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Blimp moored in Williston; Helium history is made



Crew member Dwight Fella adds 93 octane gasoline to the fuel tank that feeds the two Rotax aviation engines that power the propellers to move the airship. This is high test gasoline available from most retail outlets. It is not aviation gasoline or jet fuel, which are the types of fuel for airplanes and jets respectively. He is standing in front of the area where air goes over an engine toward the props which force the air toward the back of the blimp, moving it like an airboat's propeller moves an airboat.

Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 8, 2018 at 8:07 p.m.

(Except One Nighttime Photo By Justin Maynard)

WILLISTON – Sunday and Monday (Jan. 7 and 8) were historic days in Williston as a blimp used for advertising moored, and then launched from Williston Municipal Airport.

As best as can be determined so far, this was the first time ever that a helium blimp moored at this airport.

The 2000 American Blimp Corp. A60R Lightship used to be owned by Van Wagner Airships America LLC of Orlando, according to Federal Aviation Administration records.

Now this blimp is part of AirSign Aerial Advertising.

AirSign's Airship Division is the largest operator of blimps in the world. The only other blimp operator in America is Goodyear, and it has two blimps.

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<https://youtu.be/ILRXmtg3hv8>

In this video, Chief Pilot Terry Dillard starts telling the general public about the company being the largest airship company in the world.

Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 8, 2018



Chief Pilot Terry Dillard sits where he can guide the blimp. He is holding a paper map showing circles with five-mile radii where there are airports. Dillard said he needs to not go above 1,000 feet above the ground for two reasons. First, people cannot read the banner ads. Second, the Federal Aviation Administration mandates the blimp to be in a certain airspace. In the five miles around an airport, that can be considered a glide path for him to land at that airport. Unmanned Aerial System pilots (drone pilots) are not allowed to fly within five miles of an airport, and they are not allowed to fly higher than 500 feet off of the ground. The odds of drones and blimps running into each other, therefore is reduced as long as pilots follow the FAA mandates. Notice the potential future young pilot on the ground to the left of the pilot.

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This is a view from the pilot's seat while the blimp is moored at Williston Municipal Airport on Monday morning. A close-up of the mirror is in the photos below this one.



Here is a reflection of Jeff M. Hardison, publisher, taking a picture of himself and Chief Pilot Terry Dillard. The two engines are visible in this mirror (white cylinders on either side) as are the four life jackets (on the roof and yellow-colored). The FAA requires life jackets for all possible passengers in the event of a downed flight into a body of water.

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Chief Pilot Terry Dillard takes a break in the background after giving a fine presentation. In the foreground, AirSign Chief Executive Officer Patrick Walsh welcomes everyone and provides more information to people.



This blimp shows people at the International Builders Show in Orlando might want to visit Booth W7643 for free samples of the new Post-It Extreme Notes.

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Williston City Manager Scott Lippmann (left) and Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat are among the many visitors to the event Monday morning. City Council President Charles Goodman went to the presentation as well.

This A60 blimp, first built in the year 2000, is part of the fleet of 12 advertising blimps owned by AirSign Aerial Advertising. This is the smallest of the bunch. It is said to be “the workhorse” of the various blimps right now.

This blimp can carry 1,000 pounds of human cargo, although it only takes one pilot to operate it. There is a seat next to where the pilot operates the machine, but there are no controls there for a copilot.

The left and right foot pedals move the rudder for turning. There are wheels, like on an old sailing ship on either side of the pilot’s seat. That makes the pilot’s seat look a little bit like a wheelchair.

Those wheels point the nose up or down.

Beyond the 1,000-pound weight limit, there is the space limit in the cockpit of the A60. This blimp was not built so much for people to take rides in, as it was designed to be a flying billboard.

Patrick Walsh is the chief executive officer of AirSign Aerial Advertising. Before acquiring these advertising blimps, his company used airplanes to pull banners or to skywrite in the air.

Other top members of AirSign Aerial Advertising, beyond CEO Walsh -- especially including its airship division -- are President Trevor Thompson, Chief Operating Officer Chris Marcic, Chief Creative Officer Justin Maynard, Chief Pilot Terry Dillard, Line Pilot Cesar Mendez, Ground Crew Chief Nick Hussey, Assistant Crew Chief Cory Yglesias and Chief Mechanic Keegan Martin.

Chief Pilot Dillard provided visitors with insight about the blimp during a public viewing of the machine. The general public was introduced to the airship on Monday in Williston because of the likelihood of people seeing more of these blimps mooring at this airport in the future.

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AirSign owns 12 airships, Dillard said, although they are not all currently inflated.

Any of the blimps can be transported anywhere in the world for advertising. The blimps will not go where there is ice and snow because that weather issue presents flight issues, and Dillard said, the blimps will not go to countries where governments oppose them.

The blimps can be used for filming sporting events – such as NASCAR races, the Annual Naples Swamp Buggy Race, football games or other events, as well as for being a place to post banner ads.

AirSign's Airships Division was formed with the acquisition of the Van Wagner Airship Group.

This particular blimp lights up from inside, to make the advertising even more visible at night.



In this photograph taken and provided by AirSign Chief Creative Officer Justin Maynard of the blimp when it was over Williston on Sunday night shows how it looks in the air at night lit up.

Photo by Justin Maynard

This particular blimp has an envelope volume of 68,000 cubic feet. The envelope is the covering that holds the helium in one ballast and common air in the remainder of the space.

The blimp is 132 feet long. It is 26 feet wide and 44 feet tall.

Long ago, hydrogen was the gas used for blimps. Hydrogen is explosively combustible. Helium is an inert gas. It will not ignite and explode.

The worst hydrogen-filled blimp accident was the Hindenburg disaster, which

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occurred on May 6, 1937.

As for the A60 in Williston on Monday, the cabin, which is attached to the bottom of the blimp, is almost nine feet long, five feet wide and just over six feet tall. Some official specs show a maximum of one pilot and four other occupants, however, the combined weight of those five individuals could not exceed 1,000 pounds.

The cruising speed is listed at 32 m.p.h., but 38 m.p.h. is a possible maximum speed. That air speed is to be counted as an air speed, because if it is flying into a 12 m.p.h. headwind at 32 m.p.h., then it will have a ground speed of 20 m.p.h.

Likewise if there is a 10 mph tailwind for a 38 m.p.h. cruising speed, then the ground speed of the blimp could be as high as 48 m.p.h.

It has a 72-gallon gasoline tank. It uses between three- to nine-gallons-per-hour, depending on the revolutions per minute of the two Rotax engines.

The 13-member crew is comprised of two pilots, two crew chiefs and nine crew members.

Chief Pilot Dillard explained that he cannot launch or land without the help of the crew. The blimp lands by becoming moored to a post that is tethered to many stakes. Each stake is placed four feet into the ground. A person climbs up the mooring post and fastens the blimp to it when it lands, and a person must climb the post to unhook it for a launch.

The crew uses a mechanical auger to drill into the ground to make the holes for the powerful, thick metal stakes, he said.

That mooring post, Dillard said, can hold the blimp in winds up to 70 mph.

When the airship is attached to the mooring post, it faces the post. It can turn 360 degrees, though, moving just as a windsock to face into the wind. The airship can turn in a complete circle if the wind changes to move it like that.

Banners are attached to the blimp to advertise. If an advertiser wanted to pay for a complete wrap that would be for a long-term advertising and that ad would weigh more than 100 pounds extra – reducing the weight of possible human cargo.

Post It Extreme Notes was the product scheduled for advertising in Orlando at the International Builders Show in Orlando Jan. 9-11.

That was the banner attached when the blimp launched from Williston at about 11 a.m. on Monday.

It was estimated to be about a 4.5-hour blimp flight going against the southerly wind as Dillard flew from Williston to Orlando. It takes the crew about 45 minutes to an hour to break down the mooring pole and about 45 minutes to an hour to set it up.

Given the vehicle drive time from Williston to Orlando, Dillard said he may be flying over Orlando for a bit before he can set down there. He remains in communication with the ground crew up to a range of 30 miles, he said.

To move the people and equipment, there are two trucks and a 16-passenger van utilized, Dillard said.

There is security on the blimp at all times, he said.

This is because, he said, there may be some number of people in Williston (or anywhere it is moored) who think they are blimp pilots. The security chief would help being a would-be lay pilot become aware about the laws they violated if they tried something on Sunday night while the airship was moored at Williston Municipal Airport.

This blimp holds about \$80,000 worth of helium, Dillard said. That is why neither he

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nor other members of the team use “the D word” or the “V word.” Those words are “deflate” or “vent” or “valve.”

Helium is a relatively expensive gas, and there is no sense in adding costs to operations.

There is some loss of the gas, as its atomic structure allows it to slip through the pores of the envelope. Just as a helium-filled balloon at a party loses the gas and starts dropping, so too the blimp experiences some helium loss through osmosis.

The canisters of helium lost each week are replaced once-a-week. That is not among the daily operations, although gauges show air and helium compartments' pressures.

The price of helium depends on how far from Amarillo, Texas, the buyer is situated.

In general, Dillard said, the closer to that Texas city that a buyer is, the lower the cost of helium will be to that buyer.

This blimp is always at its proper inflation, he said. The company cannot afford to inflate and then deflate a blimp – which is different than what happens with a hot air balloon.

No one wants a limp blimp, Dillard added, because then it is just a garbage bag with helium in it.

Dillard flew hot air balloons starting in 1974, including over Disney World in Orlando.

In 1990, he switched to flying airships. He prefers blimps, he said, because a hot air balloon must go where the wind takes it. A blimp has engines and can go against the wind, if that is where the pilot wants to go.

This pilot has in excess of 18,000 hours in the air. That's when he stopped counting, and he has been flying for 42 years altogether with 28 years in blimps.

Some companies are at a Fixed Base of Operations. These FBOs are like Williston Municipal Airport. As for the AirSign Airships Division, it travels every week, although in the next couple of years there is a potential for it to build a structure to house the uninflated blimps that are stored in Tennessee now.

The Goodyear blimps are at FBOs.

Every piece of equipment goes with this blimp now, though. Dillard said if a person wants to send him a card, they can mail it to Williston and it will be forwarded to whatever city he is in at the time.

This is a worldwide operation. In the past couple of years, the group has been to Japan, Brazil, Australia and elsewhere.

Among the many Florida cities where it has gone are Williston, Ocala, Orlando, Naples and Miami.

Dillard said that after the blimp leaves an airport, no one will be able to tell it was a particular airport. In fact, the crew members have even left a landing-launching (mooring) zone cleaner than when they arrived.

This polite and considerate method of operations, he said, is because they want airport managers to welcome their return.

He does not want someone to say “Those blimp people” are litterbugs and the like.

All that he needs for the blimp to be moored is a space of ground and a fence to keep the general public away from the airship, he said.