

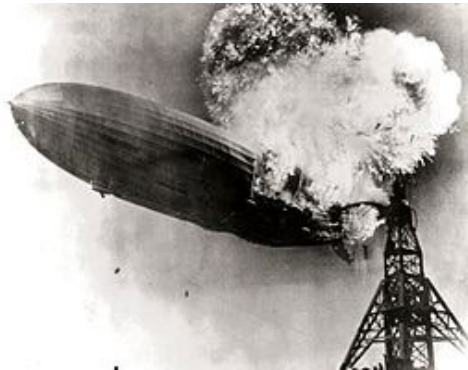
Crash of the *Hindenburg* (Herbert Morrison, reporting) (May 6, 1937)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Michael McCarthy (guest post)*



Herbert Morrison



The Hindenburg Disaster

The Recording That Burst into History

It's the most stunning and dramatic radio broadcast--ladies and gentlemen--of all time. And without a flight delay and some deft needlework, the priceless recording might never have happened.

May 6, 1937. A muddy landing field in New Jersey. Herb Morrison, a radio announcer, was on hand to interview the well-to-do passengers arriving on the watermelon-shaped flying wonder called the *Hindenburg*. The Zeppelin was drifting in to land.

Suddenly--the heat and the glow of the *Hindenburg* on fire erupted over him. His suit was toasted. Overcome from the blast, he began hyperventilating into his microphone.

It's burst into flames . . . It's a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen . . . The smoke and the flames now . . . Oh, the humanity!

Between the world wars, with air travel still a novelty, globetrotting Zeppelins were a big to-do. Passengers rode in style, defying the odds, floating in balloons filled with lighter-than-air flammable hydrogen. At nearly three football fields long, the *Hindenburg* was the grandest of them all. The *Titanic* of its class.

On its last flight, the *Hindenburg* was delayed from Germany for several hours because of headwinds over the Atlantic, then storms along the East Coast. Finally, it was on approach to land in Lakehurst, NJ, southwest of New York City. The sky was darkening, seven in the evening. With slicked-back hair, the 31-year-old rain-soaked Morrison calmly began narrating the arrival into a recorder.

His account was not broadcast live. Yet, thrust into the tragedy, Morrison kept speaking into the microphone as if it were. He choked up, gasped, struggled for composure. At one point, he lost his voice. His dramatic soliloquy was captured by a needle digging tiny grooves into a rotating disk on a transcription machine.

The explosive few moments of Morrison's recording, first broadcast the next day, stunned the nation. The radio had become a new hearth, with families gathering for news and shows around boxy receivers the size of cabinets. The public had never heard such a raw, shocking account of

an eyewitness plunged in a blink of an eye into an unfolding catastrophe. It was spellbinding. Herb poured out his pain, at times breathless, into our hearts.

It was perhaps the first viral audio, presaging the ubiquitous camera phones that capture today's tragedies on video. The classic refrain, "Oh, the humanity," drilled into the country's consciousness, with cultural revivals over the decades. The three-word proverb appeared prominently in TV episodes of the "Seinfeld" comedy series and "The Simpsons" in the 1990s. In 2022, "Oh the Humanity" resurfaced as the title of a Hollywood movie under development based on a tell-all book, "The Hidden *Hindenburg*."

Among other things, that book revealed that if the *Hindenburg* had arrived at its airfield in clear weather three hours earlier, it could have landed in perfect safety and the ground crew would have been in place. They were not, but Morrison was, waiting with his microphone.

By the time the ground handlers arrived and the ship returned, passing storms and electrical charges in the air doomed the *Hindenburg*. Because of a hidden design flaw, the famous airship had sprung a hydrogen leak, caught fire, and exploded. It was gone in less than a minute. Most of the 97 passengers and crew, remarkably, survived, but 35 people died on the ship.

For his field recording, Morrison had a sound engineer on hand, Charlie Nehlsen. Both were from Chicago's WLS, an affiliate of the National Broadcasting Company. The pair intended to produce an air-travel publicity piece, memorializing the one-year anniversary of the *Hindenburg*'s maiden flight to America.

Instead, they captured one of radio's most historic moments--with some very clunky technology. Among their 87 pounds of equipment was a modified transcription recorder, made by the Presto Recording Company; it looked like a large turntable. It was 1937: the machine could record, but it couldn't play back.

NBC broke its own rules to air the recording. The major radio networks had long banned using any recorded content, favoring live broadcasts as more reliable and authentic. But with an exclusive, red-hot eyewitness account of the calamity, NBC relented, carefully explaining to listeners that it was a recorded event.

Some sound specialists have questioned whether the Presto disks were recorded at the proper speed. Morrison's voice sounds a little high-pitched, squeaky, as if he had inhaled helium from a party balloon. If so, Morrison never seemed to have mentioned it in the considerable cannon of *Hindenburg* articles. He did recall why he shrieked "Oh, the humanity" in the moment. He couldn't imagine anyone aboard surviving the inferno.

One thing is clear: only through the poise of engineer Nehlsen did the recording even survive the *Hindenburg*'s initial blast. A shock wave knocked the Presto stylus off the disk. Nehlsen instantly spotted the malfunction, and returned the delicate needle--saving the history-making account from going silent. WLS later donated the original disks recorded that day to the National Archives.

The following year, 1938, a young actor named Orson Welles sent tremors across the radio airwaves with his "War of the Worlds" drama about an alien invasion. It was so realistic it spooked many radio listeners. One of the radio actors had carefully studied the Morrison recording, and used it to mimic the hysterical delivery of a man witnessing horror on the spot.

In all, Morrison narrated for about 40 minutes from the disaster scene, but it wasn't continuous. Between five separate reports, he left the microphone to help assist with burned passengers and

crew. As a reward for his scoop, Morrison received a watch engraved by the owner of WLS, a bonus from NBC, and an honorable mention in “Radio Guide” magazine.

Morrison died in 1989, at age 83, nine years after Nehlsen passed away. The two remained lifelong friends, reconnecting by phone over the years on May 6th, reminiscing about their ordeal and the astounding broadcast that moved the world.

Michael McCarthy, a former “Wall Street Journal” reporter, is the author of the nonfiction books “The Hidden Hindenburg,” “Ashes Under Water” (a “New York Times” bestseller) and “The Sun Farmer.” His poetry has been published in the “Southern Review” among other publications.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.
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