

# HITLER'S CARRIER

*The crowning achievement of the Kriegsmarine during World War II was to be the aircraft carrier. Indeed, the nations bordering the Atlantic lived in fear of the day the huge carrier would be unleashed. But Hitler had other plans of winning the war in the Atlantic, and the giant carrier was in limbo. Was this perhaps his most fatal mistake of WWII?*

BY WILLIAM B. MUELLER

The uniformed, stiff-armed spectators present at the launching of the *Graf Zeppelin* foresaw a great naval future for Germany's first aircraft carrier. She was well shaped, her recurved bow was graceful and her flight deck had beauty of line that was not apparent in other contemporary carriers. Yet, this *crème de la crème* of Hitler's fleet was destined to a Gilbert and Sullivan scenario with construction vacillating between urgent priority and near scrap heap lethargy.

To understand how this 31,000-ton warship — with an 800-ft flight deck — came to an ignoble end before the political structure that built her requires a brief step back into history.

The end of the First World War for Germany was not a naval disaster. In 1918, her large and powerful fleet still sat well at anchor, but not for long. The battleships and heavy cruisers were seized and scuttled by the British, who, in revenge, sought to eliminate the possibility of harassment by such a fleet ever again. After the British had their pick, the French and Italians confiscated the remaining first-class ships, leaving the recently de-Kaiserred nation

What was to be the pride of the German fleet never came to be — *Graf Zeppelin* was photographed shortly after launching.

with a navy that was, for all practical purposes, useless in modern warfare.

Taking the ships and leaving the designers and shipwrights (as well as Germany's industrial base) was a little like slapping Jack the Ripper's hand and confiscating his medical kit. For the ship designers who had given the Kaiser such prestigious ships as *Friedrich der Grosse* and *Emden* were still ready to go back to their drawing boards and lofts. Fortunately for the Allies, the ruinous economic conditions that followed the war, in addition to the severe treaty restrictions on the makeup of the postwar German Navy, gave the designers very little to work on or to hope for.

But hope they did, even though the subject of building aircraft carriers in the interwar years was *verboten*, except for secret meetings in the highest councils of the Stahlhelm and other militaristic organizations. As with other secret, forbidden subjects, there was much heated discussion — particularly between the remnant German Air Force, which didn't want an air arm based at sea, and the Navy, which did.

By 1933, 15-years after war's



Artist concept of the *Graf Zeppelin* as an operational carrier. (World of Warships)

end, many of the Kaiser's ship designers had headed into retirement — gone from the drawing boards, but still influential enough to stifle some of the newer, younger designers' attempts at putting their ideas into action on Chancellor Hitler's newest ship project — Carrier "A."

One of the younger ship designers was Wilhelm Hädeler who went to work on Carrier "A" during 1934, describing the older designers somewhat generously as having "misinterpreted" the project. His job in the early stages was to get together some sketches to try to formulate the broad areas of necessary research and planning for such an ambitious project. Carrier "A" — the first such vessel to be built by Germany — was to be constructed in the *Deutsche Werke* yards at Kiel in Germany's northernmost state of Schleswig-Holstein.

With Hitler's rising economic momentum, which supplied every German worker with a job during the mid-1930s, the work on Carrier "A" rapidly

progressed. The younger designers, somewhat unmindful of the problems involved, had called for certain innovations — one of major proportions was



*Graf Zeppelin* on 8 December 1938 at Kiel.

increasing the thickness of the transverse frames on her 820-ft hull; the better to absorb the shock of torpedo and shell hits. Nonetheless, the framing and plating went smoothly and by the 8th of December 1938, the pride of the German Navy — the ship that made it a "real" navy — was ready to be launched.

As soon as she was launched, problems began to plague the builders: Armor plate for the gun casements was diverted to submarine and other construction; lumber for the flight deck wasn't seasoned properly,

