

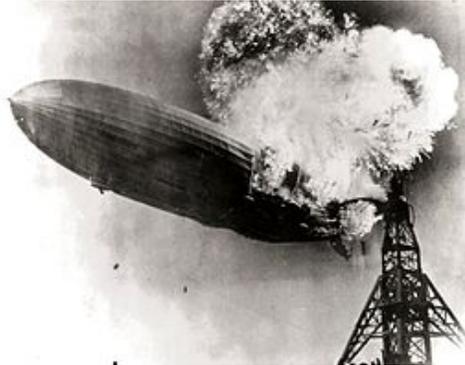
# Crash of the *Hindenburg* (Herbert Morrison, reporting) (May 6, 1937)

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*Herbert Morrison*



*The Hindenburg Disaster*

It is perhaps the most famous excerpt in the history of radio. Immediate, emotional, dramatic and unexpected, newsman Herbert Morrison's compelling, unforgettable first-person account of the crash of the German-built LZ 129 airship, better known as the *Hindenburg*, becomes imprinted into the memories of almost all who hear it.

The *Hindenburg* had already been in service for more than a year, having completed 17 roundtrips over the Atlantic, by the time of its scheduled May 6, 1937 "docking" at Lakehurst, New Jersey, a location one hour south of New York City. It had departed from Frankfurt, Germany, on May 3rd and had been delayed in its arrival by several hours due to poor weather conditions.

The *Hindenburg's* massive, mostly hollow body--just shorter than that other doomed vessel, the *Titanic*, and about half as long as the Empire State Building is tall--was propelled through the air with the assistance of 15 onboard motors. It stayed afloat however thanks to its buoyant, invisible cargo—seven million cubic feet of hydrogen gas.

On May 6<sup>th</sup> of '37, the *Hindenburg* was traveling with a contingent of 36 passengers and 61 crew members. The passengers were crossing the ocean in luxury. Though staterooms were small, the ship still sported a well-appointed dining room, a "reading and writing" room (where travelers could write letters on official *Hindenburg* stationery), and a lounge complete with a specially-made grand piano. There was even a carefully-controlled smoking lounge where cigarettes, cigars and pipes could be enjoyed during the flight. (A lower deck included crew quarters and "mess hall.")

Surprisingly, it is not believed to be a stray cigarette or an errant match which set the ship aflame that day. In fact, there is still much debate raging about what actually brought down the *Hindenburg*. While some claim sabotage, others say it was a sudden lightning bolt. Others believe static electricity ignited the weather-proofing on the exterior of the ship.

Whichever, it took only 37 seconds for the ship, as it was coming in to be tethered at 7pm in the evening, to be completely engulfed in flames.

At first, there was an explosion near the rear of the ship. As flames and smoke poured forth, it caused an immediate release of the ship's hydrogen. Immediately losing its altitude, the body of the vessel smashed to the ground in quick segments, back to front. Fire swiftly incinerated the

ship's protective skin, eating it away in seconds. Its metal skeleton, now exposed, burned and fell to the ground, snapping like sticks. Underneath, groundsmen ran for their lives.

By the time the *Hindenburg* was destroyed, 36 people had died--13 passengers, 22 crew members and an additional person on the ground.

Though this landing would have marked the 10<sup>th</sup> successful trip to the US for the *Hindenburg*, Chicago-based radio station WLS nevertheless dispatched one of their reporters, Herbert Morrison, to the site to cover it. The assignment was supposed to be routine. Actually, it was meant more for publicity for American Airlines (then running a special flight from Chicago to Lakehurst specifically for *Hindenburg* passengers) and a test run of a new sound recording method (the Preston, in which instantaneous sound was cut into 16 2/3 rpm discs) than a major news story. Accompanying Morrison was his engineer/recordist Charles (Charlie) Nehlson.

Morrison's now famous reportage began unremarkably, describing in some detail the massive dirigible as it sailed in towards its mooring mast:

The ship is riding majestically toward us like some great feather, riding as it was mighty, mighty proud of the place it's playing in the world's aviation. The ship is no doubt bustling with activities.... It's practically standing still now. They've dropped ropes out of the nose of the ship, and it's been taken a hold of down on the field by a number of men. It's starting to rain again; the rain had slacked up a little bit. The back motors of the ship are just holding it, just enough to keep it from--

It burst into flame! Get out of the way! Get out of the way! Get this Charlie. Get this, Charlie....

Recordist Nehlson had been recording all this time. But the initial *Hindenburg* explosion caused his machine's stylus to momentarily lift and skip on the disc before Nehlson replaced it and continued recording Morrison's emotional commentary:

This is terrible! This is one of the worst catastrophes in the world.... It's a terrific crash, ladies and gentleman, the smoke and the flames now. And the frame is crashing to the ground, not quite to the mooring mast. Oh, the humanity and all the passengers screaming around!

Morrison's coverage of the *Hindenburg* would last a total of 40 minutes and fill several discs. At times, both Morrison and Nehlson paused in their reporting either out of exhaustion or to assist with the many wounded on the site.

Today, coverage of such a cataclysmic event would almost instantly be broadcast out over the airwaves. But, in 1937, satellite relay and other such options did not exist. Furthermore, at that time, NBC maintained a policy *against* the airing of *recordings* on their network. It was a policy they relaxed the day after the *Hindenburg* tragedy in order to air some of Morrison's remarkable, eye-witness account.

The effect of the *Hindenburg* recordings on audiences was startling. Never before had such a large audience heard such a blow-by-blow description of such a horrific occurrence. For listeners, the news of the day suddenly became active, proximate, *real*.

News gathering and reporting was altered too. Though reporters had been witnessing devastating events for decades, previously, they had the benefit of time and distance—both emotional and geographical--between the things they observed and what they eventually wrote for publication or broadcast. The advent of the *Hindenburg's* radio coverage forever collapsed the distance between experience and expression.

Though Morrison, by and large, was commended for his accurate and careful accounting of the incident, for many years, he has been criticized by some for being overly emotional at the scene and not conducting himself in a manner more befitting a supposedly dispassionate journalist. But, for years as well, the original discs were often improperly played, mistakenly sped up by engineers compensating for the slightly slowed pace of the original. When adjusted properly, Morrison's commentary shows itself to be remarkably composed though understandably urgent.

Also at the scene that day, were various newsreel film crews including those of Pathé, Paramount, Movietone, and Universal. Their black-and-white footage captured in pictures what Morrison and Nehlson captured in sound. Since then, the two elements—sound and picture--have often been merged together leading to the mistaken assumption that they were recorded together though this is not the case. Still, the subsequent combination of sight with sound has created a stunningly powerful and chilling documentation.

Along with securing its place in broadcasting history and amongst the epic disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the crash of the *Hindenburg* also brought about the end of the dirigible era; airships lost their luster and became “death traps” in the eyes of the public. Could Morrison's graphic, often re-aired account of it have played a part? Certainly both airplanes and oceanic vessels had crashed or sunk before, taking untold lives, but they have never fallen out of favor as a means of transport. Yet, in contrast, airships never recovered from this one spectacular, widely-publicized tragedy.

If the concept of air travel by dirigible is now antiquated and forgotten, then Herbert Morrison's coverage of the *Hindenburg* disaster is not. His words—especially his iconic, pseudo-sound byte “Oh the humanity!”—have forever lived on. Over the years it's been evoked, copied, even parodied, perhaps most famously on TV's “WKRP in Cincinnati” where newsman Les Nessman says it in that series' famous “flying turkeys” episode. More recently, it was name-checked in an episode of the Sy-Fy Channel's “Eureka” when a high school science fair project got out of control.

What Morrison's *Hindenburg* coverage beget in terms of broadcast journalism has certainly never left us either. Today, almost all news coverage is done live with reporters, TV and radio, satellited in from far-off places. Often they, too, are called upon to cover tragic, suddenly changing events—consider the 1989 World Series, held in San Francisco, when an earthquake (the first fully captured over live television) delayed the start of Game 3, or the Space Shuttle disasters, or of course the events of September 11, 2001.

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