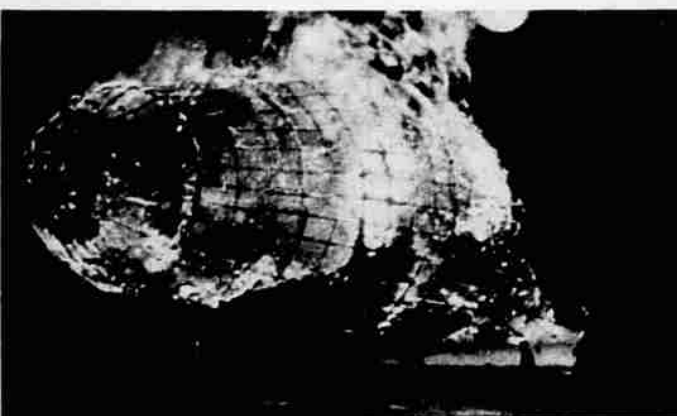


the Hindenburg

by Jerry Klein



In 34 seconds, only the dirigible skeleton remains. Now begins the grim search for 36 trapped victims. Only cinders mark "the safest aircraft ever built."

It is 20 years since a mysterious fire destroyed the world's mightiest airship and claimed 36 lives.

SEARCHLIGHTS STABBED the swastikas painted on her tail fins as the Hindenburg, world's mightiest airship, left her mooring at Frankfurt, Germany, and lifted majestically into the warm Spring evening. Four powerful Diesel engines hummed as her nose swung west and she floated away toward the Atlantic.

Queen of the air, the Hindenburg had made 20 successful crossings in 1936. Now she was starting her 1937 schedule, with 97 passengers and crew.

The pride of the Zeppelin Transport Co. was longer than a battleship and higher than most buildings. She had so many modern devices that Lloyd's of London called her "the safest aircraft ever built," and issued £500,000 insurance at a specially low premium rate.

Accommodations were extremely comfortable; the food, delightful. As usual, the passengers were taken on a tour of the ship to see its control room and the great cells of hydrogen gas that kept it afloat. But for the most part, they spent the two-day voyage reading, writing postcards, and looking down at the Atlantic far below.

On Thursday morning, May 6, the coast of New England appeared on the horizon. The captain turned

the airship south toward her mooring at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey.

The skyscrapers of New York were a thrilling sight as they came into view. At Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, the Dodgers were beating the Pirates 9 to 5. The fans looked up at the sky as the Hindenburg went over—a storm seemed to be brewing.

Along the coast of New Jersey, the sky grew darker and a blustery wind splashed rain on the airship. There were some rumbles of thunder, but still there was nothing to fear. The Hindenburg had flown through much worse weather many times.

The passengers had expected to land by 6 p. m., but the captain decided to cruise awhile to see if the rain squall wouldn't blow over. A little after 7 o'clock, he decided to come down and began releasing gas and water ballast as the Hindenburg approached her mooring mast.

Hardly anyone heard the thump that gas makes when it's lit. But at the top of the Hindenburg, near the rear fin, was a dot of something bright red.

"It's broken into flames!" a radio announcer shouted into his microphone. "It's flashing—it's flashing ter-

rible. Oh, the humanity!" Then the flames blew in, long tongues of flame, bright red. As the ship tilted, some passengers began jumping; few moved after striking the ground. In 34 seconds, the whole fiery steel skeleton of the once-proud Hindenburg crashed to earth on top of them.

Some of those who still lived fought their way from the furnace by tearing away white-hot strips of metal with their bare hands. They staggered out soaked with oil, their clothes aflame, burned to the bone. Some of the little black figures fell and rose again; others lay quietly in the glare.

A five-year-old boy dropped to his knees, crying: "Please, God, don't let my daddy die!"

A young German crewman was carried to shelter, horribly burned. "Ich lebe (I live)," he muttered. Then he died.

As he stumbled out of the flames, one of the Hindenburg's officers kept saying: "I can't understand it. I can't understand it." He too died.

Altogether, 36 persons perished, but the cause of the catastrophe was never proved. President Roosevelt sent America's condolences to Germany.

WAS IT SABOTAGE?

IT WILL be 20 years tomorrow since the mighty airship Hindenburg flashed into flame and fell to the earth at the Lakehurst (N. J.) Naval Air Station. Yet hardly a week goes by that the then commander of the station, Vice Adm. Charles E. Rosendahl, doesn't receive letters from people still speculating on the cause of the tragedy.

Admiral Rosendahl's belief, even after 20 years of investigation, is that *the Hindenburg was the victim of willful sabotage.*

Some investigators attributed the fire to a spark of static electricity igniting hydrogen gas that had leaked from the airship. For various reasons, this



Adm. Charles Rosendahl

combination of events still strikes Rosendahl as highly unlikely. The fact is, just before the Hindenburg left on its final flight, some of the officers were warned to beware of an attempt to destroy the ship. The admiral says this might have been done with an incendiary device—perhaps no larger than a fountain pen—placed near the cells containing

seven million cubic feet of highly flammable hydrogen and set to go off at a certain time.

According to Rosendahl, the passengers' baggage was searched for incendiaries before departure—but

apparently the passengers themselves were not. Judging by the time of the tragedy, the saboteur apparently wished to destroy the airship while causing the least possible danger to human life! For the Hindenburg was scheduled to leave on its return trip at 10 p. m. At about 7:30—when the fire broke out—outgoing passengers would normally not yet be aboard and incoming passengers would have long since landed. But thunderstorms delayed the landing at Lakehurst, and the blaze began just as the ship was moored.

Admiral Rosendahl says that, as is normal when landing, crew members were posted at various points in the ship. Crewmen stationed near the stern later testified to first seeing fire inside the Hindenburg, in gas cell No. 4. This was well away from the fin tip where any spark of static electricity would logically occur, and it adds weight to the admiral's theory.