

80 Years Ago in May: The Day I Saw the Hindenburg

By Irv Sternberg

May 6 marks the 80th anniversary of one of the most startling events in aviation history.

On that day the LZ129 Hindenburg, the first airliner to provide regularly-scheduled service between Europe and North America, was due to arrive in New Jersey. The German-built 800-foot zeppelin, held aloft by 200,000 cubic feet of hydrogen, was the object of much excitement, and my dad had decided he would take the family for a drive to the countryside to see it.

Early that afternoon, we left our home in Newark and headed toward the Jersey Shore where the Hindenburg, as large as an ocean liner, was scheduled to fly along the coastline before turning inland to the Lakehurst Naval Air Station for landing. It had departed three days earlier, carrying 61 crewmen and 36 wealthy VIPs who had booked round-trip passage for \$810 per person for a double room or \$1150 for a single. Many of the passengers were planning to return to London to attend the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth the following week. About 4 p.m., the ship flew at low altitude over Manhattan so the passengers could get a good look at Central Park and the skyscrapers, just ahead of approaching thunderstorms. The craft arrived at the Jersey Shore about 5 p.m. when rain started falling.

We spotted the Hindenburg somewhere between the Shore and the Naval Base. My dad pulled over on a country road and we scrambled out to get a good look. Overhead, the silvery-gray zeppelin was the shape of a sleek cigar. It glided by almost silently, its engines quiet as a small lawnmower.

We watched it until it flew out of view, then my dad headed home. We knew the ship would conduct a “flying moor” at the Naval Station, whereby it would drop lines to the ground where a crew would anchor it to a mooring tower much like a sailing vessel is moored to a dock. Not until we got home later that evening did we learn that what had happened to the Hindenburg shocked the world of aviation and remains memorable 80 years later.

About 7 p.m. the Hindenburg had reached Lakehurst and a light rain began to fall again. Near the mooring tower, the crew dropped the mooring lines. A few minutes later, witnesses on the ground saw a dim blue flame near the stern, and then a fire erupted on top of the ship. Seconds later, the entire craft was engulfed in flames. Some people jumped from the ship and were killed in the fall. Others burned to death on board, or died of smoke inhalation. Of the 62 survivors, many were severely injured.

The next day, Chicago radio station WLS broadcast Herbert Morrison’s riveting eye-witness account of the disaster during which he described the horror with the words: “Oh, the humanity!” and cried uncontrollably that he couldn’t bear to watch it.

Many theories for the cause of the disaster have lingered: sabotage, lightning, hydrogen lighted by a static spark, and more. Whatever the cause, it was the end of the zeppelin as a flying luxury hotel. But the memory of the disaster lingers on.