



MILESTONES OF AVIATION

Episode 1: Touching the sky - How the pioneers lived and died for mankind's dream

Only in 1903, the theory of flying was mature enough for practice. However, hundreds of young pilots died and only a few became famous. The documentary captures an era full of dreams and dramas, mysteries and lies.

On December 17, 1903, two bicycle technicians finalised a kite on a windy island off the North American East Coast. However, in order to study the movements secretly, they built a wind tunnel. Orville Wright succeeded to be the first man to control a self-powered airplane in flight. But why did the brothers keep their success story a secret for more than three years?

Santos-Dumont's experiments, however, were known to everybody and his trial departures in the Bois de Boulogne were attended by hundreds of spectators. He was the first one to make a flight in public, but when he saw how his achievements were taken over and misused by others, he committed suicide. Santos-Dumont would have been forgotten, if not famous for his airship cruise of 1900 circling around the Eiffel Tower in Paris. He even landed his small airship in the Champs-Élysées, fixed it to a tree and had a cup of coffee in one of the boulevard cafes.

The Wright brothers who always claimed to have been the first to fly, tried to control the construction of airplanes worldwide. They even intended to take a licence fee from everybody wanted to fly.

For most discoveries, it took centuries. The access of the skies was a matter of only 30 years. In spite of all risks, unknown pioneers opened up the air mail routes across Europe and from New York to San Francisco. They had to be able to fly at night, in an open cockpit, without any GPS or radio control. They worked with maps and a compass. They were called "suicide lot" due to their tremendous death toll. Nevertheless, many Americans dreamed of the people's plane as of to the people's car of Henry Ford. Charles A. Lindbergh went on the first single-engined flight from Paris over the North Atlantic. He was the last pioneer to understand the relevance of the new technique for the future of all people.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 2: Airmail – Messengers of the sky

In the early 1900s, flying was an incalculable risk only few passengers dared to take. Instead, the frail biplanes were often loaded with letters. In Europe, Asia and America, the foundation for commercial aviation was laid by air mail servicemen, the unsung heroes of early flight.

Today, a global air transportation network routinely transports millions of letters to the most remote corners of the world. Today's air mail pioneers like Federal Express use state-of-the-art technology. They track their freight every step of the way, every second of the few hours needed to cover the continents. The advance of laser technology and satellite communications makes it possible – a development beyond imagination in aviation's infancy.

Against all odds, adventurers of American, French, and German origin made their visions become reality. Making a dream come true took its toll, in money - and in lives. One in six air mail pilots was killed on duty. The early American air mail servicemen were nicknamed the "suicide lot".

In the 1920s and 30s, the world's first scheduled air routes were established, the predecessors of modern day passenger carriers: The US Air Mail Service, Germany's Lufthansa, and Aeropostale in France. They had a clear aim: to fly as long a distance in as short a time possible. To meet their schedule, early air mail pilots had to fly in all weather conditions. They had to take whatever nature offered, be it rain, storm, fog or snow. Flying low in their unheated, open-cockpit biplanes, pilots peered over the side of their aircraft to navigate. In their radarless planes, with low-tech instrument panels that were considered more a distraction rather than an aid, every single flight was a challenge.

Surviving veterans of that time have amazing stories to tell: after forced landings in the desert, French pilots on the route from Casablanca to Dakar did not only have to fight sandstorms, but also hostile nomads - all the while protecting their mail.

In this documentary gripping tales of air mail pioneers are being told. Human drama of aviation's early days is combined with the hard facts on the latest technological developments: the perfect logistics behind global overnight express services and the 24/7 activity of high-tech hubs powering modern global air mail transportation are being investigated.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 3: Giants of the Sky - The comeback of the Zeppelins

Imagine a ship the size of an ocean liner - gently floating above the skyline of Manhattan! Most of us have already forgotten that, once upon a time, giants like this really existed. In the first decades of the 20th century, several hundred of Zeppelins had been built. Regular airship services connected the USA and South America with Europe. They offered sky cruises in a luxury and splendour that has never since been rivalled by any aircraft. Wherever the Zeppelins went, they were sure to be greeted by large crowds who stood rapt at the spectacular sight they made.

Now imagine one of those majestic airships passing over your head again. It may happen soon: A new generation of Zeppelins has been built. The maiden voyage of the first Zeppelin NT (New Technology) was in early 1998. Six of them had been sold even before production finished. Just like their forerunners, they have little in common with the small, non-rigid blimps that can occasionally be spotted in the skies above our cities for advertising purposes. The Zeppelin NT offers all the luxury, comfort and safety of a sea-bound cabin cruiser and requires only a minimum ground crew for take-off and landing. Zeppelin visionaries from all over the world imagine an age when, once again, these giants will be touring the Grand Canyon, the Niagara Falls, Rome, Paris, London, and New York.

Our TV documentary celebrates the comeback of the Zeppelins and explains their underlying state-of-the-art technology in computer design and aerodynamics. "Giants of the Sky" presents the eventful history of the dirigible airship, showing footage that has never been shown on television before, including spectacular colorized film sequences of the burning "Hindenburg", the disaster that marked the end of the golden years of Zeppelins.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 4: Flying Boats -The Dinosaurs of Aviation

Once upon a time, boats could fly – cruise liners of the sky connecting countries and continents. In the infancy of aviation, flying boats visited the great cities of this world and advanced to horizons yet unknown. Big, strong and ponderous, with up to twelve propellers and wingspans exceeding 300 feet, the giant flight machines were supreme rulers of the skies. They helped build the fame of former Pan American Airways and serviced the first commercial air route across the South Atlantic. Then, they lost out to quicker, lighter “land planes”, much like dinosaurs did to mammals.

“Flying Boats” brings back a lost era of aviation. With rare historic footage and the witty and entertaining commentary by the world’s most renowned authority for passenger air travel, Ron Davies (National Air and Space Museum, Washington), amazing stories of the most exciting days of aviation are being told:

- Two Frenchmen’s battle for the constructors’ crown: charismatic Pierre Latécoère versus ambitious Claude Dornier in Germany, an assistant of airship visionary Graf Zeppelin.
- Legendary explorer Roald Amundsen considered Dornier’s “Whale” the only flying machine of its time capable of bringing him to the North Pole.
- German flight veteran Adolf Mlodoch was ordered to prepare a flying boat as secret escape vehicle for the “Führer” in WWII and soon found himself hunted by the British.
- Eccentric multi-millionaire Howard Hughes and his vision of a giant, wooden cargo flight boat capable of carrying up to 750 fully equipped troops.

The documentary shows today’s last relics of an extinct species. On Vancouver Island, two giant flying boats are still in service – as the world’s biggest water bombers: Rick and Stephen from the British Columbia Fire Brigade combat the murderous fiery blaze of forest fires with the last dinosaurs of aviation.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 5: Real Star Wars: The military race to space

Killer satellites. Cosmic soldiers. Nuclear explosions in outer space: Projects out of a Hollywood script for Star Wars. To military planners in the USA and Russia, these scenarios are part of the true race for space.

Long before Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon, generals on both sides of the Iron Curtain had started to reach for the stars. To date, the military secrets behind the triumphs of civil spaceflight unfold.

The son of one of the mightiest men in the Soviet Union speaks out. Rocket engineer Sergej Khrushchev, son of the legendary Nikita, took part in some of the most secret projects of the USSR. He unveils the true scope of cold war in space: Several times, the world stood on the brink of World War Three.

On the American side, prominent eye witnesses like leading NASA scientist and strategic planner Jesco von Puttkamer took us to the backstage area of international politics in dramatic times.

The documentary also gives insight into the top-secret National Reconnaissance Office, which controls all American espionage satellites, and is a driving force behind space-laser projects like SDI – ideas that seem all the more current as President Bush's "Missile Defense" hit international agendas.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 6: Chopper Dreams - The Helicopter Story

Striking fear across the battlefields of the world and saving lives in spectacular search-and-rescue missions, helicopters are the most versatile aircraft in existence. In a visually stunning documentary, we tell the history of the helicopter, a rich tale spanning the globe as well as more than 400 centuries. The documentary includes previously unseen footage and traces the history of this spectacular aircraft all the way back to the Renaissance Tuscany.

Leonardo da Vinci was the first to come up with the idea for a helicopter. But his dream didn't turn into reality until the 1930s. Profiting from a Spanish invention, the "autogyro" – a hybrid between helicopter and airplane – the German Henrich Focke was the first to build a fully functional helicopter. His FW 61 was the first aircraft that was able to act like a hummingbird. It could hover in space and take off vertically – the helicopter's defining features.

The Nazi government quickly realized the propaganda value of the new invention and staged a series of publicity flights. In February 1938, a female test pilot, 25-year-old Hanna Reitsch, was picked to be the first person to fly a helicopter indoors. But the performance at Berlin's Deutschlandhalle arena became a spectacular flop.

The research conducted by Focke and his rival Anton Flettner was partly funded by the military which sought to make use of the helicopter. It staged countless secret tests in its attempt to enlist the services of the new aircraft in the war. These tests included launches from trucks in full speed as well as from submarines. Nevertheless, the helicopter played an insignificant part in WWII. This would change though, due to the involvement of the Russian emigrant Igor Sikorsky, commonly thought to be the father of the helicopter. Being not so much a great innovator but a gifted publicist for the cause of the aircraft, Sikorsky is responsible for the US taking the lead in helicopter development.

In times of war, the helicopter proved its vantage and virtues in the jungles of Burma and Vietnam. But the "Helicopter Story" doesn't end here. Internationally renowned experts and eye-witnesses explain latest inventions and trends.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 7: Supersonic Dreams: The Concorde Story

For almost 30 years, the Concorde travelled across the Atlantic: fast as a bullet, the world's only supersonic passenger plane made it from Paris to New York in less than four hours.

The Concorde was an icon of style and a status symbol for the rich. But on July 25th, 2000, the dream turned into a nightmare. When Air France flight 4590 went down in a flaming inferno, 113 people died, among them flight attendant Brigitte Kruse, who had been the main character in several VIDICOM documentaries.

In the late 1990s, VIDICOM was granted one of the rare permissions to film during several regular Concorde flights, with unprecedented access on board. Furthermore, we were allowed to film in the elegant Concorde VIP lounge and the maintenance hangar. This exclusive material is complemented by stunning original footage from the 1960s and poignant impressions from the last flights in 2003. SUPERSONIC DREAMS: THE CONCORDE STORY tells an intriguing tale of triumph and tragedy.

VIDICOM has produced 12 documentaries on CONCORDE. This is the most comprehensive and final story on it.

Length: 52 Min



Episode 8: Air Craft Carriers - Force at Sea

They are self-sufficient cities with several thousand inhabitants and their own air force. Air craft carriers - the mightiest battle ships in the world. The events aboard these mobile air forces bases seem just about confusing, yet their strategic amenities make them irreplaceable fixtures for any super power. In international crises air craft carriers are their indispensable trump cards.

As TV reports have so far mainly focused on US air craft carriers, long-lost footage and eye-witness interviews tell the story of Germany's only air craft carrier "Graf Zeppelin", thus adding new accents to the field of military history documentaries. In 1938, when the "Graf Zeppelin" was launched in Kiel, Northern Germany, it was the largest battle ship ever built. However it remained uncompleted until it ran ground in 1945 and fell into the hand of the Soviet army.

On detours, documentation of the Nazi's ambitions to develop an own carrier that was confiscated by the US army is now being brought to television audiences. Reports of eye-witness Georg Ott, who was part of the secret mission "Zugvogel" round off the picture. Ott served as an operator aboard the "Graf Zeppelin" and had to help sink the nine-story-high giant in a secluded bay of the Baltic Sea.

Footage from the United States, Japan, France and England show quaint scenes of the first air craft carriers ever built, such as the "Birmingham" at the beginning of the 20th century and monstrous kamikaze battles in the pacific war 1944, all filmed in technicolor and at the highest standards of the time by Hollywood teams.

The role of modern day air craft carriers is examined in France, where the nuclear-powered "Charles de Gaulles" was taken into service at the time of our shooting, thus enabling the director to show the crew during the maiden trip. VIDICOM was also able to follow the pilots' training on the "Foch". The documentary shows fascinating pictures of a swimming city, tells the stories of the crew from sailor to admiral, and analyses the military and political importance of the multi-million giants of the sea.

Length: 50 Min.



Episode 9a: Eurofighter - Airpower United

The Eurofighter is more than an airplane - it is a war machine and Europe's „MEMP“ - most expensive military project. Our documentary shows how this fighter-bomber is designed, tested and built. Construction will be underway from September 1998.

We accompany a test pilot in flight and discuss the strong political opposition to the Eurofighter. We analyse its military value as well as its chances to hit foreign markets such as the civilian Airbus.

„This is one of our most challenging projects“, says VIDICOM's executive producer Peter Bardehle, „we had to struggle with military secrets when we filmed a 28 minutes documentary on the Eurofighter earlier this year. But in the end, we got great pictures and a strong story. That's why we want to follow up on this topic.“

Length: 26 Min



Episode 9b: The Desert Prince – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Heroes of early aviation established the first scheduled airmail routes in “flying crates”. Being too unsafe for passengers, the father of the best-selling *Little Prince* was one of them: French flight pioneer and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry flew the mail over northwest Africa, the South Atlantic and South America. Linking continents and countries as well as minds and mentalities was the mission of the man who sought to look at danger and adventure with a poet’s eyes.

In *Desert Prince*, Saint-Exupéry is portrayed as he becomes head of a remote outpost in the North African Sahara in 1927 – and it is documented how his adventurous life was every bit as fascinating as his books. Threatened by rebellious nomads, he was in a demanding position between skillful diplomacy and heroic action. Time and again, he saved crashed and captured air mail pilots from the rebels.

With magnificent images in the spirit of “The English Patient” and authentic historic footage from the days of the air-mail pioneers, *Desert Prince* is a fascinating and romantic take on a remarkable life that ended unexpectedly. When France went to war with Hitler Germany, Saint-Exupéry became a military pilot. At the age of 44, he left for his last mission, a reconnaissance flight over occupied France. He took off from an American air base in North Africa, on his way to cross the Mediterranean Sea. He did not return. His plane was never found. His death remains a mystery.

Length: 28 Min



Episode 10: The Hindenburg Disaster

It was one of the most mysterious and devastating accidents in aviation history: On a fateful day in May 1937, the largest airship ever built, the "Hindenburg", went down in a fiery blaze near New York.

The "Hindenburg" had come all the way from Europe - a luxurious flying hotel with a fully-equipped kitchen, spacious lounges and dining-rooms. It had crossed the Atlantic faster than any ship. Now, it was going to bring its 72 passengers back down to earth. All of a sudden, the largest airship ever built burst into flames. In a matter of seconds, the pride of the Third Reich turns into an infernal ball of fire. Even now, 70 years later, surviving eye witnesses cannot forget the horrible smell of burning human flesh that lingered in the air. 35 people died in the flames - and nobody knew why.

Was the "Hindenburg" disaster the result of sabotage, committed by opponents of the Nazi regime? Was the zeppelin's outer skin hit by gunbullets of angry farmers and therefore losing highly explosive hydrogen? Was it a cunningly planned insurance fraud? Or was it a more or less simple technical failure?

While the world press followed the investigation of the accident closely, the German public was left in the dark. The nazis had no interest in exposing flaws in German technology. Consequently, rumours spread.

A scientist at Cape Canaveral discovered the real cause. After several years of work in his laboratories, the former hydrogen manager of NASA, Addison Bain, knows exactly what happened, and he can prove it: Neither the hydrogen in the hull nor a bomb was to blame for the disaster, but a special fabric and the paint for the outer skin that, when ignited, burned like a fire wall.

Lenth: 28 Min.