows, Mrs Elmer, Mrs Bourtillion and Mrs Guest, were sitting on the balcony of the Vaniman cottage watching the balloon when it exploded. "They are all suffering and are in the care of physicians," the paper reported.

Searching for bodies started immediately and four were recovered within a couple of days. The bodies of Melvin Vaniman and Fred Elmer were finally found on July 15, 1912.

The remains of the airship were piled on

ANTHONY SIMON



Murray Simon looking over the Trent's rail.

ANTHONY SIMON



Crew of the *America*, from the left: Fred Aubert, Walter Wellman, Melvin Vaniman, Jack Irwin, Louis Loud and Murray Simon.



ANTHONY SIMON

Anthony Simon, grandson of Murray Simon.

a barge and towed to Gardners Basin in Atlantic City; then they were shipped to Goodyear in Akron, Ohio, for examination. The gasoline tank was intact and had not exploded. Parts of the airbag were examined and it was found that it had not burned but burst. It was believed that the gas within expanded and split the seams. (The entire gasbag was not examined due to souvenir hunters having taken pieces.)

Jack Irwin continued his career in radio working at the *Radio Broadcast* magazine laboratories and writing articles. He served honorably in the Army during World War I and served with the Signal Corps at Fort Monmouth. Colonel Jack Irwin died in action during World War II. General order 42, November 30, 1945 designated Irwin Avenue at Fort Monmouth.



The *Akron* during an early test flight over Atlantic City.



Remains of the *Akron* being loaded on a barge before being towed to Gardners Basin in Atlantic City.



The remains of the *Akron* were shipped to Goodyear in Akron, Ohio, for examination.



Air and Space Museum Senior Curator of Aeronautics Tom Crouch, in front of *Akron* and *America's* surviving lifeboat.

## Kiddo

Kiddo, the feline mascot, was renamed Trent after the rescue ship and for a while he was displayed in a gilded cage in the window of Gimbels department store. He would later go home with Wellman's daughter, Edith, and live a quiet life.



that time the biggest airship in existence."

In an interview with a fellow passenger on the *Hindenburg*, Murray Simon said, "I vowed at the time that I'd fly across the Atlantic yet - and now that moment has come. I'm supremely happy." Simon died in 1969.

## Murray Simon the British Navigator

Murray Simon later wrote: "You must never cross the Atlantic in an airship without a cat - more useful to us than any barometer."

I recently met Anthony Simon, a retired executive who lives in Belgium and is Murray Simon's grandson. He has forwarded some additional information.

"My grandfather received marriage proposals from damsels captivated by his adventure," Anthony Simon told the BBC ([www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11547569](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11547569)): "Offers for vaudeville, lectures and articles rained down from the skies."

Anthony continued, "In 1936, to his great joy, he was invited to fly on the maiden transatlantic voyage of the *Hindenburg*, at

## Lifeboat Found in Ohio

Constructed by S. E. Saunders of East Cowes on the Isle of Wight in 1910, the boat was thought locally to have been destroyed in the crash, but it has been in storage since 1912 at Goodyear. It was the only significant piece to be recovered from the *Akron's* accident.

The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co has made the lifeboat a gift to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum where visitors learn that "The 100 year old lifeboat is from Goodyear's earliest lighter-than-air endeavor, the ill-fated airship *Akron* in 1912. It was also used in 1910 on Wellman's airship *America*."

"The National Air and Space Museum is delighted to add this survivor of the very first Goodyear airship to its collection of

historic air and spacecraft," Senior Curator of Aeronautics Tom Crouch said in a press release. "It will have a place of honor in a section of the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center housing the *Double Eagle II*, the first balloon to fly the Atlantic, and the *Concorde*, which whisked travelers across the Atlantic at supersonic speeds."

## Where Did Airship America End Up?

No one knows for sure, but A. H. Savage-Landor, in *Across Unknown South America*, volume II, p 425, tells a story that was told to him by the people of Porto Principal, Peru, in January 1912. Some years before, a ship had been seen in the sky, passing over the town, not far above the tree tops. According to his interpretations, it was a "square globe," flying a flag of Stars and Stripes. Mr Savage-Landor thinks that the object might have been the airship that Wellman abandoned about 400 miles east of Hatteras in 1910. Whatever this thing in the sky may have been, or we think that it may have been, it returned at night and this time it showed lights.

More information and a 45 minute video presentation about the airship and rescue is available on my Web site, [www.k2tqn.com](http://www.k2tqn.com). — K2TQN