

Teen escaped Hindenburg's fiery demise

by David Maurer

The sight of the huge German airship Hindenburg coming in over the Jersey pines was something Frank E. Ward never tired of seeing.

In 1936, the teenager had watched it come in to the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey five times. On this particular day, May 6, 1937, it would prove to be making its sixth and final approach.

“My father, Peter Ward, was an engineer at the base and involved with the Navy’s lighter-than-air dirigibles,” said Ward, now 91 and living at the Colonnades in Charlottesville. “People call the Hindenburg a blimp, but it’s not.

“It was a rigid ship constructed with a metal frame that was covered with material. We lived five miles or so from the base, and I had gone in with my father that day so I could be part of the ground crew.

“It was a small base, and they wouldn’t have enough sailors and Marines to pull that big thing down. It took about 150 men to do it, so they would hire 30 or 40 civilians to help, and I was one of them.”

The Hindenburg was massive — 803 feet long — and weighed about 242 tons. It was scheduled to make what was called a “flying moor,” where it would be attached to the tall mooring mast and then winched down to ground level.

“That day there was an off-and-on rain, and when the Hindenburg first arrived at Lakehurst, it was raining,” said Ward, who was 16 at the time. “The captain of the ship, [Max] Pruss, was told to go out to sea until the rain let up, which he did.

“My observation when it came back in was that it was at a higher height and faster speed than usual. Later I found out that was because they were behind schedule and Pruss was anxious to get going.

“It made a turn over the airfield and headed toward the mooring mast below. The motors were turned off and it drifted. They threw the ropes out, and all these little groups of men grabbed them and started pulling under the command of the chief.”

Ward said the first indication he got that something was amiss was hearing someone back by the tail of the ship yell, “What the hell is going on back there?”

“I was way up near the front by the gondola,” Ward said. “I was watching Pruss, who was leaning out the open window and was looking around to see what was going on.

“Then I heard someone else yell, ‘Hey, the guys in the middle are running.’ Then suddenly the ship made a very precipitous downward motion above me.

“It was coming down, and I started to run. I ran about 20 yards, and then heard this eerie sound of metal crunching against the ground. I stopped and turned around.”

What Ward saw unfolding in the gigantic mushroom of fire and greasy black smoke was a disaster that shocked the world and ended the airship era.

“I saw the wreckage of the framework and humans trying to get out,” Ward said. “I saw them stumbling, falling, burning.

“It was a horrible sight. We stood for a moment and then we rushed back toward the flames, but what could you do? I tried to help, but you couldn’t get that close because of the billowing flames.

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“It happened in the early evening [7:25 p.m.], so it got dark soon after. One of the ground crew was killed, but I was OK.”

Of the 97 people on the Hindenburg, 35 perished. The awful conflagration caused Herbert Morrison, a radio reporter on the scene, to utter the now famous horror-edged words, “Oh, the humanity.”

“They had an investigation one week later at Lakehurst,” said Ward, who would see other horrors as an Army infantry officer in World War II and Korea. “After about 10 days they came to the conclusion that a spark from lightning had struck the ship from the side, hit the hydrogen and blew it up. After the war, some said it was sabotage.

“The truth is, no one will ever know the cause for sure.”

Ward went on to graduate from the University of Virginia and coached its track team for four years. His life’s work was teaching history — one dramatic piece of which he had seen firsthand.

“When I see the newsreel film of the Hindenburg disaster, I just think about being there,” Ward said. “It was a very tragic thing, but just another terrible thing you see in life.

“When it happened I was a high school student, and was running track and also playing baseball. I didn’t tell either coach that I was going to miss practice that day.

“When people found out I was there when this world-shaking thing happened, they said I was a hero. My coaches didn’t see it that way.

“Both of them chewed me out for missing practice.”