

Mather, Margaret G. “I Was on the Hindenburg” –

Mather was born in Morristown, NJ in 1878. She moved to Italy with her family in 1906, but visited her brother, Frank Mather Jr., at Princeton, a number of times. She was 58 when the Hindenburg crashed at Lakehurst , NJ. The following article is from Harper’s Monthly Magazine, November 1937.



I WAS ON THE HINDENBURG

BY MARGARET G. MATHER

IT HAD been my dream to fly across the gray stormy Atlantic. Swift airplanes had borne me over the Mediterranean, over Grecian islands, and through the Gulf of Corinth, over Italy and the Dolomites, over the high secrets of the Albanian mountains. I had flown through Germany and France and over the African deserts; but it seemed to be my fate to cross the Atlantic in increasingly luxurious steamers, whose lavish comfort and entertainment meant little to a sea-sick wretch.

But when at last and most unexpectedly, the way was made easy for me to travel by the *Hindenburg* from Frankfort to Lakehurst, a strange reluctance seized me. The *Hindenburg* was leaving just when I wanted to go, there was plenty of room on it, and by paying half the fare in registered marks, the price was within my means. Why, then, was I not elated, I who love the air? I tried to analyze my feeling. It wasn't fear—I had admired the great silver shape and longed to be aboard during its frequent trips to New York last summer. I decided that I was tired and let it go at that.

I arrived in Frankfort on the morning of May third, in a gentle rain. I saw the great hangar as we flew down, and asked if I might leave my luggage at the airport, but was told I must take it to the city, the official starting place, the Frankfurter Hof.

The bus did not leave at once, so I took a taxi and drove through ten kilometers or so of beech woods, most enchanting with their young green leaves. Why did

the thought come to me "what a beautiful farewell to earth"?

When the officials arrived at the hotel we had to show tickets and passports, and then the luggage examination began; it was courteous but thorough; every inch of my bags was searched, every box opened. I had to pay for fifteen kilos overweight, and tried to argue that point, as I weigh twenty kilos less than the average man, but I was told "it is the rule."

It was seven o'clock, I think, when the passengers were escorted to three great buses, and we were driven through the lovely beech woods to the airport. There by the hangar, tethered to the ground, was the great silver ship, and at the sight a wave of joy swept over me. Gone were all my doubts and reluctance; I felt all the elation and pleasure that had failed me until now. They had merely been delayed. We had to wait in the hangar for more passport inspection. I was surprised to see how few passengers there were and how few women among them.

It had rained on and off during the day, and was still drizzling as we crossed the brief space which separated the Zeppelin from the hangar. In spite of this there were many spectators, including a band of little boy Nazis who had been allowed to come quite near to inspect the ship.

I followed the other passengers up the narrow gangway and was taken to my cabin, which was very tiny but complete, with washstand and cupboards and a sloping window. After a hasty look I went above to watch the casting off.

I heard martial music and saw a brass band on the port side. The musicians were dressed in blue-and-yellow uniforms, and some of the instruments were decorated with streamers of the same colors. In the center was an instrument shaped like a huge lute, but filled with bells, instead of strings. It had yellow-and-blue horse tails hanging from it.

When the mooring ropes were loosed the band marched back a few yards, then turned and halted and the leader lifted his baton; but we drifted toward them and they had to retreat hastily. This happened several times, but at last the great ship began to rise and the band's final salute was "*Ein feste Burg*."

The little boy Nazis scurried over the field as we slowly rose. It was an indescribable feeling of lightness and buoyancy—a lift and pull upward, quite unlike the take off of an airplane.

As I leaned out of an open window to watch the receding earth, I heard short, jerky exclamations of: "*Mein Gott! Mein Gott!*" and saw near me a red-faced elderly man who had evidently been celebrating his departure with something stronger than Rhine wine, and whose excitement and enthusiasm found vent thus. His emotion was so intense that he seemed quite alone in it, it surrounded him like an aura, and isolated him; but suddenly he became aware of me and cried, "*Herrlich, nicht wahr?*" "I don't speak German," said I, thinking it more prudent to withdraw, but, "My God! Are you an American?" he cried; "So am I!" and he threw an enraptured arm about me.

All the passengers were hanging over the windows, trying to get a glimpse of the Rhine. We were sailing along rapidly through the dusk, guided by beacons, which flashed from hill to hill. We passed hamlets and villages gleaming jewel-like in the darkness, and came to a great spreading mass of lights, which someone said was Cologne, and suddenly we were looking down at the cathedral, beautifully clear and dark amid the glow.

At ten o'clock a supper of cold meats and salads was served. As the only un-

attached woman passenger, I was placed at the Captain's right, at a long table where twenty men were seated (married couples and families were given small separate tables).

Captain Pruss came in late and shook hands with me and with the men nearest. He ate a light supper, drank a glass or two of mineral water, and hurried back to his post. Throughout the trip he rarely ate more than one course and never drank wine or beer; he was courteous and genial, but very much on the job.

I was tired and glad to go to bed. My bunk was narrow but most comfortable and furnished with fine linen sheets and soft light blankets. The walls of my tiny cabin were covered with pearl-gray linen. It was charming, and I spent most of the following day there, glad to rest and to look through my sloping window at the angry waves, whitening the sea so far below.

We flew high above the storm, but a strong head wind buffeted and delayed us. It sounded like surf, but the ship sailed calmly through it. If one looked attentively at the horizon the slightest variation from the horizontal was perceptible, but there was no feeling of unsteadiness. I told Captain Pruss how much I was enjoying the trip, what a wretched sailor I was on the sea; he was pleased but assured me that it was one of the worst trips he had made. The wind grew stronger and the second night the captain did not go to bed at all, but still one felt no motion, though the wind beat like waves against the sides of the ship. It was almost uncanny.

I became acquainted with some of the passengers. There was an old couple from Hamburg, gentle old people who had been flying for twenty-five years and who loved the air so much that they were coming over for a week and were planning to return on the *Hindenburg's* next trip. An Englishman had been sent over to report on the trip; a number of young men had been vacationing or studying in Europe; my neighbor at table was a young lad from Chicago who had taken a

month's vacation to fly about Europe. When I asked him which country he liked best, he replied, "U.S.A., where you can drink plain water and there's no bother about passports." Just beyond him sat a merry young man who remonstrated with me for drinking only water while we were passing over so much water. "At least, have a dash of wine in it," he urged, and when I accepted he gave me a "dash" from his bottle at every meal, stilling my protests by assuring me that I was saving him from a drunkard's grave.

An American couple, Mr. and Mrs. — were returning from a brief business trip. He had flown on the *Hindenburg* last summer, and his wife had accompanied him this year in order to have the pleasure of flying back. I had after-dinner coffee with them, and sat with Mrs. — in the lounge, knitting or writing letters. There was a family of children, a girl and two boys, whom we liked to watch; they were so well-behaved and were enjoying the trip so much.

On the lounge wall was a great map of the world, painted in soft colors, showing the history of navigation, the routes and the ships of the first explorers, with their billowing sails, and the modern liners, and above them all the beautiful, silver *Hindenburg* sailing the great circle. All the chairs were made of aluminum and were light as feathers and most comfortable.

On the afternoon of the second day we sighted Newfoundland—the storms had abated, and we flew low and saw numerous icebergs, shining white against the stone-gray sea, with pools of vivid green in their depths and their forms spreading green under the pale water. Rainbows sprang from everywhere, and I watched one grow and grow till it completed a perfect circle beneath the ship.

That night I slept like a child and awoke in the morning with a feeling of well being and happiness such as one rarely experiences after youth has passed. No land was in sight and it was raining. I ate breakfast, joked with the young men, my messmates, who were always compar-

ing my appetite with theirs; I packed my few things, wrote a card or two, and suddenly we were flying over Boston.

A great elation seized me, joy that I had flown—that I had crossed the sea with none of the usual weariness and distress. "It is ridiculous to feel so happy," I said to the American, who replied that her delight was as great as mine.

All the ships in Boston harbor saluted us, and as we flew over the suburbs we saw cars draw up by the roadside and their occupants leap out to gaze at us. Airplanes circled about us and one or two accompanied us on our way. It was delightful to look down on the gardens. Yellow forsythia was in bloom, and some sort of trailing pink; the grass plots were vivid green, and we saw apple trees in blossom and woods full of dogwood and young green leaves. Our passing frightened the dogs, who rushed to their houses, and caused a great commotion in the barnyards—especially among the chickens and pigs; the latter rushed desperately to and fro, and seemed absolutely terrified, and the chickens fluttered and ran about in proverbial fashion. Cows and sheep did not notice us much.

We flew over Providence and recognized many villages, rivers, and bays. A young Yale graduate stood near me, a charming lad, who had studied aviation and was much interested in flying near his Alma Mater. Lunch was served early so that we might be free when we sighted New York. We cruised slowly along the sound and Mrs. — showed me the bay on Long Island where her home was and told me that her son was driving from there to Lakehurst to meet his parents.

New York swam into view. The rain had stopped, but there were black clouds behind the tall buildings. We flew over the Bronx and Harlem, then along Fifth Avenue, past Central Park, then we turned west and flew over the *Rex* and other big ships, down to the Battery. There we swung round to the East River, flew over two or three bridges, then across Times Square, and out to New Jersey.

The clouds were black and ominous as

we flew over Lakehurst. The landing crew was not there, and the weather was becoming worse instead of better, so we flew on to the coast and cruised up and down along the beach, sometimes flying out to sea. It was raining again, and there were flashes of lightning. "Not at all dangerous," somebody said. "A Zeppelin can cruise about indefinitely above the storms. It is not like a plane, which has to come down for fuel." Then somebody else told me how the *Graf-Zeppelin* had arrived over some South American country during a revolution and had circled about and waited a few days till the fighting ceased and it was safe to land.

We startled many deer in the sparse pine woods near the coast. They ran singly or in groups of two or three. Now and again we saw the hangar at Lakehurst through the driving rain, then we lost it for a time, and I blamed the American for not keeping watch over it. I was feeling foolish with happiness and didn't really care how long this cruising lasted. The ship was to start back at midnight, but of course we should not land before it was safe to do so.

We had had an early tea, and at sixty-three sandwiches were passed. I refused at first but took one when the steward told us that we might not land for an hour or two. All at once we were over Lakehurst. The ship made a quick swing about and I saw the mooring ropes thrown out. The landing crew drew back until the ropes touched the ground, then rushed forward to draw the ship down.

Mrs. ——— was standing beside me, but said she would go down to her cabin and fetch her coat. That was the last time I saw her.

I was leaning out of an open window in the dining saloon with many others, including the young aviator, who was taking photographs. He told me that he had taken eighty during the trip. When there were mysterious sounds from the engines I glanced at him for reassurance.

At that moment we heard the dull muffled sound of an explosion. I saw a look

of incredulous consternation on his face. Almost instantly the ship lurched and I was hurled a distance of fifteen or twenty feet against an end wall.

I was pinned against a projecting bench by several Germans who were thrown after me. I couldn't breathe, and thought I should die, suffocated, but they all jumped up.

Then the flames blew in, long tongues of flame, bright red and very beautiful.

My companions were leaping up and down amid the flames. The lurching of the ship threw them repeatedly against the furniture and the railing, where they cut their hands and faces against the metal trimmings. They were streaming with blood. I saw a number of men leap from the windows, but I sat just where I had fallen, holding the lapels of my coat over my face, feeling the flames light on my back, my hat, my hair, trying to beat them out, watching the horrified faces of my companions as they leaped up and down.

Just then a man—I think the man who had exclaimed "*Mein Gott*" as we left the earth—detached himself from the leaping forms, and threw himself against a railing (arms and legs spread wide) with a loud terrible cry of "*Es ist das Ende.*"

I thought so too but I continued to protect my eyes. I was thinking that it was like a scene from a medieval picture of hell. I was waiting for the crash of landing.

Suddenly I heard a loud cry! "Come out, lady!" I looked, and we were on the ground. Two or three men were peering in, beckoning and calling to us. I got up incredulous and instinctively groped with my feet for my handbag, which had been jerked from me when I fell. "Aren't you coming?" called the man, and I rushed out over little low parts of the framework which were burning on the ground.

One of the passengers, the Englishman, rushed to me with a cry of, "Thank God, you are safe" as I was helped into a waiting car which was already filled with my shipmates. I squeezed in by the chauff-

feur, and asked him to put me down near the entrance so that I might find my family. "Can't do it. Orders are to take everyone to the First Aid Station." "But I am not asking you to go out of your way. Put me down at the nearest point. I'm not hurt!" "Look at your hands, lady." I looked, felt sick, and said no more.

We were among the first to arrive at the dressing station. I was taken into a room, where a doctor or a nurse put picric acid on my hands, which were beginning to feel as bad as they looked.

A terribly injured man was seated on a table near me—most of his clothes and his hair had been burned off. Someone told me he was Captain Lehmann.

More car loads of wounded came in. We heard howling and groaning, and our helpers rushed to succor them, leaving the bottle of picric acid with Captain Lehmann who sat steadily on the table, with a large piece of gauze in one hand and the bottle in the other, swabbing the acid on his burns.

During his infrequent appearances among the passengers he had worn a leather coat with fur lining, upturned collar, which partly hid his face. He always looked alert but genial, with keen blue eyes. Now his face was grave and calm, and not a groan escaped him as he sat there, wetting his burns. His mental anguish must have been as intense as his physical pains, but he gave no sign of either, and when my burns became intolerable and I would reach for the bottle he would hand it to me with grave courtesy, wait patiently while I wet my hands and receive it back with a murmured "*Danke schön*." It was a strange, quiet interlude, almost as though we were having tea together. I was impressed by his stoic calm, but only when I learned of his death the next day did I realize his heroism.

Terribly wounded people flowed in from all sides, and I could not bear the sights and sounds. I went outside and saw an ambulance draw up. I waited to see if any of my acquaintances were in it.

When the doors were open I saw a number of men piled one upon another like fagots. Two or three were lifted out, one remained. All I could see of him were his legs, burned and stiff like charred pieces of wood. I felt sick and went out into the rain.

The Zeppelin was still burning and clouds of black smoke soared above it. I watched it with anguish. Even in the midst of human suffering and death I could not but regret the destruction of so beautiful a thing. I thought of the happiness it had given to me and to many others; of the icebergs and rainbows we had flown over; I thought of how gently it had landed.

Kind people standing near approached me, women whose husbands were stationed at the airport. They tried to lead me back into the dressing station, but I saw the little boy passengers carried in, screaming with pain and terror, and I walked farther away.

Whenever people asked what they could do for me I would tell them to communicate with my family—giving names and addresses—but I refused to be sent to a hospital, as I thought some of them might be waiting for me, and gladly accepted the offer of a lady to take me to the entrance in her car. I waited while she walked through the crowds calling out the names I had given her. When she had assured me that my people were not there she most kindly asked me to return to her house for the night, but I thought I would wait at the station in case any word came.

My hands were hurting terribly. I went in to have them dressed and was sent to another building where the women were housed, but there were no dressings there so I returned to the place to which I had been taken first. It was empty now. I saw the Englishman who had helped me into a car carried out on a stretcher with his leg bandaged.

I sat in one of the outer rooms, and someone brought me a glass of water. It was very quiet now. Most of the wounded had been taken away and most

of the dressings had been exhausted, but somebody found a tube of vaseline, squeezed it on my hands and wrapped them loosely with gauze.

I saw one of the stewards walking up and down. He looked absolutely unscathed, even his clothes were immaculate. He looked as though he might be going to pass sandwiches, as he had done an hour or two earlier.

At last someone in authority asked me where I should like to go; there was an ambulance free, and I was practically the last of the passengers. I could be taken to a hospital or to my brother's home.

It was easier to direct them to my niece's home in Princeton. I soon found myself wrapped in blankets on the hard ambulance stretcher, with two ex-service

men sitting beside me and two in front. They regaled me with tales of the horrors they had just seen, but they were most kind, propping up my aching hands, trying to avoid bumps in the road, and when the hard couch became too unyielding they helped me to sit up. One of the men put his hand at my back to support me, and exclaimed, "Do you know that your coat is all burned?" I had not known it. Indeed, aside from my burned hands, I was thinking that I was as immaculate as the steward whom I had seen.

We stopped frequently to inquire the way and the trip seemed endless, but at last I recognized the towers of Princeton and in a few more moments I was at my niece's door.