

Concrete Under Mediterranean Sun

Augusta - the last historic Airship Hangar at the Mediterranean Sea

By Matthias Pfeifer

During World War One airships were a modern high tech weapon. Germany, Britain, France and Italy used them mostly for reconnaissance services. There are not many places in Europe which remember this part of technical and military history. Many hangars had been built and destroyed or dismantled later. Only two from this period still remain in Europe: One being in Montebourg-Ecausseville in France and the other in Augusta, Sicily. (A third one in Soubise, close to Rochefort sur Mer in France, possibly had been destroyed by storm in the year 2000.)

Being one of the few remaining hangars makes the concrete building at Augusta an extraordinary item for the heritage as well as for the technical and the military history. It is a difficult subject though. Italy can proudly look back on more than 2000 years of history and the country is full of examples of this heritage. What prominence has a building not even a 100 years old, compared with much older and much more artificial [Perhaps "artistic" - Ed?] objects. After its erection it was used only a short time for its original purpose, of housing airships. It stayed a military site until today, but with the decline of military use of airships after World War One it lost its original designation.

In the following decades it was used for storage and workshops for a hydroplane base, which operated from the natural Megarese port nearby and later for a helicopter base. But since many years there is no use anymore for this impressive building and technical decline left its highly visible marks. The enormous weight of the more than 30 meter high doors hanging at a beam right under the roof gave tensions into the structure which it could not withstand. A huge steel structure was brought in, which should stop this movement, together with steel cables linking it to the ground. But still new cracks appear in the concrete structure.



View from the entrance gate

There is a group of local enthusiasts around their president Raffaele Migneco who try to preserve this heritage. The following information is taken from their website www.hangar.insw.net:

"The Hangar can contain 12,000m³ airship and is the only example made out of reinforced concrete. The load-bearing structure consists of 15 reinforced concrete frames filled in by brick and tiles walls on the horizontal truss connection.

Another interesting element, if it had been kept in working order, was the hangar door, consisting of a folding gear with 14 elements, each 31m high and controlled by a powerful electrical engine.



Hangar max dimensions are as follows:

(ext. dim.) length 105.50-width 45.20-height 37.00 m
(use dim.) length 100.00-width-26.00-height-31.00 m

The hangar area, including the manoeuvres space is 500 x 400 m with NW-SSE direction, that being the exposure [prevailing - Ed?] direction of the area winds.

The Hangar was built in order to provide South Italy with an air defence by airships against the continuous attacks from German U-boats during the First World War. Its construction began in 1917. They intended to finish it in a very short time, but it was not possible and when it was actually finished, the war had already ended and all the strategic efforts seemed to be useless. However it became operative and in the 20's the military area consisting of the hangar, barracks, cook-house, storage-house, wash-house, infirmary and some houses for the commander and officials was opened. The first airship flying over Augusta was an O.S. type of 5.000m³ (cruise speed : 31 mph at 492 feet) which had been transferred from a Centre Italy air-base. Some years later the engineer Nobile, known for having flown over the North Pole by an airship, designed and built a new type 7.000m³ N2 airship.

On August 29th 1925 King Umberto I of Italy visited the hangar. Later, aiming to reinforce the harbour air-defence, a sea plane station was built complete of cranes, workshops for the Second World War seaplane-torpedo and sea-plane reconnaissance. The alighting on water area was near the Fortresses "Garcia and Vittoria" and 3936 feet long. During the Second World War Augusta was the scene of very hard air and naval battles and the town was bombed several times, suffering heavy damages. Fortunately and probably not by chance, military buildings such as the Avalos Tower, the "Garcia and Vittoria" Fortresses, the Swabian Castle and the Hangar with the below seaplane station remained intact.

After the war and till 1958 an English Company, BOAC, used the seaplane-station as commercial basin among England-Italy-North Africa. For many years seaplanes alighted on the water of the Megarese port bringing goods and passengers. For a long period the Hangar became the base for Italian Financial Police helicopters.

On December 24th 1987 by the ordinance nr.2739 Sicily Region Government declared it a highly interesting historical monument. It was last mentioned in London on April 25th 1989 at the Exhibition "Housing the Airship" about Airship/balloons time and their hangars. Completely abandoned since then it has been damaged by frequent hooligan actions."



View from the air

The hangar is located on a hill at the north-east end of the Megarese port, a natural harbour between the peninsula with the city of Augusta and the mainland.

Visiting this place today is an absolutely outstanding experience, not only for airship enthusiasts. The whole site is full of palm trees and nature has gradually taken possession of the declining military buildings. Higher than any palm tree, the hangar dominates the site visible from far away. It has something of Inca temple ruins in the jungle.



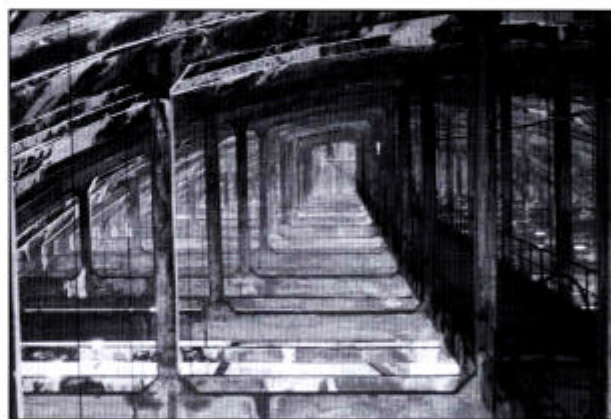
View from the front

The huge entrance doors are already very impressive, but the interior is even more so. It is as long and high as the central nave of the gothic cathedral of Cologne, but twice as wide.



View from inside

Like all airship sheds it has a catwalk under the roof, which was used for maintaining the airships. Walking on it is twice as exciting today: The view 30 Meters down is already something special on its own, but seeing the big cracks in the concrete construction on which you are walking makes it even more worrying.



The catwalk under the roof

Although, when you reach the rooftop an amazing view of Augusta and the huge natural harbour of Megarese calms down the nerves again.

Raffaele Migneco and his "Hangar Team" were promised by the government that necessary works for the technical preservation of the hangar should be carried out soon. But this does not solve the major problem: What could be an appropriate use for the building which would guarantee its further existence? This is the central question for all remaining historic airship hangars in Europe and overseas. Few of them are still in use for aviation services. For the others the use as museum is often proposed with all the typical problems of finding the financial resources for that. So the Augusta Hangar is not in an unusual position. Lets hope that solutions can be found to preserve this, in many aspects, unique building!

[Perhaps Cardington and Megarese should arrange to "twin"? A problem shared is a problem halved. - Ed]