

## XVII

### *The Fourth Chime*

RESOURCEFULNESS and planning have been responsible for most of the important NBC beats, but not even the staunchest partisans of our News Department would have the hardihood to say that without the fortuitous co-operation of Lady Luck we would have had our electrifying "exclusive" on the *Hindenburg* disaster. At that time, because the *Hindenburg's* regular schedule had ceased to be news, no radio news department was bothering to cover her arrival.

Herbert Morrison, announcer for WLS of Chicago, an NBC affiliate, was at Lakehurst to make a recording of the arrival of the dirigible for the sound-effects and electrical transcription "library." He was doing a routine job of telling how the great silver ship looked as he spotted her in the rain and she approached and he became more and more conscious of her size—when, all of a sudden, as she neared her moorings, the explosion came. His complete description of the entire scene was automatically transcribed by the recording apparatus.

Beginning with a calm description of the grace and beauty of the *Hindenburg* as she settled down to earth, the voice of Morrison continued:

"She is practically standing still now. The ropes have been dropped and they have been taken hold of by a number of men on the field. It is starting to rain again. The rain has slacked up a little bit. The back motors of the ship are holding her just enough to keep her. . . . She burst into flame!

"Get out of the way! Get this, Charley. Get out of the way, please! She is bursting into flames! This is terrible! This is one of the worst catastrophes in the world. The flames are

shooting five hundred feet up into the sky. It is a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen. It is in smoke and flames now. Oh, the humanity! Those passengers! I can't talk, ladies and gentlemen. Honest, it is a mass of smoking wreckage. Lady, I am sorry. Honestly, I can hardly—. I am going to step inside where I cannot see it. Charley, that is terrible. Listen, folks, I am going to have to stop for a minute because I have lost my voice."

Shocked by the horror of the tragedy, yet sustained by his announcer's habit of recording what he saw, Morrison went on:

"Coming back again, I have sort of recovered from the terrific explosion and the terrific crash that occurred just before it was pulled down to the mooring mast. I don't know how many of the ground crew were under it when it fell. There is not a possible chance for anyone to be saved.

"The relatives of the people who were here ready to welcome their loved ones as they came off the ship are broken up. They are carrying them, to give them first aid and to restore them. Some of them have fainted. The people are rushing down to the burning ship with fire extinguishers to see if they can extinguish any of the blaze. The blaze is terrific, because of the terrible amount of hydrogen gas in it."

The Chicago announcer kept pouring his running account of the disaster into the microphone, even to brief interviews with the first of the survivors. In his explanation of a sudden break in the recording just as he announced that the ship had burst into flame, Morrison said that the terrific blast of the explosion had knocked the tone arm of the recording instrument clear off the disc and that Charlie—Charles Nelson, the Chicago radio engineer who operated the machine—replaced it almost instantly.

That evening—May 7, 1937—NBC's rigid network rule against broadcasting recorded programs was broken for the first time in the history of the company so that the radio audience could hear one of the most dramatic eye-witness broadcasts ever presented, a "wax show" that was in process of being recorded at the exact second that the famous "Zep" blew up.

Before we knew anything about the tremendously important from-the-scene program that Morrison was recording we were on the air with the first news of the disaster heard by radio listeners in the United States and Germany. Whether we got the flash first I don't know, but we broke it first. Only a few minutes after the tragedy—at 7:45 P.M., EDST—NBC flashed a press radio bulletin over both the Blue and Red networks.

Meanwhile NBC crews were on their way to the scene, telephone lines were being installed and short-wave equipment was on the way to Lakehurst. One crew left KYW, NBC station at Philadelphia, while another, aboard Mobile Unit No. 1, set out from Radio City. Announcers took off by airplane.

Mobile Unit No. 1, and the staff cars that accompanied it, reached Lakehurst in two hours and forty minutes. Jack Hartley of our news staff who headed this unit, was convincing enough about the importance of his assignment to be able to secure a motorcycle escort provided by the New Jersey State Police.

Here is Jack Hartley's own account of this trip to Lakehurst, which radio professionals like to cite as an example of resourcefulness under difficult circumstances:

"We rolled along behind the motorcycle cops at a lively clip. We must have been going pretty fast, because one of the motorcycles got so hot that the officer who was riding it had to stop and drop out.

"We lost some time when we caught up with an ambulance that was stranded because of a flat tire. We helped the driver remove the damaged tire and replace it with a new one, and then we sped for Lakehurst right behind the ambulance until we reached a point about two miles from our destination where State Troopers barred the road.

"I did my best to explain that arrangements had been made through Inspector King of the New Jersey State Police to let us through, but apparently these instructions had not reached the Troopers, who would let us go no further. I pleaded with the Troopers to let our party proceed, but they had strict or-

ders to let no cars of any kind or description go beyond this point.

"My press card enabled me to talk my way past the point barred by the cops, but I was told I would have to make it on foot. It was easily the fastest two miles I ever made on foot in my life. I started out by walking feverishly and wound up trotting and running the rest of the distance. I reached the gate of Lakehurst Reservation only to be told that I could get no farther.

"I begged the naval officer in charge, a junior lieutenant, for permission to get our party in. I told him that our crew was two miles down the road and that we had a tremendously important assignment on which we could not fail.

"He was adamant. He said that his orders were to let nobody in, and he stuck to his story.

"I had lots of company in my efforts to crash through. A small army of newspapermen, newsreel men, newspaper photographers, and others, were trying to do the same thing.

"I was badly stumped. I started away from the gate and down the road in the direction whence I had come. Frankly, I didn't know what the hell to do.

"I had not walked very far when I saw a Government truck coming toward me. In it were marines. I signaled to them and got them to stop. Quickly I explained my predicament and told them what it would mean to me to get inside the Reservation.

"The marines were good sports. They did not like the idea of breaking the rules, but I convinced them that the instructions to the State Troopers had missed fire and that I really had permission to get to the scene of the disaster, which was their own destination, too.

"While, of course, this was the fact, it did not give them the authority to get me through the lines. They finally agreed to take a chance and see if they could get me through. One of them suggested that I crawl under a heavy tarpaulin on the truck and see if I could escape notice that way. If I got past

the gate, I would be safe. I hopped aboard the truck, got under the tarpaulin, and we got going.

Soon I was back to the point I had been unable to pass a little while before, although those in charge of the gate did not know that they again had the pleasure of my company.

“The guards were checking the truck, and it looked as if everything would be all right, when the junior lieutenant who had barred my way the first time—(I recognized his voice)—said, ‘Just a minute. See what is under that tarpaulin.’

“Well, they soon saw what was under the tarpaulin, and I came out in record time.

“I was beginning to feel discouraged, but I had no intention of giving up. I started down the road again in the direction of the roadside tavern, when I ran into a young sailor. It developed that he was having a night off and he was trying to figure out where he could have the most fun. I got busy selling him the idea that he could have a better time if he had ten dollars more to spend. I told him he could earn this ten-spot without doing much work. He wanted to know what he would have to do.

“I gave him one of my cards and asked him to take it to Commander Rosendahl or Lieutenant Watson. ‘Tell either of them,’ I said, ‘that I am stalled two miles from the field; that the New Jersey State Police will not allow me to go any farther, and that I have simply got to get in. Come back here and tell me that you have delivered the message, and the ten-dollar bill is yours.’

“His uniform was the only pass the gob needed. Not many minutes elapsed before the sailor emerged with Lieutenant George Watson, a favorite of the press, who was as helpful as he could be. He got his car, asked me to hop in, and in no time at all I was back at the roadside grill where the NBC cavalcade had grown considerably since I had left.

“There were about a dozen of us in the original party that left with Mobile Unit No. 1. Shortly before we started, we broadcast an emergency signal to all those attached to the News and Special Events Department in the New York Office.

This was done by means of 'the fourth chime.' (Our regular program sign-off signal consists of three chimes. In those days when a fourth chime was added, it meant that members of our Department who were listening in, also engineers and a few other specialists, were required to phone the office for instructions. Both WJZ and WEAF, the Blue and Red network stations in New York, sounded the emergency signal.)

"By the time Lieutenant Watson and I returned to the point where private vehicular travel was barred, a total of forty-three members of the New York NBC office—members of the News Department, announcers, commentators, engineers, etc.—had assembled near the little roadside grill. I don't recall how many cars there were, but the incident furnished impressive proof that our people listened for and responded to that confidential 'fourth chime.'

"Lieutenant Watson snapped out businesslike instructions to our group. He suggested that we line up all the NBC cars, with the Mobile Unit bringing up the rear, and then suggested that we drive in close formation so that as we started off no ambitious car could sneak in and make itself a part of the NBC group.

"This time the junior lieutenant who had twice barred my passage through the gate had to let me by. His face took on an expression of surprise, which soon became one of complete astonishment, as he observed the motor train that followed me in.

"I don't mind admitting that I gave the Bronx cheer to the newspapermen, still stuck at the gate, who had given me a similar salute when I had tried to crash through a little earlier.

"One of them yelled, 'Whom did you bribe?' And he seemed a little puzzled when I replied, 'A sailor.' Another one yelled 'Vested interests,' and added a threat about writing an exposé of the sinister 'pull' of radio. As I recalled my two miles on foot I decided I had not made very good use of our 'influence.'

"Once we were inside the grounds we discovered that tele-

phones were at a premium. The Navy had commandeered all but a few of the lines. Those that weren't being used by the Navy had been seized by newspapermen who were on the scene when the *Hindenburg* arrived. They were there to cover the arrival of celebrities on the dirigible, and their role was comparable to that of ship news reporters. (The reporters and others outside the gate had made their appearance after the catastrophe.)

"The newspapermen gave me the bum's rush when I tried to grab one of the telephones. I was up against it, especially as we had been unsuccessful in contacting New York when directly after our arrival on the scene we set up a transmitter and tried to reach the office.

"Then I remembered that when I had covered the first arrival of the *Hindenburg* in the United States there was a heavier-than-air hangar on the field that had a coin-box in it. In fact, we had once been compelled to originate a broadcast from that telephone booth.

"I got back into my car and drove to this hangar. Sure enough there was the telephone booth. Nobody was in it. I said to Tommy McFadden (of our news staff), 'Your job is to keep that booth tied up. Start 'phoning the office whenever anyone tries to dislodge you. I will dig up all the coins you need.' We used that telephone booth all night. There was no battle for its possession for apparently no one else seemed to be aware of its existence.

"Once we were in touch with the New York office and gave them the picture, we were able to get started on an organized plan for broadcasting from the scene of the disaster.

"Our engineers placed a pack transmitter close to the wreckage, and we broadcast from that pack transmitter to the roof of the lighter-than-air hangar. There a receiver caught the pack transmitter and we relayed the signals through another transmitter to the mobile unit. The mobile unit, which we stationed at a point on the Reservation about a mile away, received it there and relayed it again by another transmitter to

the telephone company's station at Forked River. That was how we got the signals through to New York.

"The only way we could tell that our broadcast was getting through to New York properly was to listen to it come back over one of the network stations on a broadcast receiver which we had with us."

About three hours after we broadcast the first flash of the tragedy we were on the air with a series of broadcasts covering every phase of one of the biggest stories of modern times. As a matter of public service, NBC held both networks open for more than two hours beyond the normal closing time of 1:00 A.M. EDT, so listeners could follow the latest news of the disaster. More than fifty bulletins from the Press Radio Bureau giving the latest figures on the number of survivors and injured, and their identity, and all developments of the story, were broadcast.

Among other first-hand reports NBC presented a broadcast of newspapermen, photographers, aviation officers, and others who had seen the famous Zep go up in flame and smoke. These accounts were brought to a spectacular climax by the dramatic description of Announcer Morrison in the electrical transcription, which has since been used by psychologists as a study of human reaction to sudden calamity.

The German authorities pleaded with us to get hold of F. W. von Meister, Vice-President of the American Zeppelin Transport Company stationed at Lakehurst. We finally located him in the quarters of the non-commissioned officers, where he had a room. We picked him up right in his room with shaving soap on his face and with no clothes on except his pajama pants. Von Meister's voice was relayed through the four transmitters to Forked River, where it went by wire line to NBC in New York. From NBC in New York it went by wire line to RCA's transmitters at Rocky Point and was short-waved across the Atlantic to Berlin.

This is how Germany got a broadcast direct from the scene.



This broadcast was in German and was not carried in the United States.

Survivors at the Paul Kimball Hospital in Lakewood told the American radio audience their harrowing experiences, relating in detail just what happened to them as the giant airship seemed to break in half in mid-air less than 150 yards from her mooring mast.

Dr. Hans Luther, German Ambassador to the United States, broadcast over our networks as he left the hospital at Lakewood, expressing his appreciation of the efforts to help the victims. His remarks in English were broadcast throughout the United States and later repeated in German for rebroadcasting in Europe.

Dr. Hugo Eckener, designer and builder of the *Hindenburg*, was heard the following afternoon from Berlin in an exclusive NBC broadcast, and Commander Charles E. Rosendahl, U.S.N., in command of the naval air station at Lakewood, went on the air shortly afterwards.

It was a thorough coverage of one of the saddest events we have ever been called upon to report.

"There's a big hole in the bottom. . . . I don't know how long it will hold together. . . . I don't know what to expect. . . . Now she's going back down again. . . . We're coming down four hundred feet a minute." . . .

Those words, spoken on July 27, 1934, from the badly damaged stratosphere balloon *Explorer* as it headed earthward, are still remembered by those who have followed the development of radio news. One of the most dramatic broadcasts of the fourth-chime era was the program from the *Explorer*.

From the time the great bag took off near Rapid City, S.D., and ripped at an altitude of 60,000 feet, until the last balloonist parachuted to safety, the radio audience heard a breathtaking two-way conversation with the occupants of the gondola in a nationwide broadcast made possible by the fine co-oper-