

1937

Editorials

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Recommended Citation

Editorials, 8 J. AIR L. & COM. 477 (1937)
<https://scholar.smu.edu/jalc/vol8/iss3/11>

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EDITORIALS

A SALUTE TO THE MEMORY OF CAPTAIN LEHMANN

By GILL ROBB WILSON*

Captain Ernst A. Lehmann had promised to fill this page with an exposition of trans-oceanic airship passenger travel. Since that day Captain Lehmann has journeyed to the Valhalla of all pioneers, and if my imagination has caught the echoes of the mighty shout with which his fellow airmen greeted him, you will understand . . . you who also have known them and him. Being fundamentally an airplane pilot I feel little qualified in comparison to airship pilots to write of Captain Lehmann. However he also was an airplane pilot and that shall serve as justification of the request which the editor has made of me.

On the evening of May sixth we waited patiently by the mast on the naval air station at Lakehurst. The Hindenburg was due to moor at six o'clock. About four-thirty she crossed the station on a southerly heading, motors working smoothly and all ship shape. She had bucked the steadiest the North Atlantic had to offer for the last seventy-five hours. Majestic against the broken ceiling she slipped down the coast to kill time until the scheduled landing hour. By five o'clock the ground crew was in readiness but a "front" was passing the station and intermittent showers fell until almost seven o'clock. The temperature rated down ten degrees, the wind veered, and conditions appeared to be working toward more settled status.

The ship reappeared on a northerly bearing, nosed across the station and came about into the wind, beautifully handled in a high fast landing and backing down her engines until poised before the mooring mast. Here she hung for a second like a great bird choosing the exact limb upon which to alight. The yaw line ports flew open and the plaited manila coils spun earthward and were made fast. She drifted a bit to starboard, was steadied by the port yaw line, and the mooring cables fore and aft had started to pay out.

Commercial transatlantic air travel for 1937 had been inaugurated. As Admiral of the Fleet, Captain Lehmann had accompanied the Commanding Officer on the inaugural run and was on the bridge, as were several other guest officers, when landing post was sounded. In a few hours the Hindenburg would be riding a tail wind back

* Director of Aeronautics of the State of New Jersey, and President of the National Association of State Aviation Officials. He has had, from the beginning, the supervision of the landings of the *Hindenburg* at Lakehurst.—Ed.

to Europe with the latest arrivals to the coronation. Then the blow fell.

Those of us long in the air know what it is to reach out in salute to the embodiment of our hopes and suddenly find our fingers filled with ashes. The gods have a way with them . . . and us. Somebody flies an ocean and a hundred plunge after him to forever disappear. Someone flies around the world and perishes in a simple stalled take-off. Somebody else discovers a pole, and nations run with buckets of paint to put stripes around it. Always we overplay our hands. Familiarity with danger is no guarantee of safety. The Graf Zeppelin, hydrogen filled, and fueled with blau gas at that, had crossed the Atlantic hundreds of times. Never before had a passenger been lost in a commercial airship over a stretch of thirty-five years. We forgot that only the superb genius of a few scientists had held back the grim threat of fire. The great defense had come to seem like an offense. Even the Hindenburg had been built to use helium, but there were complications. Hydrogen would have to serve.

So there was a reckoning on that evening of May 6th. The Hindenburg was ashes in our hands. Perhaps now all the constructive factors of airship development and operation will be embodied in a modern class of such craft. Ashes are a great element out of which to grow strong healthy plants. It has always been so. Out of them are now springing the new wings of domestic air transport. Out of them will "up ship" the dirigible of tomorrow. All the brotherhood who know the feel of a wet cloud, the pressure of a high wind, the sensation of falling ashes, will see to that.

As the Hindenburg hung poised for her mooring there came a lick of flame from the gas shaft vent just forward of the fin. In another second a dull detonation, and the after area of the ship was a veritable blow torch, burning rich. Her stern grounded, and the blow torch action moved forward as one after another the sixteen gas cells fed the flue-like influence of the axial corridor. The eight hundred feet of her beautiful hull settled slowly down.

On the illuminated stage, crew and passengers struggled to save each other and themselves. Into the inferno with them plunged members of the landing party, and in the tragedy of the ship was revealed humanity at its best. It happened so quickly that courage had to be an instantaneous reaction, or too late to avail. When the control car touched, those officers stationed there leaped to earth. They could have saved themselves certainly by jumping sooner. Their decision to hold all ballast, the more quickly to bring the ship

to earth, will stand as one of the clearest examples of disciplinary training of all time.

Captain Lehmann in his turn to abandon ship plunged through a window to starboard and was immediately overtaken by a surge of flame, the wind being slightly from the port side. So he met death at his post; and not alone one of the world's greatest aviators but a gentleman and a friend without guile perished.

He was a hard-bitten little man whose smile was as ready and sincere as that of a child. With an eternally strong pipe between his teeth, he was soft-spoken, courteous to the very humblest workman about him. It is impossible not to feel the loss of him as a lovable human being, even above his potential as an eminent scientist or a pioneer airman. My most vivid memories of him are not in the control car of his ship, nor about the facilities at Lakehurst or Frankfort or Friedrichshafen, but at dinner table with Mrs. Lehmann. Strange that it should be so, perhaps, but I rather suspect that all truly great men are greatest in the fundamentals of life's relationships. Anyhow I'll never forget the picture of them, the little Captain and his lovely wife whose gentle aristocracy of spirit was so radiant that it suffused everyone about them.

I've not told you a thing of Captain Lehmann's birth or youth or achievements. You will find these things in books—books of war and peace, history and adventure and record books. He was an engineer originally and skippered the Sachsen in commercial airship operation before the war. During the war he commanded many different dirigibles and raided high, wide and handsome everywhere from London to Moscow. He was the intimate friend of Count Zeppelin and of Gemmingen, his nephew, and almost the son of Doctor Eckener. He was close to Ludendorf and Field Marshall von Hindenburg. His comrades were such as von Butler and Breithaupt and Strasser and others of *Pour le Mérite* status. He was all man, this little Captain, and his life is a miracle of fortune as he moved through the turbulence of the years.

There was so much yet to be done in his world that as he lay on the hospital cot following the destruction of the Hindenburg, he muttered through swollen lips, "I must live. I must live." And the only answer I can think of to that is to place the name "Ernst Lehmann" on the bow of the first helium filled commercial airship which the gallant Captain Preuss will some day nose into her mooring to the mast at Lakehurst where the ashes have caused the outline of a great ship to be traced in a greener pattern. And I shall fly down to stand with my friend Rosendahl to watch while the benediction of his dream is realized. That will be a high privilege.

GILL ROBB WILSON.

THE LINTHICUM PRIZE AWARD FOR 1937

In 1935 was announced the subject for the prize biennially awarded by the Charles Clarence Linthicum Foundation of Northwestern University. The subject for 1937 was:

Air Carrier Liability in National and International Law.

The Competition was open to members of the legal profession in all countries. The first prize was the sum of \$1000 and a bronze medal; and there were five second prizes of honorable mention, carrying \$100 each. The monographs were to be submitted by March 1, 1937.

Nine monographs were received,—4 from the United States, and 1 each from Belgium, Cuba, France, Germany, and Netherlands.

After scrutiny by two Committees, the Faculty of Law awarded the prizes as follows:

First Prize: Jean Van Houtte, 246 Avenue de Tervueren, Brussels, Belgium; professor of law at the University of Liège.

First Honorable Mention: D. Goedhuis, Timorstraat 5, The Hague, Netherlands, graduate in law of Leiden University.

Honorable Mention: Joseph Kroell, 5 rue Theodore Deck, Strasbourg, France; graduate in law at Strasbourg University.

Honorable Mention: David Grant and Arnold W. Knauth, members of the New York Bar and of the Faculty of Law of New York University.

Honorable Mention: Hans Adolf Wulff, Merkenstrasse 41, Hamburg (Billstedt), Germany; graduate of the Seminar of Foreign and International Law, University of Hamburg.

The medal was delivered to the winner of the first prize by the Ambassador of the United States in Brussels. It is to be hoped that the monograph will be translated and published in the United States.

THE FACULTY COMMITTEE.