

# Hugo Eckener, Account of an Airship's Atlantic Crossing (October 1924)

## Abstract

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In this dramatic 1924 radio report, the head of the Deutsche Luftschiffahrts-AG (the German Airship Travel Company or DELAG), Hugo Eckener, describes his adventurous Atlantic crossing on the hydrogen airship LZ 126, en route from its production facility in Friedrichshafen, Germany, to its ultimate destination at a naval air station in the United States. The flight, which lasted just over 80 hours, made headlines for two reasons: 1) it marked only the second time in history that an airship had flown across the Atlantic; and 2) its delivery to the U.S. constituted a partial—and exceptional— fulfillment of Germany's war reparations debt. What made this delivery so exceptional was the fact that the Treaty of Versailles not only prohibited Germany from maintaining an air force, but also barred it from manufacturing aircraft that could serve in one. This included zeppelins, the rigid airships invented by Ferdinand von Zeppelin that had already clearly demonstrated both their civilian and military applications. The United States happily granted a dispensation for the construction of the LZ 126, however, because it wanted access to Germany's cutting-edge technology. For DELAG, this order came as a lifeline, enabling the company to stay afloat until the Allies loosened their restrictions a couple of years later. Officially, the delivery of the LZ 126 counted as part of Germany's war reparations, and—in keeping with Versailles-Treaty restrictions—the Friedrichshafen facility designed this airship specifically for research and transportation uses only. The resulting LZ 126 zeppelin, begun in 1922 and completed in 1924, had room for 30 passengers and 30 crew members. In October 1924, Eckener himself led the flight to Lakehurst, New Jersey, and he describes the jubilant crowds that greeted him and his German crew. President Coolidge even invited them to the White House, celebrating the event as a symbol of reconciliation between Germany and the United States, just five years after the First World War. The U.S. Navy renamed the zeppelin “ZR-3 Los Angeles” and kept it in service into the 1930s, finally decommissioning it in 1939, on the eve of the next world war.

## Source

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At around 8 o'clock on the second evening, after a 40-hour voyage, we had covered half of the distance. We were about 200 nautical miles west of the Azores, over which our ship had passed like a fairytale apparition in the afternoon. Apart from a moderate gust of rain on the Spanish coast, we had had very nice weather, calm seas and a smooth passage.

Now it seemed about to change. The full moon, rising in a hazy atmosphere, poured a yellowish light over a restlessly breathing sea. A stronger swell came from the southwest and the southerly wind increased in strength and slowly turned westerly. We could see that bad weather was brewing to the west of us.

Enormous masses of clouds drifted heavily and low over the water in fantastic formations. And we passed between them as if through huge gates and gorges into the twilight of the moon. It became very humid. We took off our jackets and opened a few more windows in the pilot's gondola.

Around midnight, a strong southwesterly breeze blew. The sea was whipping up white caps and heavy rain was driving into the pilot's gondola. We were making very slow progress and had to recalculate whether our fuel would last if the weather worsened, because there were still more than 3,000 kilometers

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to go before we would reach New York.

The result of our calculations was not particularly encouraging. We therefore tried to establish a radio connection with the two American cruisers that were positioned to the south of the Newfoundland Bank, in order to have them transmit weather reports to us. But for several hours our efforts were in vain, because strong atmospheric electricity made communication impossible.

It was only at 5 o'clock in the morning, after a restless night in heavy rain, that we were able to pick up a clear message. It said that a barometric depression must be northwest of us, south of Newfoundland Bank. We then decided to go around it to the east and north in order to take advantage of the following winds.

So we now set a nearly northerly course. With accelerated speed, we now moved forward. In the morning, we already came to a calmer zone and shortly after noon we encountered the expected easterly wind. This quickly increased in strength as we came further north and soon we were able to head for our destination with a stiff easterly wind at our backs at a speed of 170 to 180 kilometers per hour.

We encountered the fog of the Newfoundland Bank, which spread out before us like an endless gray wall. To sail in light and sun, we climbed above it. It rose higher and higher before us in towers and crags of bizarre shapes like a mountain range. We finally had to ascend to 2000 meters to leave the gray towering structure below us.

The sun went down and poured flaming red and bright yellow light over this airy mountain world. It was a fairytale ride of unforgettable magic.

When we descended from our height through clouds and fog into the night after dark, we found ourselves above a white, foaming, raging sea, stirred up by a violent northeasterly storm. There was now still a journey of several hours through wildly swirling gusts that put the ship through its paces.

But the brave ship easily mastered the fury of the elements. At 11 o'clock we passed the lights of Sable Island. And at midnight, string of pearl-like lights shimmered over from the coast of New Brunswick to us. The New World was in sight. At four o'clock we flew over a slumbering Boston and startled the inhabitants out of bed with the thunder of our engines.

At seven o'clock we were anchored outside the harbor of New York. The trip from the Gironde estuary to Sandy Hook had taken exactly 70 hours. The enthusiasm of the American people, who had decided to pay us, the German people, a first homage after the war, welcomed us with the howling of 10,000 sirens and steam whistles.

Source: Hugo Eckener, Bericht über die Atlantiküberquerung mit dem Zeppelin ZR III (LZ 126), October 1924. Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv K001125395

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