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William F. Althoff, *USS Los Angeles: The Navy's Venerable Airship and Aviation Technology*, Washington D.C.: Brassey's, 2004. Bibliography, illustrations, index.

Reviewed by Lt. Colonel John J. Abbatiello, USAF  
Department of History  
U.S. Air Force Academy

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Althoff's *USS Los Angeles* is a superbly researched and beautifully illustrated addition to the historiography of American naval aviation. This book is not a simple "train-spotter" history; on the contrary, it is a well-argued narrative that sets rigid airship development within the greater context of naval aviation, interservice-rivalry, and commercial air-transport. Althoff's expertise as an aviation historian is obvious throughout; he held the Ramsey Fellowship in naval aviation history at the National Air and Space Museum in 1999-2000.

The close of WWI found the US Navy as the only western maritime power not possessing its own rigid airships. Naval appropriations for 1920 called for the construction of one rigid airship at home, with accompanying bases and sheds, and the purchase of one overseas. Rigid airships would serve as a reconnaissance platform for the fleet while at sea. America's first home-built airship became the *USS Shenandoah (ZR-1)*, christened in 1923 but lost two years later. The Navy planned to purchase *R-38 (ZR-2)* from Britain, but it foundered during its fourth trial flight in August 1921. In order to make up for *R-38's* loss, the Navy negotiated the design, purchase, and delivery of *LZ-*

126 from Germany's Luftschiffbau-Zeppelin in 1922 and accepted delivery of USS *Los Angeles* (ZR-3) in October 1924.

Althoff guides the reader through the fascinating story of *L.A.*'s acquisition and construction, training and flight routine, exercises and tests, and later career as a stationary test bed. Although his claim that the rigid airship was the "first multi-million-dollar weapon system of the modern era" (p. 220) is arguable (dreadnought battleships?), Althoff nonetheless proves that *L.A.* played an influential role in U.S. naval aviation and was "the most successful aircraft of its type flown anywhere." Throughout the narrative, the author highlights U.S.-German cooperation during *L.A.*'s construction and later operations as well as American commercial-military ties during the interwar years. Examinations of the realities and politics of U.S. helium production and the colorful naval and government personalities of the era round out this account.

Although shrinking budgets and competing naval programs—such as aircraft carriers—led to a gradual decline both in interest in airships and in *L.A.*'s physical condition, the rigid proved to be an important test bed for technologies used later in non-rigid airships, cheaper weapon systems which would be useful during WW2 as sub-hunters and convoy escorts. The Navy decommissioned the USS *Los Angeles* in 1932.

Althoff's thorough research makes this book a valuable contribution to the field of naval aviation history. Documents and personal accounts found at the Smithsonian, National Archives, and University of Texas-Dallas's History of Aviation Collection provide rich detail that enhances the story of this weapon system. Drawing on contemporary technical reports and periodical articles, Althoff skillfully explains the primary and supporting technologies that enabled rigid airships to fly.

This history will be attractive to both aviation enthusiasts and professional historians alike. Again, Althoff adroitly sets the USS *Los Angeles* in its proper place in the history of U.S. naval aviation.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)

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