

The R-101 Disaster

— Case 14 —

On Saturday the 4th of October 1930, at 6:24 in the evening, the airship R101 slipped its moorings in Cardington, England, and began its maiden voyage to India. Under the command of Flight-Lieutenant H. C. Irwin, the R101 was the largest airship (otherwise known as a dirigible, zeppelin, or blimp) in the world. Its departure had been hurried to avoid stormy weather threatening along its route through France. The R101 was a new design and, like many new designs before and after it, had been pressed into service for political reasons without all the tests and trials that prudent policies might have dictated.

Less than 8 hours later, 46 of the 54 passengers and crew of the R101 were dead and its fire-blackened skeleton loomed over a soggy meadow near the town of Beauvais, just north of Paris. Early on Sunday morning, heavy rains and gusting winds had brought the nose of the behemoth almost gently down to earth, but a rotating propeller on a starboard engine dug into the dirt, causing the engine to twist and ignite the hydrogen gas flowing from rents in the forward gas bags. It only took a moment for the entire ship to be engulfed in flames.

The R101 disaster shocked the British nation. It shook the government's confidence in dirigibles, and ended British efforts to develop lighter-than-air craft for commercial use. Several months were required for investigators to determine all the factors that contributed to the disaster, but a small gathering of private citizens in London knew, only two days after the crash, what the findings would be.

On Tuesday, the 7th of October, 1930, at 3 p.m., a séance was held at number 13 Roland Gardens in London, home of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research. The laboratory had been founded 5 years before by Harry Price. A keen investigator and talented magician, Price had a reputation for exposing fraudulent mediums. Joining Price for the afternoon séance were Ethel Beenbarn,

Price's secretary and stenographer; journalist Ian D. Coster, who had requested the session in the hope of contacting the spirit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; and Eileen Garrett, a medium of growing renown in England. This was Garrett's first visit to Price's laboratory; she did not know Coster nor had she been told the purpose of the session.



Eileen Garrett



Harry Price

Garrett went immediately into trance and her control, Uvani, began to speak. He spoke not of the recently passed-on Doyle, however, but of a man named "Irwin" who was apologizing for interfering but who insisted on speaking. Then, as Price reports "the voice of the medium again changed and an entity announced that he was Flight-Lieutenant H. Carmichael Irwin, captain of the R101. He was very agitated, and in a long series of spasmodic sentences gave the listeners a detailed and apparently highly technical account of how the R101 crashed."

The reporter, Coster, was at first miffed that he wasn't getting an interview with Doyle, but he quickly realized he was witnessing a historic event. He put the story out at once, and newspapers across England and around the world carried it, often with banner headlines. Transcriptions of the session were requested and carefully studied by experts investigating the crash, one of whom asked for and received an additional séance to further interview the R101's deceased crew. The government

never officially endorsed Garrett's work, of course, but an official named Charlton, who examined the transcription in great detail claimed that the idea that anyone at the séance could have obtained such technical information beforehand was "grotesquely absurd."

Several of Irwin's statements — such as the ship being too heavy for its engines — were public assumptions or could be reasonably guessed. But many were technical, confidential, or simply unknown to anyone at the time. Here are three examples of such.



Irwin said: "Load too great for long flight. Same with SL-8. Tell Eckener."

No one at the séance knew the meaning of "SL-8" or recognized the name "Eckener." The British experts who reviewed transcripts of the session knew that Dr. Eckener was the designer of the Graf Zeppelin, but even they had to search through their records of German airships to discover that "SL-8" was the identifier for a dirigible built by the Schütte-Lanz company of Mannheim, Germany.

Irwin said: "Starboard strakes started."

"Strakes," a term foreign to all at the session, was originally a naval expression that was adopted by airship designers. Strakes are parallel layers of longitudinal plates that form the sides of a ship. Irwin was formerly a navy man, so it is a term that he would be likely to use.

Irwin said: "Impossible to rise. Cannot trim. Almost scraped the roofs of Achy. Kept to railway."

Achy, a French village 12½ miles north of Beauvais, was on the R101's route. Achy was shown on the type of large-scale air-ordnance map carried by the R101, but the village was so small

that it did not appear on any normal ordnance or road map. Neither did it mention in Baedeker's or Michelin's guidebooks. It does lie on the main rail line between Amiens and Beauvais. Witnesses near the town testified later that the airship had passed over extremely low.

Harry Price concluded: "It is inconceivable that Mrs. Garrett could have acquired the R101 information through normal channels and the case strongly supports the hypothesis of survival."

Discussion

The following dialogue between "the old man" and his student is taken from pages 96-97 of *The Survival Files*, following a presentation of the case.

"Where were the survivors of the crash when the séance was held?"

"They were still in a French hospital."

"Could Garrett have been reading one or more of their minds?"

"Of the eight crew who survived, five maintained the engines, one operated the radio (wireless), and two were riggers. It is unlikely that they would have had lengthy commentary on the faults in the ship's design, and extremely unlikely that they would have been thinking of Eckener and the SL-8."

"Was the radio operator who survived on duty when the ship crashed?"

"As a matter of fact, he wasn't. He was asleep in his bunk and only awakened when the ship went into a steep dive. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I thought that if the radio operator had been in the control car he might have seen the map and been aware of the name of the village they nearly scraped the roofs from."

"I hadn't thought of that; but, you're right. The most unlikely thing of all is that any of the survivors would have been aware that

the ship had just passed over a village named Achy.”

For Further Information

See *Leaves From A Psychist's Casebook*, by Harry Price. Also, a great deal of detail is available on the Internet, but not all of it is accurate.

