**What happened to the Hindenburg airship?**

**Take-off**

The captain of the *Hindenburg* shouted, "Schiff hoch!" ("Up ship!"), the ground crew released the handling lines and gave the giant airship a push. It was May 3, 1937 and the trip was a passenger return flight from Europe to the United States. The airship was carrying 36 passengers who had paid $720. With 61 crew members on board, the passengers were well looked after and enjoyed fine food and musical entertainment. The voyage was smooth and trouble free until it reached New Jersey in the USA.

**The Storm**

A fierce storm was brewing over the landing site in New Jersey on the afternoon of May 6, 1937. Turbulent winds were gusting so the airship circled the airport while it waited for better weather to land. At 7:10 p.m. the control tower sent a message to the airship: "Conditions definitely improved, recommend earliest possible landing."

**Arrival**

Not long afterwards the regal *Hindenburg* appeared over the airfield. The Captain desperately tried to slow down the *Hindenburg* and lower its altitude. Perhaps anxious about the weather, he made a sharp left turn as the airship approached the mooring mast. Soon, the *Hindenburg* manoeuvred to 1,000 feet from the mooring mast and was about 300 feet in the air. The excited passengers stood by the windows to wave at the onlookers on the ground as the airship decreased its altitude. Then, crewmen moved to the tail fin to release mooring lines and to drop the rear landing wheel.

**A Flame**

Afterwards, witnesses said they saw a small, mushroom-shaped flame rise from the top of the tail section at about at 7:25 p.m. The crewmen in the tail of the airship said they heard a sinister detonation which sounded like the burner on a gas stove turn on.Within seconds, a fireball exploded and engulfed the tail spreading quickly forward. The mid-section was smothered in flames even before the tail of the *Hindenburg* hit the ground. It took only 34 seconds for the entire airship to be consumed by flames.

The terrified passengers and crew had only seconds to react. Some jumped out of the windows, some fell. Since the *Hindenburg* was still 300 feet (roughly equal to 30 stories) in the air when it caught fire, many of these passengers did not survive the fall. Other unfortunate passengers were wedged inside the ship by moving furniture and fallen passengers. Other passengers and crew jumped from the ship once it neared the ground. Some were miraculously rescued from the burning craft after it had hit the ground.

The ground crew, which had been there to assist the craft in mooring, became a rescue crew. The injured were taken to the airfield's infirmary; the dead were taken to the press room which became an impromptu morgue.

**Significance**

Though it was assumed at the time that the fire was caused by a hydrogen gas leak ignited by a spark of static electricity, the cause of the disaster is still controversial. Considering the speed of the catastrophe, it is incredible that only 35 of the 97 men and women on board died in the *Hindenburg* disaster. The tragedy proved to have enormous consequences as it effectively ended commercial passenger service in airships. The future of long flights would be in the hands of airplanes.