

Explosion of the “Hindenburg”

"The most famous news photograph ever taken" - with notes on Sam Shere

Bill Jay

Explosion of the "Hindenburg," Lakehurst, N.J., 1937, is often referred to as the most famous news photograph ever taken.

Hyperbole aside, there is no doubt that it is one of the most famous news photographs in the history of a field renowned for sensational images.

It has even entered the pantheon of Important Pictures (if not Art) by being included in the history of photography textbook⁽¹⁾ used as the medium's foundation for students of photography throughout the world. I doubt if there is a photographer, active in any area of the medium, who is not aware of this image, primarily because of its inclusion in Newhall's text.

But the *Explosion of the "Hindenburg"* is not only a photographer's photograph. It is indelibly etched in the minds of every individual who is at all familiar with 20th century events through the printed media.

As confirmation of this assertion, it was significant that the Hindenburg disaster was often brought to mind by print and television journalists on the occasion of a similarly spectacular tragedy: the explosion of the space-shuttle Challenger in January 1986.⁽²⁾ Many commentators, attempting to describe the explosion, searched for an event of similar visual shock from the recent past, and all found a striking parallel in the Hindenburg disaster image of almost 50 years previously.

One commentator, however, made a slight, but significant, slip. In describing the "live" images of the disintegrating Challenger being fed into millions of homes, he recalled the evening in 1937 when "the nation watched in horror as the Hindenburg exploded."⁽³⁾

The nation did no such thing.

In a pre-television age, the nation listened to the words of radio announcer Herb Morrison, as his voice, racked with emotion, vividly described the scene:

Oh, it's flashing, it's flashing terribly. It's bursting into flames and falling on the mooring mast. Oh, this is one of the worst catastrophes - the flames are leaping 400, 500 feet into the sky. It's a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen, the smoke and the flames. And now it's crashing to the ground, not quite at the mooring mast. Oh, the humanity!

It was these words which the image, published in the next morning's newspapers, brought to life and made up-close and real. The potent combination of words and image, sound and sight, gave the Hindenburg photograph a special, unique power and propelled it even deeper into the minds of that and subsequent generations. Therefore, it is understandable that the Challenger commentator would substitute "watched" for "listened" because the still photograph of the crashing, fiery Hindenburg was so clearly etched in his mind. And, more significantly, he could assume that practically all his readers would share the same visual memory.

Explosion of the "Hindenburg" had become an icon for failed technology coupled with human tragedy. (4)

The "Hindenburg" (5) was a self-propelled, steerable (dirigible) balloon of fabric over a rigid frame. Lift was provided by hydrogen gas, which is more buoyant than nonflammable helium. It was an enormous craft, 803 feet in length and 137 feet in diameter. There was nothing unusual or experimental about its arrival in Lakehurst, New Jersey, on the evening of 6 May 1937. It had already made 36 previous crossings of the Atlantic with commercial passengers. This particular arrival was routine.

The airship approached its mooring mask around 7:20 pm, hours later than scheduled due to wind and rain, and daylight was rapidly fading. There was some urgency on the part of the ground crew because an electrical storm was still in the area, but the craft was being particularly truculent and ponderous to maneuver. Suddenly a finger of flame appeared and within seconds the Hindenburg exploded in a mass of flames.

Passengers and crew were leaping from the gondola in an attempt to escape the heat, risking a bone-crushing death to being burned alive. Forty-seven seconds from the first spark the Hindenburg was a smoldering hulk on the ground.

Of the ninety-seven people aboard the airship, thirty-six died, including its commander, Captain Ernst Lehmann.(6)

Many books and articles have been written about this tragedy but rarely is the photograph's authorship in question. Even photographers familiar with the image in

Newhall's textbook would be hard-pressed to name its maker. So who was the photographer who made this famous picture? For reasons which will quickly become apparent, this question does not have a simple answer.

The credit line for the Hindenburg image in Newhall's textbook does include the name of the author: Sam Shere. Shere's name therefore, should have entered the ranks of the "greats" in photographic history, because Newhall's book is the single most influential text in the medium. Significantly, no details of Sam Shere, nor even his name, are mentioned in the words which accompany the image. Shere's fame, such as it is, rests solely on the edge of a single image. Even the few photographers or historians who might recall Shere's name would be hard-pressed to describe any other picture by this news photographer even though he had a distinguished professional career spanning more than 30 years.

This fact may or may not be of importance, depending on the reader's philosophical attitudes toward the medium of photography. However, it does raise an intriguing issue in the field of photography in general: if its images can be so memorable without any interest in or knowledge of the author then perhaps the cult of personality fostered by academia is misplaced. Individuality of expression, the stress on authorship, the emphasis on a pantheon of master-photographers might all be irrelevant. But that is a topic for a separate discussion. Its only relevance in this context is to widen the issue of authorship when referring to *Explosion of the "Hindenburg"*.

The issue is complicated by the fact that the Hindenburg image recalled by any individual might or might not have been taken by Sam Shere.

Waiting for the "Hindenburg" to arrive at its mooring mast at Lakehurst, New Jersey, were about 22 still and newsreel cameramen. Practically all of them took pictures of the disaster. Nearly all of the still photographs are practically identical to each other; certainly it would be impossible to assess authorship from the intrinsic nature of the images.

Merely as a few examples, we can name several photographers whose pictures of the "Hindenburg" crash are as similar to Shere's as two peas in a pod: Charles Hoff of the New York Daily News; Gus Pasquarella of the Philadelphia Bulletin; Bill Springfield of Acme-NEA; Jack Snyder of the Philadelphia Record. Then there was Murray Becker, of Associated Press, whose picture of the disaster was selected for publication in Great News Photos.(7)

In fact there was almost a surfeit of pictures, by so many photographers, of the

Hindenburg crash; perhaps never before had a disaster been so thoroughly documented by the camera. The next morning, the New York newspapers were full of the images; the World-Telegram carried no less than twenty-one pictures of the flaming Hindenburg and its survivors. The New York Post ran the photographs over seven papers, the Daily Mirror, nine. The story, and the pictures, appeared in newspapers everywhere. The New York Sunday Mirror even ran full color shots in its 23 May issue, taken by Gerry Sheedy on 35 mm Kodachrome.

Any one of these photographers might have taken the image of the "Hindenburg" explosion which is so clearly etched in any viewer's mind. More likely, our memory is an amalgam of several pictures by different photographers seen over the years in different circumstances.

But it is Sam Shere's image which is featured in The History of Photography and for this reason it is appropriate to add a few details of his life and career.

Sam Shere

Born Samuel Shereshewsky, in Minsk, Russia, c.1904, Shere was brought to America by his orthodox Jewish parents and grew up in the Lower East Side of New York City. His father was a hat maker, who wanted his son to be a doctor. Unfortunately, young Samuel could only tolerate school until the seventh grade.

His first job was carrying a tripod for Pathe News cameramen, at a wage of a dollar a day, plus lunch. After following the cameramen to five-alarm fires, naval yards, and parades, he was settled in his career; he wanted to be a news photographer.

Resigned to young Sam's choice of a profession, his father bought him a 4x 5 inch Speed Graphic, the standard equipment for a newspaper photographer at the end of World War I (1918). Within a year, Sam had sold his first photograph: a picture of a young girl walking across the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan during a New York snowstorm. The New York Illustrated Daily News bought the picture for \$7.00.

At this time, however, Sam's interest in photography was in conflict with his even greater interest in going to sea. He signed on as a mess-boy with oil tankers plying between New Jersey and California via the Panama Canal. Even though he spent most of his time on board ship for the next 10 years he quickly found that life at sea was not incompatible with professional photography. He soon had an on-ship darkroom and managed to freelance during stays in port.

One of these stays lasted for a year, in 1923, when Sam Shere (the name had been

abbreviated the previous year) became a photographer for the New York Evening Graphic for \$50.00 per week. But he was soon missing the smell of the sea, and signed aboard the S.S. George Washington as ship's photographer. After one transatlantic crossing, he visited Germany and bought one of the new Leica 35 mm cameras, for \$42.00 "and spent the next few years on the other end of ridicule, enduring sarcastic remarks and innuendoes from American news photographers who regarded the Leica as a 'toy'." In spite of the constant ribbing Sam Shere persisted in carrying the Leica everywhere, along with the Speed Graphic, and is now credited with pioneering the use of the discreet 35 mm camera in American news photography.

In 1926 Sam Shere became ship's photographer for the S.S. Leviathan (flagship of the United States Line). He made good money for those days, earning \$300-400 per round trip across the Atlantic, by selling pictures to the passengers as mementoes of the voyage, public relations shots for the shipping line, portraits of notable passengers, and scenics of icebergs and storms. Altogether Shere made 126 crossings of the Atlantic on the Leviathan. While disembarked in Europe, waiting for the return voyage, he began freelance work for the prestigious International News Photo, a part of the William Randolph Hearst publishing empire.

In 1934 Sam Shere left the sea to take a full time position with I.N.P. It was also the year that Shere's persistence with the Leica led to a celebrated scoop. During the first arraignment of Bruno Richard Hauptmann a suspect in the Lindberg kidnapping case, Shere smuggled his small camera into the court room and, unnoticed, shot exclusive pictures of the proceedings. The Leica was also used the following year for a major story on the inside Sing Sing prison. Shere claimed that the series would have been a total failure if it had not been for the speed, ease and silence of the miniature camera. "(It) gave me mobility and did not attract much attention from the inmates. I was able to film, for the first time, candid shots of the prison's rock pile, fire department, flag-making shop, a cell block, the prison parade, the warden's office, the execution chamber and adjacent autopsy rooms... My 'toy' was gaining its place in news photography through these series."

By 1937, the date of the Hindenburg's explosion, Sam Shere had paid his dues as a news photographer, with both 4x5 inch and 35 mm formats. He was not only in the right place at the right time, but also he was "primed" to take picture advantage of every situation, such as Hindenburg's arrival.

Ironically, Sam Shere was reluctant to take the assignment, which was considered a routine one. He had been assigned by his editor at International News Photos to get some good "society type" shots of the celebrities leaving the airship. Shere recalled: "I

had come to think of myself as a "hard news" photographer, and sort of resented the assignment. "I just wanted to get my pictures and get out of there." (8) After waiting for over three hours in drizzling rain, the airship came into view through the evening murk. Suddenly the dirigible exploded. Shere said: "I had two shots in my big Speed Graphic, but I didn't even have time to get it up to my eye. I literally 'shot' from the hip - it was over so fast there was nothing else to do." Out of 4 x 5 film, Shere switched to his Leica and began taking shots of the passengers and crew members fleeing the wreckage. "Only one of these pictures, they were so ghastly, so graphic, was ever used..." (9)

Asked to comment on the significance, and fame, of his photograph, Shere replied: "Many photographers got similar shots. I guess I was just lucky to be in the right place at the right time. I don't really think it my most singular feat." (10)

After 1937, Shere's career as a news photographer was extraordinarily varied. A mere list of his assignments would occupy too many pages. A few highlights include: a story on the return of Wrong-Way Corrigan using carrier pigeons to deliver negatives from the SS Manhattan to New York (1938); photographing the Duke of Windsor, who had abdicated his throne, in the Bahamas (1940); an Atlantic Air Patrol which was cited as the most outstanding news event of the year (1941); the World War II invasion of Sicily (1942); several stories for Life beginning more than a decade of work for this magazine (1943); the Lepke execution and Dewey presidential campaign (1944); VE Day reaction and Pearl Harbor investigation (1945); death of Al Capone (1947); construction of the SS United States (1948); and so on. (11)

Sam Shere shot his last assignment in Ireland at the age of 75. He died in poverty in government housing on 8 July 1982.

References and footnotes:

1. Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, 5th edition, N.Y., 1982, p. 257.
2. For example: T. A. Heppenheimer, "Time to call the shuttle obsolete," Manchester Guardian Weekly, 9 February 1986, p.7. The first two paragraphs of this article recount the story of the Hindenburg crash.
3. Michael Collins, "After the Challenger Disaster", The Washington Post.
4. Heppenheimer wrote: "The Hindenburg exposed the flaws in the dirigible as a passenger carrier, showing it to be an obsolete technology that could not compete with its rival, the airplane. The Challenger disaster, in turn, will point to the Shuttle as a technology that is not only obsolete but also irrelevant."
5. The Hindenburg was named after Paul Von Hindenburg (1847-1937) a field-marshal and president of Germany from 1925. He defeated Adolf Hitler in the presidential elections of 1932 but, in January 1933, through political intrigues, was persuaded to

appoint Hitler as chancellor.

6. The Hindenburg was owned and operated as a transatlantic passenger service by the German Zeppelin Transport Company.

7. Great News Photos and the stories behind them, by John Faber, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, number 31.

8. Interview with Sam Shere, by Joanne Kash, Art Voices/South, November/December, 1980, p. 41-42.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. An extensive chronology is included in On Assignment: Photographs by Sam Shere, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1978.

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