

Daniel Guggenheim Medal

MEDALIST FOR 1937

For notable contributions to transoceanic air transport and to international cooperation in aeronautics.



HUGO ECKENER

Hugo Eckener, born on August 10, 1868, at Flensburg, Schleswig-Holstein, was destined to become the world's greatest authority on lighter-than-air ships and their navigation.

Starting life as a journalist, he wrote in 1904 a series of scoffing and critical articles for the Frankfurter Zeitung about Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, who was then experimenting with lighter-than-air craft. Count Zeppelin, meeting him at a yachting party, adroitly drew his young critic into a frank discussion of airship problems. Eckener soon after entered the service of the Luftschinbau Zeppelin, Zeppelin's airship company.

When the first World War began, Eckener was assigned to train dirigible commanders for the German Navy. Following the war he organized air transportation in Germany with the airships Bodensee and Nordstern, and maintained the service until these ships were delivered to the Allies as part of the war reparations. In 1922 he became General Manager of the Zeppelin Company, and two years later piloted the reparations airship ZR-3 across the Atlantic from Friedrichshafen to Lakehurst, New Jersey, where it was delivered to the United States Navy, and later re-christened the Los Angeles.

In 1928 he commanded the Graf Zeppelin on the first commercial trans-Atlantic flight. This great Zeppelin, the 117th in a dynasty of airships built in Germany, made the 6,168-mile westward voyage with 20 passengers and a crew of 40 in 111 hours, 44 minutes. In 1929 Eckener commanded the Graf Zeppelin on a round-the-world flight from Friedrichshafen back to Friedrichshafen with a crew of 41 and 20 passengers, making the 21,255-mile voyage in 20 days, four hours and 14 minutes elapsed time, of which 300 hours and 20 minutes were flight time.

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By May 1937 the Graf Zeppelin had made 590 flights, cruised 1,053,381 miles, and had carried 13,110 passengers and 235,300 pounds of mail and freight, mainly in service between Germany and Brazil. In 1936 Eckener inaugurated trans-Atlantic commercial passenger and mail service with the giant new dirigible Hindenburg, acting as pilot on her first voyage. During 1936 and one month in 1937 the Hindenburg made ten round trips between Frankfurt and Lakehurst, and eight to Rio de Janeiro, carrying 3,059 passengers and 41,000 pounds of mail and freight. Fire of undetermined origin destroyed the hydrogen-filled airship in one of the world's most spectacular disasters as she was coming in for a landing at Lakehurst on her first voyage of the 1937 season.

Following the loss of the Hindenburg, Eckener strove in vain to obtain from the United States a supply of helium for the Hindenburg's successor, the H2-130, also named Graf Zeppelin. Zeppelin plants during World War II were diverted to other purposes, and airship activities in Germany were not resumed. Eckener came to the United States for a short time in 1947 to aid the experts of the Goodyear Aircraft Corporation. He died at Friedrichshafen on August 14, 1954.