

This Day in History... May 6, 1937

The Hindenburg Disaster

On May 6, 1937, the Hindenburg caught fire while preparing to land in Lakehurst, New Jersey, and was destroyed in less than a minute. The disaster killed 35 people aboard the airship and one worker on the ground, ending a famous chapter in passenger airship travel.

Long before jet travel, airships offered one of the most dramatic ways to cross long distances. One early step came from French engineer Henri Giffard, who built a steerable, hydrogen-filled airship powered by a small steam engine. On September 24, 1852, he flew about 17 miles from Paris to Trappes, France. A rudder helped him steer, though strong wind kept him from returning to his starting point.

The most famous airships were later built in Germany by Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin and the company that carried his name. Zeppelin's rigid design used a light metal framework covered by fabric. That frame let builders create much larger craft than earlier balloons. It also gave the ships more room for engines, passengers, cargo, and fuel.

In 1909, the German company DELAG was founded to carry passengers by Zeppelin airship. It became the world's first airline to use aircraft in paid passenger service. Before World War I, DELAG's airships made more than 1,500 commercial flights and carried over 34,000 passengers.

World War I changed the role of the Zeppelin. Germany used airships for scouting, naval patrols, and bombing raids. Their long range made them useful over the North Sea, where they watched for British ships. Beginning in 1915, German airships also attacked targets in Britain. They dropped thousands of bombs during the war, though they were slow, vulnerable to weather, and increasingly at risk from improved aircraft and anti-aircraft fire.

After the war, Dr. Hugo Eckener helped rebuild public interest in passenger airships. The most successful was the LZ 127 Graf Zeppelin, which first flew in 1928. In 1929, it flew around the world with a group of passengers and crew. Among them was journalist Grace Marguerite Hay Drummond-Hay, who became the first woman to travel around the world by air.

The Graf Zeppelin later carried passengers and mail across the Atlantic. It flew between Germany, the United States, and South America. Its record helped make airship travel seem safe, elegant, and modern. Passengers had cabins, dining areas, and wide views from the windows. The trip was slower than later airplane travel, but it was far more comfortable than early long-distance aircraft.

The LZ 129 Hindenburg was built for this same world of luxury travel. Construction began in the early 1930s, and the ship made its first test flight from Friedrichshafen, Germany, on March 4, 1936, with 87 people aboard. It was named for Paul von Hindenburg, the former German president who had died in 1934.

The Hindenburg was enormous. It stretched more than 800 feet and was filled with hydrogen, a gas that gave strong lift but burned easily. Germany had hoped to use helium, which was safer, but the United States controlled most of the world's helium supply and restricted exports.

The ship's public debut also carried political meaning. In March 1936, the Hindenburg and Graf Zeppelin flew over Germany during a Nazi propaganda tour connected to the remilitarization of the Rhineland and national elections. After that, the Hindenburg began passenger service. In 1936, it made regular Atlantic crossings, including flights to the United States, and appeared over the Berlin Olympics.

The Hindenburg opened its 1937 season with a trip to South America. On May 3, it left Frankfurt for Lakehurst, New Jersey, with 97 people aboard. Bad weather slowed the crossing. Thunderstorms also delayed its landing.

On the evening of May 6, spectators and news crews watched as the ship approached the mooring mast at Lakehurst. Suddenly, fire appeared near the rear of the airship. Flames raced through the hydrogen-filled structure, and the Hindenburg collapsed to the ground.

Of the 97 passengers and crew, 62 survived. Radio reporter Herbert Morrison's emotional recording, including the words "Oh, the humanity!" became one of the best-known eyewitness accounts of a disaster. Investigators debated several possible causes, including a static spark, leaking hydrogen, and flammable outer covering. The exact chain of events is still debated, but the result was clear. Public trust in passenger airships collapsed, and airplanes soon took their place on transatlantic routes.



These stamps were to be used exclusively on mail carried via Graf Zeppelin on its European – Pan American flights.



Stamp issued for the Century of Progress Exhibition in 1933.

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