

Bartlett's News Briefs

NOT JUST ANYBODY

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by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

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From the childhood street of a longtime Pacifican, comes the mysterious tale of U.S. Navy blimp L-8 and its vanished crew



The U.S. Navy works with local emergency personnel to recover the non-rigid L-class airship from its unplanned landing on Bellevue Avenue, Daly City, August of 1942. (U.S. Navy public domain photo.)

On August 16, 1942, a U.S. Navy blimp landed right in front of the Hale family home at 401 Bellevue Avenue in Daly City. Allan Hale was 5. His big sister Dianne, older by three years, would always remember the event vividly. Allan remembers it mostly from what she told him. The story is strange to be sure and certainly one to investigate. But first, who is Allan Hale?

Longtime Pacifican Allan Hale and his late wife Sharon bought their first house in Pacifica in 1955. Outside of the time Allan served in the U.S. Coast Guard and went where the Coast Guard sent him, he has called Pacifica home since he was 18. He is known in Pacifica. The Korean War veteran has served as Commander of Pacifica American Legion Post 238 at least 15 times, served as Commander of Pacifica

VFW Post 10245 approximately 10 times, and in a number of those years he served as Commander of both veterans organizations, concurrently. He has also served the Boy Scouts of America in multiple leadership roles: Cub Master, Scout Master and Executive Officer. His longtime volunteer work with the Pacifica Adult Softball League placed him in the 2011 Class of Pacifica Sports Hall of Fame honorees. Parents to five, grandparents to fourteen and great-grandparents to an ever-growing number, eight at last count, Allan and Sharon additionally raised 11 foster children. Allan worked full time with his business, Accurate Appliance, he is a decades-long member of the Pacifica Lions Club and he is an Elder of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church.

That's the short of Allan's adult life résumé to date. But when he was a kid, there were a couple of big local events in his life even if he was too little to understand how they changed things. One: he was born two months and a day after the Golden Gate Bridge opened. (The suspension-bridge opened on May 27, 1937. Allan was born on July 28, 1937.) Two: in the summer of 1942, U.S. Navy Blimp L-8 headed out early one Sunday morning to search the Gulf of the Farallones for possible Japanese submarine sightings – a routine assignment. At the end of its flight the airship was late and off course, eventually landing quite unplanned in a residential district right in front of Allan's house. To everyone's surprise, Blimp L-8 was in perfect condition. Yet, something was deadly wrong. It was minus its two-man crew.

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On the morning of August 16, 1942, two experienced officers, pilot Lieutenant Ernest DeWitt Cody, 27, and co-pilot Ensign Charles Ellis Adams, 34, lifted off from Treasure Island at 6:03 a.m. in Blimp L-8 of the Navy Airship Squadron. Their mission was to patrol near the Farallon Islands and Point Reyes in search of Japanese submarines. Originally a third man, machinist mate James Riley Hill, was also on the crew roster. He climbed on board but his weight, added to the weight of the early morning fog, presented a possible equilibrium issue. Weight and balance are critically important to blimp safety operation. LT Cody ordered Hill off just before the airship left Treasure Island. Once the mission was completed, the L-8 was scheduled to land at the main base at Moffett Field.

At that time, the U.S. worried that Japan would use submarines to attack the contiguous West Coast states of California, Oregon and Washington. They had reason to worry. California saw the first submarine attack. On February 23, 1942, two months after Japan's surprise strike on Pearl Harbor, an Imperial Japanese Navy submarine 1-17 fired multiple rounds at the Ellwood oil installations near Goleta, California. Most of the oil workers had gone home for the night but those still on duty heard the shots and phoned the County Sheriff's office. (There was at that time, no immediate military presence.) The shots began at 7:15 p.m. and concluded 20 minutes later when the 1-17 submarine submerged and left the area. Thankfully, no lives were lost and physical damage was considered relatively minimal: one shell struck the Ellwood Pier, leaving it slightly damaged; a catwalk was damaged, a derrick and a pump house were obliterated; and several car-size craters were created on coastal ranchlands. The main result of the Ellwood event was to increase U.S. military security and defenses on the West Coast exponentially.

The pilots of the Navy blimp flew low over the water that August morning, in search of any surface or underwater abnormality. Several fishermen, early along the pilots' patrol, waved at the two men and the two men waved back. At 7:42 a.m., LT Cody reported they had sighted a suspicious dark smudge in the water, approximately 25 miles west of San Francisco – a possible indication of a submarine presence. "Am investigating oil slick," he said. The pilots circled to investigate. LT Cody ended his message with "stand by." Those were the last words ever heard from the L-8.

Nearby patrol boats and other early-morning fishermen had watched the blimp when it arrived and they all put a little more distance between the airship and their vessels when it circled above the slick. They didn't want to be too close just in case the Navy blimp dropped one of its depth charges. The airship's two Mark 17 depth charges, designed specifically for aerial anti-submarine warfare, weighed 325 pounds

each. As the crowd on the water watched intently, suddenly the airship flew upwards into the clouds. There were no dropped depth charges. There was no more circling. The L-8 vanished from view.

When the L-8 failed to check back in, Moffett Field sprang into action. Two Vought OS2U Kingfisher reconnaissance aircraft were sent on a search and rescue. Local air traffic was informed.

The blimp was sighted at 10:20 a.m. by a Pan Am Boeing 314 Clipper. It was reported that the L-8 was drifting heavily and appeared to be out of control. The blimp then headed back into the clouds and out of view. Shortly after 11:15 a.m., the L-8 came out of the clouds and touched down on Ocean Beach near Fort Funston. Two shore anglers tried to grab the airship's tethers and hold on to her. From their vantage point, they could see the gondola door was open. They could also see there was no crew inside. Everything else looked in order. Suddenly caught by a strong wind, the L-8 skidded across the beach. It was impossible to hold on to her. When she landed against a steep overhang, one of her depth charges dropped. It was too close to land to detonate, however the loss of its weight sent the L-8 back into the sky. Fifteen minutes later, the drifting airship grazed over rooftops and power lines, until she made a soft landing in front of the Hale home on Bellevue Avenue. It was nearly noon.

Reports had been traveling to the Squadron Commander: the first sighting by the two waving fishermen; the sighting by the Boeing 314. It had also been sighted by an Army artillery patrol station when it landed on Ocean Beach. The station reported that the two crewmen had tried to reel the airship in before the L-8 was caught by a gust of wind. The Commander relaxed when he heard that call. The men were okay and when they returned they would fill in all the holes of this wild event. Moments later the police chief of Daly City called. The airship had landed. Police and fire personnel cut open the gondola/control car but to their shock, there was no one inside.

Navy Intelligence arrived. The Squadron Commander arrived. They found the gondola door was fastened back, suggesting the pilot or co-pilot had opened it for some reason. More than five hours had passed since the L-8 had made contact, and by that point it was understood that the patrol station had mistaken the two shore anglers for the L-8's crew. A search on the water and on land commenced the moment the control car was discovered empty. It continued relentlessly for three days.

Everything inside the L-8 control car was immaculate and intact, including sensitive documents which in an emergency situation were to be destroyed. The engines were switched off, the radio system worked, the electric ignition was still active and both throttles were pushed wide open to full speed ahead. LT Cody's cap rested on the instrument panel. The only items that were missing were two yellow life jackets. Life jackets were required wearing of all airship crew members on all overwater flights.

The story made headlines and U.S. Navy Blimp L-8 became popularly known as "The Ghost Blimp." Theories as to what happened to the crew ran wild and included alien abduction. Another theory suggested the crew was murdered by a stowaway, before he or she bailed. A third explanation was the men fell and then were immediately picked up by an unseen Japanese submarine and hauled away as prisoners, or executed.

But one thing was concluded, something had come to the attention of the crew which caused the co-pilot to open the gondola door to have a better visual inspection. The official Navy conclusion was that Ensign Adams had opened and secured the gondola door and at some point, slipped. While he was grabbing the side of the blimp he called to LT Cody for help. The pilot tried to pull his co-pilot back in and both fell in the water. At the height of 300 feet above the ocean, your body would fall 80 to 90 miles an hour, hitting the water so fast, that the water molecules would not have enough time to move aside. Essentially, in that split second, it would be like hitting a solid surface. The Navy went on to note that their bodies would have quite literally broken and sunk. But that explanation has flaws. It is hard to explain why all those individuals in patrol boats and fishing vessels, who had seen the L-8 circle the oil slick, did not see the

two pilots fall out of the airship. It is also hard to explain why no remnants of the crew were ever discovered.

The United States Navy Memorial logs the date of death for Lieutenant Ernest DeWitt Cody and Ensign Charles Ellis Adams as August 16, 1942. Cause: LOST AT SEA.

Both men were survived by their wives. A cenotaph memorial marker was placed in Arlington National Cemetery for Lieutenant Ernest DeWitt Cody. A cenotaph memorial marker was placed in Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles for Ensign Charles Ellis Adams.

To this day, the fate of the missing crew remains a mystery.

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By Jean Bartlett (© September 14, 2026)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by a grant through the Pacifica Historical Society – funded by the [Sam Mazza Foundation](#).