

Photographing the USS Akron

The following was written by the preeminent aerial photographer Clyde Sunderland following his assignment to photograph the U.S. Navy Airship Akron May 13, 1932.

Photographing the U.S.S. Akron
By
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Photographing the U.S.S. Dirigible Akron was a very interesting assignment—not because it was just another aerial news job but because the great “Queen of the Skies” had such a trying trip out here to the coast and the news interest centered on her with the mishap at San Diego made arrival photographs at her destination very desirable.

The Akron was scheduled to arrive at Sunnyvale, Calif. at 7 p.m. in the evening but owing to the late start from San Diego did not arrive over the bay area until well after midnight. The weather was very foggy in fact the worst fog recorded on the coast for sometime was prevalent (the same miserable weather that kept up with the ship on her whole trip).

My assignment was to get the first arrival photographs of the Akron from the air over the Bay Area and preferably near Sunnyvale, for the Oakland Tribune. It might be well to add this was accomplished thru great hazard and the Tribune was the only local paper having any photos of the Akron on its arrival in this locality.

My pilot Lieut. Chas. Shone and I took off from the San Francisco Bay Airdrome, Alameda at 5 a.m. As was said before the weather was exceptionally thick and before we had gone half way down the airport runway the hangers were lost from sight. We flew low over the waters edge near the bay shore to Sunnyvale where we saw a field covered with a crowd, tense, expectant, waiting like wraiths amid the gray mists. Parking areas were lined with autos, ground crews ready for action; crowds stood there in the chill hour before the sun should break thru the fog. But there was no sign of the Akron.

We immediately looked for an opening in the fog to get thru, knowing that the giant ship must be near, above the vast blanket of fog which shrouded the entire valley.

After climbing about 3000 ft we emerged into clear skies with broken clouds overhead, the sun was just giving us her first golden beams which shoved long shadows across the fog to meet us. To the east poking its head thru the fog blanket was Mt. Diablo and to the north west just visible was the top of our “Sleeping Lady” Mt. Tamalpais.

In the distance like a small bright speck against the dark background of Mt. Tamalpais we first sighted the Akron, to us no larger than a pinhead, nosing her way toward us. Immediately we flew to meet the giant ship.

Owing to the great expanse of fog there were no buildings, trees, or anything with which to compare this ship in size, in fact there was not even another plane in the sky, we had the Akron all to ourselves. It reminded me of a toy balloon just lazily floating in space as if it had no place to go and all the time in the world to get there. Only as we came right up to it did it seem to take on its giant size and proportions.

We immediately went to work to procure photographs and then to rush them back to the paper.

I can assure you that the Akron floating majestically high in a golden dawn, riding above a sea of fleecy white fog clouds that blotted out the Golden Gate and shut the airship from the sight of thousands of early morning watchers in San Francisco and Oakland, was the “most beautiful sight I had ever seen.”

Equipment used was a Waco Model F 2 plane, reconverted Folmer & Schwing Aero Camera with a f4.5 Bausch & Lomb Zeiss Tessar lens. Exposure 150th of second at f5.6 with aero #1 filter using Defender Xtra Fast panchromatic film, developed in Pyro-Metol Developer. Negative quality was of medium density very good for 5:30 in the morning.