Hindenburg 80 Years Ago

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Eighty years ago Ocean County witnessed one of the greatest aerial engineering marvels ever created, as the German Zeppelin *HINDENBURG* became a regular sight local skies during her brief, exciting year of transatlantic service in 1936-1937. The U.S. Navy's giant airship hangar and Lighter-Than-Air facilities at the Naval Air Station Lakehurst, NJ had for over a decade hosted operations by the giant rigid airships of the U.S. Navy as well as the *HINDENBURG's* predecessor, the *GRAF ZEPPELIN*. But with the famed Navy airships *SHENANDOAH, AKRON* and *MACON* lost in deadly, high-profile operating accidents between 1925 and 1935 and the *LOS ANGELES* grounded in 1932 due to old age, impatient eyes of the aviation-minded public turned to Germany's new "Queen Of The Skies" which entered service in the Spring of 1936 with trips to both Lakehurst and South America that seemed to be on the brink of revolutionizing commercial air travel.

With a length of 804 feet, standing 146 feet tall and capable of speeds over 80 miles per hour, the Zeppelin was capable of crossing the ocean with a load of passengers, mail and freight in less than three days, more than twice the speed of the fastest steamships. And while the giant airship could not carry one-tenth the passenger load of an ocean liner and could not offer grand salons and deck space, the HINDENBURG's ability to carry up to 70 passengers and 10,000 lbs of express freight and mail non-stop for 10,000 miles compared favorably with the newest airplanes of the day which could only a few dozen passengers on hops of generally 500 miles or less.

For comparison's sake, it could be said that Lakehurst with its giant airships and "best and brightest" personnel and technology was the "Cape Canaveral" of its day and likewise the *HINDENBURG*, with its exclusive premium-priced express transoceanic service was the "Concorde Of Its Day." And all this was taking place against a backdrop of failure of the big airships in American service, despite the fact that the United States was the only country that possessed non-flammable helium gas and the new *HINDENBURG*, lifted (as were all 117 of her German-built predecessors) by cheap but highly-inflammable hydrogen gas was a firmly-subsidized representative of the new Nazi regime, bearing giant swastika flags on her tail fins in an image that caused increasing unrest and resentment in many of the places she visited. As much a propaganda symbol as of Hitler's "new Germany" as she was a symbol of forward strides in aerial commerce, she would forever infamously be known as the "Nazi Zeppelin."

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Over 2000 passengers safely and reliably carried on 10 round trips between Germany and Lakehurst in 1936, another 7 round trips between Germany and South America, in addition to flights over Nazi propaganda events and a much-heralded appearance over the opening of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Over 60 flights and an unprecedented 3000 flight hours racked up in the first full year of operation. Though the ticket price was $400 one way (the equivalent of about $25,000 today) the Zeppelin was particularly popular with American business travelers who found her fast passage provided a convenient "edge" in transatlantic business ventures. The mail/package freight business was busy if not thriving.

When the *HINDENBURG* left Frankfurt on the evening of May 3, 1937, she was well on her way to having established a routine passenger service operation. The 9-year-old *GRAF ZEPPELIN* was still holding down a regular bi-weekly service to South America, a new sister ship of the *HINDENBURG* had been under construction for nearly a year and would be launched that summer. It was not unreasonable to assume that 1937 would be a busy year for the *HINDENBURG* and her operators at the Zeppelin Company. With money being made available by the Nazi regime, plans were moving forward at a rapid rate; it was anticipated that there would be a half-dozen big Zeppelins in service between Germany and North/South America by 1940 and 40-50 ships linking the cities of the entire globe by 1945. Increasing tensions of the display of the swastika emblem using an American military landing facility saw the Germans hoping to establish separate commercial operating terminals outside Washington and Chicago, while an American operating partnership and access to restricted supplies of non-flammable American helium were deemed eventually essential.

And things were going to have to start happening fast; as impressive as her service was, the Zeppelin was operating in a narrowing window of opportunity. Bigger, cheaper, mass-produced airplanes were flying faster and farther with greater reliability and comfort with every month that passed. Such an expensive service would "pay and stay" only as long as it could be counted on as the fastest mode of transport.

Such was the situation on the night of May 6, 1937 as the *HINDENBURG* approached Lakehurst some 12-hours late on the occasion of her first arrival of the 1937 operating season. A large crowd had gathered despite rain and thunderstorms. While it was a slated to be a dull, routine landing with no celebrities aboard the HINDENBURG was expected to be fully-provisioned and headed back to Germany with 72 passengers in only 4-5 hours "turnaround time." It was shortly after 715pm as a young radio announcer named Herb Morrison described her arrival as "floating in like some great feather…. a great floating palace."