

THE ECKENER ALTERNATIVE

by James L. Cambias

The Hindenburg swung gently on the mast at Lakehurst as the sky over New Jersey turned to purple twilight. All the passengers, the reporters, the newsreel men were gone. A couple of sailors stood guard beneath the big ship to enforce the no-smoking rule.

John Cavalli waited until the watchman below had turned away, then slid down the stern rope to the ground. He hunkered down next to the big rolling anchor weight for a couple of minutes, then hurried off into the darkness beyond the floodlights.

Once he was clear, Cavalli stopped to peel off the Russian army arctic commando suit he'd been wearing ever since the Zeppelin had lifted off from Frankfurt-am-Main. It had kept him warm as he hid among the gas cells with his IR goggles and fire extinguisher, but now in the warmth of a spring evening it was stifling.

He hit the RETURN button on his wristband and disappeared.

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"You can't make big changes," said the instructor the first day of Temporal Studies class. He was a very laid-back physicist recruited from California in 2020s. "That's the most important rule. The folks we work for are the result of a particular set of historical events. Change history too much and their probability level drops below 50 percent. If that happens, all this" -- his gesture encompassed the Time Center -- goes away and we're out of a job. If we even exist anymore."

A student in the row ahead of Cavalli raised his hand. "What about making little changes?"

"Little changes are fine. We make little changes all the time. Most of them are things like making long-term investments, buying up art treasures for safekeeping, keeping species from going extinct, that kind of thing. You're going to learn all about gauging the effect of changes, avoiding heterodynes and chaotic points, and when it's okay to step on butterflies."

Cavalli was listening, but in the margin of his notebook he was doodling airships.

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The timegate stage was dark and the control room was empty, just as he'd left it. The Coke can was still on the console. Was it maybe a little further to the left than he remembered? He stepped off the stage and took a drink. Still tasted the same. It would take a pretty big timeshift to change the flavor of Coca-Cola.

Cavalli locked the door behind him with his purloined master key (the Time Center used mechanical locks because they were a bit more resistant to minor time-shifts) and headed for the library. He found a book about Zeppelins he didn't remember and skimmed the pages. Hindenburg served safely until 1939; scrapped when WWII broke out. No postwar Zeppelins. The usual "return of the airship" speculations.

Damn. It hadn't worked. He had hoped erasing the vivid image of the Hindenburg fire would have been enough to keep passenger airships alive, but the war still marked the end of their era.

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"So why don't we stop things like the Holocaust or the firebombing of Dresden?" It was a relatively quiet dorm room party with half a dozen trainees blowing off steam after the first written exam. Cavalli didn't see who asked the question, but he sounded drunk.

Anna Kyle, the third-year trainee, answered. "Too big. The models predict major shifts in the 21st Century if there's no Holocaust. You lose the Cold War and the whole Jihad era. We just stay away from World War II if we can help it. Rescue a few things from museums before they get flattened, take some videos for historians, that's all."

"Why not stop the whole war?"

"Kill Hitler in 1918? Everybody from the 20th and 21st wants to do that, or maybe kidnap him as an infant and leave him with a nice family of Buddhists in Tibet. The answer is, forget it. Removing the biggest conflict in human history makes the bosses go poof, not to mention just about everyone else born after 1950 or so. Frankly, we don't know what history would look like if you change something that big."

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Cavalli was waiting outside the Houses of Parliament when Lord Thomson came out, trailing a crowd of aides and hangers-on. The monocle in Cavalli's eye displayed a targeting circle and he swung the umbrella up until the bright circle was centered on the side of the Air Minister's neck. He squeezed the handle and the umbrella fired off a smart dart loaded with pneumonia bacilli. Thomson was pretty healthy; he'd get over it in a few months. Plenty of time for the Cardington team to get the R.101 really airworthy.

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There was a candy bar next to his Coke when he returned. He didn't remember getting one from the snack bar. It was a Heath bar, his favorite brand. He ate it on the way to the library.

The British Imperial Airship Service had a rocky start, but by 1935 there were direct routes to Canada, India, South Africa, and Australia. Plans to extend the service to New Zealand were put on hold in 1936 and abandoned when war broke out. The airships served as fleet scouts for the Royal Navy during the first years of the war. The Japanese shot down R.100 and R.103, and R.101 was scrapped in 1940. R.102 was used to evacuate some key people from Singapore as the Japanese approached, made an epic

flight home to England via Africa and the Azores, and spent the rest of the war in a hangar at Cardington before being donated to the Royal Air Museum. In his room he watched a movie on videodisk about the last flight of R.102, with Michael York as the heroic captain.

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At lunch one day Anna asked the Big Question. "So if you could change one thing, what would it be?"

The other trainees gave the usual answers -- save Jesus, kill Hitler, stop Cortez, save Lincoln, give machineguns to Lee. Cavalli shrugged. "Find some way to save the airships, I guess."

A couple of people who knew him just rolled their eyes, but Anna looked curious. "How come?"

"I just think they're cool."

#

He clung to the fabric covering of the Akron as she cruised out over the New Jersey coast. It was a lot harder to stow away aboard a Navy airship than a passenger craft. His first two attempts had ended in quick aborts when he ran into sailors inspecting the gas cells, so finally he moved the focus to a point just above the ship and hoped nobody was watching.

Keeping a careful hold he pulled out the radio handset and began tapping out the Morse code message he had written on the sleeve of his commando suit. It had all the proper authentications and ordered the Akron to return to base at once. By the time they straightened out the "hoax" the line squall would be long past.

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The Coke was in a bottle when he stepped off the stage. He finished it as he leaved through a big glossy coffee-table book about Navy airships in World War II. There was an exciting picture of Akron going down amid a swarm of Zeroes at the Battle of the Coral Sea, and some photos of Macon on U-boat patrol over the Atlantic. The last page of the book was a fund-raising appeal from the U.S.S. Macon Association, hoping to finish the restoration project and get her airborne again in time for the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. The book noted in passing that the luxury passenger airship never recovered after 1945.

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Cavalli started going to bed as soon as classes ended, sleeping through dinner and waking after midnight to use the projector. He made up the lost meals at breakfast.

In 1917 he disabled the radio of the Zeppelin L-59 long enough for the ship to miss the recall message and reach its destination in German East Africa. As a result during 1930s the Graf Zeppelin made a couple of voyages to Cape Town, but inevitably the war ended all that. Cavalli did get a nice Art Deco poster showing a Zeppelin over the pyramids to put on his dorm room wall.

He tried going back to San Francisco in 1864 and giving Frederick Marriott a couple of uncut diamonds and a printout of suggestions to improve his Avitor airship. The result was that in the 1930s America purchased four big Navy airships instead of only two. The three that survived Pearl Harbor were scrapped.

He gave the German Navy's airship commandant Peter Strasser a bad case of pneumonia in 1915, so that Zeppelins were used as reconnaissance platforms and fleet

scouts rather than strategic bombers. More ships and skilled airshipmen survived the war and the Graf Zeppelin was filled with American helium. All nine passenger airships were scrapped in 1939.

He stood among the sand dunes on the North Carolina coast with the dart gun umbrella in his hand, but went home again.

He did manage to ride from Rio to Friedrichshafen aboard the Graf Zeppelin, and even exchanged a few pleasantries with Hugo Eckener. Dr. Eckener was convinced the airship could maintain its position despite the growing competition from airplanes. He gestured around the comfortable lounge. "Who would not trade a cramped seat in a noisy box for this?" Cavalli agreed.

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Anna tapped on the door of his dorm room. "I know what you've been doing after hours. The projector keeps a record of every time it's used."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Good reaction. But I checked the times and places. Friedrichshafen, Lakehurst, San Diego. The London trip had me puzzled until I found out the Air Minister came down with pneumonia the next day."

"He insisted on going to India early and the R.101 crashed."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't tell Temporal Integrity about you."

"I've been careful. I haven't made any major changes. None of these are butterfly points."

"Glad to hear that they're certified safe by a first-year trainee."

"Look, I'm not hurting anyone. It's just a little side project. A hobby."

"John, it's not going to work. Airships had their day from 1900 to World War II. The war changed everything too much -- they couldn't survive as military craft and they couldn't make money as passenger liners. Airplanes just got too good."

"I thought of maybe stopping the Wright Brothers."

"What?!"

"-- but I changed my mind. Too big a butterfly." He looked at her. "I still don't understand something. Why don't we do more? Why don't we change things? We've got the power."

"Major changes would erase us."

"So what? It would be a better world for everyone else. Maybe time travel would get invented sooner."

"You can't know it would be better. Stop World War II and you could cause something worse. Maybe a nuclear war."

"Better the devil we know, eh?" He looked at her. "I take it you want my master key, too?"

"If you don't give it up I have to call in Temporal Integrity."

He sighed and dug in a pocket. "Here. I got it from Dr. Stirling's office when he made me help move his plants."

She took the key and turned to go.

"Now be sure you don't try any history editing yourself," he said.

#

He wasn't sure how long he had. She might try to use the key herself, or Dr. Stirling might, and then they'd realize it was just the key to his dorm room. No time for

much preparation. He checked a date in the library, let himself into the supply room, and hid in an unused classroom until dinnertime.

The stage was just warming up when somebody started pounding on the door. Cavalli leaped onto the platform just as the frosted glass smashed and a Temporal Integrity agent reached inside to undo the deadbolt. The last thing he saw of Time Center was Anna's face. She was shouting something, but it was drowned out by the hum of the field projector.

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He hoped he'd been clever, setting the controls for Berlin in early 1932. Maybe the TI agents would assume he was going for Hitler, and concentrate on guarding his apartment and Nazi Party headquarters. But Cavalli spent as little time in Berlin as possible; an hour after arriving he was having dinner aboard the express to Munich. At midnight he got a room in a cheap but tidy hotel in Friedrichshafen.

#

"Doctor Eckener?"

This particular morning Hugo Eckener looked tired and a little irritable. Running an airship line in the depths of the Depression would do that. "Yes, good morning. My secretary says you have come from America with a business proposal?"

"Actually, no. I just told her that to get in here."

Eckener scowled. "I do not have time for sight-seers."

"Oh, no. It's about politics. The Central Party and the Social Democrats have invited you to run for President."

"Ah, a reporter. And a very good one, too. That was all discussed in strictest confidence. I am afraid I can say nothing."

"You must accept the offer."

"I cannot. Hindenburg is a hero. He is the only thing keeping Germany from falling into anarchy right now."

"But he's going to give the Chancellorship to Hitler!"

"That little fraud? Impossible. The President is not a fool."

"The Nazis are the biggest party, and they're in favor of rearming Germany. Field-Marshal Hindenburg approves of that."

"This is all speculation. Besides, my Zeppelins keep me too busy to enter politics."

Cavalli hesitated for a split second, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his computer. "Watch this," he said, and called up the encyclopedia entry on Hitler. Eckener raised his eyebrows when he saw the little glowing screen in the young stranger's hand, but then he began to actually watch the newsreel shots and read the text.

"Another war?"

"Worse than the first. By the end of it, Germany was in ruins, thirty million people were dead -- and Zeppelins were gone forever."

"How -- " Eckener stopped and composed himself. "Never mind. You have travelled in time, like the man in Mr. Wells's story, or possibly you are an angel, like the one sent to Lot. But I am afraid it is still impossible. Even if I ran, the Nazis would oppose me. They know I loathe them."

Cavalli took out the package he'd stolen from Mission Supply, and poured a heap of diamonds onto the table. "These are worth about ten million pounds," he said. "You

can blanket the country with ads, rent stadiums for campaign rallies, and hire guards to keep the Brownshirts away."

Eckener picked up one diamond and scratched a vase with it, then quickly put it down again, as if it was hot to the touch. He was silent for a while. "I do not think I am qualified to be President of Germany," he said at last.

"You're an economist by training, and you've kept the Zeppelin company going through war and revolution and economic collapse. You're a national hero. And from everything I've read about you, you seem like a decent man. Germany needs a decent man now, Dr. Eckener. The world needs one."

Eckener looked at him out of those pouchy basset-hound eyes. "Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

Cavalli was about to give him another spiel about the need to stop Hitler, but then he stopped and shrugged. "I guess I just like Zeppelins," he said. "I figure with you as President there will be lots of Zeppelins."

#

Nine months later Cavalli was in the lounge of the Graf Zeppelin over the Atlantic. The window was open and he was holding his shift bracelet. If he hit RETURN now what would happen? Would he snap forward to Time Center or whatever occupied the site in the no-Hitler future? Would he just pop out of existence?

He watched it fall to the blue water below, then went to the bar to refresh his drink. The Zeppelin droned on into the unknown.

Cambias/ECKENER ALTERNATIVE/

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