

# Sweet wine honors memory of Navy rigid airship USS Akron

By Bill Armstrong

An unintended flight over an upstate New York farm in 1933 by one of the Navy's most famous airships left a lasting legacy – and resulted in a token that I now share with my crew and with landowners.

The legacy began when the great U.S. Navy rigid airship USS Akron was chased away from its intended landing at Lakehurst Naval Air Station by a harsh winter storm on January 25, 1933.

Commander Frank C. McCord, who had just taken command earlier in the month, had been ordered to make a goodwill flight over Philadelphia, a short distance from the airship's home base at Lakehurst, NJ. The 785-foot long airship had been proving her worth in Fleet exercises, and in the 18 months since her commissioning in Akron, had made 65 flights, some quite exceptional. McCord had already taken the ship to Cuba and back.

It was an era when the whole country stood fascinated by these giant flying machines. Newspapers reported their every flight. Crowds heralded their arrival over cities. Philatelists prized mail franked onboard. Airships were a source of national pride, much as space exploration is today.

Great zeppelins such as German Graf Zeppelin were making trans-Atlantic flights routinely. Now America had her own great rigid airship program. Akron and her sister ship, Macon (about to be commissioned) carried five Curtiss F9C-2 Sparrowhawk fighters in their hull, expanding the surveillance range of the patrols.

The Philadelphia fly-by allowed that city's citizens to celebrate the airship. Unfortunately, a strong frontal system was moving in from the west. McCord was anxious to get the airship safely back inside the shed at Lakehurst. But when he and his crew, along with a number of Navy VIPs who had come along for the occasion, arrived back on station, the wind was



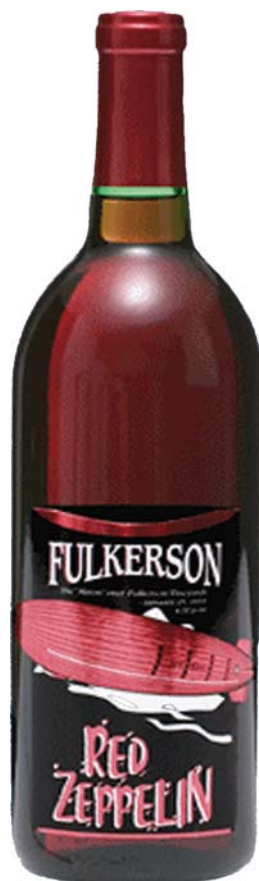
gusting up to 30 mph – far too much to allow the ground crew to gain control of the ship. McCord decided it was wiser to ride out the storm than to try landing in it.

He drove Akron north, away from the storm's path, intending to make a wide circle west of the storm. By this time, the ship had already been in the air 43 hours. Akron flew up the Hudson Valley, headed northwest and by sundown was approaching Lake Ontario in the vicinity of Rochester.

Along that flight path through upstate New York, in the Finger Lakes region, and specifically on the shore of Seneca Lake, was a small grape and blackberry farm owned by the Fulkerson family. Young Roger Fulkerson was just getting home from school about 4 p.m. when Akron's engines droned low overhead. It was dramatic sight, and made a lasting impression on the boy, his neighbors and farm hands. One of them recorded the experience in his diary.

Heavy rain forced Akron further westward. The crew navigated through dense fog over Lake Erie overnight as tons of ice formed on Akron's hull.

By 9:30 a.m., near Cleveland, McCord turned Akron back east and put her on a course toward home. The weather remained foul. Halfway across Pennsylvania, the crew made the first visual fix in more than 12 hours when the sky began to clear. They plodded along toward Lakehurst and by sunset the ship was finally back on the mast.



“The observers from Washington had more of an airship experience than they had bargained for; they had witnessed a remarkable test of the airship and of airship command, and a performance by which both passed the test admirably,” wrote Richard K. Smith in his book, “The Airships Akron & Macon.”

Akron flew to Florida and back in February. On March 4, she put in an appearance over Washington DC, for President Franklin Roosevelt’s inaugural. Later that week, Akron was enroute to Panama, where she cruised back and forth around the Canal Zone, before returning through Opa-Locka, Fla. – a potential future base – again struggling through storms to get back to Lakehurst.

This was the end of Akron’s shakedown cruises. Her sister ship USS Macon was commissioned on March 11. From now on, Akron had to prove herself to the Navy through military flights and Fleet exercises. The dream was that she would become a lighter-than-air aircraft carrier, since she carried five Curtiss F9C Sparrowhawk airplanes in her hull, which she could launch or retrieve while underway.

But it was not to be. On April 4, during a patrol flight over the Atlantic, Akron encountered a severe storm; struck

the water, and went down. Admiral William Moffett, chief of the Navy’s Bureau of Aeronautics and the Navy’s principal airship advocate, and 72 other persons, lost their lives. Only three survived.

But the berry farmers near Seneca Lake never forgot how close USS Akron had been. The great ship had done the Fulkerson family the honor of flying right over their property. Eventually, when the Fulkersons converted their business to a winery, Roger’s son Sayre Fulkerson decided to name a prized new blend in honor of the flight that had passed over their farmland.

Today, Red Zeppelin wine carries a label showing USS Akron flying over the Fulkerson Vineyards on Jan. 25, 1933 at 4:00 p.m. The carton box also shows the F9C-2 Sparrowhawk biplane, built in nearby Hammondsport, N.Y. by the Curtiss company. The semi-sweet red wine, a fruity blend of native Catawba and a French-American hybrid named Rougen, has been winning regional awards since it was introduced in 1995.

For me, it has become the offering I make to land-owners when I descend on their property. It is a wine with a story tied to the heritage of lighter-than-air flight.