

# Articles about the loss of the Akron airship near Atlantic City NJ published in 1912

From: *The Western Newspaper Union News Service, published in the Eagle Valley  
Enterprise Colorado - July 5, 1912*

**BUILT TO WITHSTAND STORMS,  
GREAT AIRSHIP GOES DOWN IN CALM WEATHER.**

**FIVE AERONAUTS DIE**

**VANIMAN AND CREW FALL TO THEIR DEATH IN  
THE TANGLED MASS.**

Atlantic City, N. J. --- Sailing out over the Atlantic ocean under perfect control and in view of several thousand interested persons, the great airship AKRON, in command of MELVILLE VANIMAN, with a crew of four men, exploded while more than 500 feet in the air and, shot down into the water a tangled mass, carrying to their death the daring aviator and his companions.



*Melvin Vaniman, pilot of the Akron*

Death is believed to have come instantly to the five men.

In all the tragic history of disasters to airships or aeroplanes probably none was as sensational as that which brought to an end the greatest and most costly air craft ever constructed in the western hemisphere. Built to withstand the storms of the Atlantic, and to carry at least a dozen men across the ocean to Europe, the AKRON went to her doom in calm weather.

Those who went down with the big dirigible beside the intrepid VANIMAN, who already had had one thrilling experience in an airship on the ocean, were:

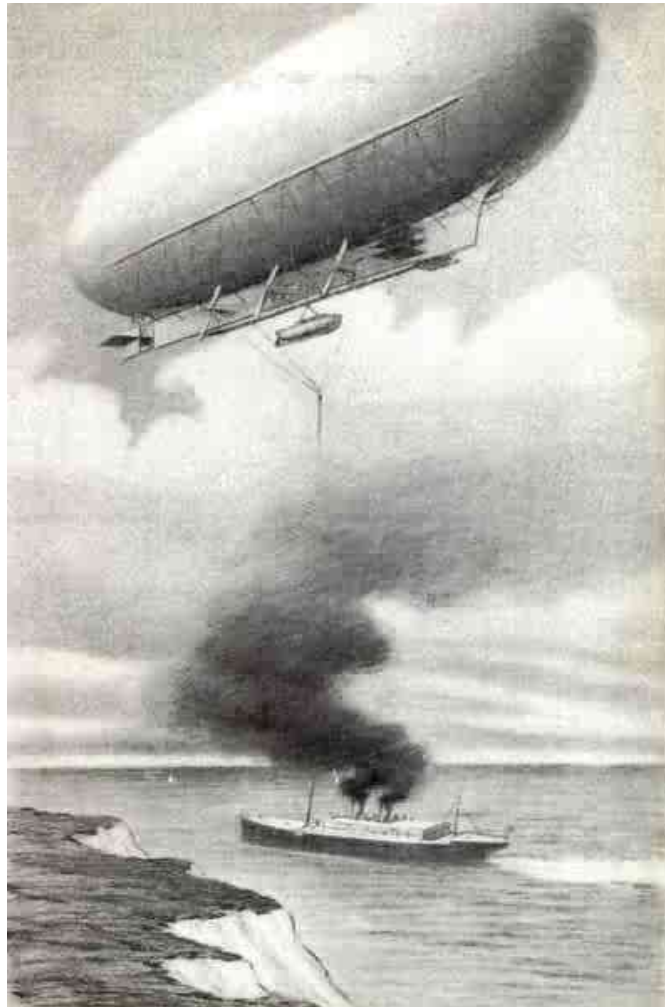
CALVIN VANIMAN, his younger brother.

FRED ELMER.

GEORGE BOURRILLION of Philadelphia.

WALTER C. GEST, a friend of VANIMAN'S financial backer.

Two bodies, those of CALVIN VANIMAN and BOURRILLION, have been recovered from the wreckage, which lies submerged in about eighteen feet of water, off Brigatine beach.



*Akron airship drawing 1911*

The AKRON, which had been inflated last February with gas manufactured by VANIMAN in the big hangar near the inlet, was taken out shortly after 6 a. m., for a test flight. One flight had been made about a month ago, and defects discovered at that time were remedied.

This trial was to have been among the last prior to the attempt to cross the Atlantic.

MRS. VANIMAN bid her husband good-bye at their little cottage near the hangar at 2 a. m. and waited for daybreak to see her husband sail away. The city authorities had been notified of the intended flight and a hundred policemen, firemen and other willing helpers assisted in floating the great gas-bag out of the hangar. The launching of the aircraft was accomplished without difficulty and she sailed gracefully away.

Over the waters of Absecon Inlet, VANIMAN maneuvered, and then sailed down over the city, and after completing a few other movements shaped the ship's course out to sea.

*Researched and Transcribed by Stu Beitler*



*Melvin Vaniman - born in Virden, Illinois in 1866*

From: *The Chateaugay Record New York - July 5, 1912*

## VANIMAN AND CREW KILLED

### Dirigible Destroyed by Explosion in Atlantic City Tryout.

### WIVES SAW THE DISASTER

Atlantic City, N. J. -- With their wives looking on and 20,000 other persons too stunned by the tragedy to utter a word, five men, the commander and crew of four of the mammoth dirigible balloon Akron, were killed instantly when it exploded 1,000 feet in the air. The men were MELVIN VANIMAN, constructor and commander of the airship; his brother, CALVIN VANIMAN, and GEORGE BOURRILION, WALTER GUEST and FRED ELMER. The bodies of only two, CALVIN VANIMAN and BOURRILION, were recovered. They were mangled badly. Those of the others are in the wreckage in Absecon Inlet, over which the explosion occurred. Divers have seen fragments of bodies in the tangle of wires that formed the car and made for the crew a fatal trap.

There does not seem a possibility that enough of any body may be recovered to make identification certain, unless it should be through clothing that may cling to it. The airship itself was blown almost to atoms. The cause of the explosion is unknown, but it is believed to have been caused by a too sudden expansion of gas.

MRS. VANIMAN and the three other widows, MRS. ELMER, MRS. BOURRILION and MRS. GUEST, who were sitting on the balcony of the VANIMAN cottage watching the balloon when it exploded are suffering from nervous prostration and are in the care of physicians.

The explosion now is laid to the experimenting of VANIMAN with a new theory in aerial navigation. Inside the great outer shell of the dirigible there was a gas bag under which were several small air chambers. It is thought VANIMAN took too much air in these compartments, compressed the gas to a danger point and the rays of the sun condensing it still further caused the tearing of the outer shell and the explosion.



From: *The New York Times, New York NY - July 16, 1912*

## AKRON VICTIMS ALL FOUND

Bodies of Melville Vaniman and Fred Elmer Taken from the Sea.

ATLANTIC CITY, N. J., July 15.----The bodies of Melvin Vaniman and Frederick Elmer, two of the five victims of the airshp[sic] Akron which exploded while sailing over Brigantine Beach on July 2, were recovered to-day and brought to the city. With the finding of the bodies all have now been recovered.

Elmer's body was found early in the day about four miles from the spot where the dirigible balloon struck the water after exploding more than 500 feet in the air. Vaniman's body was recovered late this afternoon by the beach patrol of the Brigantine Life Saving Station. Both bodies were crushed by the fall.

Mrs. Vaniman, who left for Vaniman's home at Virdin, Ill., a few days after the tragic death of her husband and his crew, was notified at once. Vaniman's body probably will be shipped at once to Virdin, where that of his brother. Calvin Vaniman, one of the other victims of the airshp[sic] accident was taken for burial.

All the victims except Calvin Vaniman were married and a fund for the four widows is being raised in this city.



From: *The Grand Rapids Tribune, Grand Rapids WI - July 19, 1912*

## **BALLOON EXPLODES 1,000 FEET FROM EARTH; VANIMAN AND CREW LOSE LIVES**

Atlantic City, N. J., July 3.---Plunged 1,000 feet to earth when the dirigible balloon the Akron blew up in mid-air, Melvin Vaniman, the famous aerial navigator and the four men of his crew were dashed to death Tuesday. The Akron had been constructed for a trip across the Atlantic and was the last word in balloon construction. The flight over the meadows began at 7 o'clock, and it was just a short time later that the accident occurred.

Like a blazing meteorite the burning balloon dashed earthward, emitting clouds of black smoke. It fell upon Brigantine Beach and rescuers who dashed two miles across the inlet were unable to give any help.

Besides Melvin Vaniman those on the Akron were; Calvin Vaniman, brother of the aeronaut; Fred Elmer, George Boutlin and Alter Gest.

Mrs. Melvin Vaniman saw the disaster from the porch of her home. She collapsed and is in serious condition.

An hour after the accident and after the rescuers had given up all hope of finding any of the bodies, the corpse of Calvin Vaniman was recovered.

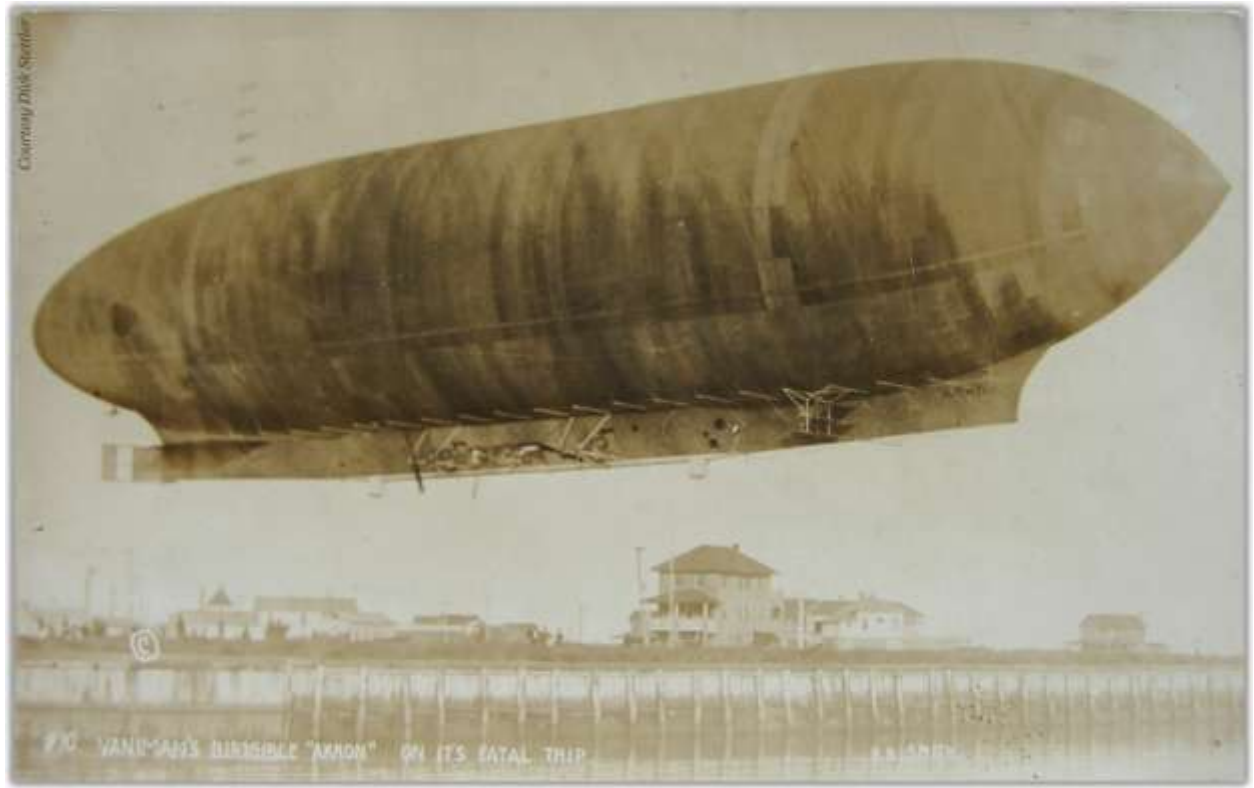
Melvin Vaniman was personally in charge of the balloon during the flight and his crew consisted of four men, including his brother.

After making a search of the beach about the point where the balloon had plunged to earth, rescuers took to boats and began searching the bay in the hope of find some of the aerial sailors with breath of life still in them.

The body of Calvin Vaniman was recognized by a party in a launch belonging to Councilman Harry Cook. It was floating in Absecon bay. Although bruised, it was not burned. News that "Vaniman has gone up" spread rapidly and despite the early hour thousands were soon gathered upon the beaches and the street watching the huge cigar-shaped craft outlined against the morning sky.

After attaining an altitude of about 1.000 feet the aerial pilot began putting his craft through fancy motions. There was no wind, the air was clear and conditions were ideal for ballooning. Taking advantage of this Vaniman decided to show the people on the beaches some fancy stunts. It was during these evolutions that the explosion occurred.

One theory was that a leak in the fuel tank caused an explosion and that the flames from this set the bag afire.



*The AKRON on the day of its final flight July 2, 1912*