Naval Air Station Tillamook / Tillamook Air Museum

Tillamook is home to the largest free-standing, clear-span wooden structure in the world. Covering more than seven acres, the building is 1,072 feet long, 296 feet wide, and towers more than 15 stories high.

Hangar B of Naval Air Station (NAS) Tillamook was commissioned and constructed by the U.S. Navy in 1943 to house blimps for anti-submarine patrol and convoy escort. Hangar A, built in the same year in just twenty-seven days, was destroyed by fire in 1992. Together, the two hangars could house eight K-class blimps—each 252 feet long. (For comparison, the average Goodyear blimp is 190 feet long.) The gas envelope contained 425,000 cubic feet of helium and had a lift capacity of 7,700 pounds.

The buildings are worthy of note as much as the aircraft they accommodated. Each hangar required more than two million board feet of lumber, most of it from Oregon. Even the gutters and downspouts used wood to conserve metal, and more than 2,000 tons of steel were saved per hangar. Each timber was treated with fire retardant, and it took fifty different lumber companies to prepare and supply all the wood needed.

The buildings were completed in summer 1943. The first blimp had arrived on February 15 that year; but because there was no hangar to protect it, it was torn to pieces in a heavy storm on March 27.

With the huge hangars completed, NAS Tillamook stationed blimps during 1943-1945. They were used to watch over ports in Oregon and Washington and shipping lanes from California to the San Juan Islands, a 500-mile radius. These Lighter-than-Air (LTA) ships could stay aloft 48 hours, cruise at 50-67 knots, and cover 13,000 square miles of water during a day's shift.

On September 15, 1945, two weeks after the Japanese surrender, Tillamook station was reduced to functional status. In October, the last two blimps left for California, and by mid-1946, all LTA wings were decommissioned by the U.S. Navy.

Three lumber companies in the Tillamook area—Rosenberg, Angel Lumber, and Diamond Lumber—had their operations in the hangars from 1949 to 1982. In 1984, Wren Aircraft leased Hangar A to build Cessna 182 Skylanes. But when fire destroyed Hanger A on August 22, 1992, it was used by Tillamook farmers and had 300 truckloads of hay in it.

After years of other uses, Hangar B has returned to much of its erstwhile glory. In 1992, the Port of Tillamook Bay established a small blimp museum and by 1996 had acquired one of the finest collections of operational vintage World War I and II aircraft and a modern F-14 Tomcat fighter jet. The museum features more than thirty war birds, including a Bf-109 Messerschmitt, A-4B Skyhawk, P-38 Lightning, Martin AM Mauler, 1938 Bellanca Air Cruiser, Bell Helicopter, Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber, AD-4W Skyraider, and the rare Nakajima Ki-43, known as the Peregrine Falcon.

Approximately 80,000 people a year visit the museum, which is open daily, year-round. Visitors can climb into a jet simulator and view historical wartime and aviation artifacts, including pieces of the German airship, the *Hindenburg*. The museum offers guided tours for school groups.

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Further Reading:

Manske, Kenneth A., ed. *The History of Naval Air Station Tillamook and Its Role in World War II.* Gresham, Ore.: M & A Tour Book, 1995.

The Tillamook Air Museum. http://www.tillamookair.com.

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