

Titanic of the Air

Hindenburg Last of the Great Airships



The World's Largest and Most Luxurious Airship and Its Tragic End

The Hindenburg was the pride of Nazi Germany. It was the largest, most luxurious and most sophisticated airship ever built. For Hitler, it represented proof that the Aryan race was the master race. Hindenburg's main function was transporting the wealthy from Europe to the United States in "just" two days of trans-Atlantic flight with first-class accommodations. It was the future of aviation... until one memorable day in May 1937.

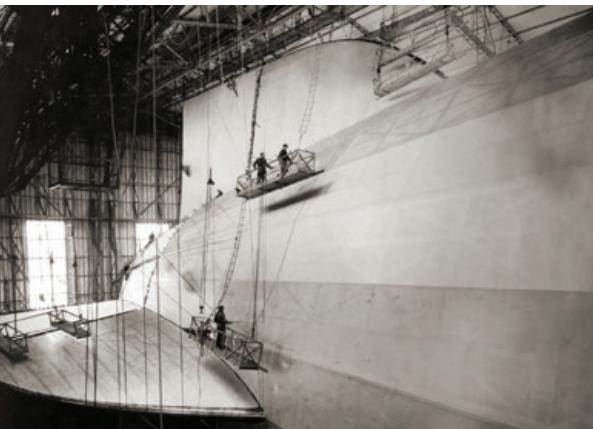


The voice of Herbert Morrison can be heard over the Navy radio station in Lakehurst, New Jersey. It is May 6, 1937. The Chicago reporter speaks enthusiastically into the microphone.

[It's floating gently] toward us like a great feather... the Hindenburg! Members of the crew are looking down on the field ahead of them....

The *Hindenburg*—the pride of Nazi Germany—represented the wave of the future. It was the symbol of a new world. A world where ocean liners were relics of the past. A world where trips across the Atlantic Ocean could be completed in days, not weeks.

The *Hindenburg* was the flagship of a growing fleet of German airships (also known as zeppelins or dirigibles). They were



Building the *Hindenburg*. Workers are dwarfed by the mammoth airship.



The airship's metal frame.

already shuttling people regularly between cities. Everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before millions of travelers would come to rely on the airships to deliver them to their destinations.

By 1937, crossing the Atlantic by airship was no longer a novelty. In fact, the *Hindenburg* itself had already successfully completed 17 round-trip trans-oceanic crossings without incident (10 to the United States and 7 to South America). The only reason the *Hindenburg*'s approach this day was considered newsworthy enough to be broadcast on radio was because this was the first such trip to the United States for the year 1937.

Morrison, the consummate professional, continues his description of the event:

[The Hindenburg] is practically standing still now. They've dropped ropes out of the nose of the ship, and they've been taken a hold of down on the field by a number of men. It's starting to rain again.... The back motors of the ship are just holding it... just enough to keep it --

Suddenly, Morrison's tone changes to high-pitched and shrill....

IT BURST INTO FLAMES! IT BURST INTO FLAMES!

It's falling. It's crashing! Watch it! Watch it, folks! Get out of the way! Get out of the way! ...It's crashing! It's crashing. Terrible! Oh my, get out of the way, please! It's burning and bursting into flames... and the frame is crashing to the ground....

Oh, the humanity! ...I can't even talk... O-ohhh! I-I can't talk, ladies and gentlemen. Honest, it's just laying there, a mass of smoking wreckage.... I-I can hardly breathe.... I, listen folks, I-I'm gonna have to stop for a minute because I've lost my voice. This is the worst thing I've ever witnessed....

Choked with tears, Morrison was unable to continue.

History of Airships

Long before the Wright brothers flew the first airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903, huge airships were already transporting people in the air. The first flight took place in 1852, when a Frenchmen named Henri Giffard flew over Paris. However, the pioneer of airship development, especially of the rigid type, was a German army officer, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin.

Zeppelin visited the United States during the Civil War while he was in his twenties, and he volunteered for service in the Union Army. While there he was amazed by the huge balloons that had been developed by the North to provide aerial reconnaissance during a battle. These balloons were huge sacks inflated with a lighter-than-air gas. A small basket (today known as a gondola) was suspended from beneath to hold people.

At the beginning of the war, inventor Thaddeus Lowe came to Washington to demonstrate how balloons could assist the army on the battlefield. For his demonstration, Lowe used a gas produced from coals. At the time, this type of gas was commonly used as fuel. The balloon lifted Lowe to a height of 500 feet, from where he dispatched a telegram to President Lincoln. His telegram to the White House described in detail everything that was visible from above, covering a distance of 25 miles in every direction. Lincoln was very impressed by this performance and ordered his army to begin deploying balloons at the front.

The Union Army created a Balloon Corps, using the balloons to spy on the Confederate positions. These balloons had no means of propulsion and could only hover in the air as they remained tethered to the ground. Lowe or an army officer would enter the gondola near the battlefield, be lifted high into the air and use binoculars to identify the Confederate positions, including artillery, cavalry and infantry. The balloons gave the Union Army a tremendous tactical advantage and were used successfully throughout the war.

While on a visit to St. Paul, Minnesota,



A small dirigible belonging to the US Navy.



A balloon is readied for reconnaissance operations during the Civil War.



Union officers would mount the balloon and report back on the battlefield situation below.