



MARK BOSTER / Los Angeles Times

The Goodyear blimp goes in for repairs at one of the giant hangars at the Tustin Marine Corps Air Station in 1990.

Hangaring in There

■ **Transportation:** A group is trying to see that the Tustin air base takes off as a commercial airship center. But at least one official sees the dream as 'pie in the sky.'

By GEORGE FRANK
TIMES STAFF WRITER

TUSTIN—From its headquarters in a doctor's office near the towering hangars at Tustin Marine Corps Air Station, a group calling itself Airships International Inc. is urging civic and military leaders to keep the former blimp base for what it sees as the inevitable return of dirigibles.

The plea comes at a time when Washington politicians and the Pentagon have already agreed to sell the Tustin air station and move the 3,500 Marines and their helicopters to other bases.

"Why should the people of Tustin put up with more congestion and more contamination?" asked Earl R. Kiernan, a Tustin physician and president of Airships International Inc., referring to the possibility that the land would be

turned over for commercial development.

"I can't see them destroying that lovely airfield out there. I would rather see them make a park out of it or use it for agriculture and preserve it for the future when the Navy or commercial interests need it for their airships."

"Just think of the potential that this holds for Tustin," Kiernan said enthusiastically. "It could be the center of the airship world. That could be very, very, important."

In the middle of the Marine air station that was originally built in 1942 as a blimp base sit the two giant wooden hangars, each 178 feet high and 1,000 feet long. The fate of the hangars is unclear, but their demise seems remote, since they are on the National Register of Historic Places, which protects them from being demolished.

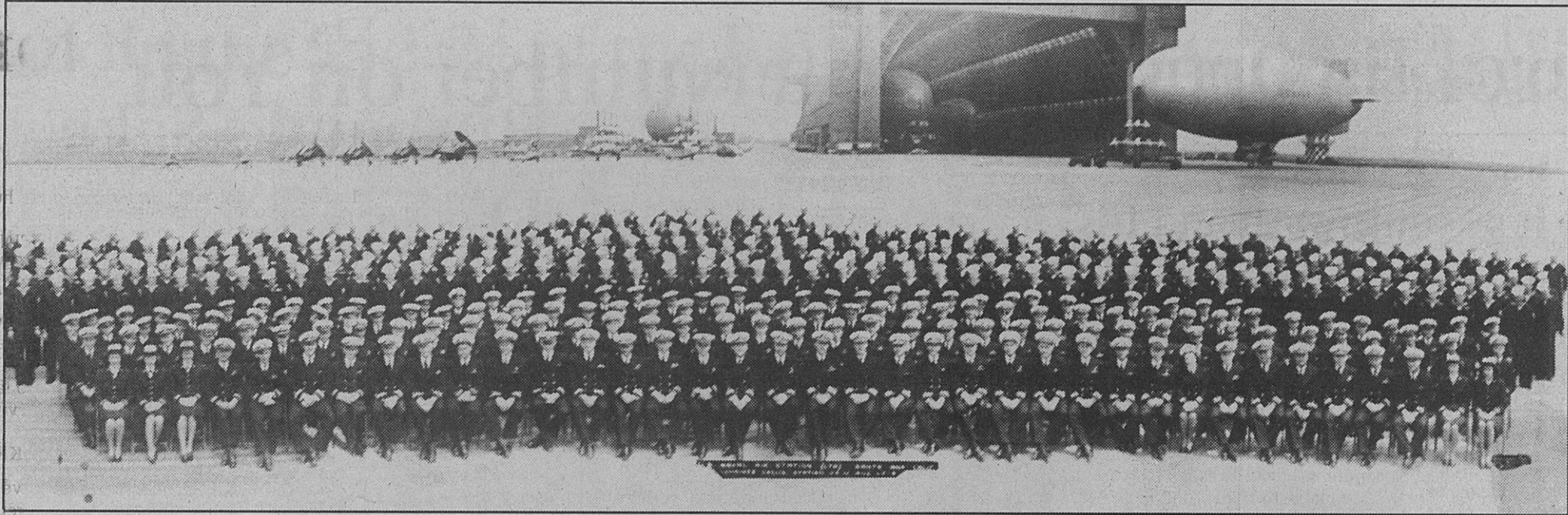
"Since there are only a few



GARY AMBROSE / Los Angeles Times

Airships International President Earl R. Kiernan: "I can't see them destroying that lovely airfield."

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Blimps sit in and near hangars behind sailors and officers on the Tustin base back in the 1940s. These days, the hangars are on the National Register of Historic Places.

AIRSHIP

Continued from E1

[blimp hangars] left, they ought to keep them, especially at a time when things may be turning around in the airship business," said Lee Payne, author of "Lighter Than Air, an Illustrated History of the Airship" and a member of the board of directors of Airships International.

In the early 1970s, the world was down to a very few, said Payne, a photojournalist and aviation historian.

"Now," he said referring to new commercial blimps built in Europe, Japan and the United States, "we are back up to at least a dozen."

Officials should wait before making any decisions on selling the Tustin air station, he said, adding, "Why rush out and build more houses and more industrial parks when there are so many empty?"

Marines Corps officials say they have to sell the base be-

cause they need the estimated \$500 million to pay for new facilities at Twentynine Palms and Camp Pendleton.

Tustin officials also expressed doubts about a commercial airship center.

"It's a little bit of pie in the sky," said Tustin Councilwoman Leslie Anne Pontious. "The only reason to close the base is to sell the property so the Marines can get enough money to move. Otherwise, we might as well keep it open."

Airships International operates out of Kiernan's office in a complex off Newport Avenue in Tustin. The company is carrying forth the vision of Vladimir H. Pavlecka, a scientist who was a director of the company before his death in 1980 at age 79. Among other things, Pavlecka developed America's first jet engine, folding wings for naval aircraft, and flush riveting used to hold down the metal skin on virtually every aircraft.

But, according to Kiernan, Pavlecka's first love was a modern-day, metal-clad airship that

he spent years designing. It is this design for an airship of the future that is now held by Airships International. Unlike the airships of the past, it is metal clad and has jet engines with Flash Gordon-type thrusters in the front, back and bottom.

"The basic and primary purpose of Airships International is to preserve Vladimir's ideas and carry them on," said Kiernan, who described the Airships International as an in-house financed project that has not made any money since it was formed 15 years ago.

Kiernan figures it would cost about \$500 million to build a prototype of Pavlecka's airship. It would be called the MC-7 and would be between 300 and 400 feet long. Unlike the Goodyear blimp, it would be a rigid design with compartments that hold the lighter-than-air gasses.

Airships International faces the task of convincing investors that the time of the airship is about to arrive. But Kiernan believes the airship's time has come, and he is looking at two

possible investment groups, he said.

Beside carrying passengers, airships could be deployed by lumber, oil and mineral interests to lift machinery, ore, trees and oil from remote areas where there are no roads.

Travel would be quite different than on the airlines, Kiernan

'Just think of the potential that this holds for Tustin. It could be the center of the airship world. That could be very, very, important.'

EARL R. KIERNAN
President of Airships
International Inc.

said. "A traveler could leave the West Coast one morning and be on the East Coast the next," he said. "Thousands of travelers crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the cigar-shaped crafts in the early

part of the century.

"They could dine and sleep and arrive the next without jet lag," he said. The ships would fly at between 1,000 and 3,000 feet at 110 m.p.h."

Kiernan said that the new airships would be safe and that accidents such as the explosion of the Hindenburg at Lakehurst, N.J., in 1937 and the crash of the Macon in the Pacific Ocean off Monterey in 1935 would no longer happen.

He said he also believes there are airships in the Navy's future. He said they can provide the forward observations for the Navy fleet and give early warning for low flying missiles.

Airships, which fly much lower than airplanes, cause less long-term pollution than aircraft flying above 30,000 feet, where tons of exhaust from jet engines remain in the atmosphere for long periods.

"Those two facts, contamination and cost, are going to drive the interest in airships up," concluded Kiernan. "Once they catch on, everyone is going to take them and run with them."