



**LEFT** The first production Skyship 500 (SK 500-02), G-BIHN, made its maiden flight at Cardington on September 28, 1981, and became the first airship to be granted a public transport licence, operating “Skycruise” passenger sightseeing flights over London, as seen here, in the early 1980s. It also starred in the 1985 James Bond film *A View To A Kill*.

the old airship shed complex at Cardington in Bedfordshire in February 1979. In June 1980 AD was acquired by Thermo-Skyships Ltd to become Airship Industries Ltd (AI), whose Skyship 600 was at the heart of Project *Convertible* — a UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) programme to assess the airship as a surveillance platform, primarily for use in Northern Ireland to counter the IRA.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE MODERN MILITARY AIRSHIP

If the UK had largely abandoned the military airship by the 1930s, the USA persevered with the idea until the early 1960s. In particular, the US Navy continued to deploy airships after 1945 for maritime surveillance and reconnaissance, based at locations on the East and West Coasts (including Lakehurst in New Jersey, site of the *Hindenburg* disaster in 1937). Most were of the 500,000ft<sup>3</sup> (14,155m<sup>3</sup>)-capacity ZP class of airships. These were further developed as long-endurance airborne early warning (AEW) platforms as part of the fledgling Distant Early Warning (DEW) line, and to accompany naval task forces. However, the airship was seen as incompatible with the modern carrier-based navy and, as fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft and ground sites replaced the DEW line airships, the LTA force was stood down in 1961. Interest in the further use of airships has continued in the USA and elsewhere with a focus on the potential of large cargo-carrying hybrid vehicles, with several programmes currently under development today.

In the 1970s changes in international law increased the traditional three-mile (5km) territorial-water limit of a nation’s boundary to 200 miles (320km) under the all-embracing title of Economically Exclusive Zones (EEZs), to protect and police fishing, mineral exploitation, offshore rigs and to safeguard future water and seabed rights. These new EEZs were given final binding recognition by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982. Coming in the aftermath of the Icelandic Cod Wars, which gave emphasis to UK Fishery Protection interests, and following the discovery of North Sea oil in 1970, these changes were seen as producing potentially vast new areas to be patrolled. The airship seemed to be one answer to this new problem.

The airships then on offer, however, were

# OPERATION CONVERTIBLE

## MILITARY AIRSHIP TRIALS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1991–97

Continuing his series on the political and industrial aspects of Britain’s post-war aerospace industry, **PROFESSOR KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS** takes an in-depth look at the UK government’s 1990s explorations of the potential use of the airship as a long-endurance surveillance platform in Northern Ireland — a project in which he was personally involved

**T**HE BROAD HISTORICAL view of British airships is often linked with the R101 disaster in October 1930, after which interest in lighter-than-air (LTA) vehicles diminished in the UK. After the Second World War airship development in the UK was largely limited to a few individuals and companies using airships for advertising or sightseeing. In the 1970s, however, British designer Roger Munk, considered to be the father of the modern airship, began to develop and build a series of non-rigid airships for a company called Aerospace Developments (AD, later Airship Developments Ltd). The first AD 500 airship, G-BECE, had a capacity of 5,100m<sup>3</sup> (181,000ft<sup>3</sup>), compared to the much larger 156,000m<sup>3</sup> — 5.5mft<sup>3</sup> — capacity of the original R series of the late 1920s) and first flew from

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