

Do you see what I see?

A part of the Lighter-Than-Air section of Langley reveals a hint of early aviation history

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In the Lighter-Than-Air community of Langley Air Force Base is a parking lot. So what, many may think. There are parking lots all over the base, and many say there should be more.

But this particular lot is among the last visible remnants of a particularly significant segment of Langley history – when huge airships graced the sky.

According to *Langley Field, the Early Years*, Lighter-than-air activity at Langley Field began with the formation of a balloon detachment in June 1918, and ended November 1935, with the departure of the 19th Airship Squadron to Moffett Field, California.

During these 17 years, especially during the 1920s, it was common to see balloons, non-rigid and semi-rigid airships over the field.

After World War I numerous balloon units arrived at Langley and were quickly deactivated. However, two balloon companies, which became Airship Company 10 and AC19 in April 1920, remained at the field, and combined to become the Airship School in the late summer of 1921.

The airships needed a home. The Harris Construction Company of New York was the low bidder in 1919 for the construction of a hangar suitable for the airships. They won

the contract with their \$55,000 bid. When the hangar was completed in December 1921, the final cost to the government was \$426,550 – a cost over-ride of nearly ten times the estimate.

The structure dominated the skyline of the field. It was 125 feet wide, 420 feet long and 116 feet high. To give some perspective, the present airfield tower is 110 feet and the new F/A-22 Low Observable Composite Repair facility, currently under construction near the tower, will be 45 feet high.

Not far from where the hangar was located is the hydrogen generating plant. This structure still stands, and was one of the first permanent buildings built on the base, in 1917. Although highly flammable, hydrogen was cheaper than helium and it has greater lifting capabilities. For this reason it was the gas of choice for inflating the airships at Langley – with tragic consequences.

For years the airship hangar was known as the Roma Hangar, named for the airship the government purchased from Italy in June 1920, after intense lobbying by Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell.

The Roma was a semi-rigid airship, its nose and keel under the gas bag were reinforced with a rigid metal skeleton. The gas bag, or envelope, retained its shape only when inflated. It was 410 feet long and held more than a million cubic feet of hydrogen.

A team of three officers and five enlisted men went to Italy, to inspect, fly, and disassemble the airship for transport back to the United States.

In August of 1921 the huge crates arrived at the field, and the reassembly process began. The gas bag had problems though. One of the NCOs who transported the airship here, and was helping put it back together, Master Sergeant Harry Chapman, found the bag mildewed and said it took 184 patches to repair the holes.

The airship went aloft a few times using the six Italian Ansaldo engines. They caused trouble every time the airship went up, so they were replaced with American Liberty motors.

On February 21, 1922, the Roma took to the skies to test the new power plants. It was cold and overcast as the crew of 45 men flew over Phoebus and Fort Monroe, and then turned south towards Willoughby Spit and on towards the Norfolk Naval Air Station. The nose had started to buckle not long after leaving the field and observers at the air station watched in horror as the elevator in the stern slipped out of place. With its controls jammed, the Roma crashed at the Army's Quartermaster Depot outside Norfolk, struck high-voltage wires and blew apart.

At the time, it was the worst air disaster in the U.S. And the tragedy revealed more than one ironic twist of fate. Just before the airship took off with its crew of 34, Capt. Dale Mabry, the ship's commanding officer decided 11 more passengers could also come on

board. It wasn't hard to find volunteers. These additional passengers were the only survivors. All 34 of the original crew perished.

Major John Thornell, the original commanding officer of the Roma was busy preparing for his new assignment to Washington D.C. but chose to fly one more time on the ship. It was his last flight.

Master Sergeant James Murray was discharged from the Army Air Service the day before, but was given special permission to fly one more time. He too perished.

Sergeant Virgil Hoffman was one of the NCOs who went to Italy to bring the Roma to the states. He was a rigger on the airship, and on that fateful day in February, he leaned from the cabin window and waved to his fiancée's family in Phoebus. It was his final wave good-bye.

Lt. William Riley was the only victim who did not die from the explosion of the Roma. He attempted to parachute from the craft, but his chute did not open.

Today the Lighter-Than-Air area of Langley is the home for many of the base's senior NCOs and their families. They live on streets named Clarke Avenue, Hilliard Street, Harris Avenue, Murray Court and several other lanes named for the victims of the Roma Crash.

Not all the streets in the community could be named after those who perished, so years ago Roma Road was named to memorialize all the airmen on the flight. The magnificent hangar was disassembled in 1947 but with a little imagination it is easy to see where the two bays once were. Near the intersection of Roma Road and Clarke Street is that parking lot, once the home of graceful gas-filled airships which floated over the airfield.