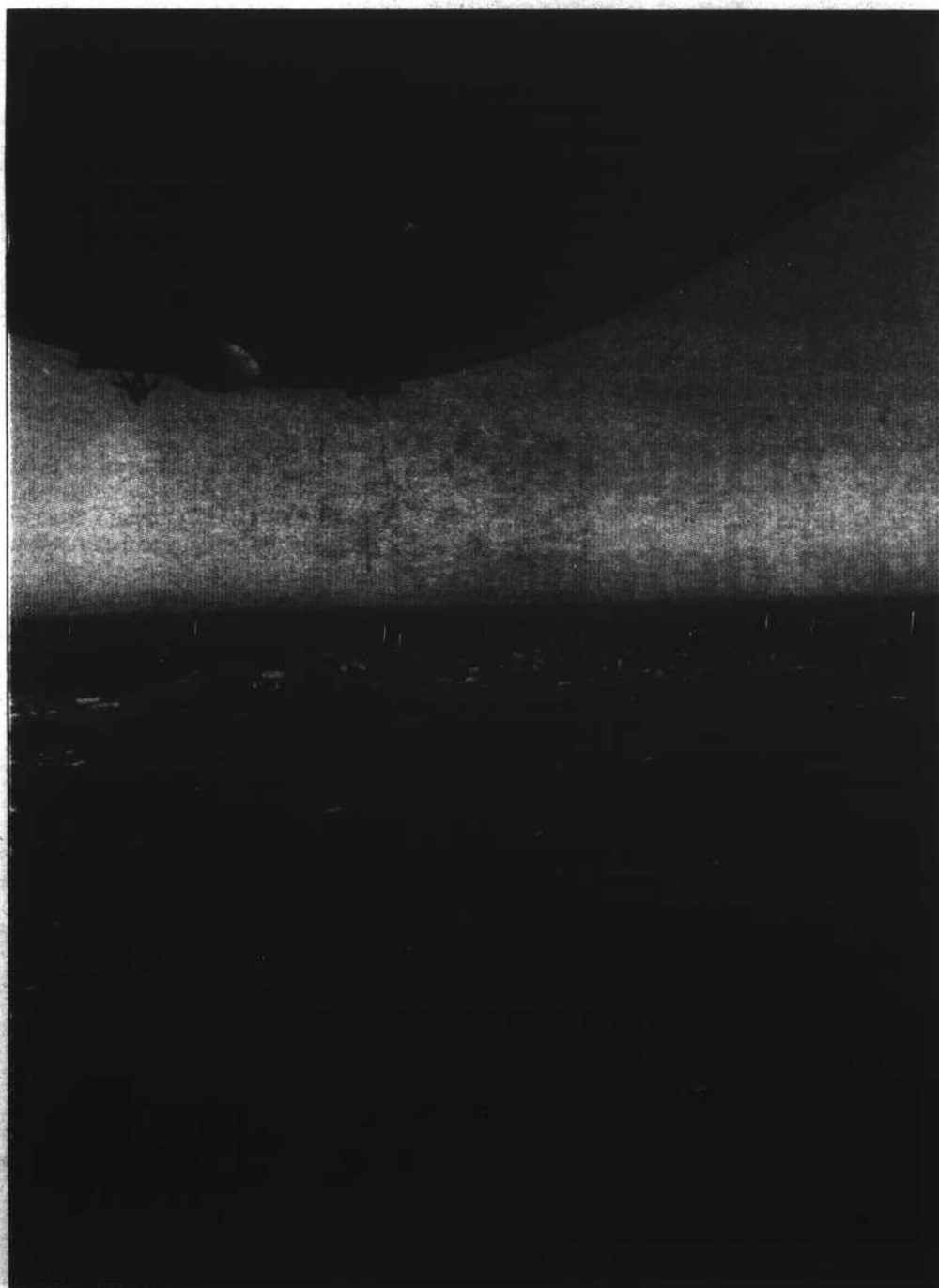


MATT MILLER/DN

Above, the ground crew holds the airship steady while a group of passengers get off the blimp after a ride Wednesday evening. Below, the city is visible from the blimp's cockpit.



Goodyear blimp bobs over Lincoln skyline

By ERIN SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

They're like sailboats in the sky. Leisurely bobbing 1,000 feet in the air, a Goodyear blimp floats at the perfect height.

High enough to see an entire golf course, but low enough to see a group of eight in brightly-colored shirts teeing off.

High enough to see the entire city of Lincoln with one turn of the head, but low enough to see people waving from their balconies.

Goodyear brought the "Spirit of Akron," one of its three blimps (also known as airships) to Lincoln this week to honor and promote Lincoln's Goodyear plant.

The plant will be making fabric for future blimps and is celebrating its 50th anniversary. The blimp, its pilots and ground crew members, are in town until Friday.

This week's visit is the first time the blimp hogged the Lincoln skyline since a visit in 1973.

The cab of the blimp fits a maximum of six passengers at a time, plus a captain and co-captain. The small cabin resembles a shuttle bus with one small aisle and airplane-type blue seats.

The windows reach from floor to nearly the ceiling, leaving passengers with a wide view of the city or countryside below.

Mark Kynett, the airship pilot on a Wednesday flight, said if airplanes were the speedboats of the sky, blimps were the sailboats.

Instead of being transported in a truck, the blimp flies everywhere it goes. It has a top speed of 65 miles per hour, and cruising speed of around 30.

The helium in the huge, wide-open bubble on top of the cabin supports 99 percent of the blimp's weight and is propelled by two 6-foot roaring turbine propellers.

People don't get where they're going very quickly, Kynett said, but that's not the point.

"When the weather's nice, we'll pop open a window, and fly with an elbow out there and wave to people," Kynett said.

The sight of a 200-foot long, 60-foot tall floating blimp brought many Lincoln residents out in the cold wind Wednesday night near dusk to watch the blimps' sharply-angled takeoffs and descents.

About 100 carloads of people left their vehicles on the side of a road by Capital Aviation, where the blimp was being stored. Clinging to a chain link fence, people hauled out kids and cameras to see the famous blimp.

Mayor Mike Johanns, who cruised in the air-

ship Wednesday, dubbed the onlookers "blimpies."

All the people got was a glimpse of the icon, but some said they were really hoping for a ride. That isn't easy, because Goodyear lets on only a select few, including a few employees, journalists and special guests.

Once there's clearance to get a ride on the blimp, getting in the blimp is another matter.

The whole event seems much like a dramatic helicopter rescue: jump on quickly amidst a swirl of violent air.

During the craft's rapid descent and landing, ground crew members rush head-on toward the nose of the blimp, grab on to long ropes and scatter to safety along the sides.

Two of the biggest crew members throw all of their weight on metal bars beneath the cabin holding the blimp down, while passengers are hustled out of their seats, down the stairs and onto the ground.

The next passengers approach the looming balloon one at a time, running past a heavy column of air from the engines on to a floating staircase leading to the cabin.

Once the blimp is cruising, passengers can walk around the open cabin. In Lincoln, blimp pilots gave 30- to 40-minute rides, floating over the capitol, the UNL campus and north on 27th Street, then back to Capital Aviation.

Goodyear only has 15 blimp pilots to handle their three ships, said Aaron Jenkins, a blimp pilot for 33 years.

They make up an elite bunch, as there are fewer than 20 blimps in the nation.

While in flight, pilots regulate the helium to control the height of the blimp, Kynett said. They also communicate with air traffic controllers.

"The blimps are semi-automatic but pilot maintained," he said.

Blimps, which may also be known as "zeppelins" or "dirigibles," got their start in the air during World Wars I and II. Jenkins said they would escort Navy convoys and scout for submarines in the water.

Helicopters created ripples, clouding the surface, but smooth-floating blimps could see into the water, he said. No Navy conveyance accompanied by blimps were ever torpedoed, Jenkins said.

After the wars, Goodyear, the blimps' maker, bought them back and painted the company's name on the side for a publicity stunt. The rest is marketing history, Jenkins said.

"It was so effective for promotion and advertising that they've always kept it up."



MATT MILLER/DN

The Cornell family (left) and the Cropp family, both of Lincoln, watch the blimp through a fence on the side of the road by Capital Aviation.

“

When the weather's nice, we'll pop open a window, and fly with an elbow out there and wave to people.”

MARK KYNETT
blimp pilot