

1

00:00:01,093 --> 00:00:08,092

Lakehurst, New Jersey, 725 in the evening, May 6, 1937.

2

00:00:08,092 --> 00:00:14,092

Delayed by storms, the airship Hindenburg was finally preparing to land.

3

00:00:15,091 --> 00:00:21,091

Passengers peered down looking for familiar faces as the ship turned for the final descent.

4

00:00:22,091 --> 00:00:26,090

Water ballast was released to bring her into trim.

5

00:00:27,090 --> 00:00:32,090

Engines were reversed from idle ahead to idle astern.

6

00:00:33,090 --> 00:00:37,089

Winchman paid out handling lines to the ground crew.

7

00:00:38,089 --> 00:00:41,089

Tragedy is seconds away.

8

00:00:42,089 --> 00:00:47,088

The mystery is, was it an accident or sabotage?

9

00:00:57,087 --> 00:01:01,087

Lakehurst, New Jersey is a place that time has passed by.

10

00:01:04,086 --> 00:01:08,086

Forty years ago, it was the city of the future.

11

00:01:09,086 --> 00:01:15,085

The nearby Naval Air Station was the East Coast terminal for dirigible transatlantic crossings.

12

00:01:16,085 --> 00:01:21,084

The mammoth hangar strained to accommodate these giants of the ship.

13

00:01:21,084 --> 00:01:25,084

Airship travel had become a reality.

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00:01:29,084 --> 00:01:35,083

Germany was the starting point for most of these lighter than air voyages due to the engineering dominance of the company founded by Count Ferdinand von Zppelin.

15

00:01:38,083 --> 00:01:43,082

In 1924, the company built this dirigible for the United States.

16

00:01:43,082 --> 00:01:47,082

As part of Germany's reparations for World War I.

17

00:01:48,081 --> 00:01:55,081

Named the Los Angeles, she was pangoded to Lakehurst by Hugo Ekener, the foremost authority on commercial airships and head of the Zeppelin Company.

18

00:01:57,081 --> 00:02:02,080

In 1928, Hugo Ekener built the large ship of the Zeppelin Company.

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00:02:03,080 --> 00:02:07,079

The ship was named the Zeppelin Company.

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00:02:08,079 --> 00:02:16,078

In 1928, Hugo Ekener built the largest, most luxurious airship to date, the Graf Zeppelin.

21

00:02:18,078 --> 00:02:24,078

Wherever she flew, the Graf Zeppelin was hailed as proof of the practicality of airship travel.

22

00:02:26,077 --> 00:02:34,077

Her popularity helped to restore the war-ravaged pride of the German people, many of whom had contributed money for her construction.

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00:02:38,076 --> 00:02:43,076

In 1929, the Graf circumnavigated the world carrying passengers.

24

00:02:44,075 --> 00:02:48,075

Airlines with fixed-wing planes would not equal this feat for years.

25

00:02:50,075 --> 00:02:57,074

She established a regular schedule of flights from Germany to Brazil, years before transatlantic airplane service.

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00:02:58,074 --> 00:03:01,074

Ocean liners were the only competition in the Atlantic.

27

00:03:03,073 --> 00:03:14,072

Hugo Ekener felt confident his dirigibles could cut the transatlantic crossing time to two days, but he would need a new airship, one larger and faster than the Graf Zeppelin.

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00:03:28,071 --> 00:03:32,070

By late 1934, a new dirigible was under construction.

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00:03:34,070 --> 00:03:40,069

She would be the largest airship ever built, the largest object ever put into the sky.

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00:03:41,069 --> 00:03:44,069

She would be called the Hindenburg.

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00:03:46,069 --> 00:03:55,068

147 feet high and one-sixth of a mile long, she was so massive that a special hangar had to be constructed to house her.

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00:03:58,068 --> 00:04:05,067

The control car would be separated from the passenger accommodations, which would be contained in

the underside of the hull.

33

00:04:06,067 --> 00:04:12,066

70 air travelers could be pampered by a 40-man crew as never before.

34

00:04:14,066 --> 00:04:18,065

The metal framework would surround 16 huge gas bags.

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00:04:20,065 --> 00:04:25,065

7 million cubic feet of lighter-than-air gas would give the Hindenburg buoyancy.

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00:04:26,065 --> 00:04:34,064

Unlike other German Zeppelins which were filled with explosive hydrogen, Hugo Ekener had designed the Hindenburg to be filled with helium.

37

00:04:35,064 --> 00:04:38,063

A gas so safe, it would actually smother fire.

38

00:04:40,063 --> 00:04:47,062

The United States was the primary source of this rare natural gas and was at first willing to sell it to the Zeppelin Company.

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00:04:48,062 --> 00:04:56,061

A doll Hitler's rise to power complicated the negotiations.

40

00:05:02,061 --> 00:05:08,060

Hitler saw the airships as propaganda machines to carry the message of the Third Reich around the world.

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00:05:09,060 --> 00:05:18,059

The increasing militancy of the Nazi government caused the United States to have second thoughts about selling its helium to a German company,

42

00:05:19,059 --> 00:05:22,058

fearing it would be used in dirigible fitted for war.

43

00:05:25,058 --> 00:05:27,058

A disappointed Ekener had no choice.

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00:05:28,058 --> 00:05:33,057

If he wanted the Hindenburg to fly, she had to be inflated with flammable hydrogen.

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00:05:34,057 --> 00:05:39,057

In early March 1936, the Hindenburg was ready.

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00:05:40,057 --> 00:05:46,056

Accompanied by the Graf Zeppelin, the Hindenburg set out on a three-day propaganda flight.

47

00:05:50,055 --> 00:05:55,055

Ekener complained loudly and publicly about what he considered to be the misuse of his airships.

48

00:05:56,055 --> 00:06:02,054

The furious propaganda minister forbade the German press to ever mention Ekener's name again.

49

00:06:04,054 --> 00:06:09,053

Earlier, Ekener's anti-Nazi sentiments had brought him into disfavor with the Third Reich.

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00:06:10,053 --> 00:06:13,053

He was removed as director of the Zeppelin Company.

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00:06:14,053 --> 00:06:16,053

The airships sailed on.

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00:06:17,053 --> 00:06:21,052

Named for the former German president, the Hindenburg was the symbol of the new Nazi era.

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00:06:34,051 --> 00:06:39,050

The 1936 Olympics were to be a showcase for the master race.

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00:06:47,049 --> 00:06:53,049

In the wake of Jesse Owen's four gold medals, the stunned Nazis turned to the Hindenburg to regain their lost prestige.

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00:07:06,047 --> 00:07:11,047

In 1936, the Hindenburg was re-established.

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00:07:16,046 --> 00:07:21,046

In 1936, the Hindenburg made ten flights from Germany to the United States.

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00:07:22,046 --> 00:07:26,045

Almost every crossing set a new transatlantic speed record.

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00:07:31,045 --> 00:07:39,044

In her first year, the Hindenburg logged almost 200,000 miles, carrying over 2,600 passengers.

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00:07:40,044 --> 00:07:46,043

Jogging at Lakehurst, the Hindenburg was reunited with her smaller sister ship, the Los Angeles.

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00:07:49,043 --> 00:07:56,042

Ekener's joy in the Hindenburg's success was dampened by the fact that she was now piloted by Captain Ernst Lehmann,

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00:07:56,042 --> 00:07:59,042

the new head of the nationalized Zeppelin Company.

62

00:08:01,041 --> 00:08:08,041

In spite of increasing international tensions, the Zeppelin Company established an ambitious passenger schedule for 1937.

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00:08:10,040 --> 00:08:14,040

18 flights from Germany to Lakehurst were planned for the Hindenburg.

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00:08:16,040 --> 00:08:23,039

Almost immediately after the announcement of the schedule, the German Embassy in Washington began receiving threats against the airship.

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00:08:25,039 --> 00:08:30,038

Warnings came by phone and mail that the Hindenburg would be destroyed at Lakehurst.

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00:08:31,038 --> 00:08:41,037

When the Hindenburg was ready to leave on her first US flight of 1937, the ship was thoroughly searched for any kind of destructive device.

67

00:08:42,037 --> 00:08:45,037

Passengers' luggage was also carefully inspected.

68

00:08:46,037 --> 00:08:56,035

Although this flight would be commanded by Captain Max Proust, Captain Lehmann decided to go along, hoping his presence would help alleviate the rumors of sabotage.

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00:09:01,035 --> 00:09:06,034

The Hindenburg was ready. Captain Proust gave the launch command, up ship.

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00:09:10,034 --> 00:09:15,033

The Hindenburg lifted off from Frankfurt in the evening of May 3rd, 1937.

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00:09:16,033 --> 00:09:23,033

The 97 people on board expected the flight to be as routine as several years of passenger service had proven it could be.

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00:09:24,032 --> 00:09:34,031

The route across Europe was determined by international politics. The Hindenburg flew across Holland to the English Channel.

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00:09:36,031 --> 00:09:39,031

By May 4th, the Hindenburg was over the North Atlantic.

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00:09:40,031 --> 00:09:46,030

Violent storms and strong headwinds reduced her speed to only 60 miles per hour.

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00:09:47,030 --> 00:09:54,029

Unaffected by the turbulence outside, passengers settled down to a meal of rind salmon ala Hindenburg.

76

00:09:56,029 --> 00:10:01,028

The great airship flew on smoothly through the storms and lightning that would delay her arrival.

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00:10:06,028 --> 00:10:14,027

In the afternoon of May 5th, the cloud cover broke long enough for passengers to catch a glimpse of North America, the southern tip of Newfoundland.

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00:10:16,027 --> 00:10:22,026

Throughout the night, the Hindenburg sailed down the Canadian coast, headed for the United States.

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00:10:24,026 --> 00:10:30,025

The morning of May 6th found the Hindenburg over a foggy Boston, 10 hours behind schedule.

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00:10:31,025 --> 00:10:39,024

As she flew further south, the clouds cleared. The Hindenburg came to New York City in bright sunshine.

81

00:10:40,024 --> 00:10:51,023

As the Hindenburg left New York, Lakehurst radioed that a weather front was moving into the New Jersey area.

82

00:10:55,023 --> 00:11:03,022

The Hindenburg reached Lakehurst at 4 in the afternoon, but gusty winds and rain made an immediate landing impossible.

83

00:11:04,022 --> 00:11:10,021

She turned east, back out to sea, to ride out the storm over the New Jersey coast.

84

00:11:11,021 --> 00:11:15,021

She would have to wait three more hours before reaching her final resting place.

85

00:11:20,020 --> 00:11:23,020

5 p.m. May 6th, 1937.

86

00:11:24,020 --> 00:11:30,019

The airship Hindenburg cruised off the New Jersey coast, waiting for the weather to clear at Lakehurst.

87

00:11:33,019 --> 00:11:42,018

At 6.23 p.m., Lakehurst radioed, recommend landing now. Captain Proust acknowledged and set course for Lakehurst.

88

00:11:46,017 --> 00:11:52,017

Radio commentator Herb Morrison recorded her arrival for the first transcontinental broadcast.

89

00:11:53,016 --> 00:11:55,016

Well, here it comes, ladies and gentlemen, and what a great sight it is.

90

00:11:55,016 --> 00:12:00,016

A thrilling one. The ship is riding majestically toward us like some great feather.

91

00:12:01,016 --> 00:12:06,015

Newsreel cameras word as water ballast was released to bring the ship into trim.

92

00:12:06,015 --> 00:12:10,015

The ship was no doubt busting with activities we can see. Orders were shot as a crew.

93

00:12:10,015 --> 00:12:15,014

The passenger problem was lining. The wind was looking down the field ahead of them, getting their glimpse of the mooring mass.

94

00:12:15,014 --> 00:12:20,014

It's practically standing still now. They've dropped ropes out of the nose of the ship.

95

00:12:20,014 --> 00:12:23,013

It's been taken a hold of down on the field by a number of men.

96

00:12:23,013 --> 00:12:28,013

At starting to rain again, the rain had slacked up a little bit.

97

00:12:29,013 --> 00:12:33,012

They back motors of the ship are just holding it just enough to keep it from...

98

00:12:33,012 --> 00:12:36,012

It's rusting, it's rusting, it's getting started, it's getting started.

99

00:12:36,012 --> 00:12:41,011

It's rising terrible. Whoa, I get out of the way, please.

100

00:12:41,011 --> 00:12:44,011

It's running, rusting, it's falling on the mooring mass.

101

00:12:44,011 --> 00:12:49,010

Now the folks between the beds are terrible. This is one of the worst disaster in the world.

102

00:12:49,010 --> 00:12:54,010

It's still... it's rusting, it's falling 400, 500 feet into the sky.

103

00:12:54,010 --> 00:12:56,010

And it's a terrific great lady.

104

00:12:56,010 --> 00:13:01,009

The children have spoken in slave style and they claim it's rising to the ground.

105

00:13:01,009 --> 00:13:03,009

Not quite to the mooring mass.

106

00:13:03,009 --> 00:13:07,008

Oh, the humanity. All the passengers, me be gone.

107

00:13:07,008 --> 00:13:11,008

I told them I can't talk to people.

108

00:13:11,008 --> 00:13:13,008

The friends are out there.

109

00:13:13,008 --> 00:13:18,007

I can't talk, ladies and gentlemen.

110

00:13:18,007 --> 00:13:22,007

Honest, it's just late now, the mass is smoking wreckage.

111

00:13:22,007 --> 00:13:25,007

And everybody is getting out of the way.

112

00:13:25,007 --> 00:13:28,006

It's a great lady. I'm sorry.

113

00:13:28,006 --> 00:13:31,006

Honestly, I can hardly breathe.

114

00:13:31,006 --> 00:13:34,006

I'm going to step inside while I cannot see it.

115

00:13:34,006 --> 00:13:37,005

It's starting, it's terrible.

116

00:13:37,005 --> 00:13:39,005

I can.

117

00:13:39,005 --> 00:13:42,005

Let's hope I'm going to have to stop for a minute

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00:13:42,005 --> 00:13:46,004

because I've lost the voices. It's the worst thing I've ever witnessed.

119

00:13:53,004 --> 00:14:00,003

Even today, the disaster is vivid in the memories of those who witnessed the crash.

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00:14:00,003 --> 00:14:05,002

A member of the ground crew was directly beneath the Hindenburg when she exploded.

121

00:14:05,002 --> 00:14:07,002

Lawrence Thomas.

122

00:14:07,002 --> 00:14:11,002

My job was to have what they call a spider line.

123

00:14:11,002 --> 00:14:13,001

I would hook the spider line onto the ship

124

00:14:13,001 --> 00:14:20,001

and there would be eight men would spread out with the different ropes and pull just as hard as they could.

125

00:14:20,001 --> 00:14:26,000

So just as I was reaching for the rope to put my spider line on,

126

00:14:26,000 --> 00:14:30,000

she went boom and it blew it right out of my hand.

127

00:14:30,000 --> 00:14:34,999

And matter of fact, if I remember correctly, I think most of us went off our feet.

128

00:14:34,999 --> 00:14:39,998

Stanley True worked at the Lakehurst base as an ambulance driver.

129

00:14:39,998 --> 00:14:45,998

They asked us to take the two commanding officers, which was Captain Proust and Captain Lehman.

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00:14:45,998 --> 00:14:48,998

We proceeded to put them in our ambulances.

131

00:14:48,998 --> 00:14:54,997

Captain Proust, who was I was attending in the ambulance, was burnt from head to foot,

132

00:14:54,997 --> 00:14:59,996

but he was in perfect spirits. Captain Lehman seemed to me like he was gone.

133

00:15:01,996 --> 00:15:06,996

Miraculously, 62 people on board the Hindenburg escaped from the flames.

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00:15:06,996 --> 00:15:09,995

The death toll was 36.

135

00:15:09,995 --> 00:15:14,995

13 passengers, 22 crew members and one groundsman.

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00:15:15,995 --> 00:15:20,994

Captain Proust did recover, but Captain Lehman died from his burns.

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00:15:20,994 --> 00:15:24,994

The Hindenburg herself was the last of her kind.

138

00:15:29,993 --> 00:15:36,992

The 13 passengers killed in the Hindenburg crash were the only passenger fatalities in the Zeppelin Company's 30-year history.

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00:15:36,992 --> 00:15:40,992

The reason for the fire that consumed the Great Airship was obvious.

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00:15:40,992 --> 00:15:45,991

The 7 million cubic feet of volatile hydrogen gas contained in the hull.

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00:15:45,991 --> 00:15:49,991

The reason why the fire started has been a source of controversy to this day.

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00:15:49,991 --> 00:15:52,991

Was it accident or sabotage?

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00:15:53,991 --> 00:15:57,990

One man has spent a lifetime sifting the evidence.

144

00:15:57,990 --> 00:16:03,989

World authority on airships and author of numerous books on the subject, Dr. Douglas Robinson.

145

00:16:03,989 --> 00:16:06,989

I've never been satisfied that the ship was sabotaged.

146

00:16:06,989 --> 00:16:10,989

I don't think there's an adequate proof of a plot to do so.

147

00:16:10,989 --> 00:16:15,988

I believe that there was an accidental ignition of leaking hydrogen.

148

00:16:15,988 --> 00:16:24,987

There is no doubt at all that the ship landed in a condition where there is a very high electrical potential difference right after a thunderstorm.

149

00:16:24,987 --> 00:16:31,986

After she dropped her landing rope, she was discharging the static electricity into the atmosphere.

150

00:16:31,986 --> 00:16:37,986

The other question, of course, is there is obviously free hydrogen that was ignited by the brush discharge.

151

00:16:37,986 --> 00:16:39,986

How was there free hydrogen present?

152

00:16:39,986 --> 00:16:44,985

And there's quite a number of arguments about that and there's certainly no agreement.

153

00:16:44,985 --> 00:16:50,984

How could hydrogen have escaped from the gas-tight bags? How could it have ignited?

154

00:16:50,984 --> 00:16:58,984

Theories were debated immediately after the disaster at a board of inquiry convened by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

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00:16:58,984 --> 00:17:03,983

Germany sent an official commission headed by Hugo Ekener.

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00:17:03,983 --> 00:17:09,982

Airship officials from both countries looked to Ekener to provide the answers.

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00:17:09,982 --> 00:17:16,982

Ekener speculated that a bracing wire inside the hull had broken during landing maneuvers in the gusty winds.

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00:17:16,982 --> 00:17:21,981

The broken wire slashed open a gas cell, allowing hydrogen to escape.

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00:17:22,981 --> 00:17:29,980

It was then ignited by static electricity, sometimes called St. Elmo's Fire.

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00:17:29,980 --> 00:17:37,979

Ekener's theory was accepted as the official conclusion by both American and German investigators.

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00:17:37,979 --> 00:17:42,979

Everybody involved in the accident investigation assumed that there had been St. Elmo's Fire,

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00:17:42,979 --> 00:17:46,978

but nobody had actually seen it among the witnesses who appeared.

163

00:17:46,978 --> 00:17:51,978

I think this was because they were all standing underneath the ship and couldn't see what was going on on top.

164

00:17:51,978 --> 00:17:56,977

Quite a few years ago I interviewed a couple who were standing outside the main gate of the air station

165

00:17:56,977 --> 00:18:00,977

and had quite a different view of the disaster. They were about a quarter mile away.

166

00:18:00,977 --> 00:18:07,976

They saw it silhouetted against the evening sky and both of them observed a dim blue flame flickering along the full length of the top of the ship

167

00:18:07,976 --> 00:18:14,975

and even had time to exchange some remarks about it before there was a sudden yellow flaming burst of burning hydrogen

168

00:18:14,975 --> 00:18:20,975

just ahead of the upper fin. So I see a field, no doubt whatever, there was St. Elmo's Fire

169

00:18:20,975 --> 00:18:23,974

and it did set fire to escaping hydrogen.

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00:18:23,974 --> 00:18:27,974

Many present at the board of inquiry however disagreed.

171

00:18:27,974 --> 00:18:33,973

They argued that the ship had been subjected to much greater stress without wires breaking

172

00:18:33,973 --> 00:18:38,973

and that St. Elmo's Fire was not powerful enough to ignite hydrogen gas.

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00:18:38,973 --> 00:18:44,972

They believed the Hindenburg had been destroyed by another cause, sabotage.

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00:18:44,972 --> 00:18:50,971

I spent a morning with Captain Cruz, the captain of the Hindenburg at the time of the fire in 1957.

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00:18:50,971 --> 00:18:54,971

He by then had convinced himself that the ship was sabotaged

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00:18:54,971 --> 00:19:01,970

and insisted that a particular passenger had used various excuses of being the tail of the ship to plant a bomb.

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00:19:02,970 --> 00:19:11,969

The sabotage threats received by the German Embassy before the Hindenburg took off were brought up in the testimony at the inquiry in 1937

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00:19:11,969 --> 00:19:13,969

but they were not pursued.

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00:19:16,969 --> 00:19:27,968

Because official investigations were clouded by diplomatic considerations, it may never be known whether the Hindenburg was destroyed by accident or by sabotage.

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00:19:28,967 --> 00:19:36,967

Either way, it is likely that there would have been no fire if the ship had been filled with helium instead of hydrogen.

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00:19:36,967 --> 00:19:46,965

Had it not been for the strained international politics of the 1930s, the tragedy of the great airship Hindenburg might never have occurred.

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00:19:51,965 --> 00:19:56,964

The Hindenburg crash sounded the death knell for giant passenger airships.

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00:19:58,964 --> 00:20:06,963

Today, however, there is no longer the risk of fire that threatened the hydrogen-filled dirigibles. Helium is easily available.

184

00:20:07,963 --> 00:20:11,963

Perhaps commercial lighter-than-air service has a future after all.

185

00:20:12,963 --> 00:20:15,962

Goodyear Public Relations spokesman Ron Bell.

186

00:20:16,962 --> 00:20:25,961

With the fuel efficiency of the airship and the energy considerations of today and our modern technology and 50 years of experience in airship manufacturing

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00:20:25,961 --> 00:20:29,961

we are going to be able to build a far superior airship to what they had in the days of the Hindenburg.

188

00:20:30,961 --> 00:20:39,960

We have two airships currently that we have designed. One of them is the heavy lifters, 450 feet long and capable of carrying 75 tons of cargo.

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00:20:39,960 --> 00:20:49,959

The other airship is the coastal patrol airship and it's 320 feet long and able to patrol international as well as domestic borders.

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00:20:49,959 --> 00:20:56,958

They have a very real feasibility. They're far more economical than aircraft and faster than ships for cargo transportation.

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00:20:57,958 --> 00:21:03,957

In Europe and America, a number of companies are designing and testing a new generation of lighter-than-air craft.

192

00:21:04,957 --> 00:21:09,957

Perhaps the airship business is about to take up with a Hindenburg left off.

193

00:21:09,957 --> 00:21:21,955

Coming up next, 20th century with Mike Wallace puts perspective on the 1970 killing of four Kent State students by the National Guard.

194

00:21:22,955 --> 00:21:30,954

Then from the Western Front through Patton's Race to Berlin to Desert Storm, it's the story of hell

on wheels, tank divisions on weapons at war.