

R-101 Airship Disaster

On 5 October 1930, the R-101 dirigible airship crashed in northern France killing all but six of the crew and passengers. In London two days later, a sitting was held with a trance medium, during which a previously unknown personality appeared, identified himself as the vessel's deceased pilot, and gave an urgent description of the technical failures that caused the crash. Communicators who identified themselves as other deceased crew members appeared in subsequent sittings to give their own accounts, concerned that the authorities would cover up the true reasons for the disaster. Since the technical details given by the communicators regarding the vessel's structure and mechanisms appeared far beyond the medium's knowledge, the case is considered by many to be strong evidence of survival.

Background

The R-101 was built under the auspices of the British Air Ministry at a time when airships were considered as viable for air travel as airplanes. With a length of 777 feet it was one of the largest ever built. It and the R-100, a rival airship built by a private company, attracted immense public interest. The vessel was designed to provide a long-distance air travel service within the British Empire, and was scheduled to embark on its maiden voyage, to Karachi, India, on 4 October 1930. There had been concerns about whether it had sufficient lift to carry its weight and these had led to a major modification. But this did not satisfy the crew, and the pilot, Lieutenant Herbert Carmichael Irwin, wanted to postpone the trip for more test flights. However, he was overruled by the air minister Lord Thomson, who planned to be on the flight himself and felt that a delay would be politically disadvantageous as well as personally inconvenient.^[1]

Crash

Accordingly, the airship was released from its mast on the morning of 4 October, carrying twelve passengers (mostly notables) and a crew of 42, including the ship's designers. The weather forecast had been favourable; however, rain began to fall as the vessel headed across the English Channel, adding to its weight. Meanwhile, the winds blew stronger than predicted, causing damage to its coverings and gasbags. The crew struggled to maintain altitude, but it gradually lost height, and finally crashed and exploded in flames near the town of Beauvais at 2:05 am. Of the 54 people on board, only six crew members survived. Thomson and Irwin both perished. The disaster marked the effective end of Britain's airship program.

Warnings

Before the initial sitting, sensitive Eileen Garrett experienced disturbing visions of an airship crash on three separate occasions, in 1926, 1928 and September 1930, the month before the R-101 crash. She had seen a dirigible in the sky faltering, diving and catching on fire. She also revealed she had received a warning from a communicator at an earlier sitting who identified himself as a deceased aviator named Raymond Hinchliffe that the R-101 was destined for disaster. Hinchliffe's widow Emilie, who had attended the sitting, attempted to warn Squadron Leader EL Johnston, the navigator of the R-101, who responded only by offering reassurance. Garrett herself tried to persuade a key air ministry official, Sir William Sefton Brancker, to urge others to postpone the flight. However, Brancker disregarded the warning. He and Johnston both perished in the crash.

Harry Price Sitting

On 7 October, a mediumistic sitting was held at the National Laboratory of Psychological Research in South Kensington in London, which was owned and run by the well-known paranormal investigator Harry Price. It had been requested by an Australian journalist Ian D Coster with the aim of contacting the spirit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a leading figure in the Spiritualist movement who had died three months earlier. Price recruited Eileen Garrett, whom he had found could be relied on to convey large amounts of confirmable details from the personalities that communicated when she was in a state of trance.

As was usual with Garrett, her control personality 'Uvani' began to speak in his characteristic voice, unlike hers, after she entered the trance. 'Uvani' stated that someone named 'Irving' or 'Irwin' was coming; his voice was then quickly replaced by a different voice which spoke fast, urgently and brokenly, while the stenographer struggled to keep up, as follows:

The whole bulk of the dirigible was entirely and absolutely too much for her engine capacity. Engines too heavy. It was this that made me on five occasions have to scuttle back to safety. Useful lift too small. Gross lift computed badly—infirm control panel. And this idea of new elevators totally mad. Elevator jammed. Oil pipe plugged. This exorbitant scheme of carbon and hydrogen is entirely and absolutely wrong ... with the new carbon hydrogen, you will be able to get no altitude worth speaking about ... explosion caused by friction in electric storm. Flying too low altitude and could never rise. Disposable lift could not be utilized. Load too great for long flight. Same with S.L. 8. Tell Eckener.

The communicator continued in this rapid-fire manner to give an account of an airship's failure and destruction from the point of view of its captain, and an analysis of the causes. He enumerated problems such as overly-heavy engines, insufficient engine bore, insufficient fuel feed, a bad cooling system and air-screws that were too small. The ship had not been tested sufficiently, he said, and no one knew it well enough. He went on to recount the flight's harrowing conclusion, interspersed with further critique:

Cruising speed bad, and ship badly swinging. Severe tension on fabric, which is chafing. Starboard strakes started. Engines wrong—too heavy—cannot rise ... Pressure and heat produced explosion. Weather bad for long flight. Fabric all water-logged and ship's nose down. Impossible to rise. Cannot trim. You will understand that I *had* to tell you. Two hours tried to rise, but elevator jammed. Almost scraped the roofs at Achy. Kept to railway ... From beginning of trouble I knew we had not a chance.^[2]

In his account, Price notes that the medium could not possibly have known the terminology used by the communicator, as she had no interest in aviation or engineering. Nor could this information been known to anyone else present. He was particularly intrigued by the detail of the airship having passed over the village of Achy: French officials confirmed at the subsequent official inquiry that the R-101 had been sighted at an altitude of about three hundred feet at Poix, fourteen miles north of Achy.^[3] However, he could not find it on any road maps of northern France, even ones said to be comprehensive, only on a large-scale railway map, such as Irwin would have had onboard the R-101.^[4] This detail also seemed too obscure for Garrett to have known by any normal means.

Looking up the word 'strake', Price learned it was a naval term that originally referred to the horizontal plates that make up the hull of a boat and that had been adopted into airship terminology; also that it would have been familiar to Irwin, as a naval pilot.^[5]

After an account of the sitting was published, Will Charlton, a supply officer for the R-101 who had known the airship and its personnel well, got in touch with Price, and gave a commentary on 'Irwin's' utterances, mostly confirming their accuracy. Charlton was particularly impressed by the

mention of 'this exorbitant scheme of carbon and hydrogen', as the plans to experiment with combining carbon from the fuel oil and hydrogen gas as a fuel was likely being kept secret by the designers and crew, and therefore was especially unlikely to have been discovered by the medium by any normal means. He also found the mention of 'S.L. 8' remarkable, as it referred to a German airship whose existence Charlton had to search deeply through German records to discover, but which would have most probably been known to Irwin.^[6]

Villiers Sitzings

In a separate development of which Price was unaware, Major Oliver G Villiers, an air ministry intelligence official, held private sittings with Eileen Garrett, having mentally heard what he took to be a plea from the discarnate Irwin: 'For God's sake, let me talk to you. We're all bloody murderers.' The official inquiry was about to start, and it was feared that witnesses loyal to Thomson and the air ministry would attempt a whitewash. These sittings took place concurrently with the inquiry.^[7]

In the first sitting 'Irwin' appeared again, and gave a rapid hour-long account of the R-101's final hours while Villiers did his best to take notes in longhand. Irwin said the airship's final two fatal dives had been caused by a tear in the cover caused by a failing girder, and the first explosion had been caused by an engine backfire igniting escaping hydrogen.

In the second sitting a communicator appeared who identified himself as Brancker, a friend of Villiers, gave details of the last futile attempt by Irwin – together with Major GH Scott, Director of Airship Development, who had also died and EL Johnston, who apparently had heeded Emilie Hinchliffe's warning after all – to convince Thomson to postpone the flight. 'Scott' himself then appeared and gave the precise location of the faulty girder and a similar reason for the explosion as the one given by Irwin. Each, when speaking through Garrett, conveyed his usual tone of voice, and verbal and physical mannerisms.

In the third sitting, a communicator appeared who identified himself as wing commander RBE Colmore, technical director of airship development, who had also died in the crash. 'Colmore' said that the V-shaped end of the girder had widened in flight, splitting the outer cover. He also referred to his own technical diaries, and specified in which book the history of the problem would be found.

'Scott' provided more detail in the fourth sitting, saying the tear had happened about ten minutes before the crash, that two crewmen had been sent to try to fix it, and that all crewmen who were on duty had been aware of it, including those who had survived.

In a later session 'Colmore' returned in an apparently agitated state, saying he had learned that his diaries were not in his office where they should be. He noted that diaries written by the first officer, Lt Commander NG Atherstone, who had also been killed, might provide needed evidence. By this point, Villiers had decided to contact the head of the inquiry in an attempt to ensure no evidence would be concealed. In the seventh sitting, 'Atherstone' communicated that he had recorded in a secret diary the crew's concerns about the airship's airworthiness, and had left it with his wife.

Villiers presented a summary of his notes, but the head of the inquiry said he could only accept as evidence the written materials that they mentioned. Colmore's wife stated that his progress books should be where the communicator who identified himself as her husband said they should be, but then confirmed that they had indeed been removed. Atherstone's wife would not confirm or deny the existence of his secret diary.

For Villiers, this written evidence would have served to confirm both the R-101's unfitness for flight and survival of death, and he remained frustrated by its absence for the rest of his life. In 1967,

Atherstone's wife finally revealed his secret diary to a documentary maker, and it was found that it did indeed describe the crew's misgivings about R-101's airworthiness.^[8]

Analysis and Controversies

Harry Price

Price is at pains throughout his writings to emphasize his sceptical view of mediums, most of whom he considers to be blatant fakers. However, he was impressed by certain mediums, among them Eileen Garrett, while preferring to steer clear of the survivalist interpretations insisted on by spiritualists. It is clear from his account of the R-101 that he was greatly impressed by the 'Irwin' material, calling it 'in many ways, a very remarkable document'.^[9] He further writes:

The medium, it is understood, has never possessed any sort of engine or motor-car and knows nothing about aeronautics or engineering.

The building and handling of an airship is a very specialized business, in which a number of technical terms, peculiar to the industry, are used.

How many women, taken at random, would understand the use of such terms as: "useful lift," "gross lift," "control panel," "elevator" (as applied to the raising of an airship), "hydro-carbon," "disposable lift," "cruising speed," "tension on fabric," "starboard strakes," "cruising altitude," "airscrews," "fuel injection," "trim," "volume of structure," etc. ? Very few men would be able to reel off in rapid succession such a string of terms with any degree of relevancy. And every term used is relevant, and the statements made are, in nearly every case, entirely correct or probably or reasonably correct. Some of Irwin's statements were confirmed at official inquiry. ...

The "hydro-carbon" observation is likewise remarkable, and, as the experiments were a more or less official secret, it seems unlikely that Mrs. Garrett could have been normally aware that they had taken place.

He concludes:

Thought-transference, it is considered, can be ruled out of the experiment with Mrs. Garrett. Not one of the small group of sitters was consciously thinking about the disaster; no one present had any technical knowledge of airships or their engines; the name of Irwin had not been mentioned, and the disaster had not been discussed. It came as a great surprise to the sitters when the alleged "Irwin" entity manifested.^[10]

Archie Jarman

Garrett was unusual among mediums for taking a sceptical view of her trance abilities and for looking to science for answers. She turned to Archie Jarman, a wealthy businessman who was a personal friend and also a sceptical member of the Society for Psychical Research, to evaluate its veridicality. After six months Jarman produced an 80,000-word report. However, this material was never published, possibly due to its acerbic language^[11] and its tendency to denigrate almost all the witnesses.^[12]

Much of the subsequent controversy has centred on Jarman's arguments and conclusions, as described in particular by three researchers: John G Fuller, an American journalist and author; British sceptic Melvin Harris; and more recently, Steven Hume, a member of the Society for Psychical Research, who analyzed aspects of the case in *Light* magazine.

John G Fuller

Fuller's book is a novelistic account of the disaster that also covers the background and aftermath in some detail. It is titled *The Airmen Who Would Not Die* and was published in 1979. Fuller is generally sympathetic to a paranormal explanation, and concludes with a detailed consideration of the possibility of survival. About Jarman, he writes:

He probably came to know more about the subject than any living person. Blocked from getting anything out of the Air Ministry, he came to the conclusion that there had been a massive cover-up to protect Lord Thomson. He appraised both the Harry Price and Major Villiers transcripts, and came to the conclusion that the Harry Price session was almost foolproof and indicated strong evidence of communication with Captain Irwin. He did not, however, have the same opinion of the Villiers transcripts, pointing out that Villiers' lack of ability to take the material down in shorthand was a serious drawback.^[13]

Fuller also quotes a magazine article by KM Goldney, an investigator for the Society for Psychical Research, who had reported on experiments carried out with Garrett in 1937. Goldney identified three paranormal possibilities:

- the medium in a trance state had access to subconscious memories
- there was telepathy between the sitters (Harry Price and Ian Coster), or between the medium and other human beings
- there was communication (presumably also telepathic) through the medium from a spirit who had survived death

Goldney added: 'It must be admitted that there are strong arguments in favor of the spirit-communicator hypothesis, and that this theory is by no means ruled out, even if we cannot prove it.'^[14]

Goldney also sought testimony from the former Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding, who had become involved with matters pertaining to the R-101 shortly before its fatal journey. As the head of Fighter Command he lost 449 pilots during the Battle of Britain in 1940 and his experience of comforting the bereaved later led him to accept the reality of survival of death, and of spirit communication through mediums. In 1950, twenty years after the disaster, Goldney asked Dowding to compare the Price-Garrett script with Charlton's comments, and appraise their worth. Dowding disagreed with Charlton in only eight out of fifty-three points. In a signed statement for the SPR, Dowding wrote:

This is not a communication I would pick out to convince a sceptic. On the other hand, it is evidential in the sense that it is quite in consonance with the idea of a person who had passed out under extreme stress, and perhaps physical agony, desperately trying to bring through a communication which he believed would be important and helpful to his comrades.^[15]

Air Marshal Sir Victor Goddard, a former commander of the Royal New Zealand Air Force and administrative head of the British air forces in Burma and Malaya, also took a sympathetic interest in the R-101 scripts, not least because Irwin had been a personal friend, and Goddard himself might have been chosen instead of Irwin to pilot the vessel. Goddard contacted Garrett, who authorized him to examine the Villiers scripts. He found numerous technical errors, but also many accurate statements. Interviewed by Fuller, Goddard said he felt the ring of truth behind the evidence. He also said that the head of the official inquiry had been more deeply impressed with the Villiers transcripts than he had been prepared to admit.^[16]

Fuller also refers to the interest in the case shown by Flight Lieutenant William H Wood, a former airship pilot and close friend of Irwin, with whom he had flown during World War I. Fuller describes Wood^[17] as a 'direct, spanking, forthright and outspoken atheist' who 'hated the church in any form'

and contributed regularly to an atheist-rationalist magazine called the *Freethinker*. Wood stumbled across Price's 1930 newspaper article some eighteen years later in 1948, and instantly recognized 'Irwin's' statements as typical of the man he had known. He too considered the technical information beyond the ability of any layman to produce. Wood got in touch with Charlton and with the journalist Coster, and went through the scripts point by point. In 1949, he contributed an article to *Freethinker* stating that he was fully convinced that his friend Irwin had communicated through Garrett, causing a storm of criticism.^[18] He continued to be an atheist, but now one who believed in survival of death.

Melvin Harris

Sceptic Melvin Harris devotes a twelve-page chapter to the case in his polemical 1986 book *Investigating the Unexplained*. He criticizes Fuller and other writers for being 'taken in by these scripts, which are worthless and little more than flights of fancy'. He dismisses the notion that the technical details were too obscure for Garrett to have known, considering them 'either commonplace, easily absorbed bits and pieces, or plain gobbledegook'.^[19]

Harris attacks the credibility of Charlton, the supply officer who confirmed the accuracy of much of the technical detail, disputing in particular two items that had impressed Charlton. One was the hydrogen and carbon fuel experiment, which Charlton claimed was too secret for Garrett to have known. Harris claims, by contrast, that this was 'pure fantasy invented by Charlton's over-eager mind', since such experiments had often been carried out and were never secret. Moreover, he adds, 'this fuel scheme was never considered in respect of the R-101, which was saddled with diesel engines, working on compression-ignition.'

Harris goes on to deny the evidentiality of the reference by 'Irwin' to the S.L.8. Charlton considered this too obscure for Garrett to have known. Harris argues, by contrast, that this German airship would have been familiar to the British public, since it was used for air-raids during World War II, and was widely depicted in poster warnings.

To explain Charlton's allegedly misleading testimony, Harris cites Jarman's view that Charlton had an inflated view of his own importance, also that as a convinced Spiritualist, his involvement 'most likely gave him the jubilant feeling that he could play an important part in advancing his beliefs'.^[20] He further criticizes Fuller for 'tragically' allowing himself to 'ride along with Charlton's follies'.

Harris goes on to point out that two 'undisputed experts' contested the view that the technical information in the Price-Garrett scripts was meaningful, and, on the contrary, rejected it as valueless,^[21] urging it be disregarded. These were wing commander Tom Cave-Brown-Cave, who helped design the R-101, and wing commander RS Booth, who had flown its sister ship the R100 to Canada and back.

Finally, Harris addresses the detail about Achy, citing Jarman's discovery that Garrett had frequently travelled in France during the 1920s, and that she would have frequently driven past the village of this name, as it was on the main route and well signposted. He comments, 'So the mysterious reference depended on nothing more than holiday memories triggered off by the Beauvais connection.'^[22]

Harris concludes by stating that Jarman himself had 'no hesitation in dismissing the séance material as valueless'. Jarman died before Harris could meet him, but, Harris says, had previously emphasized to him that he disagreed that the Price material was 'almost foolproof and indicated strong evidence of communication with Captain Irwin', and that he considered the 'psychic side of R-101' to be 'a dead duck'.

Harris's explanation is cryptomnesia on the part of Garrett, a process by which, during her trance state, her unconscious mind fabricated a bogus communication using information she had picked up from press reports and media gossip.

Steve Hume

SPR investigator Steve Hume obtained access to the Jarman report and described his findings in a 2015 article for the Spiritualist magazine *Light*. He agrees with Harris that Fuller takes too positive a view of Jarman's findings. However, he points out that Harris did not himself discuss the issues with Jarman himself, or even read Jarman's report (as Harris reveals towards the end of his R-101 chapter). Jarman died the week before the two were due to meet. Instead, Harris quotes selectively from a somewhat conflicted 1980 article that Jarman wrote about the case for *Alpha* magazine, which, confusingly, ends by providing arguments for both sides.

Turning to the report itself, Hume finds that Jarman, contrary to the impression given by Harris – and despite his 'dead duck' comment – in fact is as critical of sceptical witnesses as he is of those who favour a paranormal explanation, which he himself does not rule out. For instance, having denounced Charlton as a self-important Spiritualist, Jarman goes on to concur with virtually all of Charlton's positive comments regarding the obscurity of the technical details. Hume also corrects Harris by pointing out that, if Charlton had wished to promote a paranormal interpretation in order to conform with his spiritualist beliefs, he would need to have held these beliefs *before* reading the R-101 scripts, when in fact it was the scripts that converted him to a belief in survival.

Hume further reveals that Jarman in his report questioned the sceptical testimony of Cave-Brown-Cave and Booth, suspecting that their dismissal of the details provided by 'Irwin' in the Price-Garrett sitting was actually part of the attempt to exonerate the authorities of any blame. Moreover, Cave-Brown-Cave had himself been involved in the design of the engines, whose heaviness was blamed by 'Irwin' as a major factor in the disaster,^[23] and would therefore have been strongly motivated to discredit this source.

Hume writes, 'Jarman seems to have ended up highly conflicted over the case; reluctant to trust the opinion of anyone, other than himself, associated with it'.^[24] According to Hume, Jarman concluded that Eileen Garrett could not have learned the information given in the Price sitting in any normal way, which would mean it could only have been gained by some form of ESP (his preferred explanation), or from the discarnate Irwin.^[25]

From his own research, Hume contests Harris's claim that Garrett must have seen signs to Achy on the road from Calais to Paris. He learned from Lisette Coly, Garrett's grand-daughter, that the medium could not drive, and that on her trips to France she always went by rail, which did not pass close to Achy.^[26]

Hume also addresses Harris's suggestion that Garrett could have read about the problems with the R-101 from numerous press reports in the months and years before the disaster. He researched such press reports, and found them to be 'almost completely devoid' of the technical details of all the séances, most probably because the government was disseminating only favourable information. The terms only appeared in specialist publications that Garrett was unlikely to have come across, and even these sources did not mention some of 'Irwin's' details.^[27]

KM Wehrstein

Literature

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ The main sources for this article are Price (1931; 1933, 118-32), which gives the details of the first Garrett sitting, and Fuller (1979), which gives the context and background.
- 2.^ Price (1933), 120-21.
- 3.^ Price (1933), 130.
- 4.^ Price (1933) 131.
- 5.^ Price (1933), 127.
- 6.^ Price (1933), 123-30. Note: Charlton is here referred to as 'Mr X'.
- 7.^ Fuller (1979), 227-63.
- 8.^ Fuller (1979), 296.
- 9.^ Price (1933), 130.
- 10.^ Price (1933) 131.
- 11.^ Hume (2015), 6.
- 12.^ Hume (2015), 8-9.
- 13.^ Fuller (1979), 293.
- 14.^ Fuller (1979), 285-86.
- 15.^ Fuller (1979), 287.
- 16.^ Fuller (1979), 292.
- 17.^ Fuller (1979), 288.
- 18.^ Fuller (1979), 288-10.
- 19.^ Harris (1986), 186.
- 20.^ Harris (1986), 179.
- 21.^ Harris (1986), 179.
- 22.^ Harris (1986), 171-82.
- 23.^ Hume (2015), 5-10.
- 24.^ Hume (2015). 9.
- 25.^ Hume (2015), 10, 12.
- 26.^ Hume (2015), 11-12
- 27.^ Hume (2015), 13.