

THE GRAF ZEPPELIN

a background history to a philatelic article

An Overview

LZ 127 Graf Zeppelin (Deutsches Luftschiff Zeppelin #127; Registration: D-LZ 127) was a German-built and-operated, passenger-carrying, hydrogen-filled, rigid airship which operated commercially from 1928 to 1937. It was designed to be operated by a crew of 36 officers and men. When it entered commercial service in 1928, it became the first commercial passenger transatlantic flight service in the world.

The LZ-127, the most successful zeppelin ever built. The naming took place on the 8th July, 1928 by Countess Helene (Hella) Amalie von Brandenstein-Zeppelin (1879-1967), the daughter of the German airship pioneer and nobleman, Ferdinand Adolf Heinrich Graf von Zeppelin (1838-1917). It would have been the late count's 90th birthday.

By the time of the Graf Zeppelin's last flight nine years later, the ship had flown over a million miles on 590 flights, carrying thousands of passengers and hundreds of thousands of pounds of freight and mail, with safety and speed. The Graf Zeppelin had circled the globe, was famous throughout the world and inspired an international zeppelin fever in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The LZ 127 was the longest rigid airship at the time of its completion and was only surpassed by the USS *Akron* in 1931. It was scrapped for fighter plane parts in 1940.

Graf Zeppelin Test Flights

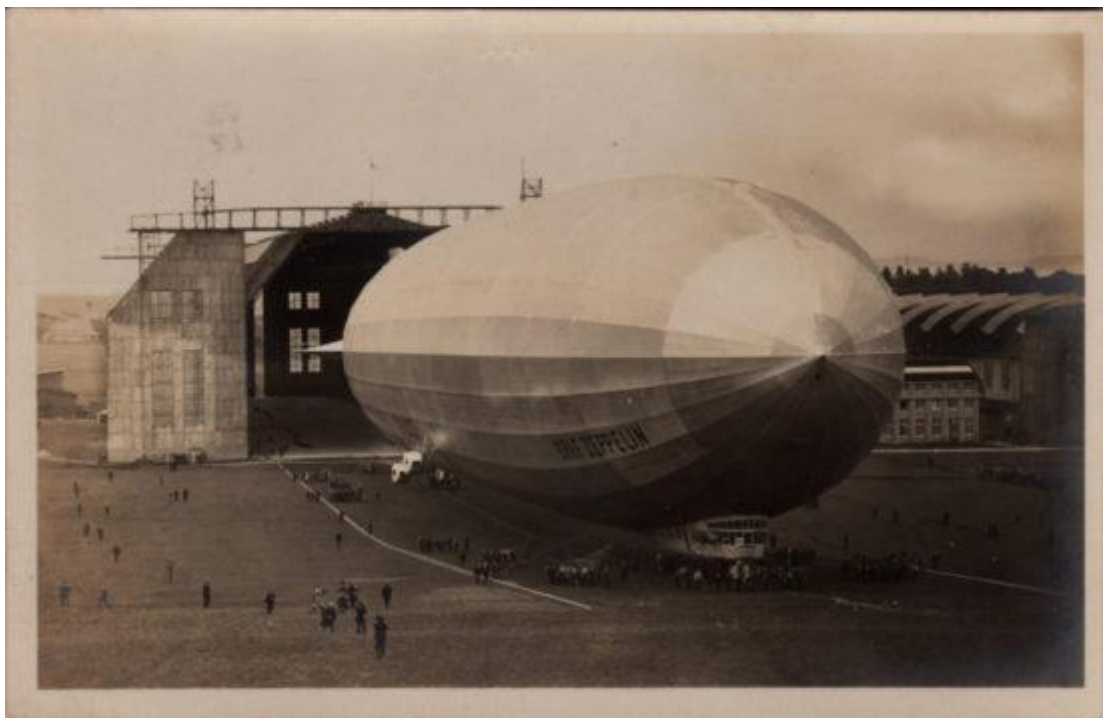
Graf Zeppelin made its first flight on 18th September 1928, under the command of Hugo Eckener. Born 10th August 1868, Flensburg, Germany, he was the manager of the Luftschiffbau Zeppelin during the inter-war and the commander of the Graf Zeppelin for most of its record-setting flights. He died 14th August 1954, Friedrichshafen, Germany.



Dr. Hugo Eckener (1868 – 1954)



Capt. Hans von Schiller (1891 – 1976)

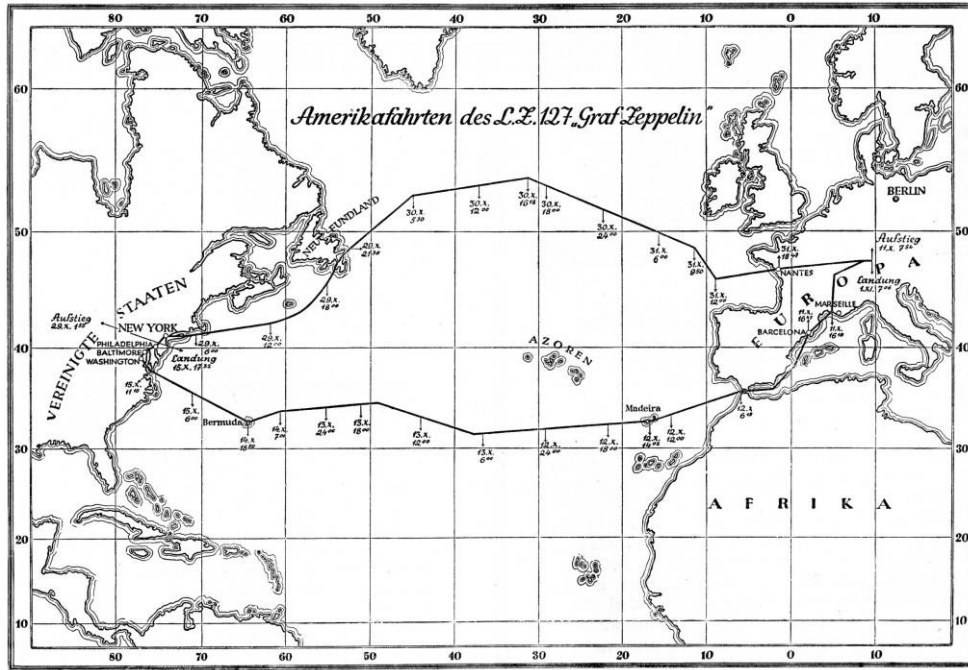


Graf Zeppelin being led from its hangar for its first flight on 18 September 1928.

Graf Zeppelin's first flight across the Atlantic

Graf Zeppelin made the very first commercial passenger flight across the Atlantic, departing Friedrichshafen at 7:54 AM on 11th October 1928, and landing at Lakehurst, New Jersey on 15th October, 1928, after a flight of 111 hours and 44 minutes. The ship carried 40 crew members under the command of Hugo Eckener, and 20 passengers including American naval officer Charles E. Rosendahl and Hearst newspaper reporter Lady Grace Drummond-Hay.

This first transatlantic crossing almost ended in disaster when it encountered a strong squall line on the morning of 13th October, sustaining substantial damage. The details should not detain us.



Graf Zeppelin's route across the Atlantic

Graf Zeppelin Round-the-World flight ("Weltfahrt")

In 1929, Graf Zeppelin made arguably its most famous flight; a Round-the-World voyage covering 21,2500 miles in five legs from Lakehurst to Friedrichshafen, Friedrichshafen to Tokyo, Tokyo to Los Angeles, Los Angeles to Lakehurst, and then Lakehurst to Friedrichshafen again.

Being the first passenger-carrying flight around the world, it received massive coverage in the world's press. The flight was partly sponsored by American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, who paid for about half the cost of the flight in return for exclusive media rights in the United States and Britain.

For his part, Hearst insisted that the flight begin and end in America, whilst the Germans naturally thought the Round-the-World flight of a German ship should begin and end in Germany. As a compromise, there were two official flights; The "German" flight Graf Zeppelin left Friedrichshafen on 27th July 1929 and crossed the Atlantic to Lakehurst, New Jersey, and the "American" flight began on 7th August 1929 with an eastbound crossing back to Germany.

The Round-the-World flight carried 60 men and one woman, Hearst's newspaper reporter Lady Grace Hay-Drummond-Hay, whose reporting greatly increased the public's interest in the journey. Other passengers included journalists from several countries, American naval officers Charles Rosendahl and Jack C. Richardson, polar explorer and pilot Sir Hubert Wilkins, young American millionaire Bill Leeds, and representatives of Japan and the Soviet Union.

Graf Zeppelin Polar flight

In July 1931, the Graf Zeppelin carried a team of scientists from Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Sweden on an exploration of the Arctic, making meteorological observations, measuring variations in the earth's magnetic field in the latitudes near the North Pole, and making a photographic survey of unmapped regions using a panoramic camera that automatically took several pictures per minute. The size, payload, and stability of the zeppelin allowed heavy scientific instruments to be carried and used with an accuracy that would not have been possible with the aeroplanes of the day.

The polar journey, like other zeppelin flights, was largely financed by stamp collectors. The Graf Zeppelin carried approximately 50,000 letters sent by philatelists, and made a water-landing to exchange mail with the Soviet icebreaker Malygin, which itself carried a large quantity of mail sent by stamp collectors.

After the three-day Arctic flight, which included a landing in Leningrad, the Graf Zeppelin returned to a hero's welcome at Tempelhof airfield, Berlin, where the ship was met by celebrities including the famed polar explorer Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd (USN).

The Century of Progress flight to 1933 Chicago World's Fair

By late 1933, the Graf Zeppelin had not been to the United States since the Round-the-World flight of 1929. When the Zeppelin Company was asked to fly the ship to the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, officially dubbed the "Century of Progress International Exposition," Eckener agreed on condition that the United States issue a special commemorative stamp and share the postal revenue with the Zeppelin Company. After initial opposition by the United States Post Office (and President Franklin Roosevelt's initial rejection of the idea of a fourth zeppelin stamp), an agreement was reached to issue the stamp. Thus, at the end of the Graf Zeppelin's last flight to South America in October 1933, instead of returning directly to Germany from Brazil, Graf Zeppelin flew to the United States for stops in Miami, Akron, and Chicago.

While Graf Zeppelin's appearance was one of the highlights of the Chicago Fair, the swastika-emblazoned ship, which was viewed as a symbol of the new government in Berlin, triggered strong political responses from both supporters and opponents of Hitler's regime, especially amongst German-Americans. The political controversy dampened the enthusiasm that Americans had previously displayed toward the German ship during its earlier visits, and when Eckener took the Graf Zeppelin on an aerial circuit around Chicago to show his ship to the residents of the city, he was careful to fly a clockwise pattern so that Chicagoans would see only the tricolour German flag on the starboard fin, and not the swastika flag painted on the port fin under the new regulations issued by the German Air Ministry.

Graf Zeppelin and the Nazis

Inevitably, the Graf Zeppelin was recruited as a tool of Nazi propaganda soon after the National Socialist takeover of power in early 1933. Only three months after Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor, the Propaganda Ministry ordered the Graf Zeppelin to fly over Berlin as part of the government's "Tag der Nationalen Arbeit" celebrations, the Nazi version of the Labour Day celebration on 1st May, 1933.

Later in May, 1933, the Graf Zeppelin flew to Rome to mark the Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels' first official meeting to the Italian fascist government. At that time Goebbels invited the Italian Air Minister Italo Balbo to join him on a flight over Rome. In September 1933, the Graf Zeppelin flew over the *Reichsparteitag* congress at Nuremberg (the "1933 Nuremberg Rally") to dramatically underscore Hitler's appearance before the crowd.

Throughout the remainder of its career the Graf Zeppelin was ordered to make numerous propaganda flights, occasionally in concert with LZ-129 Hindenburg after that ship was launched in 1936.

The South American Service

By the summer of 1931, after many pioneering flights which demonstrated the airship's impressive capabilities and captured the enthusiasm of the world, the Graf Zeppelin began regularly scheduled commercial service on the route between Germany and South America.

The Graf Zeppelin crossed the South Atlantic 18 times in 1932, and made a similar number of flights in 1933. By 1934, the Zeppelin Company was advertising a regular service to South America, departing Germany almost every other Saturday to Brazil, with connecting airplane flights to Argentina. In 1935 and 1936, the Graf Zeppelin's schedule was almost exclusively devoted to passenger and mail service between Germany and Brazil, with crossings back and forth almost every two weeks between April and December. Over its career, the Graf Zeppelin crossed the South Atlantic 136 times; it was first regularly scheduled, nonstop, intercontinental airline service in the history of the world.

Graf Zeppelin's last planned commercial flight

The Graf Zeppelin was over the Canary Islands on the last day of a South American flight from Brazil to Germany when it received news of the Hindenburg disaster in Lakehurst, New Jersey. Captain Hans von Schiller withheld the news from his passengers, and told them of the disaster only after the ship's safe landing in Germany.

The Graf Zeppelin landed in Friedrichshafen on 8th May, 1937, and never carried a paying passenger again. The ship made only one additional scheduled flight, on 18th June 1937, from Friedrichshafen to Frankfurt, where she remained on display — all her hydrogen removed — until she was broken up on the orders of Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe in March 1940.

This postal item, though possibly not unique, is rare. It appears that privately the Zeppelin was especially recommissioned to fly this mail. Further, the 19 September 1939 was the day Hitler, following the invasion of Poland, entered the former Free City of Danzig unhindered.

The Danzig LZ130 1939 Zepp scarce postcard Private Flight cancel Sieger O464. The stamps are DANZIG 29 April 1939 Anti-cancer issue (Mendel-Koch-Roentgen) and DANZIG 25 October 1935 Air.



The inscription on the postcard reads as follows:

DANZIG Grüßt Jubelnd seinen Führer und Befreier Adolf Hitler
 Infolge Kriegsausbruches Ausfall der Zeppelinfahrt Beförderung durch flugpost
 Mit Luftschiff Graf Zeppelin beforder|

DANZIG greets his leader and liberator Adolf Hitler
 As a result of the outbreak of war Zeppelinfahrt flight through airmail
 Requested by airship Graf Zeppelin

References:

1. LZ 127 Graf Zeppelin https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LZ_127_Graf_Zeppelin
2. Graf Zeppelin History <http://www.airships.net/lz127-graf-zeppelin/history/>

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