

The Real Sky Captain Revealed

By Michael Cnudde

Since watching the film version of Sky Captain's 1939 exploits, *Sky Captain and World of Tomorrow*, I began to wonder about Sky Captain's place in the Wold Newton Universe. By doing some basic research, I began to put the desperate pieces together and shed some light on the life and times of the *real* Sky Captain.

Sky Captain, whose name was H. Joseph Sullivan, was actually the younger brother of Dr. Cameron Sullivan, a.k.a. Hermes Frankenstein. (The Frankenstein/Sullivan link was first revealed by Dennis Power on his *Secret History of the Wold Newton Universe* site: <http://www.pjfarmer.com/secret/chron/chron/char2-revised.htm>.) Breaking with his family and its dark heritage, Joseph Sullivan used his considerable inheritance to build and sustain his Flying Legion. The Flying Legion was one of several aerial mercenary bands that flew in the late thirties and into the war years (the other notable group was, of course, the famed Blackhawks.)

According to the novelization of *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, we can date the Legion's activities from at least 1936. At the time, Sullivan was involved with photojournalist Polly Perkins while in Nanjing. In a fit of pique over Sullivan's brief dalliance with RAF pilot Frankie Cook, Perkins sabotaged his plane; Sullivan spent six months in a Manchurian slave camp before making a daring escape.¹

The Events of *The World of Tomorrow* and Confronting Some Apparent Inaccuracies:

The film opens in 1939 with the zeppelin *Hindenburg III* making a docking on the rarely used 102nd floor dirigible mooring mast of the Empire State Building. However, this also is also the first seeming contradiction of the story: the 86th floor of the Empire State Building, which acted as the receiving and clearing area for the passengers coming down from the 102nd floor, was the headquarters of none other than Doc Savage.² (There is some controversy as to whether Doc's HQ was actually on this floor, but in the final analysis it doesn't really matter, as only the Man of Bronze and his associates had access to it.)

I can only surmise, given the special security needs of a particular passenger of the *Hindenburg III*, Dr. Jorge Vargas, that Doc allowed for this special one-time use of the 86th floor. (The only reason that Doc and his Famous Five were not physically involved, is that they were out of town during for the events of *The Awful Dynasty*.³ This would allow us to date the incident: April 1939.) As the novelization has Vargas trying to "escape Germany before it is too late," a pre-war date also would seem to jive with the facts.⁴ Additionally, the pre-war timing works, if only for the reason that transatlantic zeppelin flight would have been impossible after September 1939. Doc had probably made security arrangements with Sky Captain and his Flying Legion – in the novelization they

are seen providing fighter escort for the zeppelin.⁵ As for snow, in April, late-season storms on the Atlantic coast are very common.

Of course there was no zeppelin ever named *Hindenberg III*; the zeppelin in question was actually the *Graf Zeppelin II*, the sister of original *Hindenberg*. The reason for name change is unknown, but it may be related to the gathering war clouds. In August 1939, the *Graf Zeppelin II* was engaged in electronic eavesdropping, probing the British radar chain. It could be that this particular cover-up was security-driven.⁶

If we accept this timeline, we are faced with yet another apparent incongruity. Polly Perkins met Vargas' colleague, Dr. Jennings at Radio City Music Hall, which was showing the *Wizard of Oz*. The only problem was, the film did not have its New York premier until August 17, 1939. Obviously, also for security reasons, I believe the true meeting place was changed.⁷

Finally, the last apparent inaccuracy deals with the P-40 Warhawks that Sky Captain and his Legion flew. The XP-40 was first flown in May 1939 — a month after the events depicted in the book and film. With first production deliveries to the US Army in April 1940, there was no way that these planes could've been flown by the Legion.⁸ Instead, I believe the Legion flew P-36s, the P-40's immediate predecessor, but modified to P-40 standards by the Flying Legion's resident technical expert, Dex Dearborn. Dex also provided the special upgrades to Sky Captain's personal plane, which enabled it to "swim."⁹

After the events of April, 1939, not much is known about Sky Captain and his Flying Legion. History records that the Flying Legion and its base received a punishing beating from Dr. Totenkopf's robot minions. Perhaps the damage was too extensive; we will never know. With the coming of the Second World War, perhaps Joseph Sullivan joined the air services of one of the allied nations or joined the one of the other mercenary air groups.

An intriguing connection is Polly Perkins's own family lineage. There is some evidence to believe that she is the daughter of Neptune Perkins, who was gifted with the ability to breathe under water and is in fact, the son of Arthur Gordon Pym. (An excellent reference is Jess Nevins' *The All-Aces Squad: Super Heroes at War* web site: <http://ratmmjess.tripod.com/wold5.html>.) Given that that the final crucial engagements depicted in *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* took place under water, is it possible that Joseph Sullivan and Polly Perkins may have had had extra help from her father. It certainly was a close-run thing and that help would've been critical in turning the tide.

Notes:

1. K.J. Anderson, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, 2004 Onyx, New York, p.56.

2. Phillip José Farmer, *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life*, 1981 Playboy Books, New York, p.66.
3. Ibid., p.254
4. Anderson, op. cit., p.4.
5. Ibid., p.7.
6. Edward Bishop, *Their Finest Hour: the Story of the Battle of Britain, 1940*, 1968 Ballantine Books, New York, p. 43.
7. Anderson, op. cit. p.19. For a complete *Wizard of Oz* movie timeline, I recommend: <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/6396/timeline.htm>
8. William Green and Gordon Swanborough, *The Complete Book of Fighters*, 1994 Salamander Books, London, p.138.
9. Anderson, op. cit. p. 94.