

The Downfall of a Dirigible

WESTMINSTER Abbey on September 7 opened her doors in a memorial service for the forty-four American and British victims of the wreck of the great super-Zeppelin, which occurred at Hull on August 24. Only five of the crew total escaped. From the bed of the river Humber all but four of the bodies of the sixteen American victims have been recovered. The first of these memorial services was held at Howden, where the dirigible, the ZR-2; was evidently planning to land after a trial trip of nearly thirty-six hours in the air. At Hull on September 1 the funeral procession proceeded from the Guild Hall, led by the Lord Mayor and accompanied by the American consul and by units of the British army and navy, with officers from the United States navy at Hull, and representatives from the Air Service of both countries.

The ill-fated dirigible was the mightiest airship ever built, larger than the British R-34, which flew across the Atlantic in 1919, and with a gas capacity greater than the German Zeppelin L-71, which was built during the war to bomb Paris. Her total length was 700 feet, just 150 feet longer than the height of the Washington monument. As fully equipped almost as an ocean liner, she was the Titanic of the air, and met a Titanic's fate. There were quarters for officers and for crew, a radio set with sending apparatus of about 1500 miles, wireless telephone, and electrical control systems thruout the dirigible itself, to permit of what seemed like certain safety. The cause of the accident, however, was evidently a weakness of the great steel girders somewhere amidships. As soon as the heavy nose of the dirigible began to part company with the rest of the ship, heavy explosions of the highly inflammable hydrogen gas took place, rendering escape almost impossible for the imprisoned crew. Men with parachutes in hand were burned to death before they could work clear of the tangled and falling rigging. Most of the wreckage has now been salvaged from the shoals of the Humber river, and probably all of the bodies recovered that were not destroyed.

In the coroner's inquest it was discovered that the body of Brigadier-General Maitland was found on the airship near the water ballast controls, which in emergencies are operated to insure the safety of an airship. Similar devotion to duty was reported in the case of Wireless Officer Wicks, who sent out as his last message, "Ship broken, falling." Subsequent signals were sent out but they were unintelligible.

The accident in England is not the only disaster that has overtaken the American dirigible service. Only a week later, on August 31, occurred in the hangar at Rockaway Point Naval Air Station another fire of hydrogen gas that destroyed the naval balloon D-6, the largest and newest non-rigid dirigible possessed by the Navy. Gasoline fumes are thought to have been ignited by a stroke from a workman's hammer just twenty minutes before the airship was to have sailed for the Lakehurst, N. J., hangar, left vacant by the destruction in England of the ZR-2. The D-6 was 200 feet long and fifty feet in diameter fully inflated. She was propelled by two 125-horsepower Union type motors, and could make fifty-five miles an hour. She had a lifting power of about ten tons, carried 200 gallons of gasoline, and had a cruising radius of 1000 miles.

The fact that the D-6 was equipped with the limousine type of gondola, completely enclosed, made it possible, the authorities believe, for the men in the hangar to escape before the balloon ignited. The trip to Lakehurst would have been her maiden voyage, tho she had previously made several short test flights. Two small dirigibles and a kite balloon, not inflated, were also burned in the Rockaway hangar along with the inflated dirigible. The Navy Department has under way plans for several other ships of the D-6 type.