



The **Hindenburg** Disaster

1 In the first half of the twentieth century travelling by air was a luxury. Wealthy passengers had the option of flying either

in cramped, noisy aeroplanes or on board gigantic airships. Airships were luxurious, with sleeping cabins, dining rooms and a viewing

deck for passengers. Also called *zeppelins*, the most famous of these airships was the German-built *Hindenburg*.

2 On May 6th, 1937, the *Hindenburg* floated majestically over the city of New York. At this point it had successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean twenty-one times, and a large crowd had gathered to witness it.

The *Hindenburg* was meant to moor at the nearby Lakehurst Air Base, however reports of an approaching thunderstorm caused the airship's crew to change their plans. For two hours the zeppelin circled the airfield, changing its course to the south in order to escape the storm. The passengers, although disappointed with the change in plans, used the delay to spend time watching the beautiful view of the ground.

3 Finally, the giant airship approached Lakehurst airfield to dock. The weather had improved slightly and the rain had slowed to a drizzle. The zeppelin released its water-filled ballast tanks, drenching the ground crew below. This slowed the descent of the airship, so that it would not crash. It was not too long before the *Hindenburg* was close enough for the crowd on the ground to wave up to individual passengers above. News reporters and camera crews were also present, recording the event.

4 Just as it was about to dock, witnesses heard a hollow "thump" from the back of the airship,

sending a ripple throughout its frame. A bright flash burst from the ship; it was obvious that something had gone very wrong. Smiling faces were blanched with terror and people ran in panic to escape; the Lakehurst ground crew included. Inside, everything was thrown all over the place as the ship tilted backwards. People tried to brace themselves and avoid being thrown around. Seconds later, the entire airship was engulfed in flames. The *Hindenburg* was now a giant fireball crashing out of the sky in an horrific sight. Herbert Morrison, a radio reporter who was at the field, summed up this disaster with his famous quote, "Oh, the humanity!"

5 The *Hindenburg* had large bladders or balloons filled with a flammable gas called hydrogen. These were all igniting and bursting open in flames. Passengers were overcome with smoke and the screams of terror could be heard everywhere. Many people jumped from the fireball before the airship crashed into the ground tail first. Those still on board came crashing to the ground with it. People could be seen running and even crawling from the wreck with their clothes on fire. Brave onlookers raced in to save these survivors.

6 In less than one minute the *Hindenburg* had gone from luxury airship to melted wreck. More than 30 people died and many were injured. Remarkably though, most people on the flight survived. This horrific accident ended the era of luxury airship travel.

7 Some researchers now believe that it was not the hydrogen igniting that caused the explosion, but rather it was the coating on the cotton fabric of the airship. This coating was made up of iron oxide and aluminium, two materials that are so flammable they are used to make rocket fuel. While there are many theories about how this substance was ignited, a number believe that there was a spark of static electricity when the *Hindenburg's* first mooring line touched the ground. This in turn ignited the coating on the airship, with explosive results.

8 Today, airships are only used for advertising and there are plans to use airships for transporting heavy cargo. Passenger flights may even be resumed, which could be very popular once again. It is important and reassuring to note though that the modern breeds of airships are now filled with helium, a nonflammable gas.



Questions

- 1 Travel on the *Hindenburg* was
 - a uncomfortable.
 - b less comfortable than on an aeroplane.
 - c more comfortable than on an aeroplane
- 2 The *Hindenburg* didn't moor at the correct time because
 - a storms were expected.
 - b they were waiting for a bigger crowd.
 - c they had engine trouble.
- 3 Why was water released from the ballast tanks?
 - a to drench the people below
 - b to speed up the landing
 - c to control the descent
- 4 The first sign of trouble was when
 - a a thump was heard.
 - b a bright flash was seen.
 - c everybody was thrown all over the place.
- 5 At the time they believed
 - a the fabric coating caused the inferno.
 - b the hydrogen caused the inferno.
 - c lightning caused the inferno.
- 6 What might entice people back to using airships?
 - a They can be made larger.
 - b They can carry heavy cargo.
 - c They are safer because they are filled with helium.

Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section shown in brackets.

- 7 Confined and overcrowded (1)
- 8 To secure or fasten with ropes (2)
- 9 Was completely surrounded (4)
- 10 Amazingly or surprisingly (6)
- 11 Comforting and encouraging (8)

Grammar

A **compound word** is made of two separate words, e.g. *afternoon*. Make compound words from the following lists.

- | | |
|------------|-------|
| 12 thunder | ship |
| 13 air | ball |
| 14 through | storm |
| 15 fire | out |

Back To The Text...

- 16 In section 2, "it had successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean 21 times" is
 - a fact.
 - b opinion.
- 17 Another good name for this text would be:
 - a Disaster at Lakehurst
 - b Terrible Thunderstorms
- 18 Prediction: What is likely to happen in the future?

- a Airships may be used again for passenger flights.
- b Airships will not be used again for passenger flights.

Sequencing

Look back through the card to find what happened first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- 19 a A large crowd gathered to witness the *Hindenburg* dock.
- b A thunderstorm approached.
- 20 a The weather improved.
- b The crew released the ballast.
- 21 a A thump was heard.
- b The reporter said "Oh, the humanity!".

Think About This

- 22 Researchers are confident they know how the fabric ignited.
 - a true
 - b false
- 23 Choose the best answer. There were
 - a more than 10 people on board.
 - b more than 30 people on board.
 - c more than 60 people on board.

Challenge Option

Drawing: Sketch a hot air balloon with a basket.

