

# **Blimp Crash-Lands on Roof of a Building in Manhattan**

Published: July 05, 1993 - by Robert D. McFadden – N.Y. Times

A commercial blimp porpoising along above an urban scene of office towers, tenements and busy streets began to deflate and crash-landed on the roof of an apartment building on Manhattan's West Side yesterday in a spectacular Fourth of July mishap that left its two crew members injured and a neighborhood agape.

The cause was not immediately determined, though the pilot and Federal aviation officials said a piece of the tail assembly apparently broke off and punctured the nylon skin of the helium-filled airship Bigfoot, which bore the Pizza Hut logo and arrived in New York from Boston yesterday afternoon on a summer-long tour that was its maiden voyage around the nation.

As the 165-foot dirigible plowed onto the top of the seven-story building at 410 West 53d Street, between 9th and 10th Avenues, its gondola came to rest just inside the parapet and its body perched, perilously and surreally, with its nose on the rooftop and its tail jutting out high over the street.

Then, said witnesses -- some of whom were sunning themselves on the roof -- the huge airship rapidly deflated from a gash in its side, its nose fell limp amid a forest of pipes and vents on the gray asphalt roof and its tail draped down the building's brownish brick facade, covering scores of windows with a bunting that might have been conceived by Salvador Dali.

## **A Tangle of Metal and Fabric**

When rescue workers reached the roof minutes later, the submarine-like 12-foot gondola lay crumpled in a tangle of twisted metal and torn fabric, its windows shattered and its interior a jumble of plastic lunch trays, sandwich bags and other debris around two empty blue seats. But nearby lay the stunned pilot and co-pilot, who had been helped out by rooftop sunbathers.

Witnesses, as close as the crash scene and as distant as the observatory of the Empire State Building, saw the accident happen, as did people in streets and windows and on surrounding rooftops.

"I got out of my chair and I was standing maybe 20 feet away and it hit the chair I'd been sitting in," Joseph Nadeau, a 22-year-old brokerage auditor who was taking the sun on the roof, told The Associated Press. He said he watched the blimp approach from the northwest, "spinning, definitely out of control," then come directly at him on his safe retreat. After the crash, he helped the pilots out and followed their instructions to shut off the fuel and electrical systems. Both pilots seemed disoriented and spoke of back pains, he said.

At nearby St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center, Carmine Quinones was visiting her niece and looked up from the street. "All you could see was this huge thing coming down, circling, and they are throwing things out -- big white stuff," she said, echoing accounts noting that the pilots had desperately tried to lighten the falling ship to gain altitude.

Two miles away, on the 86th floor observatory of the Empire State Building, Bryce Hauschildt was taking in the view with friends when the improbable occurred.

"I put 25 cents in the viewfinder and I could see this blimp that was totally out of control," he recalled. "The back end was sagging and bringing the whole thing down."

Mayor David N. Dinkins, who left on a trip for Israel last night, visited the scene briefly, examined the damaged blimp and said: "The first thought I had was I haven't even gotten on a plane yet," an apparent reference to crises that seem to pop up whenever he goes out of town. "Thank God no one was injured and the pilot apparently did a pretty good job."

### **Crew Members Injured**

A spokesman for Pizza Hut, Robert A. Doughty, identified the pilot as Lee Cermak, 62, and the co-pilot as Pat Russell, 41, both of Eugene, Ore., who sustained minor injuries. Mr. Cermak, a blimp pilot for Goodyear for 35 years, was in stable condition at St. Clare's Hospital, and Mr. Russell was in good condition at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center.

Mr. Cermak refused to be interviewed. From his hospital bed last night, Mr. Russell, wearing a neck brace but in good spirits, also declined to discuss the crash, but confirmed accounts that he and Mr. Cermak had tried to keep the ship aloft by lightening its load. "We were dropping ballast to try to keep in the air -- that's what people saw falling," he said.

The Bigfoot -- a new white \$4 million blimp bearing the red logo of Pizza Hut and a wild-dog cartoon character that is the mascot for the company's new large pizza product of that name, two feet across and one foot wide -- was leased by Pizza Hut from U.S.L.T.A. (United States Lighter Than Air), of Tillamook, Ore., two months ago for a \$6 million campaign tour that began in Los Angeles in mid-May and was to visit 19 cities by mid-August.

### **Previous Problems**

Mr. Doughty said the blimp carried the world's largest fiber-optic display panels, capable of flashing 17 different messages. But he also acknowledged that the Bigfoot had encountered problems before. The rudder control went awry after a bearing failed on May 28 on a cruise north of Los Angeles, but the ship landed safely, he said.

After touring Dallas, Detroit, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis and other cities, it had gone to Boston for a Harbor Fest, left there yesterday morning and flown to New York. Its destination was Linden, N.J., where it was to be suited up with fiber-optic signs and would join the evening's Fourth of July fireworks over the Hudson River.

But shortly after 3 P.M., as the airship lumbered down the Hudson shoreline on Manhattan's West Side, something went wrong. The police said it was about 800 feet in the air when it began to lose helium from its gigantic envelope and began to go out of control.

Police and fire officials later quoted the pilot as saying a piece of the tail assembly had broken off and punctured the skin. Duncan Pardue, a spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration, said preliminary indications pointed to structural problems in the tail, but he said a full investigation would be conducted.

### **Trying to Lighten the Ship**

Apparently opting for land rather than the river, the pilots steered over Manhattan, looking for a parking lot, a large rooftop or some other open space, the police said. As they did so, witnesses said, they began throwing things out of the cabin, apparently to lighten the airship and prolong its time aloft.

Unlike the great dirigibles of the 1930's, which were many times larger and had rigid aluminum skeletons to maintain their shape and support an internal string of bags that were filled with flammable hydrogen, modern blimps are supported entirely by the pressure of nonflammable helium contained in ballonets, or large air sacks, inside the blimp's skin.

Many of those ships of the past came to grief in explosions or crashes, most notably the Hindenburg, the 800-foot German airship that crashed and burned at Lakehurst, N.J., on May 6, 1937, killing 36 of 97 people on board after a trans-Atlantic flight.

The familiar modern airships, which carry sightseers in their cabins and advertisements on their hulls, have a good safety record. The last crash of a blimp in the metropolitan area before yesterday occurred in 1986 at Lakehurst, where one person was killed and four were injured.

### **Tail Sagging and Nose Surging**

Yesterday, as the Bigfoot moved ever lower over the West Side, many witnesses looked up and were alarmed. "I saw a guy throwing things out of the cabin -- he was panicking," said Thomas Cargen, an artist who was sitting in the window of a building on West 54th Street and saw the blimp go overhead, its tail sagging and its nose surging to stay up.

On the roof of the Midwest Court apartments on 53d Street, a space the size of a football field, two women and three men were sunbathing. They looked up, astonished, as the airship came toward them, skimming the rooftops. Three ran into a stairwell, but two men stayed to watch, fascinated, as it landed beside them, hissing in its death throes.

Source: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)



*The Bigfoot Blimp lies limp against the side of an apartment building at 410 West 53rd in New York after crashing on July 4, 1993. Luckily, the pilot and co-pilot sustained only minor injuries. None of the residents sunbathing on the roof of the apartment were harmed.*  
Source: [robdoughtycommunications.com](http://robdoughtycommunications.com)



*US-LTA 138S #002 promoting Pizza Hut.*  
Source: [www.myairship.com](http://www.myairship.com)