

A story by David Bradford

# Mass of Humanity

*A survivor's diary of the Hindenburg's final flight*

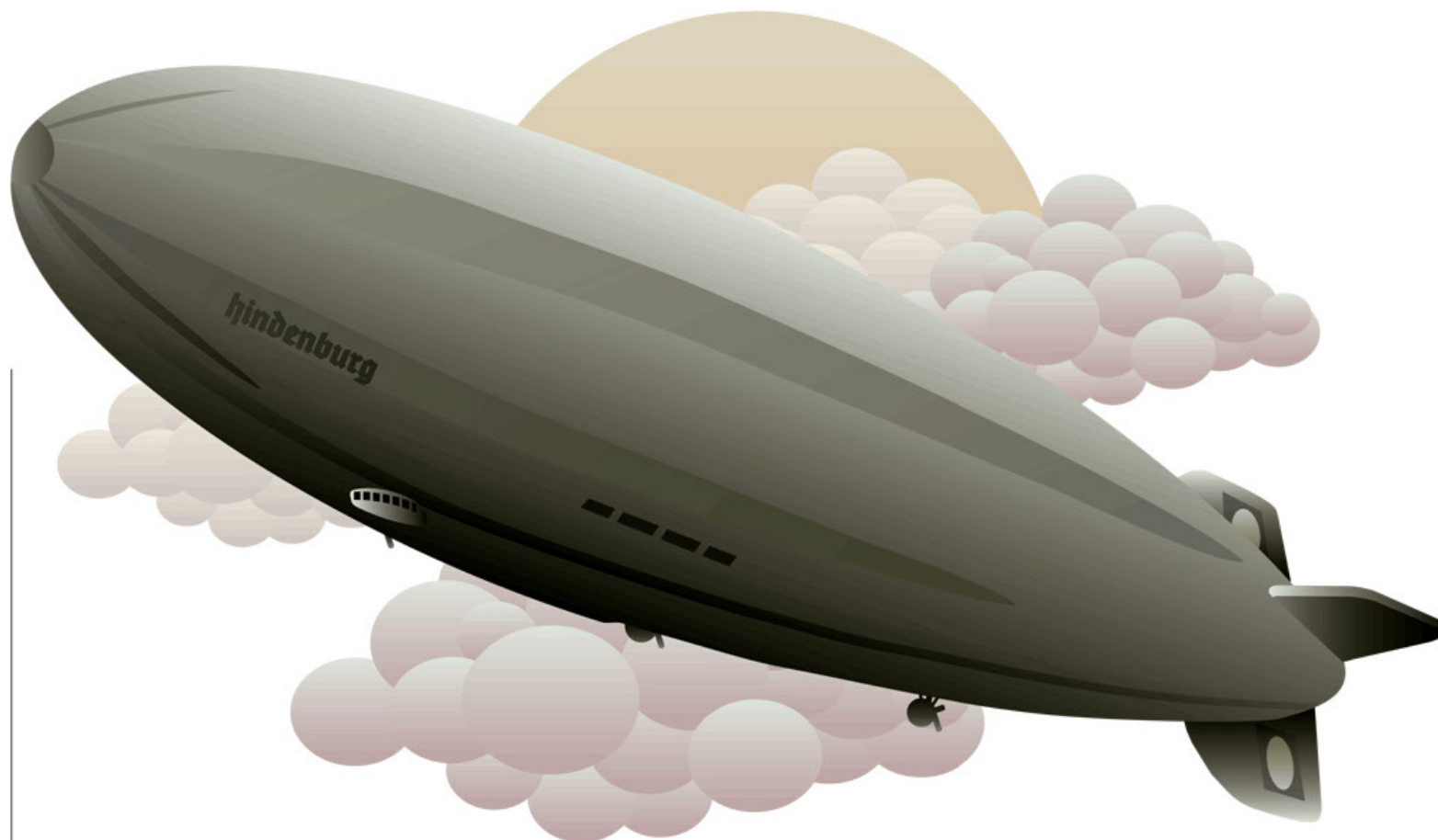
**May 3, 1937**

I've missed the boat many times in my life, but never before has it cost me so dear. The steamer chugged off, and now the only way I'll get to New York before the honchos at Radio City tear up my contract is on this over-puffed airship – with inflated price to match. Apparently, I'm blessed to get the chance. The truth is, I'd consent to being Herr Hitler's first transatlantic human cannonball if it were going to get me home on time. It would probably hurt less, too.

Four hundred dollars for a ride in an oversized gasbag? That's the best joke I've heard all season. Thankfully, the stony-hearted empire has yielded a trickle of blood; after pleading like a dog (Ulla, my new stage partner, showed me how), Berlin are coughing up early for a week's worth of shows. I know vaudeville attendances are down, but you can't blame me, a lone comedy acrobat, for the fact everyone's transfixed by motion pictures. Besides, audiences will come back. Nothing's ever real enough for them on the screen. On stage, a performance enralls because it's right there and alive, but film demands a stunt – like the time I swung from my lamp-post 50 storeys high. There was no net to catch me, but who cares? You don't need a net when the camera's catching everything. Once it's caught on film, it's already happened and everything is safe.

**May 4, 1937**

This must be the slowest taxi in Europe. As my panic increases, my driver's haste diminishes. He conjures endless versions of the same anecdote about his mother's dog, each one venting childish jealousy about how the mongrel is excessively pampered. I really don't know what Ulla did to offend him, but I spent the first half-hour of the journey convincing him she had better manners than to mess on his back seat. I should be shouting at him to shut up and get a move on, but I'm mesmerised by the view ahead. The



## From here, the great silver torpedo eclipses everything

Hindenburg has been visible, as a grey blob on the horizon, for what seems like forever. If I didn't know better, I'd have to guess it was a giant fungus blooming from the landscape. We could be five or 50km away, I simply can't judge. This Zeppelin warps perspective.

I cannot conceive how human hands have created a thing of such immense proportions. It doesn't seem feasible, either, that something so huge is hovering above the ground. "Lighter than air," I heard someone say, but how the heck can it be? It is impossible to survey the Hindenburg as a whole; I'm getting dizzy flicking my eyes between separate sections. What kind of strange vertigo is this? I'm ridiculous. I feel no fear, dangling precariously atop a high-rise, when everything below looks tiny, but here, this proximity... this engulfing vastness is giving me the heebie-jeebies. Something inside me wants to jump back in the car and speed away until this thing is just a part of the view again. I'd like to

turn the Hindenburg back into a fairytale mushroom. From here, inside the gates, the great silver torpedo eclipses everything.

I feel much better now that we're on board, looking from the inside out. The officials on the ground were less like a welcoming party, more like registrars of purgatory. Everyone is suspicious of everything in Germany nowadays, I know that, but these folks took a perverse pleasure in their distrust. The way they snatched my passport, I thought they were going to spit on it. Telling them, in my best American-drawled German, that I'm originally from Strasbourg and therefore not very French, didn't seem to help. As an Alsatian, Ulla could scarcely hope for kinder treatment – they threw her into a tiny cage as though she'd committed canine treason. Next up for humiliation was the beautiful doll I'd bought for little Marilyn. They tore her from her wrapping, prodding and poking as though they thought they might find a heartbeat. You'll never guess what the pervert Gestapo did next; he looked up the poor dolly's skirt. I couldn't resist assuring him she was a girl and that he should really respect her modesty. Not one of them cracked a grin. It hurts

me when no one smiles. If I ever see these gargoyle faces in my audience, I'll retire... Something's happening; we're rocking. It must be take-off.

**May 5, 1937**

I've only now managed to draw myself away from the promenade windows. We're like inhabitants of a new planet, in a new kind of orbit. Though I'm assured we are travelling as fast as a racing car, our movement is virtually imperceptible, and there is hardly any noise from the motors. It is like floating inside a bubble. The tranquillity is beautiful, but there is something eerie about it. There are two children on board, Walter and Werner, but even they are calm and timid; when I pull faces at them, they look away. I long to hear young Gilbie's laugh again – he'd better prepare himself for a good tickling!

Ulla is imprisoned at the rear of the ship, where passengers aren't meant to go. I had to go and check she was OK, so I won the favour of a young crew member with a couple of silly gags. The furry princess was behaving perfectly – I promised her she'd get to meet her new family soon. On my way back, I bumped into Commander Ernst Lehmann and congratulated him on his round-the-

world voyage in the Graf Zeppelin. He was quick to redirect my praise on to the Graf's faultless construction. I mentioned to him that I'd first seen the Hindenburg when she appeared above the stadium at the opening of the Berlin Olympics. I thought for a moment I'd offended him, as he stared down at the floor. After a pause, Lehmann took a step forwards, looked me in the eye and said with grumpy firmness, "Zeppelins are built to soar, not swagger." Then he walked away – conversation kaput!

Vera would love all this luxury – it really is a most civilised way to travel. The food is too rich for my taste, however. My 'fattened duck' was coated in treacle-like slime, and I'd rather have Champagne in a glass than on cabbage.

I've retired to the writing room for some quiet time to digest while I ponder Lehmann's strange comment. I supposed at first that he was just tetchy about having been demoted from the driver's seat – apparently there's a new skipper called Pruss at the helm. There's more to it, though, I'm certain. Everyone knows that Hugo Eckener, the brains behind these airships, can't stand the Nazis and hated it when they used his creations for propaganda flights like the one above the Olympics. Now the Hindenburg's decked out with great big swastikas on her tail, Eckener's nowhere to be seen. What are we doing now if not swaggering across the Atlantic to remind America how both her own grand airships ended up in the drink? Am I travelling aboard the biggest boast in history? I'm surprised Goebbels is not on board just so he can bare his backside at the Statue of Liberty.

**May 6, 1937**

The silence infected my sleep last night. I dreamed of giant, freakish babies crawling across a swamp, delving their hands into the mud as though they were searching for something to eat. Their faces were deformed, with neither eyes nor mouths, yet somehow I knew they were trying to cry. I wanted to help but all I could do was watch.

It was hard not to be startled when Margaret, an affable, middle-aged New Yorker with a twinkle in her eye, informed me over breakfast that she had "slept like a baby". Worse still, she told me that we're a whole goddamned half-day behind schedule. Apparently we've been flying into a strong headwind for most of the journey. Margaret doesn't seem to care, evidently loving every minute of the flight, but I'm growing restless. I asked a passing crewman if Captain Pruss could step on the gas

a little more, but all I got in return was a condescending smirk. I'm going to steal a sausage for Ulla, then take a nap.

I was just dropping off when cheers from the promenade jolted me awake. I rushed out to join them and instantly apprehended the reason for their glee – Boston, clearly visible on the horizon. American terra firma at last! I filmed it all: the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and along the East River, and now we're sinking gently down into Lakehurst. I haven't spotted my darlings yet, but I picked out Vera's shiny blue new car. Just a few more minutes and I'll be reunited with them! We're turning sharply now; I must get back into a good viewing position.

**May 7, 1937**

You will have seen what happened. I cannot explain why some of us are still alive; all I know is that I had stopped writing to start filming and it was the camera that saved me. I hurled it against the window and the whole pane popped out. I grabbed a rope and hung on for as long as I could. There is no trace of Ulla – I cannot bear to tell the children – but my camera survived, as did the contents of its leather case: my reels of film, my diary, even my pen, which it hurts too much to grip any longer.

**May 8, 1937**

It wasn't a miracle, I wasn't chosen and I didn't have special powers. I pushed and fought with the rest, which now I must try to forget. The newsreel footage is a constant reminder, and the funny man clinging on for dear life is no kind of star this time. Herb Morrison's commentary plays over and over. "Oh, the humanity..." It's a search for words at their most helpless. We can do no more. The fallen and the burned are with me night and day.

## About the author

David Bradford was a journalist on SuperBike Magazine until an eyesight disorder forced him to hang up his leathers. Instead, he went back to university to study for an MA and is now a freelance writer. See more at [www.dbfreelance.co.uk](http://www.dbfreelance.co.uk)