

US-LTA Corporation - Model 138S blimp

Peter Lobner, updated 9 January 2023

1. Introduction

In the mid-1980s, the GRACE Aircraft Corporation conceived and designed a non-rigid, single engine blimp known as the GAC-20, which was intended for commercial use and was designed for type certification in accordance with newly proposed Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) airworthiness standards for airships. US-LTA (US Lighter Than Air) Corporation acquired this design and began the FAA type certification process in early 1989 for the airship, which was renamed the Model 138S. In the following eighteen months, a variety of design deficiencies relative to [FAA Report P-8110-2, Airship Design Criteria](#) were identified, re-engineered and corrected by US-LTA. The FAA issued Type Certificate AS2NM on 24 July 1990. Two Model 138S blimps were built, Airship # 001 had tail number N25BP (1986) and #002 had tail number N832US (1993). Airship #002 was lost in an accident.

In May 2009, US-LTA Corp put up for sale their FAA Type Certificate for the Model 138S blimp, with all engineering documents and many spare parts. The asking price was \$500,000. Since then, the Type Certificate has passed through a series of owners, including Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) and Leidos, Inc. Since 12 June 2018, Type Certificate AS2NM has been owned by Airship do Brasil, and serves as the basis for their ADB-3-X01 prototype blimp & ADB-3-3 production blimps.

2. Model 138S design

This non-rigid airship consists of three major components, a helium filled envelope, rigid tail surfaces, and a control car (gondola). The envelope is made of a multi-layer coated fabric with fore and aft air ballonets. An internal catenary system supports the gondola with its attached single engine. This airship is readily recognizable by its inverted “Y” configuration tail, similar to that on the Zeppelin NT. The airship is controlled with a single stick via a hydraulically-actuated control system.

The gondola was designed to accommodate 6 people in two compartments, a 2-seat pilot's compartment and a 4-seat passenger / cargo compartment that can be configured to meet mission needs. There is about 147 ft³ (4.16 m³) available for cargo. Maximum payload, including fuel, crew, passengers and mission equipment is 3,000 lb (1,361 kg). The weight available for mission equipment depends on many factors, but can be in the range from 1,200 to 1,900 lb (544 to 862 kg).

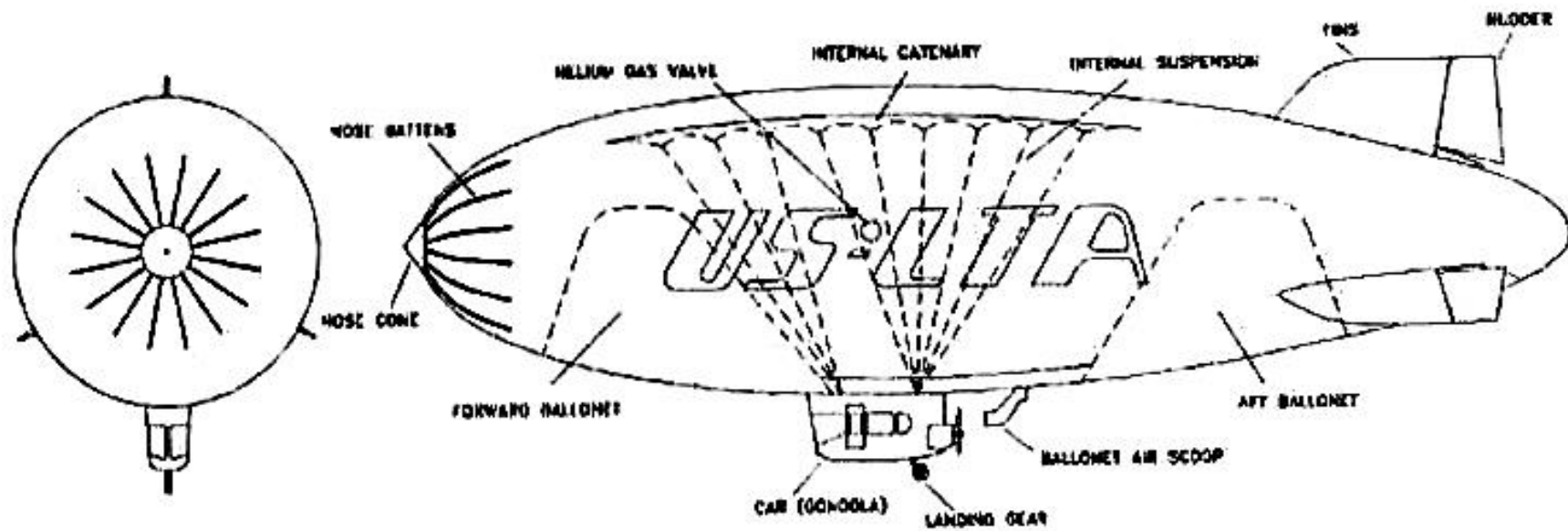
The 138S airship can fly with full control at 15 mph (24 kph) airspeed and has a top airspeed of 54 mph (87 kph). During missions with the airship trimmed for neutral buoyancy, the airship can hover over a target area or remain stationary in an air mass.

A suitable takeoff and landing site is a flat area, preferably asphalt, concrete or short grass, at least a 1,000 ft (300 m) in diameter.

In the 1990s, the Model 138S was the largest single engine type certified airship in the world.



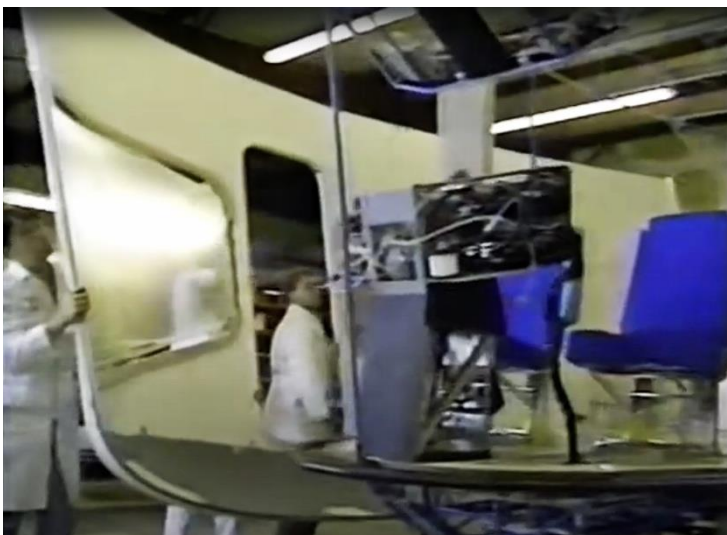
Model 138S being maneuvered by ground crew inside a hangar.



Model 138S general arrangement. Source: US-LTA, Hamley (1994)

General characteristics of the Model 138S

Parameter	Model 138S
Type	Non-rigid (blimp)
Length, overall	160.0 ft (48.8 m)
Diameter, max	41.6 ft (12.7 m)
Fineness ratio	3.8
Height, overall	56.7 ft (17.3 m)
Envelope volume	138,000 ft ³ (3,908 m ³)
Ballonet volume	Fore & aft ballonets, each 18,000 ft ³ (510 m ³)
Ballonet % envelope volume	26%
Max / min pressure	2.8 / 1.1 inch (71 / 28 mm) H ₂ O
Propulsion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One AVCO Lycoming IO-540-K2A5 engine @ 300 hp (224 kW) driving a 78 inch (2 m) Hartzell propeller. Mounted at the back of the gondola in a “pusher” configuration
Weight, max	8,900 lb (4,037 kg)
Payload, max	3,000 lb (1,361 kg)
Max static heaviness	400 lb (181 kg)
Max static lightness	200 lb (90.7 kg)
Accommodations	Pilot + 5 passengers
Speed, max	54 mph (87 kph)
Speed, gusty conditions	40 mph (64 kph)
Speed, minimum	15 mph (24 kph)
Operating altitude, max	9,000 ft (2,743 m)
Range	400 miles (640 km)
Endurance	5 to 20 hours, depending on mission profile



Model 138S gondola fiberglass skin being attached to the gondola chrome-moly steel tubular frame. Source: Screenshot from video (2020)

For an aerial advertising role, US-LTA equipped the Model 138S airship with a large “Nightsign” full color fiber optic display with 10,000 “pixels” spaced 4 inches (10 cm) apart along each side of the envelope. Each panel consisted of three sections that can display and scroll a still color image independently of the other sections. All three sections can be coordinated to display a single large image. First tested in 1992, this display is capable of cycling through a series of high resolution still images in flight. In the 1990s, “Nightsign” was the most advanced aerial display system in the world.



*Model 138S
Nightsign test
1992.*

*Source:
Screenshot,
US-LTA
video (1992)*



*#002 Model
138S in use
as an
advertising
blimp for
Pizza Hut.*

*Source: US-
LTA*



*#002 Bigfoot Model 138S just after takeoff.
Source: Screenshot, video (News Clips, posted 2008)*



#002 Bigfoot Model 138S. Source: Advanced Hybrid Aircraft

3. Crash landing on a building

In an intriguing post entitled “Airship Landings on Buildings,” Bill Welker provided the following description of the 1993 crash landing of the US-LTA Model 138S “Bigfoot” advertising blimp (#002) on an apartment building in New Your City:

“On July 4, 1993, the Pizza Hut ‘Bigfoot’ advertising blimp ran into trouble in New York City and crashed onto the roof of a Manhattan apartment building. The Bigfoot Blimp was a US LTA 138S non-rigid painted with the Bigfoot pizza logo and carried a large fiber-optic digital display on the side of the envelope. Apparently, some rigging near the tail broke loose, perhaps a cable, and slashed the side of the envelope, releasing helium. As the envelope lost volume, control of the blimp was lost and the crew attempted to throw out anything they could to lighten the load and slow the uncontrolled descent. The location of the crash was the Midwest Court Apartments, 410 W. 53rd, Manhattan.”



The Bigfoot Blimp, showing a large rip in the envelope forward of the gondola, loses altitude above Manhattan. Source: Screenshots from YouTube video posted by Matthew Cipolla (2022)





Source: Screenshots from YouTube video posted by Matthew Cipolla (2022)

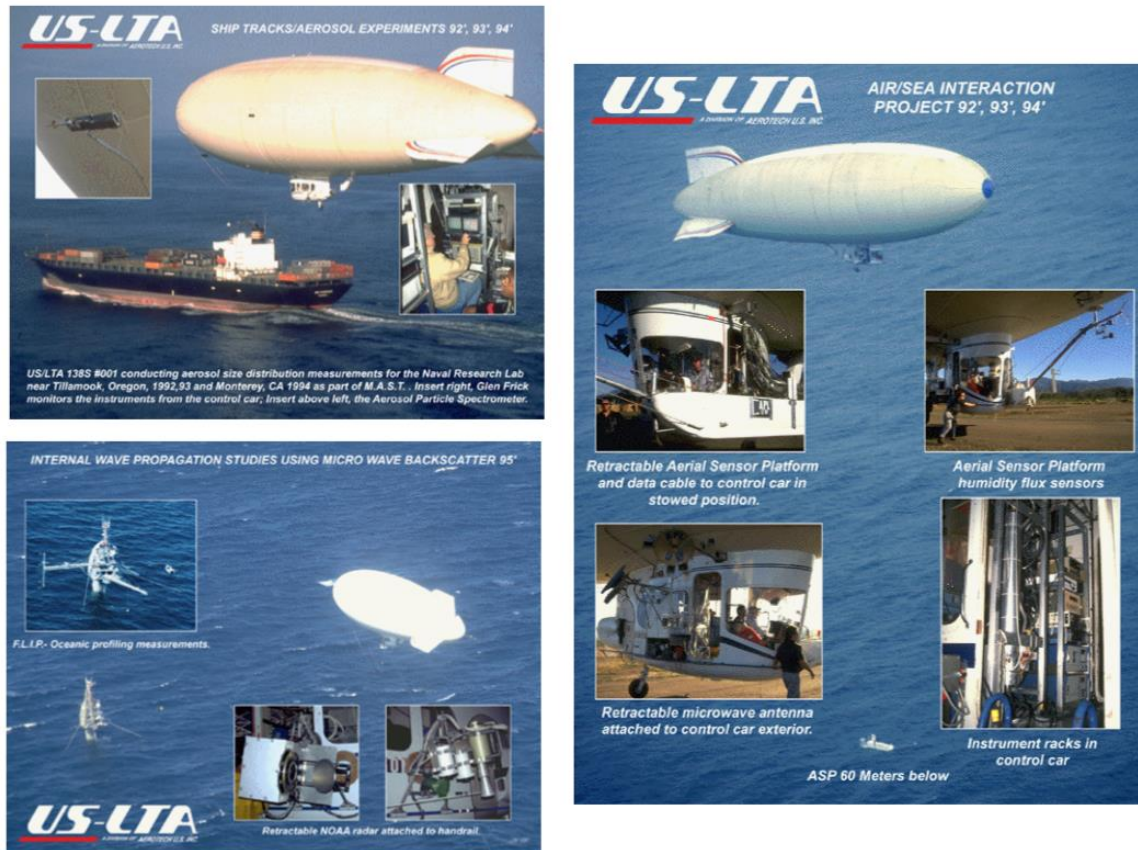


The NY Times reported that the pilot and copilot were rescued from the smashed gondola and hospitalized with minor injuries. There were no injuries to people on the ground, although there was a reports of a car being damaged by a dropped sand bag. The blimp's fuel tank, containing about 100 gallons of gasoline, did not rupture.

The Bigfoot Blimp crash landed and collapsed on a New York apartment building. Source: Associated Press by Justin Sutcliffe (1993)

4. Oceanographic research applications

The Model 138S airship was employed by scientists from the Applied Physics Laboratory at the University of Washington and from the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) in Washington, D.C. to investigate various atmospheric and oceanographic phenomena.



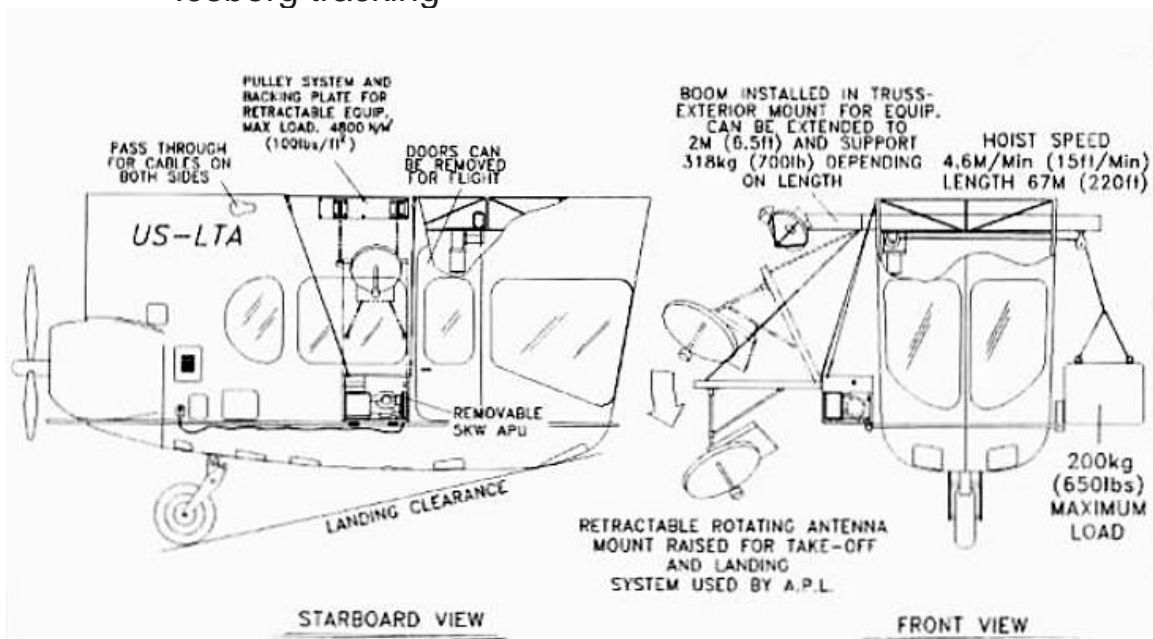
US-LTA posters summarizing some of the research projects that employed the Model 138S. Source: US-LTA via Eric Faure (2004)

Eric Faure provides a summary of this research in his paper, "The scientific use of airships: history, results and perspectives" ("L'utilisation scientifique des dirigeables - historique, bilan et perspectives"). Faure reported :

"This machine, the envelope of which is 3,900 m³, turned out to be an excellent aerial platform, very stable, being able to do almost hovering, whose great autonomy made it possible to collect a large number of measurements on vertical and horizontal transects (from an altitude of 30 m to 3,000 m). The payload of

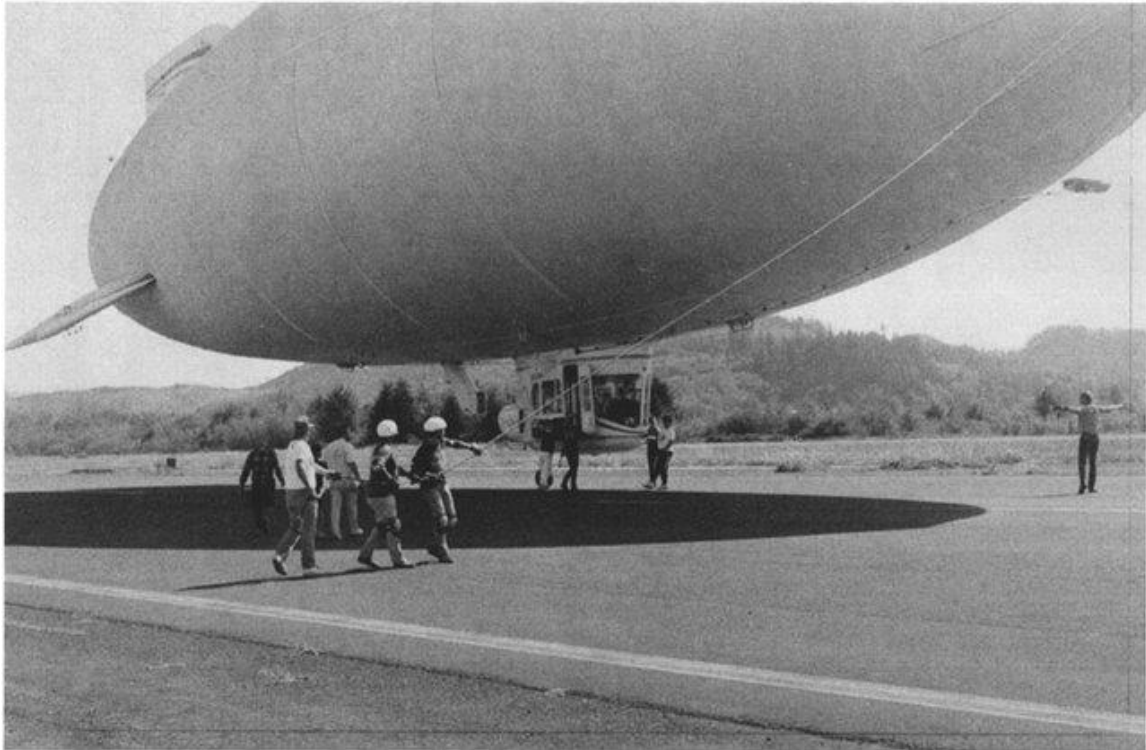
around 1,500 kg can accommodate a large amount of scientific equipment as well as two to four researchers. Here is a list of missions, provided by the American manufacturer US-LTA Corporation, that these airships can fulfill:"

- Airborne gravity measurements
- Mesoscale oceanographic phenomena
- Lagrangian trajectory measurement (applied to estimate residual currents considering several tidal constituents)
- Propagation studies in acoustics
- Calibration of ground based remote sensors and orbital sensors
- Atmospheric wind shear measurements
- Boundary layer inversion studies of turbulence, profiles and cloud/radiation properties
- Atmospheric internal boundary layer at coastal zones
- Whitecap coverage vs. wind shear stress
- Turbulent humidity exchange measurements
- Vertical gas chemistry measurements
- Iceberg tracking

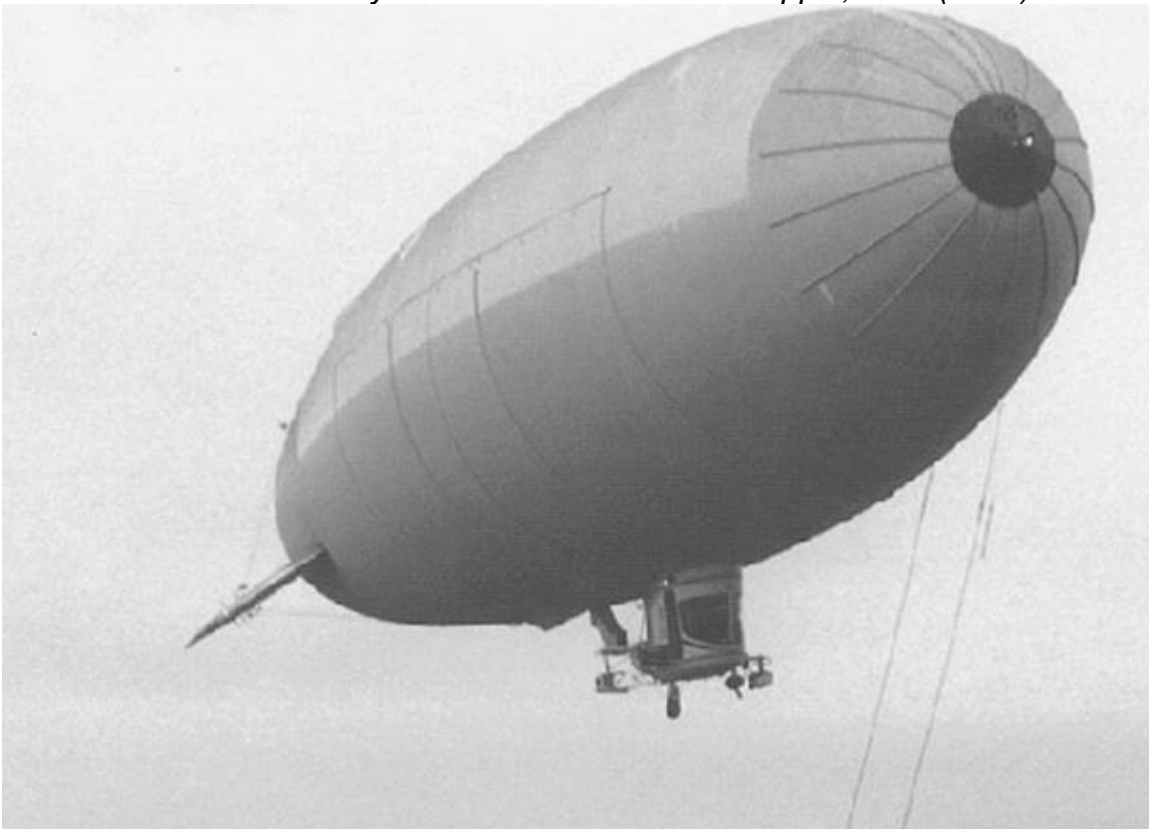


Model 138S gondola equipped with starboard-side external sensors and port side electric hoist and deployable payload platform.

Source: US-LTA, Hamley (1994)



Model 138S ready to launch. Source: W.A. Hoppel, et al. (1994)



Model 138S in flight with antennas mounted on the gondola for a research project. Source: D.E. Weissman (2002)

An external 120 VAC generator and an electric hoist system were developed for use by researchers. A boom attached on the port side of the gondola was used to rigidly attach equipment or, with the hoist, to deploy and retrieve payload packages weighing up to 650 lbs (300 kg). The deployed payload packages were suspended 200 ft (61 m) beneath the airship, where they are not influenced by the slow-moving airship.



Gondola closeup showing the configuration for an NRL project, with antennas mounted starboard side and a deployable meteorological platform stowed on the port side. Source: Eric Faure (2004)



Gondola closeup showing some of the antennas mounted for a research project. Source: D.E. Weissman (2002)



*The US-LTA Model 138S airship with the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) meteorological platform suspended 200 ft (61 m) below it to measure microwave backscatter from surface waves.
Source: W.J. Plant (1998)*



Above: Deployed meteorological platform viewed from the Model 138S airship. Source: Screenshots from US-LTA video (1992)



*NRL's suspended sensor package viewed from the Model 138S airship.
Source: Screenshot from video (2020)*

See the US-LTA video of June 1992 research flights with the deployed meteorological platform, "US-LTA Airship w Navy Sensor Platform," (4:50 minutes) at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhh2ILWBN48>



Model 138S. Source: US-LTA via AirshipWorld Blog (13 May 2009)

5. For more information

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- Roland Escher, "US-LTA Corp.," Airship and Blimp Resources, 1995 - 2003: <http://www.myairship.com/database/uslta.html>

Type certificate

- "FAA Approves Single-Engine LTA Blimp," Flying Magazine, Vol. 117, No. 10, p. 13, October 1990: <https://books.google.com/books?id=CMTZQfPoSXoC&q=>
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4 July 1993 Crash

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- John Goldman, "Blimp Crashes in N.Y. on Midtown Building : Aviation: Crew of 2 is rescued from smashed gondola and treated for minor injuries. Some residents shaken," LA Times, 5 July 1993: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-07-05-mn-10254-story.html>

- Video: “Blimp Crashes Into Building” (on 4 July 1993), posted by Matthew Cipolla, 12 March 2022:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV-5Zmp8pdU>
- Video: “1993 Big Foot Pizza blimp crash in Manhattan,” (3:24 minutes), STATter911, 4 July 2009:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvR72iPEkls>

Scientific applications

- Micah Hamley, "US LTA 138S Airship as an Airborne Research Platform," US-LTA, Presented at the First International Airborne Remote Sensing Conference and Exhibition, Strassbourg, France, 11-15 September, 1994:
<https://studylib.net/doc/7547507/us-lta-138s-airship-as-an-airborne>
- Eric Faure, “L’utilisation scientifique des dirigeables : historique, bilan et perspectives - Exemples d’applications lors de missions naturalistes: inventaire de la biodiversité dans la canopée de forêts tropicales et études océanographiques,” (in French), Laboratoire Systématique Evolutive, 2004: [http://www.dirigibili-archimede.it/docs/Faure\[1\].pdf](http://www.dirigibili-archimede.it/docs/Faure[1].pdf)
- W.A. Hoppel, et al, “Marine boundary layer measurements of new particle formation and the effects nonprecipitating clouds have on aerosol size distribution,” Journal of Geophysical Research Atmospheres, 991(7):14443-14460, DOI: 10.1029/94JD00797, July 1994:
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https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/atot/19/1/1520-0426_2002_019_0100_cosarw_2_0_co_2.xml
- “US-LTA Airship w Navy Sensor Platform,” (4:50 min), posted by JoeOlma718, 12 November 2008:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhh2ILWBN48>

More Videos

- “US-LTA Airship & Nightsign (1992),” (2:13 min), posted by JoeOlma718, 12 November 2008:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpRiWEe1Lto>
- “US-LTA Airship - News Clips,” (3:35 min), posted by JoeOlma718, 17 November 2008:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJ37rIZCZZ8>
- “US-LTA Airship Promo Video - 2009,” (3:36 min), (3:35 min), posted by JoeOlma718, 17 November 2008:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEPdpBYXCqA>
- “Airships of the 1990s,” (7:23 min, includes US/LTA 138S, which starts at 2:38 min & ends at 3:20 min), posted by zrsthemovie.com, 27 April 2020:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hqAKZGYZRc>

Other Modern Airships articles

- *Modern Airships - Part 1:* <https://lynceans.org/all-posts/modern-airships-part-1/>
- *Modern Airships - Part 2:* <https://lynceans.org/all-posts/modern-airships-part-2/>
 - Airship do Brasil – ADB 3-X01 prototype & ADB 3-3
- *Modern Airships - Part 3:* <https://lynceans.org/all-posts/modern-airships-part-3/>