K2TQN

VINTAGE RADIO

100 Years Ago this Month — Jack Irwin and the Airship *America*

This month I am continuing the story of Jack Irwin's adventure on the Airship *America*. Last month I discussed the airship itself and how it came to be. This month we will lift off from New Jersey for the transatlantic crossing attempt.

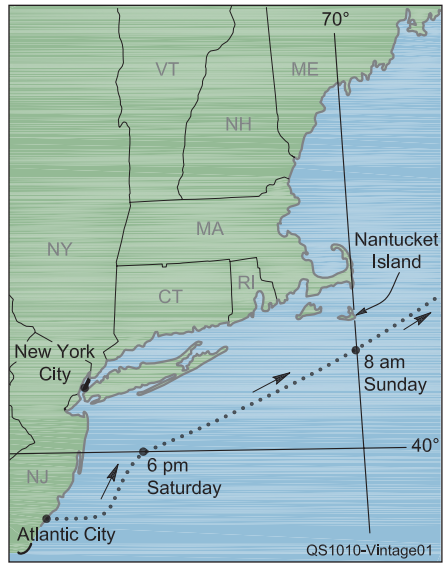
Continuing from Jack's report: "On the morning of October 15, 1910, I was awakened about 4 o'clock and told to go aboard. There was not a breath of wind. A dense fog dripped down over everything. The crew of the ship consisted of Messrs. Walter Wellman, commanding; Melvin Vaniman, chief engineer; Louis Loud and Fred Aubert, assistant engineers; Murray Simon, navigator; and the writer. With the help of a few hundred police and firemen we proceeded to launch the largest non-rigid airship ever constructed. At 8 AM all was in readiness and the crew climbed aboard. The last to embark was our mascot, a pretty foundling kitten that had been a pet around the hangar. The crew had jokingly told visitors that the kitten was going along with us and just as the word to "let go" was passed, somebody in the crowd threw the kitten into the lifeboat where I had taken my station. Up we went and the cat was one of us! Kitty, at first, appeared scared and raised an awful 'holler,' but he (yes, it was a Tom!) soon settled down. In the long days and longer nights that followed, I will admit I was grateful for that kitten's affectionate company. It was always to be found cuddled up to me in the wireless corner of the boat.

"We did not start our motors immediately, but preferred to be towed out through the narrow entrance called 'The Inlet' at Atlantic City. Reaching the open water our tug cast off our line and we started our engines. We were flying at an altitude of only 200 feet, with a portion of the equilibrator trailing on the surface of the ocean. This low altitude was due to the heavy cargo we carried and the fact that the morning was cold and wet. The moisture of the fog contracted the hydrogen with a consequent loss of lifting capacity."

Not everyone was happy having the cat aboard. His name was Kiddo. He was at first caught and placed into a sack with a rope attached and was lowered down toward the tug's deck. But by then the wind was pushing the airship out to sea faster than the tug could go and it wasn't able to keep up. So rather than drop him into the water, he was pulled back up to become a member of the crew.

HARPERS MAGAZINE 1910

This is an artist's conception of the launch of the *America*. Police and firemen help pull the *America* out of the hangar.



This is a map of the flight of the *America* during its first day in the air.

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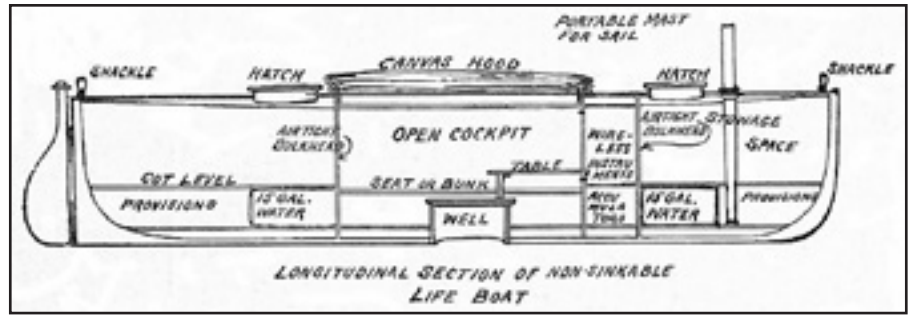
Engineer Melvin Vaniman and Kiddo, the adopted stray cat.

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN 1910



Schematic drawing of the lifeboat.

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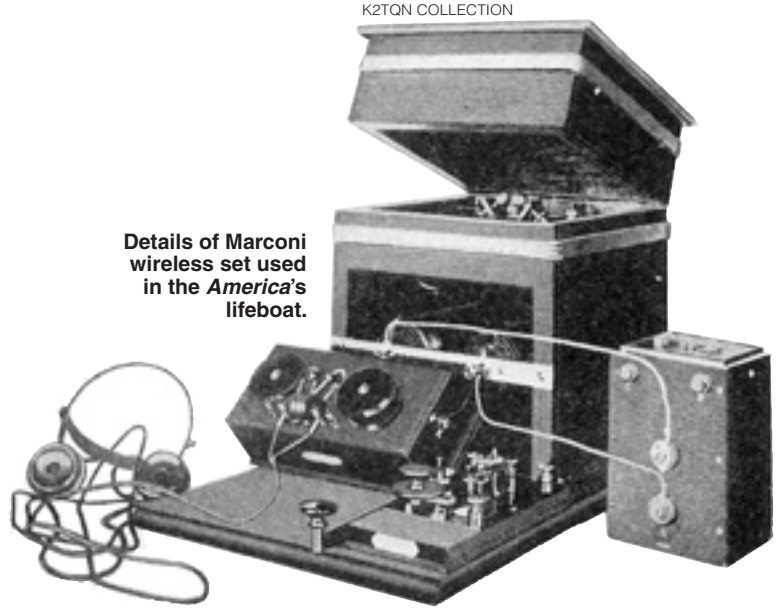
SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN 1910

An artist's conception of airship *America* under way.

K2TQN COLLECTION



Details of Marconi wireless set used in the *America*'s lifeboat.

Irwin continues: "During the first hour of the flight I was busy making various adjustments. Listening in, I could hear 'Bobby' Miller, at the old United Wireless station 'AX,' on Young's Pier at Atlantic City calling 'W,' the call letter assigned to the *America*. The signals dissipated any doubts I may have had regarding the receiver.

"For months we had discussed the possibility of sparking in the rigging and the risk of burning a hole in the fabric of the balloon, so when the moment came to 'sit' on the key of the transmitter, I think I can be pardoned for my nervousness. I am sure I experienced the moment that a suicide passes through when he is about to pull the trigger. Stationing the crew in different parts of the ship to report any sparking, I threw in the sending switch and answered Miller's repeated calls. I shall never forget my expansive satisfaction when he came back and told me my signals were clear and strong. I had opened the coupling of the transmitter for a minimum radiation; therefore, with only a few miles separating us from the nearest station, I had established radio communication for the first time between a ship of the air and the earth. I had plenty of power in reserve and knew that we had reliable communication within certain limitations. Mr. Wellman, during the time I had been engaged in these preliminary tests, had been sitting at my elbow, anxiously waiting the result. But as he afterwards wrote in his book describing the trip, he could tell by the pleased grin on my face that we had succeeded in establishing communication.

"By reference to my log, I find that communication was established with AX at 10:30 AM and that at 11:05 AM I had sent eight messages to Miller; At 12:30 PM I made an entry of receiving two messages from AX, while at 1:30 PM, there was this notation in the log, 'Received one message and sent two to Atlantic City. Everything going fine, sensation very fine, all happy.' Thus was the first airship traffic conducted, and it had soon developed into the ordinary routine. I had been very busy, these hours, without time to reflect upon my strange surroundings or give thought to the unusual experience of flying. I have spent hundreds of hours in the air since and been asked innumerable times what my first sensations were, but I can truthfully say I cannot recall them, if I had any. My only anxiety was regarding the success of the installation of wireless; once that was assured I felt nothing but elation. While I was busy at the radio key, successfully maintaining constant touch with Atlantic City, things were not going so smoothly with the engineering department of the ship.

"After several hours in the air the dense fog in which we started condensed upon the huge surface of the dirigible, adding a great weight to an already overloaded ship. Instead of steadily rising, as the heat of the sun increased and expanded the gas, we slowly descended and lost altitude. We were compelled to jettison some of the cargo. Due, also, to the lack of trial flights, the engines required tuning and we proceeded very slowly during the morning of the first day. Several times during that morning either one or the other of the engines had to be stopped, caused by sand in the bearings. Our hangar at Atlantic City was in a most exposed spot where every wind that blew brought clouds of sand. However we continued to make progress.

"At 3:30 PM on that first day, I received my last message direct from Atlantic City. At that time I find that a notation in the log states that I was no longer able to hear him, because his signals were weak. The motors made a fearful noise. The only means I had of deadening the sound of those big engines was the slight protection provided by the cotton battens, I had fashioned. From then until 8 PM, with the exception of intermittent motor trouble, the voyage was uneventful. At that time, still in a dense fog, we almost ran into a large sailing ship. So close did we pass that we could see the crew running round the decks. Later we passed very close to a large steamer, which we eventually learned was the *COAMO*. From time to time I tried to get into communication with various shore stations, without success. It is quite possible that some of them answered me, but the engines killed anything but the very strongest signals."

An Engine Gone Bad

"During the night, our best engine had to be stopped, permanently out of commission. It appears that the bearings of the propellers had broken, causing one of them to wobble alarmingly. Up to this time there had been no wind at all, but now it began to freshen up a bit which drove us eastward, but in a northerly leeway. The fog still persisted and we were compelled to jettison some fuel to prevent descending into the sea. Another danger which became apparent when night fell was the stream of sparks from the exhaust. We were afraid that they would cause an explosion and Wellman wanted to stop the remaining engine. Vaniman, however, talked him out of this, explaining that we had been running all day and that, if we stopped the engine we would undoubtedly drift over Long Island. Furthermore, the balloon by this time was so saturated with water from the condensed fog that we ran little risk of fire. So, through all that night we preceded under one engine. The engine that had gone bad on us was the one to which the dynamo was belted and that meant that we would be unable to charge our battery. With this in mind, I began to hoard the battery juice and used the wireless only when positive that there was something to use it for: As subsequent events proved, it was well I did."

The *America*'s story will be continued next month. More photos are posted at **www.k2tqn.com**. — *K2TQN* QST