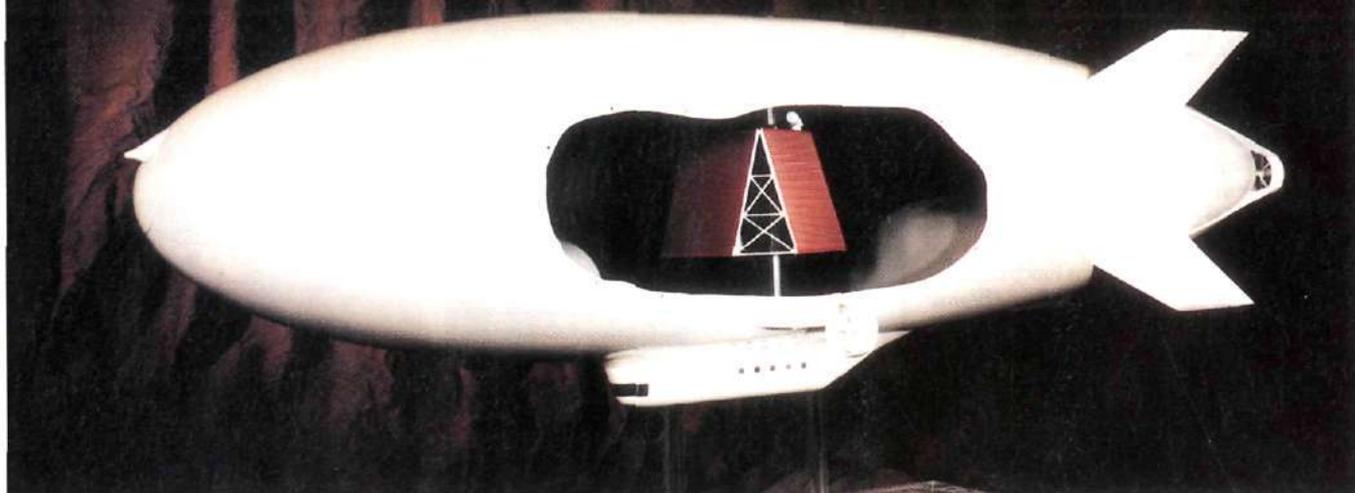*The radar antenna of Westinghouse's naval air vehicle would be housed within the envelope*

Burning ambition

A towering inferno and pending Pentagon funding decisions place airship production on an uncertain course.

RAMON LOPEZ/**WASHINGTON DC**

OFFICIALS AT US lighter-than-air-dirigible manufacturer Westinghouse Airships hope to establish before the end of the year a firm flight-plan for future airship production.

The previous business strategy went up in smoke, literally, when a devastating fire on 2 August destroyed the only existing Westinghouse Sentinel 1000 non-rigid airship and its hangar, at the firm's Airship Flight Center at Weeksville, North Carolina.

Over the next few months, company officials will decide whether to replace the Sentinel 1000 or build an improved model instead. They must also determine where to re-establish the company's airship production and support services.

Meanwhile, they await a clear signal from the US Department of Defense and US lawmakers on the future of the US Navy's large-airship programme, which has moved at a snail's pace over the past decade.

The company believes that the fire was accidentally started by a welding firm hired to repair the doors of the leased hangar — one of the largest wooden structures in the world before it was consumed by fire. The hangar was one of six built by the US Navy to house ZPG-3W air-ships during and after the Second World War.

The factory was used by Westinghouse Airships for Skyship 500/600 and Sentinel 1000 manufacturing, repair and support. The loss in lighter-than-air vehicles, property, equipment and spares will total millions of dollars.

The Weeksville plant handled regularly scheduled maintenance for the six Skyship 500s and 600s in North America. The US firm has set up a temporary support base in the Baltimore, Maryland, area and customers have suffered no break in service, says William Adams, Westinghouse Airships chairman and chief executive.

OPEN OPTIONS

"We are still planning our future. All kinds of options are on the table," says Adams. A survey is being conducted of the remaining airship sites in the USA, and the firm is evaluating overtures from state and local governments for construction of a new manufacturing and support site.

The 67m (220ft)-long helium-filled Sentinel 1000 was claimed to be the largest non-rigid airship built and was certificated by the US Federal Aviation Administration in November 1993. It was a one-half-scale model of the YEZ-2A which Westinghouse wanted to build for the Pentagon.

A decision on whether to replace the Sentinel 1000 remains to be made. Westinghouse Electric, the parent of the airship manufacturer, has yet to approve production funds for a replacement, or for an improved airship which exists on the drawing board. The firm is seeking new customers which might contribute to airship construction. In the interim, Westinghouse Airships will be unable to undertake an airship demonstration to the USN which had been scheduled for late 1995

Despite the setback, Adams is buoyant about the prospects for selling modern airships to the US military, other US Government organisations and commercial customers such as FedEx, which has explored using airships for overseas package shipment.

Adams says that senior USN officials and US lawmakers continue to support planned operational trials in 1998 of the YEZ-2A, first proposed in the mid-1980s. They want to see whether an airship can provide continuous and extended surveillance for low-flying cruise missiles targeted at USN warships.

Earlier in the programme it was estimated that the YEZ-2A would cost $440 million to build. It is believed that a major redesign of the propulsion system and gondola will allow Westinghouse to build the giant non-rigid airship for $275 million. The mission-avionics suite would be extra, estimated to cost $120 million.

A USN request for $60 million in initial airship production funding is before the US Congress. Adams says that "...the redesign allowed us to reduce the gondola's complexity and take a lot of cost out of the programme".