

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Huge Airship Over Coronado

By Bruce Linder



In the 1920s nothing bigger ruled the air than majestic Zeppelin-sized dirigibles, first built by Germany during World War I. Following the war, the U. S. Navy built an airship of its own, the massive *Shenandoah* (ZR-1).

No huge airships had flown on the West Coast and Coronado's experience with impressive dirigibles was limited to Metrotone newsreels at theaters. All that changed on October 10, 1924 at 10 o'clock at night when *Shenandoah* arrived over her mooring mast at North Island after a transcontinental flight from Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Awestruck observers talked of the thunder from *Shenandoah's* five engines, her dark imposing loom suddenly caught in the shimmering

cast of multiple searchlights, and the astonishing sight of something as large as a battleship floating effortlessly above. She made quite a sight as she maneuvered carefully to her tall mooring mast at the far end of the North Island field.

Built in the USA but from German plans, *Shenandoah's* impressive design came from rigid aluminum girders that held huge bags of helium for lift. *Shenandoah's* flight was designed to see if she could get all the way to the distant Pacific and, once there, operate successfully with ships of the Battle Fleet. Naval tactics of the era emphasized use of an airship for long-range search, observation, spotting and early warning. It was hoped that as squadrons of battleships and cruisers advanced across the Pacific that airships would sail ahead of them to spot any approaching enemy.

Crowds of sightseers flocked to North Island or high on Point Loma to catch sight of the huge silver zeppelin. "Nothing like this has ever happened," read one San Diego newspaper quote. *Shenandoah* stayed for six days then cast off early on raw, foggy morning, rounded Point Loma and headed northward to rendezvous with the fleet off San Pedro. She would later journey further northward to San Francisco Bay.

Shenandoah returned briefly to Coronado on October 21st for refueling and replenishing. After taking aboard 150,000 cubic feet of helium she rose gracefully, pivoted over the city and headed eastward over Sweetwater, Jacumba, the coastal mountains, and then toward Texas. © CHA