

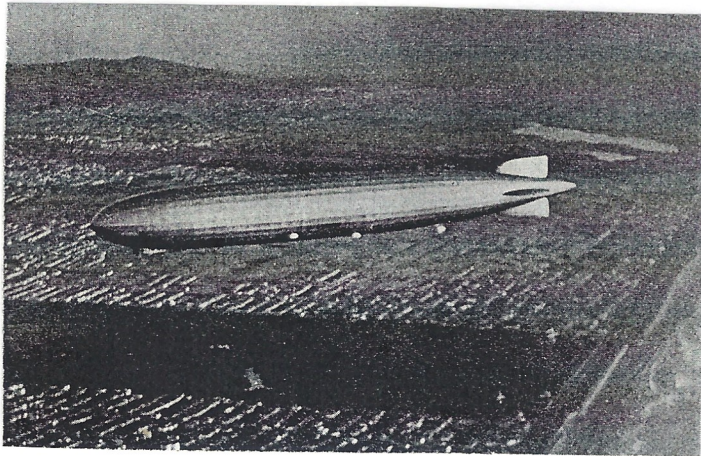
THE TRANS-ATLANTIC ZEPPELINS

The employment of Zeppelin airships on the trans-Atlantic routes introduced the first NON-STOP flights carrying mail and passengers between Europe and the Americas. This marked an important phase in the development of long range international airmail services. Aeroplane services of the day comprised short stages with night flights seldom attempted. The airships often took less than half the time. While early mail was largely philatelic, the business world soon took advantage and eventually the bulk of the mail carried was commercial; over 100 countries using the services between 1928 and 1937 when, following the loss of the *HINDENBURG*, the service was suspended. Representative samples of the mail are shown on the following pages. The airships featured are the precursor ship LZ-126 p.2; the LZ-127 pp.3-6; & the LZ-129 pp.7-8.

THE AIRSHIPS:

LZ-126, later ZR3 USS *LOS ANGELES*

Built as WWI reparations for the US, the airship flew to that country in October 1924 thus showing the practicality of such flights and acting as a precursor to later commercial operations. Mail carried 68kg mostly philatelic, with a small amount of diplomatic and Zeppelin group companies mail (Dornier, Maybach, ZF, etc.) to US clients. Bermuda issued a stamp to mark the visits of the airship in 1924 and 1925.



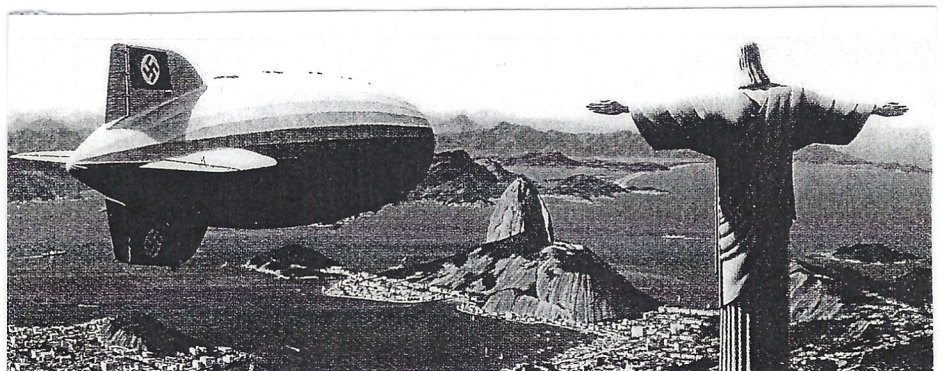
LZ-127 *GRAF ZEPPELIN*

The most famous airship built, the ship first crossed the Atlantic in 1928; it became the first aircraft to cross more than 100 times (143 times) and the first to fly more than 1 million miles (1,060,000m). Made a total of 590 flights and carried 32,219kg of mail, the bulk of commercial to South America. The airship featured on the stamps of many countries – typical examples below.



LZ-129 *HINDENBURG*

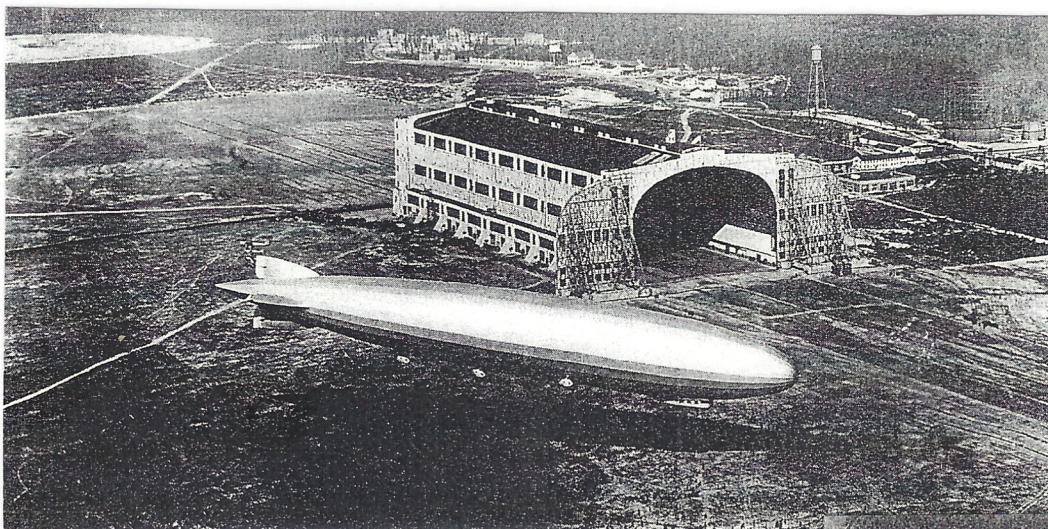
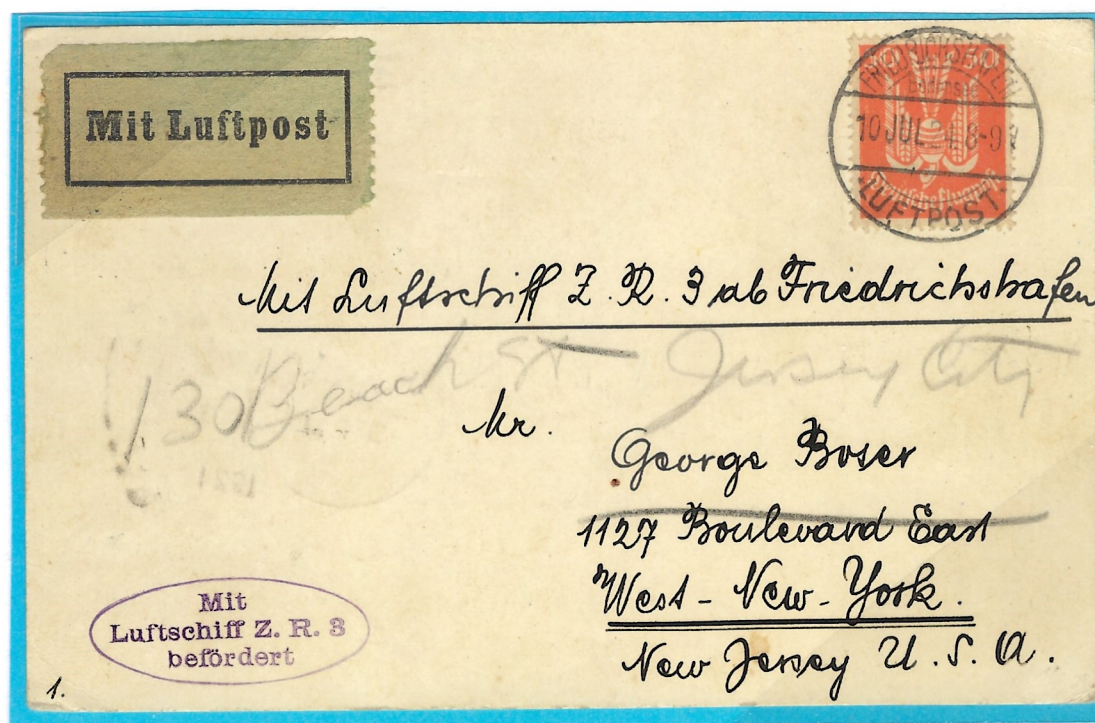
Entered service in May 1936 and made 37 Atlantic crossings (21 N and 16 S). Destroyed by fire in May 1937; this marked the end of the Zeppelins' non-stop trans-Atlantic services. Made 63 flights and carried 8,869kg of mail. Also featured on many stamps – typical examples below.



1924: LZ-126: Delivery Flight to USA – Postcard carried on the crossing

The ship was built as WWI reparations for the US. Given the works designation LZ-126, it was later redesignated ZR-3 (Zeppelin Rigid 3) by the US Navy and named USS *LOS ANGELES*. This transit was the forerunner to many more crossings once the LZ-127 was put into service in 1928, & LZ-129 in 1936. The delivery flight took 81.5 hours over 12-15 October; the photo below shows the ship about to land on the east field at Lakehurst Naval Air Station at 0936 on the morning of 125 October.

References: William Althoff: *The USS LOS ANGELES*. (USA 2004); Frost Airship Mail & Postcard Catalogue (USA 2005)



The crew assembled before take-off from Germany. >
The Commander, Dr. Eckener in the centre, front row.

1928: LZ-127 *GRAF ZEPPELIN* First Flight to USA 11 October - 1 November
 US cover carried on the return stage, and bearing the special cachet applied by the USPO.
 Note the 7.30 pm Cedar Rapids cancel missed the \$1 stamp and it was cancelled again at 8.00 pm.



1929: LZ-127 *GRAF ZEPPELIN* Round-The-World Flight 7 August - 4 September
 This voyage featured non-stop crossings of both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. There were four stages to the trip: Germany-Japan-US West Coast-US East Coast-Germany. The Swiss cover below was carried on the complete Germany-Germany circuit. A special flight cachet was applied in red. Various combinations of stages exist, and mail of 14 countries was accepted for all or part of the trip.



1930: LZ-127 GRAF ZEPPELIN "Triangular" Flight 18 May – 6 June

The airship first flew to Brazil, then to the USA before returning to Germany. The postcard below was flown on the USA-Germany stage; it bears a 65c Zeppelin stamp specially issued for this flight. A circular cachet in red was applied by the on-board PO; a diamond shaped cachet in violet was applied by the USPO. A Friedrichshafen arrival postmark is also at the bottom of the card.



1931: LZ-127 GRAF ZEPPELIN First South American Flight of Season

A Brazilian air letter flown on the return stage to Germany. The writer has used a lightweight Syndicato Condor envelope and part of the franking is with a stamp specially overprinted for this seasons mail; a circular flight cachet in blue (rather faint) has been applied centre left.



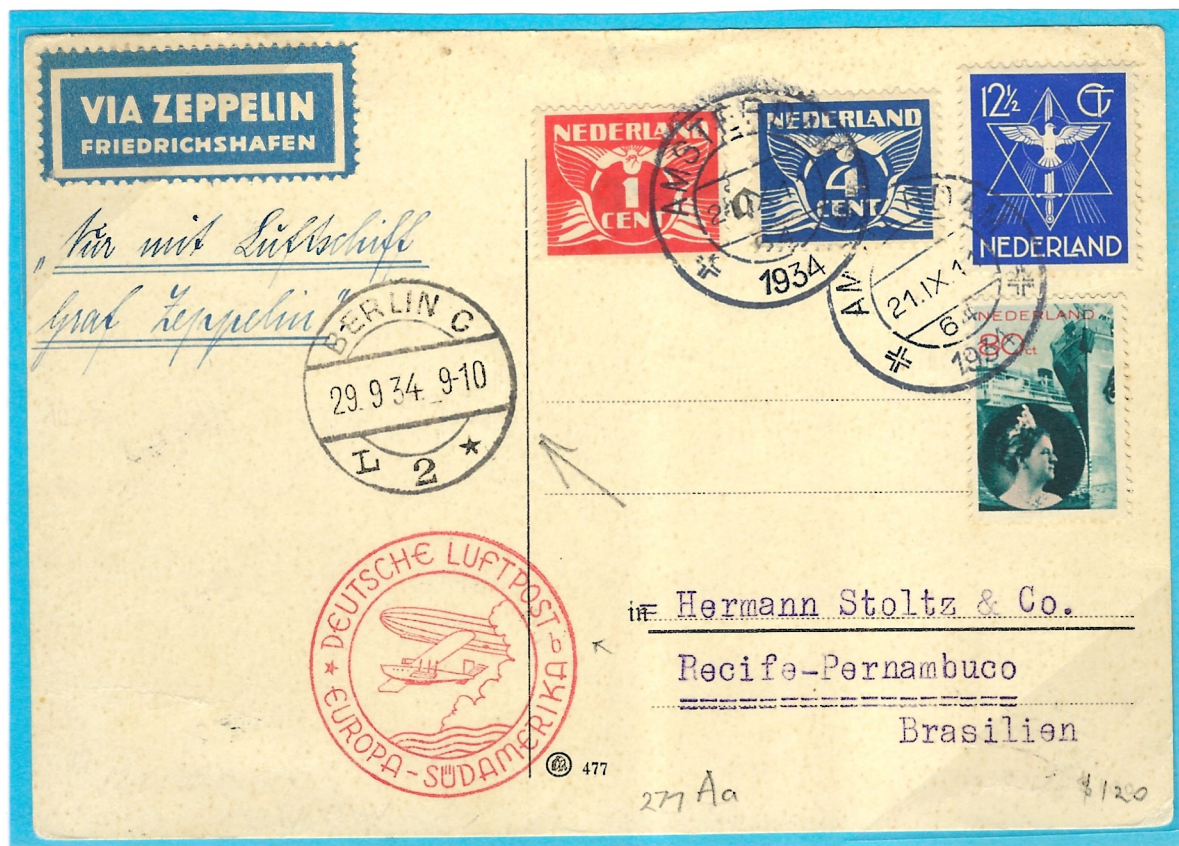
1932: LZ-127 **GRAF ZEPPELIN** 4th. South American Flight of the Year
 A French cover posted in Paris and carried on the south-bound stage to a Brazilian addressee.
 The cover has a Friedrichshafen transit mark, plus the special cachet for this flight in red.



1933: LZ-127 **GRAF ZEPPELIN** Chicago World Exposition Flight
 This was another "triangular" flight via South America. Below is a Greek cover for the Germany-Brazil stage of the trip. Posted at Athens and forwarded by rail to Berlin, where it was carried on a special connecting flight to Friedrichshafen. Berlin transit mark and connecting flight cachet applied.
 Then flown to Brazil receiving the special cachet used for that flight.



1934: LZ-127 *GRAF ZEPPELIN* 9th. South American Flight of the Year
 Dutch cover flown on the Germany-Brazil stage. By surface to Berlin, then flown to Friedrichshafen (no transit mark or special cachet used). For all southbound flights 1934 to May 1937 when the Zeppelin service ceased, a standard generic cachet was used on both airship and seaplane mail (the seaplanes did short stages between the support ships *WESTFALEN* and *SCHWABENLAND*, not non-stop ocean crossings), and the only way to determine whether the mail was Zeppelin-flown is by the postmark dates.



1935: LZ-127 *GRAF ZEPPELIN* 15th. South American Flight of the Year
 Uruguay cover to Germany carried on the return stage. The addressee is Herman Sieger, well-known airmail dealer and publisher of Zeppelinpost Mail Catalogues. The Zeppelin Coy. Representatives in Uruguay were the Stoeker Coy. and from late 1934 to December 1935 they applied a different cachet of their own design to mail handled by them. This cover bears the 15th. SAF version.



1936: LZ-129 *HINDENBURG* First North American Flight

A Liechtenstein registered card flown to the USA. Bears the special cachet for this flight and a 1fr. Zeppelin stamp produced for this first crossing. This particular one features the "red spot" flaw about one third of the way back from the nose of the airship. (Lehmkuhl Cat. 199a). Only 275 copies from the first printing exist, and once the flaw was discovered very few were affixed to postcards, most being kept mint, so it is relatively scarce postally used.

(Reference: Donald Lehmkuhl: The Zeppelin Stamps (USA 1992)



1936: LZ-129 *HINDENBURG* 3rd. North American Flight

Card posted on board on the return leg to Germany. Franked with stamps from the 1936 Welfare issue and cancelled at the on board PO. No Frankfurt transit stamp, and no street address for the addressee so it has probably been a "by favour" cancel and an example of so-called "pocket mail". The name of the addressee does not appear on the crew or passenger lists so it was probably for a friend or relative of the writer.



LZ-129 HINDENBURG Final Flight 3-6 May 1937

The airship was scheduled to make a local "Deutschlandfahrt" on 1 May. However this was cancelled and the mail held over until the first North American flight of the season, when it was carried and dropped over Cologne, receiving a 4-line explanation in addition to the pictorial cachet. As is well known on arrival at Lakehurst the ship was destroyed by fire and only 378 pieces of mail were recovered. Many collectors (and dealers) are unaware that this mail drop took place part way into the ship's final flight. Below is a postcard from the drop with appropriate markings relevant to the event.



The Ship's Loss:

On arrival at Lakehurst, NJ on 6 May 1937, the ship caught fire and was completely destroyed. Recent research has shown that charged carbon particulates from the right rear engine exhaust reacted with flake aluminium powder in the outer cover dope, causing sparks which set alight the fabric and then the rest of the ship. Despite many claims to the contrary, hydrogen played no part in causing the fire,

although it burnt once other burning materials reached it. Remarkably 62 of the 97 persons on board survived, many shocked but uninjured. And so ended the era of the trans-Atlantic Zeppelins. It was several years, and with the impetus of WWII before aeroplanes were capable of regular commercial flights over the Atlantic.

References: John Duggan: *LZ-129 HINDENBURG: The Complete Story* (UK 2002) ; Addison Bain: *HINDENBURG – Exploring the Truth* (USA 2014)

(Disclosure: Excerpts from this entrant's writings on the loss of the ship are directly quoted in both books.)

Philatelic Data: John Duggan: *Zeppelinpost LZ-129 HINDENBURG* (UK 2004) (Detailed study of mail carried with valuations)



Many countries have issued stamps depicting the ship's loss – seen here is a stamp from Grenada Grenadines and a mini-sheet from the Maldives.

