

Airship 103: A Ride thru the Adventures of an Airship Pilot



One of the Airships Hunter Harris flew (circa late '80s/early '90s). Getting the blimp on the ground required a ground crew of 13. Keeping it on the ground required the presence of a crew member who stayed to monitor pressure while on the ground.

"I'm a farm boy from the eastern shore with a keen interest in things mechanical and anything aviation oriented," Hunter Harris likes say. But a short google search belies the need for humility. Several years of international awards for aerial photography, a long-standing exhibit at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, invitations to perform at airshows, our intrepid Eastern Shore pilot has been described as the Jack Ryan of flying, or better yet, "Hunter H. Harris, alliterative and adventurous, like Indiana Jones" in an AOPA Pilot magazine article.



Hunter Harris upside down over the Eastern Shore.

Hunter Harris will be back for the upcoming Fall Semester of Chesapeake Forum, an Academy for Lifelong Learning, which opens for registration on August 24th.

This will be Harris' third time chronicling his adventures piloting blimps from 1986 to 1995 for McDonald's, Sea World's Shamu, the Met Life Snoopy Blimp, and the Pink Floyd Airship, yes, THAT Pink Floyd, that flew around the countryside promoting the Division Bell World Tour and was used for media coverage during their concerts. He has soared above major golf and tennis tournaments, NASCAR and Indy-car races, parades, Super Bowl and World Series games, all while accumulating thousands of hours as one of only a handful of Airship pilots.

Which leads him down a path reminiscing on the subject of Airship pilots as he settles in to tell about the time when, "I was down in Houston when one afternoon some of the other pilots and I were sitting at a fun little NASA-style bar (meaning bare bones, nothing fancy) right across the street from NASA. That's where everyone went after work. One of the Space Shuttle pilots we were with



Hunter Harris (L), with Mike Fitzpatrick, another Chief Pilot, who was with Harris during the toe-counting encounter with the Shuttle Pilots.

asked us how many blimp pilots there are. My chief pilot counted them out on his fingers. I think there were 9 of us at the time."

With a conspiratorial chuckle Harris continues, "We asked, 'how many Shuttle pilots are there?' and they needed their toes to count them!"

The story of how Harris got into flying blimps is another adventure. Already a commercial pilot with additional ratings for seaplanes, gliders and helicopters, he was working as part of the flight test crew for an Airship being developed to move heavy equipment.

The business was winding down and he was about to be jobless, when a chance encounter led to a job flying blimps at the start of the aerial advertising days. It was a unique opportunity and he quickly signed on.

“When you are flying an Airship, you’re flying a big bag of helium thru the atmosphere that is affected by wind, sunlight, precipitation... It’s a type of flying that that requires much more situational awareness (than other types of aviation),” describes Harris.

On an airship operation, there are 3-4 pilots, and 20 to 25 crewmen (riggers, mechanics, technicians, and mooring people). There were also 13 people on the ground to help land the Airship. And while landed, there was always someone on the ground with the blimp to maintain pressure.

Describes Harris, “It’s a real orchestrated team effort. We traveled non-stop on-the-go. I averaged 200 nights a year in a hotel. The lifestyle had a lot of good points, and difficult ones. The family is your crew.

“Toward the end of my fulltime work flying blimps, I saw things

happening in the industry that I didn’t like – new pilots who accepted lower pay and had less experience and as a result, had accidents. In about the span of a year, after a couple highly-publicized accidents, the number of clients dropped to about 10% of what it used to be.



With so few Airship pilots, a crew could include pilots from all over the world. Hunter Harris (r) with a hat he wears to this day.

“With the exception of Goodyear, the big aerial advertising blimps haven’t been flown for about 10 years. But in the meantime, I got to ride that wave of the Airship industry. It was great fun.”

“The series for Chesapeake Forum is all about my piloting experiences. I want to explain and share the experience of something that is really unique,” says Harris. “This will be my third time teaching this class. I will use video that I created on the computer with stills and music, and will stop at certain points to tell a story and answer questions before carrying on.”

Class 1: We will travel from Miami to the West Coast (with a side-excursion along the length of the Mississippi valley)

Class 2: From there, we go from San Diego up the coast to British Columbia

Class 3: Our last trip will be a repeat of last Semester’s Montreal to Miami trip

The course will be presented live on Zoom. Recordings of each live session will be available for viewing at a later date.

Editor’s Note:

This course is presented thru Chesapeake Forum, an Academy for Lifelong Learning, and is scheduled this semester as a live online ZOOM course. For those who cannot attend the live course, recordings of the three ZOOM sessions will be available after each class and may be purchased for viewing during the course registration process.

Mark the date: **Monday, September 21, 1:30 to 3pm.**

Registration is available at ChesapeakeForum.org starting August 24th.