

By airship or by catapult flight across the Atlantic?

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The year 1937 has gone down in aviation history as the year of the disaster of the airship LZ 129 "Hindenburg". After the commissioning of the LZ 129 in March 1936 and the trouble-free operation of its predecessor, the LZ 127 "Graf Zeppelin" (commissioned on September 18, 1928), for the first time two airships were available for service across the North and South Atlantic in 1936/37, the LZ 129 was destroyed by fire during the landing manoeuvre at Lakehurst (New Jersey, USA) on May 6. Not only did 36 of the 97 people on board burn to death, but almost all the mail went up in flames. Out of 17,609 letters and cards, only about 370 were recovered in whole or in part¹.

After its 590th and last voyage, the 2nd South America voyage from April 27 to May 8, 1937 (the 3rd South America voyage in total), the utilisation phase of the airship "Graf Zeppelin" LZ 127 ended as planned.² The disaster of the LZ 129 at Lakehurst meant that within a day there were no more airships available.³ What's more, the Hindenburg disaster marked the end of transatlantic Zeppelin travel. The "fixed-wing aircraft", the aeroplane as we know it today, began its triumphant progress.

However, only part of the mail volume was carried by airship during the 1937 South America flights, namely printed matter, samples, parcels and express mail. The rest of the mail from Germany and delivery mail from Europe, such as postcards, letters and registered mail, was carried by aeroplane. Deutsche Lufthansa flew from Stuttgart on Thursdays and Air France on Saturdays. The airship flew fortnightly on Mondays (it was still possible to post mail on board).⁴

In the following, I would like to show you an airmail letter that was sent in those historic days of May 1937. It is a business letter from one of the directors of the oil shale plant in Kohtla (N.C. Gold Fields Ltd. Oil Works), Dipl.-Ing. H.A. von Wahl, to Helen Baroness Wrangell, an employee of the Scadta airline⁵ in Baranquilla (Colombia), from where the letter was forwarded to Bogota.

The light airmail cover shown at the top left, weighing three grams, is franked with Estonia Mi-Nos 98 (2) and 130, with postage for an airmail letter to Colombia weighing up to five grams at 2.25 crowns and 0.25 crowns for an international letter weighing up to 20 grams in the postage period from May 1, 1937 to March 31, 1939.¹ The sender from

¹ Wikipedia, LZ 129

² The airship LZ 127 was transferred to Frankfurt / Main, released for inspection and dismantled on March 1, 1940.

³ LZ 130 "Hindenburg" was still under construction in 1937 and only travelled within Greater Germany between December 1938 and August 1939.

⁴ Cf. MICHEL 2017: Zeppelin and airmail special catalogue 2017/18, 3rd edition. Unterschleißheim: Schwaneberger Verlag. Pages 295 and 320.

⁵ SCADTA, abbreviation for Sociedad Colombo Alemana de Transportes Aéreos, German-Colombian air transport company, oldest airline in South America, founded in 1919

Kohtla had it posted at the post office TALLINN-VAKSAL +A+ EESTI -4 V 37, Hurt / Ojaste 649:3, so that it reached BERLIN-ZENTRALFLUGHAFEN a at 8 p.m. on the following day -5.5.37 as evidenced by the transit postmark affixed on the reverse. The sender expressly noted in three languages the routing mark "**MIT ZEPPELIN FLUGPOST / BY AIRSHIP ZEPPELIN / ZEPPELIN ÖHUPOSTIGA**", outlined in red.

But which Zeppelin airship could have carried the letter? The letter was posted more than a week too late for **LZ 127**'s second South American flight from April 27 to May 8, 1937 – the airship's last flight to America. **LZ 129** had completed its first South American flight from March 16 to 27, 1937, and had been on its first – and last – North American flight since May 3. Transport by Zeppelin airship was therefore objectively not possible and due to the above-mentioned agreement between Deutsche Lufthansa and Air France, not planned. Accordingly, the routing note was crossed out in violet.

Somewhat indistinct, but still recognisable, the envelope bears the red "DEUTSCHE LUFTPOST * EUROPA – SÜDAMERIKA *" postmark on the front. So the letter travelled on by airmail from Berlin to Stuttgart and then into the air transport bag to South America: via Marseille, Seville and Las Palmas to Bathurst (today Banjul, capital of Gambia, ed.); there loading onto the "**Westfalen**" and by ship across the South Atlantic in 36 hours; while still on the Atlantic, launch of the Do J Wal "**Taifun**" on the catapult runway of the "Westfalen" with destination Natal on the north-east coast of Brazil and onwards within hours by plane to Rio de Janeiro; from there onward transport to Colombia⁶.

The Haberer **catapult flight** no. 539⁷ left Germany for South America on May 6, 1937. Our airmail light letter may have been transported on this flight. The second possibility arose with the Haberer catapult flight no. 541 on May 13, 1937. In view of the Berlin-Zentralflughafen postmark of May 5, 8 p.m. and the CORREO AEREO BARANQUILLA c 15.V.1937 arrival postmark (on the front and back), both possibilities seem possible. However, the transport time of 36 to 48 hours between Stuttgart and Rio de Janeiro described above, plus the uncertain transport time for the route from there to Colombia, argues much more in favour of flight Haberer No. 539. In any case, I know of no other catapult cover from Estonia to Colombia in May 1937. The question posed at the beginning of this article can therefore be answered clearly in favour of the catapult flight.

When might Dipl.-Ing. H. A. von Wahl have learnt of the end of international Zeppelin airship travel across the Atlantic?

Fig. 1: LZ 127 "Graf Zeppelin" on September 24, 1930, over Pärnu

Fig. 2: Explosion of LZ 129 "Hindenburg" in Lakehurst on May 6, 1937

Fig. 3: Light airmail cover Tallinn-Vaksal – Berlin – Baranquilla – Bogota, May 4–15, 1937

Fig. 4 without text

⁶ Cf. Haberer, Erich 1987: Catalogue of the Catapult Mail, Part 2: South Atlantic. Weil der Stadt. P. 5 ff.

⁷ Dito, p. 54