



Press Release No. 1/98  
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## Balloon accident investigation soon completed

The investigation of the fire and crash of a gas balloon near Kienberg (just W of Berlin) on 18. October 1997 are almost complete. Four balloonists were travelling from Bitterfeld to Fehrbellin with a gas balloon of a capacity of 1000 standard m<sup>3</sup> hydrogen. They died when their vehicle crashed for reasons initially unknown.

The result of the investigation by the Federal Aviation Authority (LBA) at Brunswick was that the balloon was too close to a strong radio station. Deutsche Welle has four short-wave antennas with a power of 500 kW each at the site of the accident. The balloon approached them to about 100 m. The strong electromagnetic field caused a separation of the balloon itself and the net over it, which carries also the basket. Net and basket fell down from a height of about 150 to 200 m. There was no chance to survive.

The balloon itself, which had caught fire, rose after the loss of the basket and flew burning for a while until the residual gas burnt explosively. Media reports described the accident on this basis as "explosion in mid-air". This is an unjustified over-simplification.

Competent sources in the Federal Aviation Authority told DWV that the hydrogen in the balloon was not the cause of the accident. To a helium filled balloon exactly the same would have happened.

The investigation was difficult because such an accident is without precedence so far. LBA worked together with a number of experts from the German Balloon Sport Association, German Hydrogen Association (DWV), Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt (PTB) and Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing (BAM). The question now is which consequences the results will have.

Radio stations are shown in maps for aviation, but not so much because of the electromagnetic fields, but rather as obstacles like spires and chimneys. Interference by fields had affected primarily military aviation (flying at low height), not the civilian domain. Balloonists will be more advised about these risks in the future.

**Remark:** These results provide no reason either to view hydrogen as unacceptably dangerous. **Did you know** that even the "Hindenburg" accident of 1937, which is always mentioned anew, had nothing to do with the hydrogen on board? This was in the archives of the Zeppelin works at Friedrichshafen since 1937, but remained unknown until recently. Look up the ["Hydrogen Mirror" No. 3/97!](#)

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