



## Newsletter Issue 51, April 2021

### US Navy Zeppelin Disaster

At the end of World War I, the British were in the process of procuring four large zeppelins to help with long range patrols over the North Sea. The war ended and the procurement for three of them was cancelled. Development of the lead airship continued when the US Navy agreed to purchase the R38 class zeppelin—the world's largest airship at the time. During its final test flight on 24 August 1921, the airship suffered a catastrophic structural failure over the city of Hull in the UK and spectacularly crashed into the nearby estuary, killing 44 of the 49 crew aboard. This was actually the first of the great airship disasters, with more victims than the more famous Hindenberg disaster of 1937. 17 of the crew were American sailors, 16 of



whom perished in the crash. Today these 16 are listed on the memorial located in the western cemetery of the town of Hull which remembers the incident. The cause of the disaster was determined to be a faulty design.

### Training Pilots in Italy

Towards the end of 1917, because of a lack of suitable training areas in the US, 500 Americans were deployed to Foggia, Italy to learn military flying. Most of the new pilots were then sent to France to fly for the AEF, but about 75 remained in Italy under the command of Captain Fio-rello LaGuardia (a serving congressman in New York who later became mayor of NYC). Called "Foggiani", these US pilots were attached to Italian bomber squadrons to augment the Italian effort and to gain experience in bombardment operations. These missions were actually the first combat bomber operations by members of the US Army Air Service and were flown in Caproni bombers. Several American airmen received Italy's highest decoration, the Medaglia di Oro, for their heroism in combat. A total of 406 US pilots earned their wings at Foggia. 80 served with the Italians, taking part in 65 missions and flying 587 hours of combat operations. Today there is a memorial plaque in the Cathedral of Foggia honoring the American pilots killed at the aviation school. There is also a monument at the old military airfield Gino Lisa, immediately adjacent to Foggia's commercial airport, to tell the story.



### The Norwegians

Norwegian Americans served with distinction in unique roles in WWII. The 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) was composed solely of Norwegian men who had emigrated to America and their descendants. Activated in Minnesota, the unit trained in mountain warfare with the 10th Mountain Division in Colorado. The intent of the battalion was to form the core of the OSS Norwegian Operational group for special operations in Norway. They deployed to Europe in August 1943, but with no OSS missions scheduled in Norway they assumed a conventional role. Landing two weeks after D-Day, they fought across northern Europe to the German border with the 2nd Armored Division, joined the 30th Infantry Division at Aachen, and held the line around Malmedy during the Battle of the Bulge. In January 1945 they were attached to Darby's Rangers in the new 474th Infantry Regiment and then joined Patton's Third Army in April for the final drive across Germany. Parts of the unit did get to Norway to participate in Operation Rype (OSS sabotage actions to slow the German withdrawal from Norway and prevent those troops from being used to defend Germany). Rype was the only US operation on Norwegian soil during WWII. The detachment was led by then Major William Colby, who after the war went to law school and eventually culminated his career in the CIA by serving as its director. The 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate) earned five battle stars: Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes, and Central Europe and during 101 days in combat, the Battalion suffered the loss of 54 men killed, and 207 wounded. Today the unit is honored on a monument by the Emigrant Church in Sletta, Norway.

