



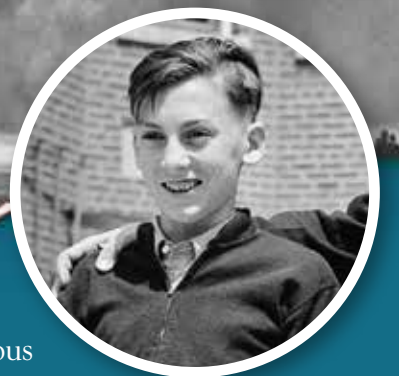
Main Ideas Stories often have more than one main idea. As you read this article, look for the main idea in each section.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 9 TERMS IN BOLD



THE FLAMMING SKY

Werner Franz was just 14 when he got a job on the *Hindenburg*, the greatest airship of its day.



The true and tragic story of the *Hindenburg*, the greatest flying machine ever built

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

In just minutes, 14-year-old Werner Franz would be in the middle of one of the scariest disasters in history. But on the evening of May 6, 1937, he felt like the luckiest kid on Earth.

He had a job on the greatest passenger aircraft ever built, the *Hindenburg*. The *Hindenburg* was a **zeppelin**. In the 1920s and 1930s, these flying machines ruled the skies. Tens of thousands of people traveled on them. Millions more wished they could.

And no zeppelin was as grand as the *Hindenburg*. In the U.S., the *Hindenburg* was more beloved than any president or movie

star. It was more famous than the baseball player Babe Ruth. As a boy, Werner would gaze out his window at school, hoping for a peek at the aircraft zooming through the clouds.

Werner grew up in Germany, where zeppelins were invented. The *Hindenburg* was built there.

The 1930s were dangerous years in Germany. The country's leader, Adolf Hitler, was stirring up hatred and evil. Many Americans feared he would soon start a war.

In Germany, millions were out of work, including Werner's father. For Germans like Werner and his family, the *Hindenburg* was a

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rare source of pride.

In 1936, Werner left school. He had to work to help his family. Working as a cabin boy on the *Hindenburg* was fun. Each trip took him into a world of excitement and glamour.

Little did he know that his adventure would end in tragedy.

The Joy of Zeppelins

In 1937, passenger airplanes couldn't carry enough fuel to go long distances. For most people, crossing an ocean meant a long journey on a ship.

Most Atlantic Ocean crossings took between 5 and 10 days on an ocean liner. There were storms, small rooms, and long, boring days. Seasick passengers vomited over rails. Kids sat around in hot, smelly cabins.

Imagine, then, the joy of crossing the sea in a zeppelin instead. The *Hindenburg* could speed across the Atlantic in just two-and-a-half days instead of five.

The zeppelin was huge. It was as tall as a 12-story building and longer than two football fields. Its egg-shaped body was filled with gas that lifted it up into the sky like a balloon. The ship's four car-sized motors would rev up, and *vroom*, the aircraft would zoom across the sky at 85 miles per hour—twice as fast as an ocean liner.

The ride was famously smooth. No one got airsick. *Hindenburg* passengers stayed in lovely rooms. They slept on silk sheets. They woke to the scent of fresh-baked rolls drifting from the kitchen. They feasted on gourmet meals in the bright and modern dining room. There was a writing room for writing letters, and a salon for playing cards and games.

And the views!

Airplanes usually travel at least 30,000 feet above the Earth; look down and you see only clouds. Zeppelins flew close to



SPEEDING TO AMERICA
Above: The *Hindenburg's* route took passengers from Germany, over northern Europe, and then across the Atlantic Ocean. Its U.S. airfield was in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

the ground. Passengers would stand at the ship's big windows and gaze down at great European castles, glittering cities, and people waving from below. At sea, passengers often saw dancing dolphins and spouting whales.

Famous for Safety

Of course, there was a high price for this thrilling ride. One ticket cost \$450 (equal to about \$7,500 today). Most passengers were business leaders, celebrities, and lucky cabin boys, like Werner.

The May 1937 flight was Werner's fifth ocean crossing on the *Hindenburg*. As always, the ship had taken off from its **airfield** near Frankfurt, Germany. It had zipped across Europe, and then flown about 3,400 miles over the Atlantic.

As a cabin boy, Werner served meals and washed dishes for the ship's crew. When there



FIT FOR MILLIONAIRES
Above: The *Hindenburg's* fancy dining room. Left: Cabins were small but the most modern of the day, with cozy beds that folded into the wall when not being used.



was time, he could enjoy the views and explore the ship.

Much of the space

inside the ship's body was taken up by 16 large "gas cells." These bags of **hydrogen gas** gave the zeppelin its lifting power. Werner tried not to think about the dangers of hydrogen, one of the most **flammable** gases on Earth. The smallest spark could trigger an explosion. For this reason, matches and lighters were not allowed on zeppelins.

The *Hindenburg* had first been designed to fly with **helium gas**. Helium does not burn. But most of the world's helium supply was in America. And the U.S. government wouldn't sell the gas to Germany.

Though the two countries were still on friendly terms in 1937, many mistrusted Hitler. People thought he might turn his zeppelins into weapons of war.

The dangers of hydrogen were well-known. Still, the *Hindenburg* was known for its safety. German zeppelins had flown more than 1 million miles without a single accident. Meanwhile, thousands of people had died in shipwrecks, like the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912.

Stormy Skies

The ride across the Atlantic had gone smoothly. But a storm near New Jersey delayed the *Hindenburg's* landing. On Sunday evening, the storm cleared. The ship prepared to land at its airfield in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Families and friends of passengers lined the airfield. There were also about 150 men from the U.S. Navy.

It would be their job to grab hold of the aircraft's landing ropes and pull it to the ground.

Slowly, the aircraft dropped from the sky. Kids in the crowd cheered. Reporters used movie cameras to film the landing.

Then a small flame appeared at the back of the zeppelin, flicking like a serpent's tongue. People in the crowd stared. Hearts stopped. A few people turned to run.

And then,
Kaboom!

Millions of cubic feet of hydrogen **ignited**.

Just 32 Seconds

Werner heard a muffled blast. He turned and saw a wall of fire racing toward him. He started to run away.



Adolf Hitler, Germany's hateful leader, ruled from 1933 to 1945.

BIGGEST, SAFEST, FASTEST—AND DOOMED

You might have noticed many similarities between the *Titanic* and the *Hindenburg*. Both were the biggest of their kind, the fastest, the most elegant. **Can you think of more similarities and differences?**



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But the nose of the airship jerked up. Werner crashed to the floor. He slid back, back, back, straight toward the wide-open jaws of the monstrous fire.

The heat was intense. He felt sure he would burst into flames.

But then, *splash!*

Water poured down from somewhere above. It soaked him. The water cooled his body and cleared his mind.

Werner stood up. He stumbled away from the fire. Then he saw a small door in the side of the ship. He kicked it open. He didn't know how close the ship was to the ground. But he had no choice. Staying on the ship meant death.

Werner jumped out into the flaming sky.

It took just 32 seconds for the *Hindenburg* to crash to the ground in a burning heap. Passengers burst through windows and doors.

Of the 97 people on board, 35 lost their lives. Many more would have **perished** if it hadn't been for the Navy

landing crew. These men risked their lives to rush into the flames and pull people to safety.

For months, the crash remained front-page news. Many Germans felt sure that a bomb was to blame. Even now, no one knows for sure what caused the disaster. But most experts believe there must have been a small leak in one of the gas cells. Electricity in the air, left over from the earlier storms, likely sparked the explosion. That was all it took to destroy the grandest airship ever built.

zeppelins. No one ever flew on a passenger zeppelin again.

As for Werner Franz, he had been right all along: He was the luckiest kid in the world. The water that had soaked him had come from one of the ship's broken water

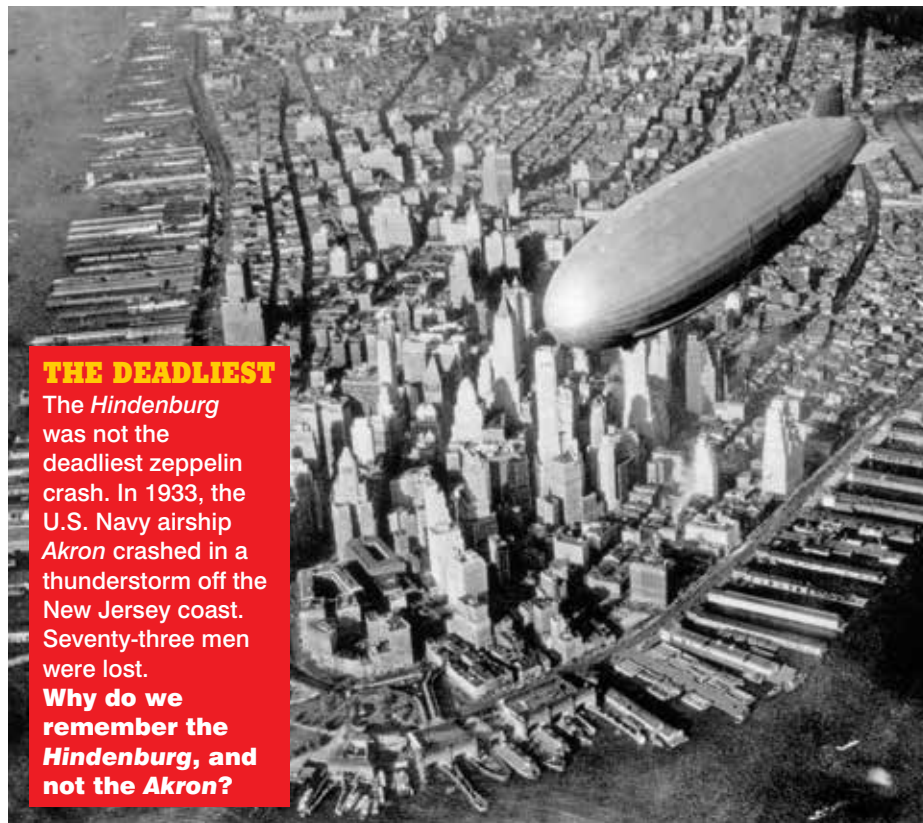
tanks. It surely saved his life.

When he jumped from the ship, it was close to the ground. He was able to run away. "It was a heavenly gift," he would later say.

Two weeks after the crash, Werner went home to Germany. Later, he married and had a family.

He would face other **catastrophes** in his life. One of them was World War II, which started not long after the *Hindenburg* crash. But Werner lived to the age of 92. He never forgot how close he came to dying on that fiery night in 1937.

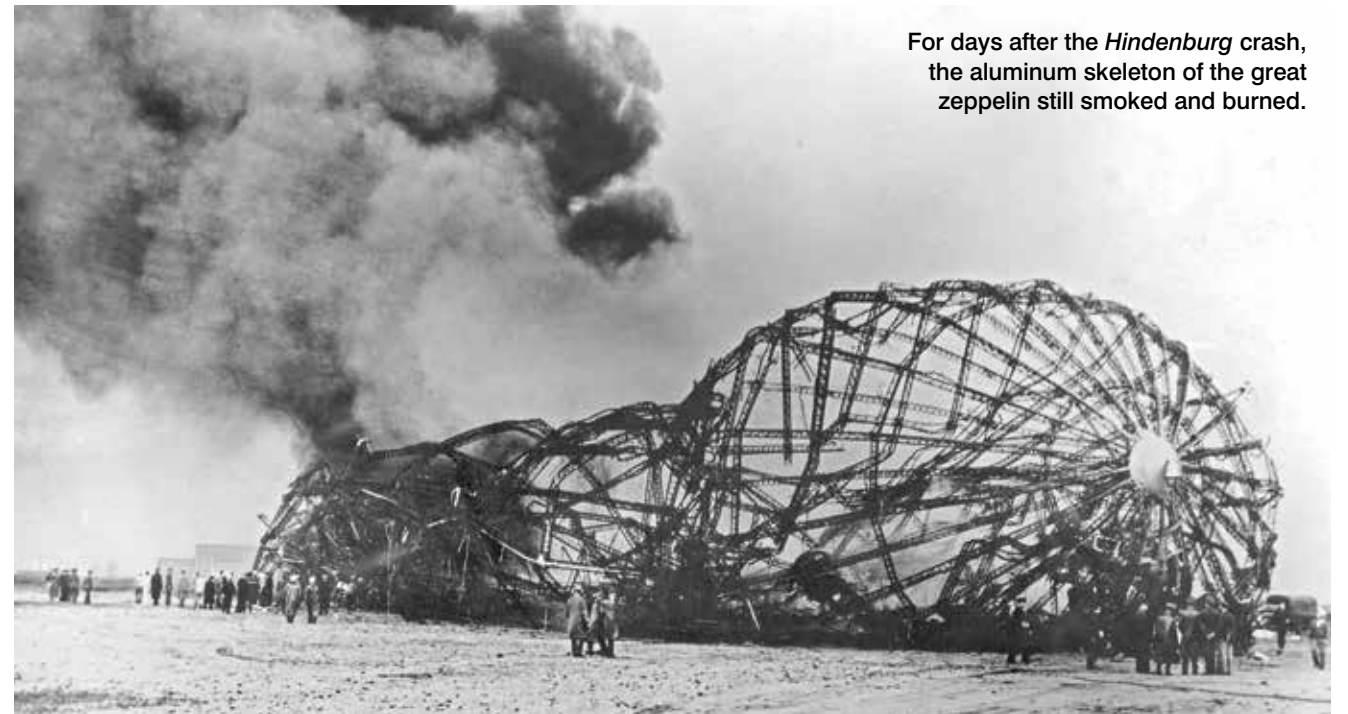
"I was grateful for everything I was allowed to experience after that," he said. ■



THE DEADLIEST

The *Hindenburg* was not the deadliest zeppelin crash. In 1933, the U.S. Navy airship *Akron* crashed in a thunderstorm off the New Jersey coast. Seventy-three men were lost. **Why do we remember the *Hindenburg*, and not the *Akron*?**

HIRZ/GETTY IMAGES (HINDENBURG); US NAVY/INTERIM ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (AKRON); GLASSHOUSE IMAGES/ALAMY (TITANIC)



For days after the *Hindenburg* crash, the aluminum skeleton of the great zeppelin still smoked and burned.

WRITE TO WIN

Think of a new title for "The Flaming Sky" that tells a main idea of the whole article. Write a paragraph using details from the text to explain why you chose this title. Send it to "Hindenburg Contest" by November 1, 2016. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *I Survived the Hindenburg Disaster, 1937* by Lauren Tarshis. See page 2 for details.

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