Navy's modern airship receives historical identification

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A modified American Blimp Corporation A-170 series commercial blimp, the MZ-3A boasts a proud heritage and now serves as the only manned airship in the United States Navy's inventory. Credit: Naval Research Laboratory

Unveiled at a ceremonious ribbon-cutting event, Oct. 26 at the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division, Lakehurst, New Jersey, NAWCAD and the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, reveal the MZ-3A airship now adorned with the insignia of Scientific Development Squadron ONE (VXS-1) and the banner of the U.S. Navy.

"It's been nearly 50 years since the last U.S. Navy Lighter-Than-Air platform cruised the skies over the New Jersey coastline," said CDR Jay Steingold, Commanding Officer, VXS-1. "Today, the MZ-3A joins the ranks of her predecessors by sporting the emblems of the United States Navy, marking an important milestone in the history of naval airships."

After 47 years, the U.S. Navy effectively terminated Lighter-Than-Air (LTA) operations, August 31, 1962, with the final flight of a ZPG-2 airship at Naval Air Station Lakehurst. Emblazoned with red, white and blue stripes on her rudders acknowledging the Navy's Centennial of Flight and earliest days of Navy airship operations, the MZ-3A boasts a proud heritage and now serves as the only manned airship in the United States Navy's inventory.

Built by American Blimp Corporation, the MZ-3A is propeller-driven by two 180 horsepower Lycoming engines producing a top speed just under 50 knots with an operational payload capability of up to 2,500 pounds.

The manned 178-foot LTA craft can remain aloft and nearly stationary for more than twelve hours, performing various missions in support of technology development for Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) concepts.

"Airships offer extreme utility in C4ISR roles and patrol missions where persistent stare and reliable communications are often more important than speed," said Bert Race, MZ-3A Government Flight Representative and Project Manager. "Our MZ-3A has proven that an airship is a very effective platform for mission system research and development."

The MZ-3A is government-owned and contractor-operated. The contractor, Integrated Systems Solutions, Inc., employs highly qualified commercial blimp pilots whom the Navy has approved to command the airship.

Scientific Development Squadron ONE (VXS-1), stationed at the Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Md., is the U.S. Navy's sole Science & Technology research squadron. Commissioned, December 2004, VXS-1 employs NP-3D Orions, RC-12 Guardrails, Scan Eagle UAS, and most

recently, the MZ-3A in its support of NRL-priority airborne research efforts. Since its transfer to VXS-1 in 2009, the MZ-3A has accumulated more than 1,000 mishap-free flight hours in support of the Naval Research Enterprise and recently provided assistance during the tragic Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill in 2010.

Provided by Naval Research Laboratory