

# **Zeppelin Airship On Board Mail**

## **Synopsis January 2024**

### **Zeppelin Background**

Rigid airships are often referred generically as zeppelins but actual zeppelin airships are only those built by the German Zeppelin Company. Of these true zeppelin airships, only two were officially permitted to have mail posted on board, The Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 and the Hindenburg (LZ-129). The Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 was the 127<sup>th</sup> airship designed and built by the Zeppelin company. It was also the biggest airship in the world when launched and flew for longer than any previously built airship. Comprehensive flight records exist for all zeppelin airships ever flown and this exhibit is organized by chronological zeppelin flight numbers. A flight is defined as the journey between two landings and many flights are seen as starting and finishing in the same place after a round trip in which the airship did not actually land. However, mail was dropped by parachute and taken on board using ropes, at designated points for these flights. The Sieger and Michel catalogues are invaluable not just as a philatelic reference to zeppelin mail, but also as a historic resource as the catalogues contain a comprehensive list of all commercial flights by zeppelins.

Similarly, The Hindenburg (LZ-129) was the 129<sup>th</sup> airship built by the Zeppelin company and it became the largest airship when it was launched in 1936. (The 128<sup>th</sup> airship was abandoned before completion and was never launched)

On board mail is defined as mail sent and cancelled on board the airship and this exhibit specifically covers mail posted on the two Zeppelin airships detailed above. The Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 airship was partially funded by donations from the public, after a plea from the airship company, and both airships were considered symbols of national pride, drawing large crowds to witness each take-off and landing. For those passengers on board the airship, many took the opportunity to mail their friends and family, marking the historic occasion for them.

### **Subject Treatment and Philatelic Importance**

The Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 story is central to the development of the airmail service from Europe to South America, providing the first commercial transatlantic service and the early test flights were key to establishing the reliability of the airship. The Hindenburg airship also operated to South America but was built primarily for the North America route.

The Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 airship had only 10 double berth bedrooms and could accommodate at most 20 passengers on overnight flights, with a small number more on day flights. Similarly, the Hindenburg LZ-129 had only 25 double berth bedrooms which could accommodate at most 50 passengers. This exhibit is composed of mail posted by these passengers or by crew members, which was a small portion of the overall mail carried by these two airships. The airships rarely had full passenger capacity and on board mail is consequently among the more difficult usages to find.

### **Scope of Exhibit**

The scope of this exhibit is mail posted on board the Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 (March 1929 to May 1937) and the Hindenburg (March 1936 to May 1937).

### **Mail Management On Board.**

On board mail was managed by an on-board postmaster, who was responsible for the sale of adhesive stamps and the subsequent cancellation of mail, using a circular handstamp which was set to the date of cancellation. Different handstamps in use are discussed in exhibit. It is these handstamps which definitively identifies mail posted on board the Zeppelin airships. Cancelled mail was retained in a locked metal box and combined with regular mail at points of arrival or appropriate mail drops from the airship.

Mail posted on the outward leg of the South America or North America flights were required to enter the mail at the point of airship landing unless a further airship/postage fee was paid for the return trip.

The common room of both airships also contained two typewriters for use by passengers, so many covers and cards have either typed or hand written addresses.

The Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 airship flew for 9 years (over one million miles, 560 flights) while the Hindenburg LZ-129 flew for just fourteen months (62 flights) before it was destroyed by fire while landing at Lakehurst New Jersey on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1937.

The exhibit is organized largely on a chronological basis, with Graf Zeppelin and Hindenburg flights kept within their own sections (to avoid mix up of flights).. The more difficult items to obtain have been highlighted in red.

### **Exhibit Plan**

1. Introduction
2. Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 Pioneer Flights
  - 2.1. 1929 Pioneer Flights
  - 2.2. 1930 Pioneer Flights
  - 2.3. 1931 Pioneer Flights
3. Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 Commercial Flights (1932 to 1936)
  - 3.1. 1932 Commercial Flights
  - 3.2. 1933 Commercial Flights
  - 3.3. 1934 Commercial Flights
  - 3.4. 1935 Commercial Flights
  - 3.5. 1936 commercial Flights
4. Hindenburg Flights (1936)
5. End of an Era
  - 5.1. Final flights of Hindenburg airship (1937)
  - 5.2. Final Flights of Graf Zeppelin LXZ 127 (1937)

### **Bibliography (selected texts)**

1. Seiger, Hermann “Zeppelin Post Katalog” published by Sieger-Verlag of Lorch/Wurttemberg (2001 edition).
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4. Frost Special Airmail and Postcard Catalog, Frost Publishing Co., 2005.
5. Dick, Harold; Robinson, Dougla, “The Golden Age of Great Passenger Airships, Graf Zeppelin and Hindenburg”, Smithsonian Press, 1985.

