

GRAF ZEPPELIN (LZ-127) MAIDEN FLIGHT COVER FROM THE USA, Jersey City, New Jersey Cancel

By John Trosky

The Graf Zeppelin was built in Friedrichshafen, Germany and first flew on September 15, 1928. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Hugo Eckener, head of Luftschiffbau Zeppelin, commanded the mighty airship on its first intercontinental passenger flight from Germany to the USA, departing on October 11, 1928 and arriving at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station only four days later after flybys of Washington, DC, Baltimore, MD and New York City.

After disembarking its inaugural passengers, the airship was prepared for its maiden eastbound trip. The Graf Zeppelin maiden flight eastbound from Lakehurst, NJ began on October 28, 1928 with arrival in Friedrichshafen, Germany in a mere 71 hours and 49 minutes, on November 1, 1928. This was about half the time of normal steamship travel of the day. This was significantly shorter than the westbound trip of 111 hours and 44 minutes – this was largely due to mid-ocean repairs to the canvas covering on the craft after encountering a squall line. The engines were shut down for repairs and the craft came within 200 feet of the sea before restarting power.



Fig. 1: First transatlantic flight of the Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 in October 1928. This cover was sent from Jersey City October 26, via the NY City Postmaster, to be carried on the return flight to Germany on October 28. It did not receive a New York postmark, because the stamps were already cancelled in New Jersey.



Fig. 2: Special cachet used for covers on this flight.¹

To mark the maiden eastbound departure, a commemorative cachet was available for letter mail being carried. This cachet was unlike subsequent cachets used for the Europe-Pan America flights in 1930. The cachets done for the westbound leg of this first passenger flight were much simpler in design with no indication of the commemorative nature of the flight. It was merely an oval strike indicating the mail was being carried via Zeppelin LZ-127. This cachet does not indicate the route taken, à la Europe Pan-America cachets of 1930.

GRAF ZEPPELIN (LZ-127) MAIDEN FLIGHT FROM THE USA ~ John Trosky

Although mail destined to be carried by the Graf Zeppelin eastbound was to be loaded on board at Lakehurst NJ, mail was directed to the Postmaster, New York City for consolidation and affixing of the commemorative cancellation, hence the two day delay from posting in Jersey City to actual departure. The rate paid is \$1.05 with Scott #557 and 571.



Fig. 3: Backstamps on this cover, showing arrival in Friedrichshafen on Nov. 1, 1928, and Offenbach on Nov. 2.

This cover arrived at its destination of Offenhafen am Main only one day after arriving at Friedrichshafen as illustrated by the back stamps.

When the LZ-127 was retired in the late 1930s, it was replaced by the LZ-130, also called Graf Zeppelin but built as a larger “Hindenburg” class airship. It had a rather short career due to the crash of the Hindenburg (at the Lakehurst New Jersey Naval Air Station in 1937) and the lack of available helium due to embargo and the start of WW II.

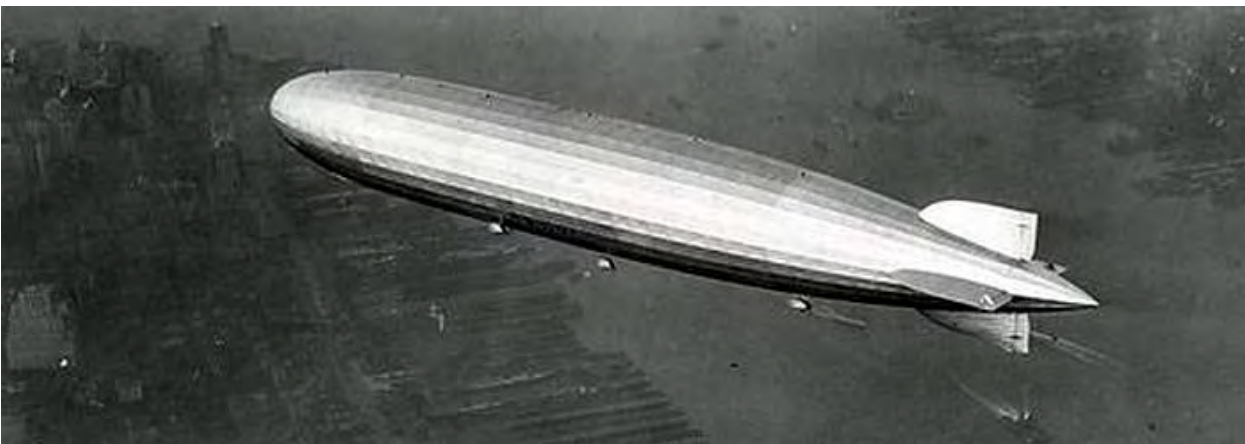


Fig. 4: Graf Zeppelin LZ-127 over New York City in 1928.²

A now often-forgotten piece of historic trivia is that the spire on the Empire State Building, which was beginning construction at the time of the Graf Zeppelin's first visit to New York, was originally planned not as a radio tower, but a mooring mast for airships.



Fig. 5: This “photo” is a fake. By the time the Empire State Building was completed in 1931, this plan had been abandoned, but not before it had spawned the production of such fantasy post cards.

The Empire State Building was originally planned to be 85 floors, just slightly higher than the Chrysler Building, until financier John J. Raskob decided it needed the addition of a mooring spire, and should become “an airport in the sky.” The additional 200 feet included a mooring mast for airships, and the 86th floor was designed as a departure lounge with customs and ticket offices. The building’s framework was reinforced against what would be a 50-ton pull of a moored zeppelin, and winch equipment was installed.

The imaginative scheme failed to take into account the treacherous winds of the canyons of Manhattan, the fact that a ship would be tethered only by its nose with no ground lines to secure it, and that ballast water released to maintain pitch would dump large amounts of water to the streets below. Passengers disembarking would need to maneuver a swinging gangplank high above Manhattan, to a narrow open walkway near the top, then descend two steep ladders inside the spire just to reach the elevators below. Before completion of the Empire State Building in 1931, safety issues had overcome the enthusiasm for this dangerous scheme.³

See the following page for an addition by Len Peck, who offered his own cover and experiences.

ENDNOTES

References:

The web pages that were visited were as follows: <http://www.airships.net/lz127-graf-zeppelin/history>, <http://alphabetilately.com/Z.html>, <http://www.ezep.de/zc/zc.html>, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LZ_127_Graf_Zeppelin#First_intercontinental_passenger_airship_flight. [May 25, 2009].

Notes:

¹ Similar cover at <http://www.airships.net/zeppelin-mail/graf-zeppelin-covers> with NY USA/FOREIGN oval strike on stamps. [May 25, 2009].

² Graf Zeppelin over NYC at <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=34300&page=5> [May 29, 2009].

³ ESB in the News: http://www.esbnyc.com/tourism/tourism_facts_esbnews_july2000.cfm [May 29, 2009].

A SECOND 1928 LZ-127 COVER! ~ Originating Flight, Germany to the USA, Oct 10, 1928

By Len Peck

[Member Len Peck [probably our oldest NJPHS member, a nonagenarian approaching centenarian status] responded to the article in our recent *NJPH* with a spectacular cover of his own and the accompanying letter:]

Sept. 2, 2009

Had I known that John Trosky was writing an article for the August, 2009 issue of the *NJPH* journal I could have sent him the enclosed photocopy of a cover in my collection which came to me on the same flight from Germany, in the opposite direction.

At that time I was working for David H. Smith and Sons who were Steel Wholesalers and Fabricators in Brooklyn, N.Y. using heavy duty steel fabricating equipment that was manufactured by R. Sonntag in Germany who knew of my interest in stamp collecting and sent me a letter on the first flight made by the Graf Zeppelin to the United States.





The letter is postmarked FRIEDRICHSHAFEN, 10.OKT28 and backstamped New York, N.Y. 10 AM, Oct. 16, 1928. It had arrived at Lakehurst, N.J. the previous day.

Backstamp noting arrival date on this first Zeppelin flight to the U.S. of October 16, 1928.

I'm not sure about this but I seem to vaguely remember that an attempt to moor one of our dirigibles to the tower on the Empire State building was scheduled and aborted when the aircraft (I believe it was the Akron) became practically unmanageable when nearing the low level needed for the mooring. They blamed the terrific down drafts encountered on the heat caused by the sun shining on the brick and stone buildings and asphalt covered streets.

I also remember watching the Graf Zeppelin flying over Brooklyn, N.Y. on its way to Lakehurst, N.J. where it was moored. The year before I also watched the reception of Charles Lindbergh when he returned by boat from his first solo plane trip to France.

Best Regards.
Len

**********

Our appreciation to Len for sharing this piece. Would that we could see through his eyes what he has seen.