FRANK WARD INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewed by Cheryl Ganz
August 11, 2011
Smithsonian National Postal Museum

Frank Ward, Ground Crew Member, Hindenburg, May 6, 1937, “The Hindenburg Approaches”:

Ward: I had been on the grounds crew the previous year five times, and all those five times, when it came over, it varied very little in its approach, coming over the New Jersey pines and then onto the field and making a big turn and then descending and going down, hooking onto the mooring mast with the help of the grounds crew. This time we waited through rain and rain again and then clearing, and so when they finally got the go ahead sign the ship came in, and when somebody hollered, “Here’s the ship, here it comes,” it came out of the New Jersey pines and you could see it suddenly appear. It was going faster, at a greater speed, than at any other time I had seen it. It was higher in the altitude than at any other time, and it seemed to be speeding towards the field and then it slowed down, made a big U-turn, and then started to descend toward the landing crews.

[Break]

And I was staring right up at Captain Pruss, who had his gondola window open and had his elbows on the windowsill, looking out, surveying the situation. And I, my thoughts at that time as I looked up, I thought, we were pulling on the rope, and one chief petty officer from the tower of the 200-foot mooring mast would be yelling orders, “Bow, pull, starboard”— uh, what’s the other side —

Ganz: Port.

Ward: “Port,” thank you. “Port, port, starboard,” and guiding us and pulling. And I looked up at Captain Pruss, and I thought, “You know,” my thoughts went back, “this is not a bad job because the future is still ahead, and perhaps someday the sky will be filled with blimps and air, big 700-800 foot airliners, that will be going from country to country, and that wouldn’t be a bad job. I might look into that some day, when a few years,” not thinking of a war or anything else like that.

Frank Ward, Ground Crew Member, Hindenburg, May 6, 1937, “Disaster Strikes”:

Ward: Well, as every group is pulling all along the line, and my thoughts I’ve told you, and then suddenly somebody in our group said, “Hey, huh, look down the end there at the tail, a bunch of fellas are movin’, look it, they’re running.” And so we looked, and we’re 800 feet away, and I didn’t pay any attention. I said, “Oh yeah, I don’t know, maybe possible, maybe some oil or gas fell out and they’re running to get away from it.” (0:41) And twenty, thirty seconds went by and then closer to the middle of the ship another group or two started running, and I said, “Boy, I see, huh, look over there, must be somethin’ wrong, oil or gas, or something.” It was actually, it was not hydrogen, but if it were a form of chemical that’s what it would have been. (01:08) So, I was, oh, ignorant about the whole thing, I kept pulling with other men and others started running, and then suddenly the ship made a very precipitous drop right above us, about, uh, let’s say 150 feet or something like that, not much higher. And somebody said, “Hey, oh, look at the fire, she’s caught on fire, look, the back. It’s burning, it’s burning, look at everybody running.” So, uh, I woke up with others and, being young, it didn’t take me long to
lead the pack running. (01:47) And so I said, “Holy cow, let’s get out of here,” and so we ran. Everybody scattered quickly. I don’t think we went twenty yards, and then we heard this eerie sound when the metal of the ship hit the ground, the mud, and it started crackling, and the fires burning along, very heavy black smoke, and the coverage, fabric, is burning very quickly, and so when I heard all this eerie sound from when it hit and so on, that brought me to a quick stop, and I turned to see what had taken place.

[Break]

And these people, especially the civilians who paid the price of the ticket, were in frantic—you can’t really use the right words—but they were grabbing the metal and then falling because the metal was just red hot. (02:52) It had turned red from, naturally, the fire and so on, the canvas fabric had burned quickly, and they were falling, men in civilian suits who had paid. One gentleman, middle-aged man, had held on to his briefcase, he wouldn’t let go of it, and he stumbled over the metal trying to get out. A lady did the same thing, grabbed a hold of the metal and just her hands I guess started to burn, fell. Others were coming out. What do you do in a situation like that? And the chief boatswain’s mate who was the announcer giving orders from the tower, uh, was yelling out, uh, “All crewmen,” not crewmen but grounds crew, “stand by, Navy get in there and help, Navy men, marines, help!” And there was not a large number of marines or sailors at that base, so they moved forward as best they could with the heat and all. So, the civilians, myself and others, did not pay much attention to his orders, and we moved forward as well, but you couldn’t get too close. People were coming out burning, their clothing, and then falling in mud because it had rained heavily that day—puddles of mud and water. And it was a horrible sight to see.

Frank Ward, Ground Crew Member, Hindenburg, May 6, 1937, “After the Hindenburg Disaster”:

Ganz: Well, Frank, I have a little surprise for you. I went to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, to investigate the Hindenburg Investigation Papers. And in addition to the testimony of everyone who was before the board, they had a lot of documents that they had prepared in advance, including documents from ground crewmen. So here’s one of those forms; can you tell me the name at the top of the form?


Ganz: That’s right. And so the first question says, “State your position in relation to the ship, including the distance from the ship.” And how did you answer that?

Ward: Starboard bow line, approximate, uh, what is it, 200 feet from the ship.

Ganz: And in addition to these questions they asked you, they gave you a form to fill out with like a diagram of the Hindenburg. And they asked you to mark where you were standing under the ship. And you can see, you put an X right here—

Ward: Yeah

Ganz: —on the starboard bow side.
Ward: Right.

[Break]

Ward: Everybody used to say, uh, “Gee, I guess when you returned the next day you were a big hero,” this, that and the other. I don’t think three people mentioned it. And the ones that I do remember very much mentioning it, when I went out on the field the next day for track, and baseball followed, both coaches chewed me out: “Where were you yesterday?” And I said, “Well, I went to pull the Hindenburg down,” and they said, “What’s that? Why didn’t you say something? We didn’t know about that, did you know about it? No I didn’t know about it. You could at least tell somebody,” and this, that and the other, and blah, blah, blah. So I said I wasn’t any great hero to the coaches, I’ll tell you that, ‘cause they chewed me out for missing practice.