



The airship that could usher in a new age



Pathfinder 1, bankrolled by a Google billionaire, is an attempt to revive the airship. A century after terrifying disasters, is a safe-enough bet?

The understated tone in LTA's post belies the historic achievements of Brin's company so far. This was the first flight of the first airship built by the Google cofounder's company, the first time a classic rigid airship of this size had flown since the 1930s, and the first of a new generation of airships. The last giant rigid airship Graf Zeppelin II flew for the final time on 20 August 1939, 12 days before World War Two started, and was scrapped the following year. Rigid airships have a complex metal framework that supports a huge envelope filled with enough hydrogen or helium to lift a sizeable number of passengers, or cargo such as disaster relief, for days at a time.

They have used this freedom to, for example, find better materials than lightweight aluminum alloys like duralumin to construct the giant frame of a rigid airship from, and cotton-composite materials and even cow guts to make the envelope out of, and gain a much better understanding of aerodynamics involved in flying very large airships. And it seems like they have been able to cautiously flight test their creation, without the over confidence and pressure from investors that have been a problem in the past.

are currently "the world's largest" fleet of airships. "This is a brilliant, very bold attempt to do the hard work, the engineering that is required, to mass-manufacture big airships. I don't think they will build hundreds of those because of the difficulties in mass-manufacturing airships of that size, but it's still possible." Pathfinder 1 is not a historical replica. It is a proof-of-concept airship designed to see if a rigid design can be updated with new materials.