

Time Magazine

Monday, Oct. 12, 1925

National Affairs: Shenandoah Investigation

The Naval Court of Inquiry investigating the wreck of the dirigible Shenandoah sat for a second week at Lakehurst, N. J. The chief testimony taken dealt with air conditions at the time of the disaster and the chief witness was Captain Anton Heinen, German Zeppelin pilot, for years employed as a pilot and tester by the Delag Co., makers of the German Zeppelins.

Lieutenant Anderson, aerologist of the Shenandoah, had told that he had advised Lieutenant Commander Lansdowne to change the course of the ship shortly before the accident occurred, but that Commander Lansdowne had demanded reasons for doing so and that he was unable to point out any definite danger signs.

When Captain Heinen took the stand he was questioned with some asperity because he had said previously to the press: "They will appoint the usual whitewashing inquiry board to camouflage this disaster and its cause, but every man at the Air Station knows why it happened. That accounts for the tense air over there at Lakehurst. I consider the Lakehurst crew responsible for taking off those valves."

He said that this statement was based on his personal opinion. He testified that in his opinion there were unmistakable danger signs in the air, that Commander Lansdowne made an error in judgment in not steering

around the storm, and that the destruction of the ship was caused by the bursting of gas cells because a number of safety valves had been removed (all points that the survivors of the disaster deny). Lieutenant Rosendahl, one of the survivors, questioned him:

Rosendahl: "Although you admit you have made mistakes in judgment, you do not think that in the position we were in it would have been possible for you to make a mistake?"

Heinen: "No, it was not possible. The piling up of evidence of the danger was so great and so varied that it would have been on this occasion impossible for me not to have seen it. ... My opinion of Captain Lansdowne as an aerologist is not changed with this flight. It is the same now as it was before, for I know that he was making his observations as closely as he possibly could. I only say here that he made a mistake in judgment because he had not quite enough experience. My opinion of Captain Lansdowne as a pilot was of the highest and is of the highest."

At the close of his testimony Captain Heinen said:

"I thank the Court for their courtesy in allowing me to go to the length that I thought it my duty and the most difficult duty of my life to go, and I am thankful that the spirit was accepted everywhere, especially in that quarter where I had to hit. . . ."

But Captain Heinen's testimony was not done. Several other witnesses were called who answered him, denying his several points. One of them had testified regarding a

quotation of Heinen in the newspapers (Heinen was reported as saying that sending out the Shenandoah with some of her safety valves removed was "murder") that when he read that statement he said to his wife: "That man is a liar and he knows he is a liar."

After this Captain Heinen was recalled by the Court to verify certain points in his testimony. He said:

"If I understand the meaning of the English word, a liar is one who conveys false facts with intent to deceive. I did not make the statement reported and I have never attempted to deceive.

"As long as this term was applied to me in private I would only be rather sad at having lost a friend. But since this comes up in open court, where it will get the attention of the widest publicity, I am forced to fight this and seek means and ways to have an apology made to me, as I may be flattering myself that the Court up until now will have realized the sincerity of my purpose—of my fight. I ask the protection of the Court."

The Court hurriedly called an executive session and announced in a few minutes that the offending remark had been stricken out as "irrelevant and unnecessary."