

0. WHAT CAUSED IT? - Story Preface

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As the *Hindenburg* airship burns in a massive fire, at Lakehurst Naval Air Station, Navy Chief Petty Officer Frederick J. "Bull" Tobin—in charge of the U.S. Navy's landing crew—cries-out: "Navy men, stand fast!" As others run away from the wreckage, sailors run toward it to help the injured. Photo online via "Naval Historical Blog" at the U.S. Naval Institute.

Otto Beyersdorff wrote two letters that detail his findings. Neither were included in the official German report. Today those letters are part of the archives at Friedrichshafen, the town where the *Hindenburg* was built.

People have always suspected sabotage, but the FBI report does not support that conclusion. Others have thought bad weather caused the fire, but the great airship had been through many storms without a major problem. Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Third Reich, determined the cause was "an Act of God."

Many people blamed the use of hydrogen instead of helium. Dr. Bain's findings, however, are directly on-point with the Beyersdorff letters which, translated from German into English, state (at pages 12 and 13):

The actual cause of the fire was the extremely easy flammability of the covering material brought about by the discharges of an electrostatic nature. (Quoted by Joseph J. Romm in *The Hype About Hydrogen: Fact and Fiction in the Race to Save the Climate*, at page 104.)

In other words - according to this theory - the exterior paint on the *Hindenburg* caught fire and burned like dry leaves after a spark from an unknown source started the fatal process. Or, as Dr. Bain and his colleagues put it, the great airship (which still had about 5 million cubic feet of hydrogen on board) was:

A flying match known as Hindenburg.

In 2013, experts working with three *Hindenburg* scale models concluded that the "spark," setting-off the explosion, was ... static electricity.

Channel 4 aired a documentary about those findings on the 7th of March that year. It is interesting that extensive, independent study—conducted decades later—seemingly supports Beyersdorff's original "electrostatic" conclusion.

On the other hand ... different experts, such as A.J. Dessler—a former director of NASA's Space Science Laboratory at the Marshall Space Flight Center—hold differing opinions which support a finding that *Hindenburg* erupted into flames because of ... hydrogen.

Whatever the cause of the disaster, the death of the *Hindenburg* ended the use of rigid airships as commercial transports.

Modern blimps (non-rigid dirigibles that do not ferry people across the ocean) are mere reminders of what used to be. Yet ... when people look at the blimps of today, it's easy to remember the tragedy of yesterday.

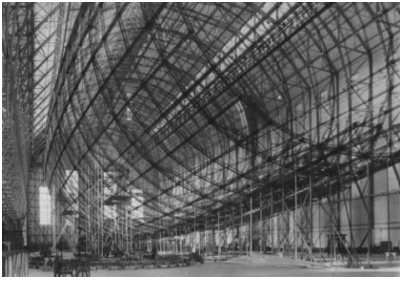
EDITOR'S NOTE: Several excellent sites, linked in this story, feature the *Hindenburg* disaster. The best of all is the Naval Lakehurst Historical Society.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WHAT-CAUSED-IT-Hindenburg>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

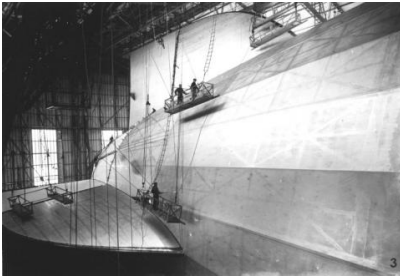
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Airship Construction

Image online, courtesy the return2style.de website.

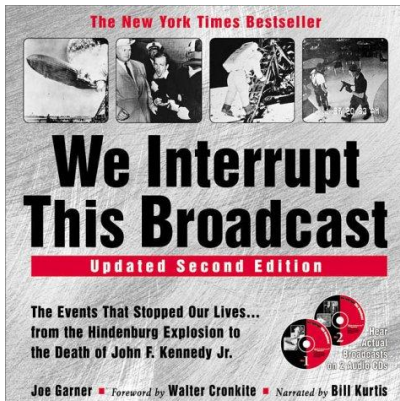
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Painting the Airship

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