



DISASTERS

AIR DISASTERS

ANN WEIL

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CHAPTER 1 | Introduction

DATAFILE

Timeline

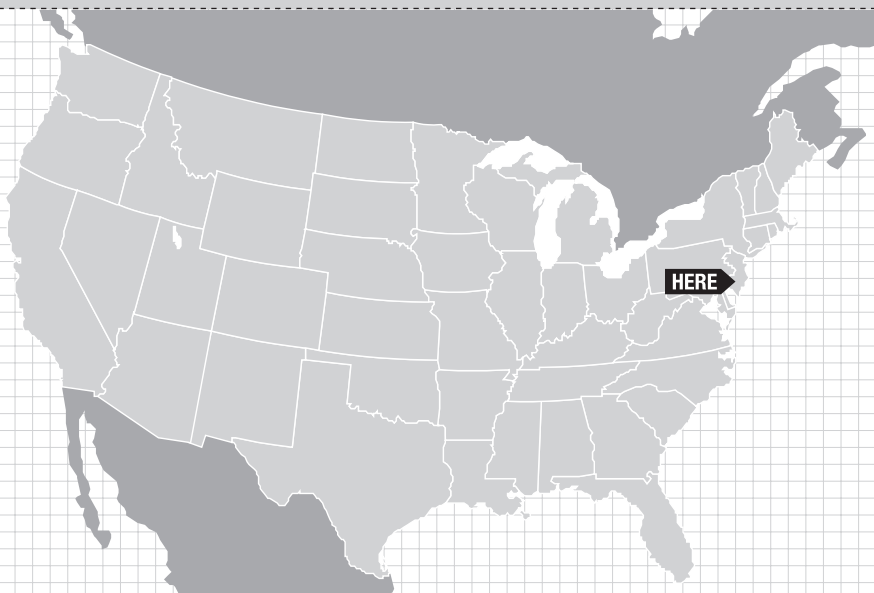
May 6, 1937

The *Hindenburg* airship catches on fire in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

November 28, 1979

An Air New Zealand airplane crashes into a volcano in Antarctica.

Where is Lakehurst, New Jersey?





Did You Know?

A mechanical failure caused a commercial airplane crash in Chicago in 1979. More people died in this crash than any other single plane crash in the United States.

Key Terms

airship—an aircraft filled with gas, not air

commercial airline—a service that people pay to fly somewhere

mechanical failure—a problem in the machinery

CHAPTER 1 | Introduction

Flying is a very safe way to travel. More people are killed in car accidents than plane crashes. Yet many people are afraid of flying.

Why is stepping onto a plane scarier than getting into a car? Perhaps it's because flying seems so extraordinary. Anyone who has looked down on clouds from inside a plane knows this feeling.

Perhaps it's because passengers on a plane are helpless when there is a problem in the air. Perhaps it's because many people survive car accidents, but only a lucky few survive a plane crash.

Before Commercial Airplanes

The *Hindenburg* was a German airship. An airship is like a blimp. It carried passengers across the Atlantic Ocean. The trip took about 65 hours.

The *Hindenburg* flew between Frankfurt, Germany, and Lakehurst, New Jersey. It was built in 1936 and flew 186,000 miles safely.



The *Hindenburg*

Airships were very different from planes. They could float like a balloon. They were filled with hydrogen instead of air.

Hydrogen explodes and burns when it touches fire. The Germans wanted to use helium gas instead. Helium does not explode or burn.

It would have been safer. But the Germans did not have helium gas. America was the only country that did.

The American government refused to sell helium to the Germans. They were suspicious of Adolf Hitler. This was a few years before World War II began.

So the Germans used hydrogen in their airships, even though they knew it was dangerous.

The Last Trip

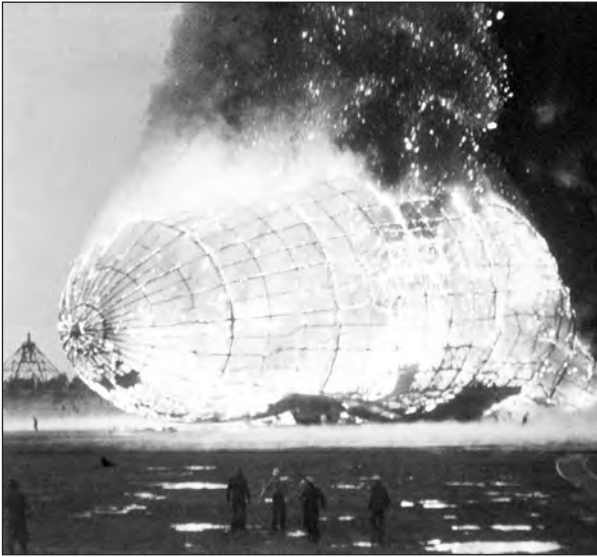
The *Hindenburg*'s last trip began in May 1937. It left Frankfurt, Germany with 97 people on board. 36 were passengers. Sixty-one were crew.

When it tried to dock in New Jersey, it caught fire. There was an explosion. A huge ball of flames shot out from the top of the airship. It fell to the ground in a blaze.

A radio announcer was making a live broadcast. There was no TV then. People listened to the radio instead. The announcer was watching as the *Hindenburg* burst into flames.

He was shocked! He tried to describe what happened. But he was so upset, he was crying. "This is the worst thing I've ever witnessed," he said.

Thirty-six people died. No one wanted to fly in an airship anymore. The other German airships were scrapped. The Germans used the aluminum frames to build airplanes to fight in World War II.



No one knows for sure exactly how the *Hindenburg* caught fire. The most likely explanation is that a spark of static electricity triggered the explosion.

A New Way to Travel

Airplanes were used in World War II. But there were no airline companies in the 1940s. Ordinary people could not simply buy a plane ticket.

The British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) was the first commercial airline. BOAC's first flight was on May 2, 1952.

It went from London, England, to Johannesburg, South Africa. This was the first time passengers paid to fly somewhere.

Exactly one year later, a BOAC plane crashed. The plane was flying over India. It broke up in the air.

There were 43 people on board. Some were passengers. Others were part of the crew. All of them were killed.

The First Commercial Airplanes



The first commercial airplanes were called “Comets.”

The first commercial airplanes could carry only about 50 people. Now, hundreds of people can travel together on a single jet. A crash today can be deadlier than ever before.