

**FAMOUS EVENTS: What happened on ... ?
Was ist am 6. Mai 1937 geschehen?**

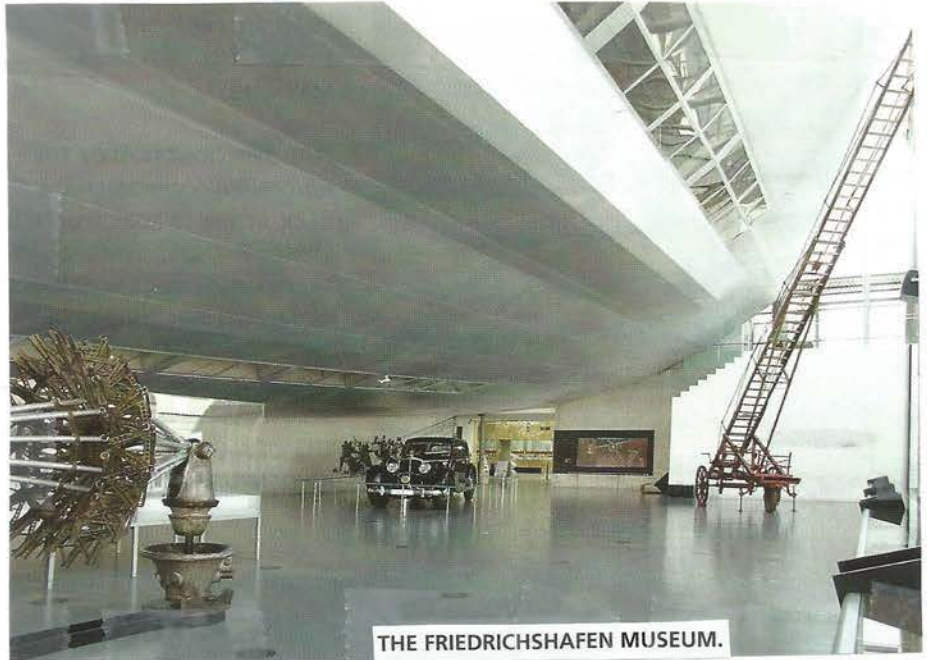
Explosion of the “Hindenburg” Luftschiff in Lakehurst, New Jersey

did not consider themselves competition to airplanes, which at the time could fly only short distances, carrying little weight and requiring constant re-fueling. The zeppelins competed with ships. They could cross the Atlantic in less than half the time and offer comparable luxuriousness.

The *Hindenburg*, christened in 1936, was intended for transatlantic service. Named after the German president and World War I General Paul von *Hindenburg*, it was the largest aircraft ever built. It was only slightly shorter than the ill-fated ocean liner *Titanic*, and a jumbo jet would have looked puny in comparison to it. It was based at Frankfurt, which was more centrally located than Friedrichshafen. Huge hangers for it and other zeppelins were built right adjacent to the Frankfurt airport, as was a housing area for the flying and ground personnel. The area, now a part of neighboring Neu Isenburg, is still called Zeppelinheim.

The *Hindenburg* was so large partly because it was intended for helium to be used for lifting, and it had less lifting power than hydrogen. Helium was preferred because it was not inflammable, but the Americans, who controlled the supply, were not about to sell any to Hitler’s Third Reich. So the highly inflammable hydrogen had to be used in the *Hindenburg*, as it was with other zeppelins in the fleet. In a grisly, and perhaps prophetic note, aluminum from the British airship R101 was used in the *Hindenburg*’s construction. The R101, which used hydrogen, had crashed and burned in France in 1930 with the loss of forty-eight lives.

There were special precautions on the *Hindenburg* because of the hydrogen. All matches and lighters were confiscated from the passengers, and there was a special smoking room-bar aboard that was pressurized to



THE FRIEDRICHSHAFEN MUSEUM.

keep any hydrogen from leaking in. The only means of lighting up on the whole ship was an electric lighter chained to a table in the smoking room, and the bartender saw to it that nobody left the room with a lighted cigarette.

The sleeping quarters aboard the *Hindenburg* were small, more comparable to a sleeper train than an ocean liner. However, there was a dining hall, a smoking room and bar, on-board movies, a children’s nursery and even a specially-made lightweight piano. Best of all there was a promenade around the outside, with an outer wall that was made up largely of downward-facing windows that could be opened.

There is lots of mythology surrounding the *Hindenburg*’s crash. It is thought that it occurred, as with the *Titanic*, on the ship’s maiden voyage, and that the world first learned of the disaster through radio announcer Herb Morrison’s dramatic on-the-scene description. The *Hindenburg* had made thirty-four transatlantic

crossings in 1936, from Frankfurt to either Lakehurst or Rio de Janiero, and in 1937 had already made one



COUNT FERDINAND VON ZEPPELIN (1838 TO 1917).