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## Blimp's billboard floats across the sky

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The Hood blimp ground crew jumps into action securing the blimp as it lands for a quick change of pilot and passengers.

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – The Hood blimp floats lazily above the Providence skyline, loosely following the late-day traffic streaming south on Interstate 95 about 1,000 feet below.

The huge white airship casually veers southwest, hugging the coastline of Narragansett Bay, as it heads to the Quonset State Airport in North Kingstown, which will be its home base for the week.

A convoy of Hood Airship Operations trucks and trailers is already at the airport, waiting for security officers to escort them across runways to an open field where the blimp is to be stationed.

As the blimp circles overhead, a crew of 10 men, each clad in khaki pants and dark blue shirts, races onto the field and lines up in V formation into the prevailing wind – like a flock of birds – ready to catch the blimp as it descends.

Four men – two on each side – grab each of two long ropes dangling from each side of the blimp as it touches down onto the field. Another grabs the lead rope on the nose of the oversize helium balloon and pulls it to the ground.

The two-person crew jumps out of the tiny cockpit and a new pilot, Mats Backlin, scrambles in. He dons a set of headphones and, after a quick check of his instrument panel, asks the control tower for permission to take off again.

On Backlin's go, the ground crew lets go of the tethers and the blimp gently eases back up into the sky, a gigantic balloon powered on either side by propellers driven by two 2-liter engines – about the size of the engines in the original Volkswagen Beetles.

Backlin is destined for McCoy Stadium in Pawtucket, where his job is to fly the blimp around the stadium for 90 minutes or so while the crowd assembles for the game.

It's a gorgeous summer evening – about 80 degrees, with virtually no wind and a visibility of more than 50 miles, clear to Boston and beyond.

Flying a blimp is a lot like skippering a boat, Backlin explains. And with weather like this, he says, he can't imagine a better way to make a living than sailing the skies.

The Hood blimp is a fixture over New England in summer and fall. It's primarily a floating billboard – a form of advertising designed to spread the company's name, explained Mickey Wittman, a spokesman for the Lightship Group in Orlando, Fla., which owns and operates the Hood blimp and nearly 20 others worldwide.

Blimps are a novelty, so they attract attention wherever they go, Wittman said. They're also incredibly quiet – at least at ground level – so they're not distracting, he said. And, they're economical and environmentally friendly, flying for hours on a single tank of gas.

The blimp flies five days a week over beaches, boating areas, ballgames and other outdoor events – as well as along highways and byways as it travels to its destination.

Most fans don't look beyond the blimp itself – a cigar shaped balloon that's 128 feet long and 44-feet tall, filled with 68,000 cubic feet of helium (which is worth about \$20,000, Macklin said).

It totally dwarfs the command station – known as a cockpit or the gondola – that's strapped to the underbelly of the blimp by a network of 24 wire cables. At nearly 9 feet long, 5 feet wide and 6 feet tall, the cockpit is about as big as a full-size car and similarly laid out, with two bucket seats in the front and a bench that seats two or three in the back.

The pilot sits to the left, in a chair equipped with foot pedals that control the rudders that move the blimp from side to side. Large wheels on either side of the pilot's seat, much like those on a wheelchair, control the rudders that keep it level in the sky. This is Mats Backlin's office 30 or so hours each week, several months each year.

Backlin, 53, is among about 150 licensed LTA – lighter than air – aircraft pilots worldwide. About 40 of them work for the Lightship Group.

Backlin, who's been around gliders and other aircraft since he was a boy, went to college to study aeronautical engineering. He took a summer job at a firm that designed and built hot air balloons and never left. Along the way, he test-piloted some airships and was eventually persuaded to become an airship pilot.

He's been piloting airships as a career for about 15 years, in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

He's also amassed a slew of memories, from flying over the 1992 Barcelona Olympics to regular trips over the New York City Marathon. Once he saw a line of about 50 beachgoers on Long Island queue up to simultaneously moon the blimp as it flew overhead.