

This Day in History... April 19, 1930

Graf Zeppelins Issued

On April 19, 1930, three special airmail stamps, the Graf Zeppelins, were made available for sale to be used exclusively on mail carried via the *Graf Zeppelin* on its European-Pan American flights the following month.

In the 1920s, many nations became aware of the commercial possibilities of transoceanic flight. However, there was only one company willing and able to initiate this service – Germany's Luftschiffbau Zeppelin. Even today this firm's ventures seem daring and visionary.

The story begins after World War I, when the company was stripped of its three airships (two of the ships went to France and one to Italy) and was left to face a war reparations debt of \$800,000. In an act of desperation, the company offered to build an airship for the United States as payment of its war debt. The US quickly agreed, but with one stipulation, the dirigible had to successfully complete a transatlantic delivery. On October 15, 1924, after 77 hours over the Atlantic, the LZ-126 arrived at the US Naval Air Station, Lakehurst, New Jersey. It carried 55,714 pieces of mail.



There are only 72,428 \$1.30 Zeppelins left.

Because of its great success, the Zeppelin Company then planned a trip to the United States by way of Spain and South America. The *Graf Zeppelin* was to carry mail both ways. The postmaster general decided to issue a new set of stamps for two reasons. The first, and most obvious reason was to cover payment for mail to be sent on the flight. And second, the stamps were intended as a gesture of good will toward Germany.

The *Graf Zeppelin* stamps went on sale on April 19, 1930, in Washington, DC. They were then made available for sale at select post offices in other cities two days later. The 65¢ green issue (Zeppelin over the Atlantic) paid the postage for a post card traveling via *Graf Zeppelin* one way. The \$1.30 brown issue (Zeppelin between Continents) paid the postage of a letter going one way. The \$2.60 blue issue (Zeppelin and Globe) paid the postage on a letter going the full route. This included a trip by steamer from New York to Germany, via Spain, to South America and North America.

Though the *Graf Zeppelin* stamps are beloved today, they didn't sell that well. For starters, they were only available for sale until June 7, 1930 – so just over 10 weeks. Additionally, the stamps were issued during the Great Depression, so very few people could afford them at the time of issue. The cost of all three stamps was equivalent to a workman's wages for an entire week!

Anticipating collector demand for these stamps to be astronomical, the Post Office Department had the Bureau of Engraving and Printing produce a combined total of 3,260,000 of the stamps. However, sales of all the stamps were poor and about 90% of the total stamps produced were destroyed.

The zeppelin's journey, for which these stamps were issued, began on May 18, 1930. The *Graf Zeppelin* was later grounded when the Hindenburg exploded on May 6, 1937. During its service, the *Graf Zeppelin* established an incredible performance record. It made 590 flights, including 144 ocean crossings, and covered more than one million miles. It carried over 13,000 passengers and 235,300 pounds of mail and freight.



Only 93,536 65¢ Zeppelins remain.



This is the rarest stamp in the set, with just 61,296 stamps left undestroyed.

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