**Fort Monmouth's Signal Corps Scientists Feared Hindenburg Connection**

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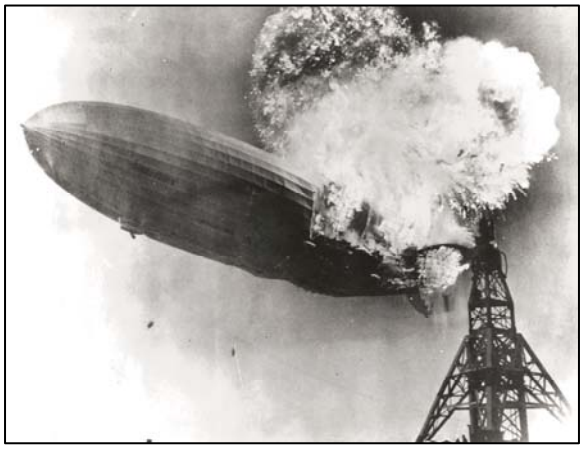
Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst (JB MDL) leadership pays respects at a 6 May 2010 ceremony commemorating the 73rd anniversary of the Hindenburg disaster. JB MDL and the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society hosted a traditional wreath-laying ceremony honoring the men and women from all branches of service who lost their lives in combat and in airship disasters. In honor of the commemoration ceremony, Lakehurst gates were open to the public for the first time since 11 September 2001. More than 250 guests attended the ceremony to pay their respects. The ceremony was held in the exact spot the Hindenburg airship burned and crashed in the open field west of Hangar One 6 May 1937. (U.S. Navy photo/Pattie Odoardo)

The 73rd anniversary of the Hindenburg airship disaster in Lakehurst, NJ passed on 6 May.

At 803.8 feet in length and 135.1 feet in diameter, the German passenger airship Hindenburg (LZ-129) was the largest aircraft ever to fly, according to the Navy Lakehurst Historical Society. The commercial flights of the Hindenburg, along with the Graf Zeppelin, pioneered the first transatlantic air service. The Hindenburg carried hundreds of passengers and traveled thousands of miles before bursting into flames as she approached her destination, Naval Air Station Lakehurst.

At the time of the Hindenburg crash, Signal Corps scientists located at nearby Fort Monmouth were working diligently on a new system for aircraft detection by radio- or, as we now know it, radar. Their work included tracking blimps out of the Naval Air Station at Lakehurst.

Fate intervened to keep the scientists from tracking the Hindenburg on its final voyage. Radar pioneer John J. "Jack" Slattery recalled in a 2001 oral history interview, "the von Hindenburg, we had expected to track this marvelous target if it got anywhere near us. [But] a storm came up and drenched our equipment. Now, our equipment…was haywire. It operated on batteries, antennas were held together with wire, all the insulators for the antenna were dry redwood. The storm put us completely out of business. We couldn't have tracked a fly if he was on the transmitter. And, when we heard on the radio what had happened at Lakehurst, when it blew up, the engineer there with me, Jack Hessel, we just … said 'thank god that this rainstorm came!' Because if we tracked them, and then this happened, we felt that we'd wind up in jail or something!"



On 6 May 1937, the hydrogen-filled German airship Hindenburg burned and crashed in Lakehurst, N.J., killing 35 of the 97 people on board and a Navy crewman on the ground. Radar pioneers at nearby Fort Monmouth, NJ, feared they might be accused of sparking the Hindenburg's flames with their top-secret devices.

Slattery and Hessel's fears were not without merit. Dr. Harold Zahl, who worked at the Signal Corps Laboratories at Fort Monmouth in 1937 and later became the Director there, recalled in his book *Electrons Away* that, "What caused the fire was the critical question, and there were some who thought it might have been caused by our radar, which, we knew, under

some conditions, could produce sparks at considerable distances. The next morning, we were queried from Lakehurst on that possibility. It was with great relief that I was able to say, ‘we were not on the air on the time of the tragedy.’ But had we been operating at the time of the explosion, there always would have been some suspicion pointing on us.”

While some conspiracy theorists posit that the Hindenburg was sabotaged in an attempt to embarrass Germany’s Third Reich, it is commonly held that static electricity ignited leaking hydrogen aboard the airship as it approached Lakehurst’s Hangar One. Thirteen passengers, 22 crewmen, and 1 member of the ground handling party were killed. There were 62 survivors.

The Signal Corps at Fort Monmouth demonstrated their new radars just a few weeks later, on 18-19 May, for the Chief Signal Officer, Chief of the Coast Artillery, Assistant Chief of the Air Corps, and representatives from the Ordnance Department and Corps of Engineers.

The Signal Corps repeated the show on 26 May for the Secretary of War, Chief of Staff, the Chief of the Air Corps, and members of the Military Affairs Committee of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

These demonstrations represented the culmination of years of hard work, innovation, and politicking.

According to the Signal Corps’ 1945 report, “The Signal Corps Development of U.S. Army Radar,” radar emerged historically from the defensive need to counter the bombing plane. Sound detectors suffered from inherent limitations. Attempts to use electromagnetic waves during the First World War gave interesting experimental results, but no operational equipment was produced. Numerous tests were made in the 1920s with heat emitted from airplane motors or reflected by airplane surface.

From 1926 to 1930 this work was done by the Army Ordnance Department, which transferred the project in 1930 to the Signal Corps. Due to a misunderstanding, the research was duplicated for several years by the Corps of Engineers, but in 1936 all Army development of detection by heat or radio was officially assigned to the Signal Corps.

Harry H. Woodring, Secretary of War, expressed his immense satisfaction with the 26 May 1937 radar demonstration in a letter to the Chief Signal Officer. While the praise was likely appreciated, the Signal Corps was in dire need of money to fund their top secret radar work. By June, the government offered $200,000 to the Fort Monmouth labs to fund radar for the following fiscal year (equivalent to roughly $3 million dollars today).

Signal Corps radars developed at Fort Monmouth went on to detect the incoming Japanese planes at Pearl Harbor, and were sufficiently developed to make a difference in World War II.

The Director of the Signal Corps Laboratories at Fort Monmouth, COL William Blair, would ultimately receive the patent that earned him the nickname, “the Father of U.S. radar.”

Navy Lakehurst Historical Society volunteer and U.S. Navy veteran Nick Rakoncza leads a tour of Hangar One for the U.S. Army CECOM Historians on 12 May 2010. Rakoncza recalled seeing the Hindenburg pass over his home as a child.

The all volunteer Navy Lakehurst Historical Society offers tours of the Hindenburg crash site and Hangar One (the airship's planned destination) on the second and fourth Saturdays of the month. Wednesday tours are available for DoD personnel. Tours cover much more than just the Hindenburg disaster; the goal of the society is to preserve and protect the rich history the Naval Air Station Lakehurst and tenant commands over the past 93 years. Contact Don Adams at 732 818 7520 for more information