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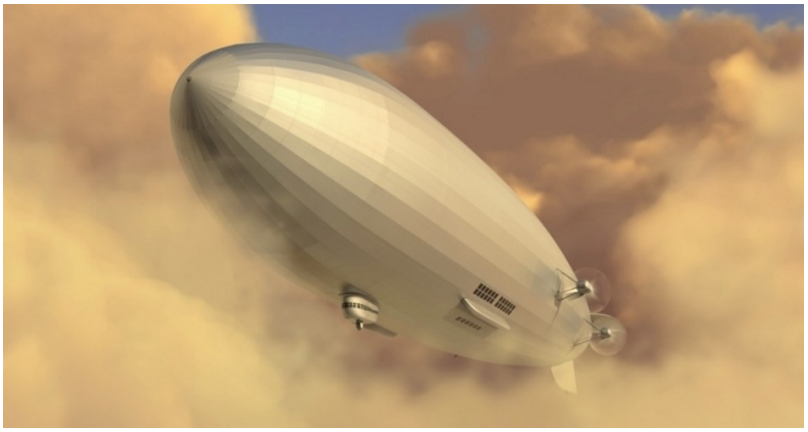
Seventy-Five Years After the Hindenburg



On May 6, 1937, a little over 75 years ago, the most famous of the German airships, the *Hindenburg*, burst into flames at Lakehurst, New Jersey. The scene was caught on camera and by radio announcer Herbert Morrison of Radio WLS of Chicago, who famously broke down during his broadcast. The Hindenburg was the culmination of decades of German engineering and innovation. Man's first conquest of the air, we often forget, was by hot air balloon and not the Wright Brothers or gliders.

It did not take long for innovative men to come up with ideas for increasing the lifting power of balloons and for coming up with ways of directing these lighter-than-air craft. German Count Zeppelin actually became these powered flights in 1900, before the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. His Zeppelin craft did not use motorized power to lift the airships, however, but to direct the airship in flight.

Zeppelin captured the imagination of the new German Empire and also people around the world. Although the count always struggled for money to continue his work, giving rides and received donations from German people helped finance his work (Count Zeppelin relied upon private, not taxpayer, funds to research and develop his incredible airships.) The *Hansa* carried 24 passengers and mail from Germany to Denmark and Sweden and it flew 399 flights over a period of years until it was requisitioned by the military during the First World War. The *Hansa* had an outstanding safety record as a commercial airship. Indeed, the German Aviation Association, before the First World War, had flown over 1,600 flights, carrying almost forty thousand passengers without a single death or serious injury.

As Zeppelins develop, the German military became involved and during the First World War, Zeppelins became a long range bombing weapon used primarily for night attacks on London. These attacks achieved much notice but did almost no damage at all to London. The Germans were the first to discover that indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations accomplishes almost nothing militarily and that it is extremely expensive (the RAF discovered the same fact in 1941, when there were more RAF aircrews killed in bombing raids over Germany than Germans killed from British bombs.) The military ineffectiveness of Zeppelin raids had little to do with the highly flammable hydrogen gas. In fact, the combat history of these sorties suggests that it was much harder to burst a Zeppelin into fire than had been generally assumed.

After the war ended, the United States and Britain both tried to develop rigid airships to military purposes. The four American airships — *Shenandoah*, *Los Angeles*, *Akron,* and *Macon* — carried several small "Sparrow" biplane fighters. The airships could "launch" and recover the fighters by trapeze. Although the lift was provided by the inert gas Helium, so that these vessels could never burst into flames as the *Hindenburg* eventually did, all four American airships were disasters. The engineering, much less than the lift gas, was more important.

Although the count had died in 1917, Otto Eckener, a brilliant engineer took over the development of Zeppelins for civilian use. Under his guidance, the Graf Zeppelin, a true passenger airship was developed and entered service. This class of airship flew had a regular and luxurious round trip flight to Brazil and the Graf Zeppelin also flew across the North Atlantic to America, as well as actually circumnavigating the globe. Zeppelins also had regular flights in the Mediterranean and even had an Artic flight over the North Pole. Money for these flights came from passengers, from the sale of air stamps (which were, of course, unique) and from the contributions of large numbers of private citizens.

When the Nazis came to power, they elbowed out the management. Otto Eckener despised National Socialism and although he was kept on the staff, practical control was removed from him. The Nazis sought to use the Zeppelins for propaganda purposes, for peacetime spying (especially upon the Lowlands of Holland and Belgium), and as a potential weapon of war. Much of the history of the *Hindenburg* revolves around its use of hydrogen and the inability of the Germans, after the Nazis came to power, to acquire the more expensive, less buoyant but safer Helium, which was almost unavailable outside the Texas Panhandle.

While it is undeniable that the *Hindenburg* could not have burst into flames 75 years ago in New Jersey if it had been lifted by helium, this does not mean that the *Hindenburg* would have been safe — the record of virtually all American and British rigid aircraft, which used Helium instead of volatile Hydrogen, was disaster while the Graf Zeppelin class of passenger liners had a safety record much better than most passenger airplanes of the period.

Yet the *Hindenburg* Disaster, which had a relatively slight death toll, was seen by the world. Airliners would crash with no survivors, but the Hindenburg left most of its passengers and crew alive. What might have happened if the *Hindenburg* had not burst into flames that fateful day 75 years ago? The creation of a safe and long distance means of travel on hydrogen lifted rigid airships had already been established and the *Hindenburg*, the biggest of the line, set a standard for comfort and luxury surpassing anything yet achieved on sea or by rail, according to sophisticated world travelers who knew ocean liners and the Orient Express.

Rigid airships, however, traveled much faster, about 80 miles per hour on a dead line, and so could cross the Atlantic Ocean in a couple of days. These vessels were not turbulent at all, and passengers did not record anything like air sickness or sea sickness. Perhaps the most interesting historical consequence of the development of a vast fleet of profitable *Hindenburg*-class airships might have been the ameliorating influence on German politics. Rigid airships were useless in war but very valuable in peacetime. As common commercial carriers, bigoted discrimination cut deeply into profitability and so, like the Summer Olympics in 1936 caused Nazis to dramatically curtail their anti-Semitism, a successful rigid airship line that brought in desperately needed foreign currency might well have done so too.

The legacy for mankind generally of a commercially safe, fast and comfortable rigid airship line would have given travelers the world over a way to view our world in a way that nothing created since has provided: a calm, clear and beautiful view of oceans, cities and mountains. Could that happen today? Sadly, it is not even conceivable. The army of trial lawyers, bureaucrats in government regulating every aspect of commerce, and the sensationalist media that must have a crisis to survive, are all militantly against this most graceful and majestic way for people to travel. The *Hindenburg* disaster deprived mankind forever of something truly wonderful.