

# Remembering the Hindenburg: 75 Years After the Disaster

By Graelyn Brashear



*Hindenburg on an early visit to Lakehurst Hangar One.*

Photo Credit: Kevin Pace Collection

**F**ew are alive today who can remember, but in the 1920s and '30s, giant passenger airships were a regular sight over the Jersey Shore. The shiny silver Zeppelins floated into Ocean County from transatlantic trips on their way to a mooring mast at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station, carrying wealthy travelers taking advantage of the newest, fastest method of passenger transportation on earth.

But everything changed 75 years ago this May, when the Hindenburg, the largest airship of its day, caught fire and burned while landing at Lakehurst, killing 36 people in a catastrophe captured on film and seen all over the world.

The event changed air travel forever, said Kevin Mulligan, one of more than 200 volunteers who support the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society, which maintains a museum near the site of the crash and has led tours of the site for decades.

“In 34 seconds, it destroyed forever the possibility of the rigid airship as a viable means of transporting people and products,” he said.

## The Airship in Ocean

Zeppelin travel had put Lakehurst on the map by the '20s, said Kevin Pace, Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commissioner and a curator with the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society. The Naval station was outfitted to receive the first trans-Atlantic airships, making it the country's first international airport. By the start of the Hindenburg's second season of flights, in 1937, said Pace, the coming and going of giant airships was relatively common spectacle for residents of Ocean County.

“My mother was in Seaside Park when the Graf Zeppelin arrived on its first trip in 1928,” said Pace, whose family has deep roots in the area. “She could look up from the beach and see the people waving out the windows.”

*Continued on page 8*

In the '20s and '30s, the world believed airships were the future of flight. The giant flying machines, built by the German Zeppelin corporation, could cross the Atlantic in as little as 58 hours, said Navy Lakehurst Historical Society tour guide Don Adams, but in 1937, a ticket on the Hindenburg cost the same as a five-to-seven-day ocean liner crossing – about \$450.

Kevin Mulligan likened the fervor over all things airship to that surrounding the early space flights in the '60s. “Everyone was Zeppelin crazy,” he said. Little boys carried toy airships and wanted to grow up to be commanders. People clamored to buy special Hindenburg stamps so they could send their letters by airship mail.

During its inaugural season in 1936, the Hindenburg made 17 round trips across the Atlantic, carrying everything from postcards to a full-sized elephant, said Adams. Passengers, including many celebrities and dignitaries, would disembark at Lakehurst and hop on a small plane to fly to Newark, where they could then board planes to take them all over the country, he said.

That summer, the Hindenburg was a major tourist draw. Adams said the Central Railroad offered cheap tickets that allowed Shore residents to travel to the base, picnic baskets in hand, and watch the giant ship land and take off. But few tourists were on hand for the Hindenburg’s ill-fated first 1937 arrival. The novelty of the dramatic landing had worn off, said Adams.

## Disaster Strikes

“May 6, 1937 was a really nasty day,” Adams said. “High winds, heavy rain, lightning all over the place.” A slow crossing and the bad local weather had put the ship about eight hours behind schedule. But when the Hindenburg finally approached Lakehurst at 7 p.m., the 250 men required to land her – including many local civilians who were paid \$1 a day and a sandwich for their labor – were ready.

After a few attempts, the crew dipped the ship low over the landing field, said Adams, dropping the ropes that were be used to manhandle all 803 feet of it to the ground. The crews wrestled with the ship as they would an oversized Macy’s parade balloon, he said, and began the process of mooring it. Meanwhile, newsmen shot footage of the ship’s first landing of the year.

What happened then is still a mystery.

Today, most historians believe some kind of electricity – a static spark, or possibly lightning – ignited hydrogen leaking from the rigid ship’s interior gas cells. Some at the time believed a saboteur planted a bomb. Since none of the cameras filming the landing captured the initial fire, said Mulligan, no one can be sure. But shortly before 7:30 p.m., flames burst from the rear of the Zeppelin. Newsreels from the time show it all: The vast airship was consumed from within as the hydrogen cells caught and burned in enormous, mushrooming clouds of flame and smoke. The aluminum alloy skeleton settled to the ground, collapsing

*Continued on page 9*



*Hindenburg ignites on May 6 - 1937.  
Photo Credit: Ocean County Collection*

on itself. The destruction took only half a minute.

Kevin Pace's grandfather – a man he never met, but whose stories lived on as family lore – worked at the Lakehurst base helping to build the Navy's own airships. As chance would have it, he was home the night of May 6, repairing his garage roof just nine miles from the field where the Hindenburg was scheduled to land. There was no explosion, Pace said, "but the sounds that it made as the gas cells erupted – my grandfather had a very good idea what it was. From the garage roof, he could look over toward the base and he saw a large cloud of black smoke."

The family raced to Toms River to see if they could learn what had happened. Eventually, everyone learned the scope of the disaster.

## The Human Toll and the Death of an Industry

Of 36 passengers and 61 crew members on board the Hindenburg, 13 passengers and 22 crewmen died, along with one worker on the ground, said Adams. Many simply didn't have time to escape the interior of the ship before the hot, fast-burning flames destroyed it. It wasn't the worst airship disaster in history, Mulligan pointed out. But it devastated the public's confidence in "lighter-than-air" travel.

"This was one of the first major catastrophes caught on film," he said. And soon the images were everywhere, paired with the emotional narration of well-known broadcaster Herbert Morrison, a Chicago radio man who had been on the scene to record a feature on the Hindenburg for his audience back home.

Other factors hastened the death of airship travel. The premier commercial manufacturer, Zeppelin, was a German company with strong ties to the rising Nazi regime, Pace explained. Hitler wanted to put his stamp on his nation's most impressive industry, and he did, literally: A swastika was emblazoned on the Hindenburg's tail, visible to all who saw her as she flew around the globe.

But just a few short years after the Hindenburg disaster wrecked public confidence, Europe – and ultimately the globe – was engulfed in World War II. Airships weren't practical as war machines. They were too noticeable and too slow, Mulligan and Adams explained. New technological advancements focused on airplanes. And whatever hopes Germany had for a revival of its airship industry were swept away with the axis powers' defeat.



Rare Promotional Interior – Early color image  
Showing observation windows.  
Photo Credit: Kevin Pace Collection

But the Hindenburg and the era it ushered to a close live on in Ocean County.

## History on Display

Hangar #1, the vast man-made cavern built in 1921 at the Lakehurst base to house airships, is visible from miles away. Added to the national register of historic sites in 1968, it's now home to the headquarters of the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society, whose 200-plus volunteers keep the legacy of the

*Continued on page 10*

Hindenburg and airship travel alive. Don Adams, Kevin Mulligan and others lead tours of the crash site and the hangar several times a month, letting visitors soak in the story of the disaster in the very place it happened.

Out on the landing field, surrounded by acres of empty land, Adams narrates the tragedy at the memorial marker on the site of the crash. The Navy vet, who worked on the base during his career, has been leading tours on the base for more than two decades.

“This is as far as she got,” he said on one recent winter morning. Under his feet was a concrete outline of the Hindenburg’s control car. “Where you’re standing is where the gondola came down.”

After he shared the story of the disaster in vivid detail, he moved the tour inside the hangar, where the Historical Society’s large collection of Hindenburg artifacts and displays is housed in a side room. Kevin Mulligan, who frequently leads school tours of the site, led the way to the hangar itself.

“There’s no way to capture it on camera,” he said. It’s true: At 807 feet long, 262 feet wide and 224 feet high, the hangar has to be seen to be believed. When built, said Mulligan, it was the largest room without interior floor support in the world.

Its days of housing giant airships are over, but there’s still plenty to see. The Historical Society is painstakingly restoring a life-sized model of the Hindenburg’s control gondola, one of the movie props in the 1975 film about the disaster. A retractable ladder used in the construction of rigid air ships, carefully refurbished to period accuracy, stands nearby. And as history has churned on, the site has become important for other reasons. A recreated aircraft carrier deck now occupies a portion of the hangar floor, allowing Naval trainees to learn the complicated skill of managing landings at sea in a safe environment. Below, the society has installed a museum tracing decades of military machines – ships, planes and tanks – through model representations, as well as a display dedicated to the country’s POWs and MIAs.

The museum and the tours are labors of love for the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society volunteers, said Mulligan. “We’re all here for the same purpose, which is to maintain this, and keep this history alive,” he said. In the 75 years since the Hindenburg disaster, the impact of the horrific crash hasn’t worn away completely. But its legacy in Ocean County isn’t just one of tragedy. The history of an industry and an era are encapsulated in the place where the Hindenburg met its end.

And that’s a good thing, said Mulligan, because it will always be there for future generations. “Thankfully, this is a national historic site,” he said, “and it can never be destroyed.”

### **Facts About the Hindenburg**

- Construction on the airship began in Germany in 1931, and the Hindenburg’s first flight was in March, 1936
- The Hindenburg was originally intended to be 812 feet long. However, Hangar #1 at the Lakehurst Naval base, the only facility on the east coast anywhere near large enough to house a Zeppelin of the Hindenburg’s size, was only 806 feet long, requiring the German engineers to shave down the length of the ship and ultimately build it 803 feet long.
- Unlike blimps, the Hindenburg and other Zeppelins of its class were not air-filled balloons themselves. Instead, a rigid outer skin contained a number of gas cells suspended within an aluminum alloy framework. This allowed passenger facilities to be built within the aerodynamic skin as well.
- Despite the fact that it was kept aloft by highly flammable hydrogen, the Hindenburg’s passenger decks included a smoking room, separated from the rest of the passenger facilities by a pressure-locked door.
- Zeppelins could fly high if they needed to, but as a passenger ship, the Hindenburg rarely flew more than about 1,500 feet, even over the Atlantic. Passengers could look out the window and see whales.