

Zachary Lansdowne, Lt. Cdr. USN

The story behind his rise to prominence—and his fall to earth

Zachary Lansdowne was born in Greenville, Ohio, on December 1, 1888, at the family home at 338 East 3rd Street, which still stands today and is listed on the US Historical Register. Zachary Lansdowne left the Greenville School System his senior year to accept an appointment to the US Naval Academy in 1905. He graduated from the Academy in 1909 and spent his early career on board the battleship USS *Virginia* and the destroyer USS *McCall*. Later he was attached to the Ohio Naval Militia and served as a Navy recruiter in Cleveland. After the death of his first wife, he requested to be reassigned to naval aviation training; he graduated as the country's 105th Naval aviator.

He was sent to England to study and train for the operation of lighter-than-air ships, or LTA's. He spent the final years of WWI at the British Naval Department and the French LTS stations. On board the British R-34 airship when it made the historic first trans-Atlantic flight in July 1919, he earned the Navy Cross. Later duty assignments would include the Navy station in Akron and aide to the White House. In 1922-23, Lt. Cdr. Lansdowne served as a Naval attaché in the US Embassy in Berlin, Germany. With his experience, Lt. Cdr. Lansdowne was active in the United States' decision to build a fleet of five airships while his friend Col. Billy Mitchell was actively promoting the use of winged aircraft as war planes and warning that the entire US fleet stationed in Hawaii could be destroyed by a strategic air attack.

The first US-built LTA was the ZR-1, later to be known as the USS *Shenandoah*. The United States was a late comer to this type of aircraft; other nations such as Italy, France, England, and Germany had been flying them since WWI but with disastrous consequences due to the use of the highly flammable hydrogen gas as the lifting agent. The *Shenandoah* would use the non-flammable gas helium, which had just been discovered, as the lifting agent that had 92% of the capability of hydrogen and was \$55 per 1000 cu. ft. compared to \$5 per 1000 cu. ft. for hydrogen.

Lifting capabilities, air speed, operational ceiling, difficulties launching and landing, building costs, and gas costs were a detriment to the LTA's future viability. Much larger than today's blimps, the *Shenandoah* was 682 feet long and 80 feet in diameter, weighed 41 tons, cruised at 70 mph for 5000 miles using five 300 hp Packard gas engines and 20 internal gas cells made from the intestines of 900,000 head of cattle. Its propellers were made by Hartzell Propeller in Piqua, Ohio. The construction of the *Shenandoah* cost in excess of \$3 million, not including the cost of 2.3 million cu. ft. of helium. The *Shenandoah* entered service on September 4, 1923, with plans for it as a reconnaissance platform and flight over the Arctic. On February 12, 1924, Lansdowne was given command of the *Shenandoah* because of his experience and capabilities. He had been successful docking the LTA to a ship at sea for refueling. Later in 1924, Lansdowne embarked on a West Coast trip to Seattle. On October 25, 1924, on the return trip

to Lakehurst, New Jersey, Lansdowne hovered over his mother's home in Greenville and talked to her briefly via short wave radio and dropped a message in a pouch, which unfortunately landed on a neighbor's roof.

When the *Shenandoah* returned to its homeport, its Artic trip was canceled and its helium was transferred to the ZR-3, the Los Angeles, the newest airship from Germany. The Los Angeles had an unfortunate accident and so the gas was transferred back to the *Shenandoah* for a big six-day promotional trip in September covering 40 cities and five states coinciding with several state fairs, but Lt. Cdr. Lansdowne was concerned over the weather conditions in the Midwest. He voiced his concerns to the higher command on two occasions to no avail. As if he had some premonition, he gave his files outlining his concerns to his wife fearing they wouldn't be made available if the worst should happen.

There was excitement in Greenville that once again the airship would pass over the city. At 5 a.m. on September 3, 1925, the *Shenandoah* had just entered Ohio near Ava in Noble County when it encountered a turbulent storm. The *Shenandoah* was broken into three sections; 14, including Lansdowne, were killed, but 22 crew members survived. The forward section floated 12 miles farther south and fell with seven more survivors. Lt. Cdr. Lansdowne and several crew members were buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Spectators stripped the airship of anything loose for souvenirs, and Lt. Cdr. Lansdowne's Academy ring was found in a garden 12 years later. Naval Courts of Inquiry were held, and Mrs. Lansdowne and Billy Mitchell expressed their feelings that the Army and Navy had demonstrated "incompetence" and "almost treasonable administration of national defense." The *Shenandoah* was finally sold for scrap at 20¢ per pound, a sad end after only two years for the "Daughter of the Stars" as the *Shenandoah* was known. The writing was on the wall, and the age of the LTA came to an end in 1937 with the tragic loss of the German *Hindenburg* in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

As a tribute to Lansdowne's contributions, a destroyer, USS *Lansdowne* DD-486, was commissioned in April 1942. Lt. Cdr. Lansdowne's widow presented the ship with his class ring for proper display "on board" the destroyer. The USS *Lansdowne* sank two German U-boats in the Atlantic and served in numerous critical actions in the Pacific during WWII. Known as the "Lucky L," it received 12 battle stars and had the distinction of delivering the Japanese envoys to the USS *Missouri* for the signing of the surrender documents that ended WWII.

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