The Hindenburg

Dwarving anything that has ever flown, before or since, the Zeppelin remains the most luxurious mode of travel ever known.

It is now nearly forty years since the short, spectacular career of the Hindenburg ended abruptly in a holocaust at Lakehurst, New Jersey. So brief was its era, so awesome were its dimensions, so opulent were its accommodations, and so horrific was its end, that today the whole age of Zeppelin travel seems like an elaborate fantasy from another time.

Indeed, the sight of the Hindenburg seemed unreal to many an onlooker. Massive as an ocean liner, blotting out the sun as it floated majestically and effortlessly by, this great silver ship of the air defied all probability. But the airships were real. And for all the achievements of our aerospace age, they have in many respects never since been equaled.

Length, girth, and bulk. At 803 feet in length and 137 feet in diameter, the Hindenburg was an airborne superlative. 7,000,000 cubic feet of volatile hydrogen was contained in 16 giant gas cells, lifting nearly half a million pounds into the sky. For all its size, the Hindenburg was lighter than air.

Power and speed. The Hindenburg was pushed along at 80 M.P.H. by four 1,520 horsepower diesel engines. The voyage from Germany to America took 52 hours. Slow by jet standards, but twice as fast as steamships. And this in 1936—three years before airplanes went into transatlantic service.

Crewing Aboard the Hindenburg. A close-knit family of sixty hands manned this great Zeppelin. She was run pretty much like a sea-going ship with the men standing watches of four hours on, eight hours off. Crew specialties included rigger, machinist, radio operator, steersman. When necessary, they were capable of making major repairs to engines or fabric covering while underway.

The Passengers. With a minimum one-way fare of $400, economy was not a class aboard the Hindenburg. Never-the-less, eastbound flights rarely departed without all 70 berths filled. For the rich and adventurous, this was the way to go. And the passenger rosters read like an international Who's Who. Douglas Fairbanks with his wife, Lady Ashley. Max Schmeling heading home after beating Joe Louis. Aboard the Hindenburg, royalty, high officials, and industrialists were just the usual mob.

A Hotel On High. The Hindenburg offered the most lavish accommodations that will ever be launched into the sky. Three bars. A library. A lounge complete with a specially built aluminum piano. There was a reading and writing room. And on the promenade deck, the world gazed by beneath great picture windows.

Each stateroom was outfitted with two berths, a folding sink, a writing table, and a button which summoned wine. Even showers were available, on the deck below.

Very popular with passengers was the smoking room. Sealed by an airlock door, and pressurized against hydrogen, it was the only place aboard where smoking was allowed. It was guarded always by the vigilant bar steward.

Dinner is Served. The dining room of the Hindenburg offered some of the world’s finest cuisine. From an electric kitchen presided over by a master chef and five assistants, there came freshly baked breads and a new menu daily which included the likes of “Fattened Duckling Bavarian Style” and “Venison Cutlets Braised”.

An Aura of Safety, Serenity, and Security. The comfort of Zeppelin travel was the marvel of its age. Quieter than any other form of transportation. And rock stable through calm or squall.

The Hindenburg’s predecessor, the Graf Zeppelin, entering service in 1928, circled the globe, explored the Arctic; and provided regular passenger service to Rio de Janeiro. Over a million miles, nine years, and 16,000 passengers without a mishap.

When the Hindenburg embarked May 4, 1937 on her first voyage of her second season, she was a veteran of numerous North and South Atlantic crossings and had carried over a thousand passengers. Public confidence in Zeppelin travel was at an all time high.

Two and a half days later, she lay a charred and twisted skeleton on the sands of Lakehurst. Of 97 aboard, 35 perished — though miraculously 62 survived.

But for the Zeppelins, it was the end. And all that was really left amidst the smoking ruin was a question…

WHO DESTROYED THE HINDEenburg?