This article first appeared in the 1987 COMPEX directory and was awarded the Ben Reeves Literature Award. It is reprinted courtesy of the author.

BURTIS J. DOLAN    MILDRED P. DOLAN

HOMECOMING

By Dennis R. Kromm, Chicago, Illinois

Hutchinson Street is a pleasant residential street on Chicago’s northern lakefront. Many of the houses that line it are architectural gems, including examples of the Prairie School and various historical revival styles. It is, and has always been, a prosperous street. Illinois Governor James Thompson owns a house there, as does a judge of the Federal Court of Appeals. A walk down Hutchinson Street is a walk back in time. Despite the highrise condos that have sprung up like weeds on nearby streets, Hutchinson remains defiantly lowrise and steeped in its own history. Yesterday is never very far away there.

On May 6, 1937, most people in the neighborhood still called the street by its old name, Kenesaw Terrace, even though it had been formally renamed the previous October. Old habits die hard. Burtis J. Dolan disliked the new name and continued to call it Kenesaw Terrace in the letters he wrote home from Europe that Spring. He had been overseas on business since January, and he missed his family and their home at number 734. It wasn’t the fanciest house on the street, but the large, comfortable two-story stucco was a house befitting a successful executive; a house to raise a family in.

So, on May 6, 1937, Dolan’s wife and four children went about their business and awaited his homecoming. He had written that he would be returning by steamship in mid-May. In just a few more weeks the family would be reunited. As the afternoon shadows lengthened in Chicago that day, no one at 734 Kenesaw Terrace knew that Dolan was no longer in Europe, nor was he at sea on an ocean liner. He was, that very afternoon, a passenger on the Zeppelin airship “Hindenburg”, three days out of Frankfurt, Germany, about to land at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Burtis John Dolan was born in Chicago in 1890, the son of accountant Andrew E. Dolan. He grew up in the city’s DePaul neighborhood and attended Illinois and DePaul Universities. Although he was a small man — five feet, seven inches and 140 pounds — he was fit and athletic, and a skillful enough baseball player in his youth to have tried out for the Chicago Cubs. In adulthood his passion for golf led to a friendship with famous professional golfer Chick Evans. Dolan served in the U.S. Army as a cavalry officer, volunteering for the force that went to Mexico in 1916, under General John J. Pershing, to capture the bandit and revolutionary Pancho Villa. He served as a Major in France in World War I.

In January, 1913 he met Mildred Philbin and began a nine-year courtship. Mildred was one of two orphaned sisters, raised by their aunt in a mansion at Diversey and Lakeview Avenues. The mansion had been the home of the girls’ grandfather, Thomas “Black Tom” Mackin, who came to Chicago from Ireland in 1846 without a shilling in his pocket. He made and lost a fortune and by his death in 1893 had become one of the most famous and colorful of Chicago’s power brokers. Mildred’s aunt was opposed to the relationship between her pretty 17-year-old niece and Dolan, going as far as to put Mildred in boarding school. Love found its way, however, and the couple eloped on February 4, 1922. The marriage was a strong and happy one and the Dolans became the proud parents of four children: Mary Alice, Burtis, Jr., Mildred and James.
Dolan's career was just as successful as his family life. Although he had taken a degree in law, he chose not to practice. Intelligent and gregarious, Bert, as he was known to friends and associates, was well-equipped for success in the business world. As a young man he worked in real estate and as a salesman before becoming secretary to Nelson Morris, grandson of the founder of Morris and Company, one of Chicago's most prominent meat packers. Morris saw Dolan's professional potential and also liked him as a person. The two men began a lasting friendship.

After his war service Dolan worked as vice president of a sign and advertising company for a time before returning to Morris and Company. When Morris was bought out by Armour and Company in 1928. Dolan went along to Armour, where he served as a department manager. In 1936 he moved to the Lelong Importing Company, in which Nelson Morris held an interest, as vice president. From offices in the Pittsfield Building in Chicago's Loop, Lelong imported the essential oils for perfumes sold under the Lucien Lelong trademark; brands such as “Mon Image”, “Indiscreet”, “Tailspin” and “Balalaika”. As 1937 dawned on a still severely depressed economy, Burris J. Dolan, 47 years old, was a success by any measure: a corporate vice president with a fine home and a beautiful wife and family.

And so it was that on January 16, 1937 he left Chicago for an extended trip to Europe to visit Lucien Lelong's London and Paris offices. The Dolan family was close-knit and the separation would be painful. Mildred and the children accompanied Bert to LaSalle Street Station to see him off to New York, where he would catch his ship. Before he boarded the train, Mildred pressed a rose in his hand, telling him that he keep it with him until he was safely home. The next two-and-a-half months were busy ones for Dolan. His assignment in Europe was to reorganize the Lelong offices: to hire and fire personnel and get the offices running more smoothly. He was on the go until the end of April. After a week or so of wrapping up loose ends in Paris, he would be able to return to Chicago.

Dolan's old friend and mentor Nelson Morris was also in Paris, vacationing with his second wife, the French actress Blanche Bilboa. The two friends had been in touch during Dolan's stay in Paris. Morris had to return to Chicago for a few weeks to attend to some business and had booked a round trip on the Zeppelin Hindenburg. Blanche would wait for him in France. Knowing that Dolan's work in Europe was nearly finished, Morris encouraged him to come along on the Hindenburg. Morris had twice been a passenger on the Graf Zeppelin and he painted for Dolan an exciting picture of the pleasures of a Zeppelin voyage. Dolan was fascinated. He had always been the adventurous sort, and the thought of a trip on the flying ocean liner, with his old friend as travelling companion, was tempting indeed. There was only one problem: Mildred was deathly afraid of flying. She had made him promise that he would do no flying on this trip, and he had been true to his word. So far, it had been boats and trains all the way. But this... a Zeppelin flight across the Atlantic! Who could turn that down? Besides, the Hindenburg had been called "the safest aircraft ever built." Still, he had promised.

Mildred had one more card to play. He reminded Dolan that if he came along on the airship he would be home in time for May 9 — Mother's Day. Dolan agreed. The thought of surprising his family by returning early was too exciting to pass up. Once he was safely home, Mildred would forgive him for breaking his promise. But he resolved not to send a telegram informing her of his change in plans. He wanted the surprise to be complete.

May 3 found the two Chicagoans in Frankfurt, Germany. From the Hotel Frankfurter Hof the 86 men and women who were about to embark on the Hindenburg were bussed south across the Main River, through countryside lush with beech and pine woods, to the Flug und Luftschiffhafen Rhein-Main. A misty rain was falling, drenching the spirits of the travellers almost as much as it did the landscape. Then, a thrilling vision appeared. In the middle of the huge landing field lay the silvery dart that was the Hindenburg, moored to a light mast next to one of the two giant airship hangars that dominated the field. Soon the passengers boarded the 804-foot-long ship, and familiarized themselves with the cozy modern cabins and public rooms that would be their home for the next two-and-a-half days. At 8:15 PM the "Hindenburg" rose so softly as a prayer — while a Nazi military band strove to give the occasion political symbolism with its renditions of the "Deutschland" and "Horst Wessel" songs. Leaving this snare-rattling behind, the airship started its four Daimler-Benz diesels and drones off into the darkness on its sixty-third flight.

It was to be an uneventful, even a lackluster, crossing. The ship was only half-full — it could have accommodated seventy passengers — and there were no celebrities aboard, as there had been on many past flights. Then, too, the famous aluminum Bluthner grand piano had been removed the previous Autumn, so there was no music. Ernst Lehmann, commander of the ship in 1938, was aboard as an observer on this flight, but he politely declined to play his accordion. His young son had died of pneumonia in April and Lehmann was in mourning.

Indeed, none of the ship's officers, from Captain Max Pruss on down, were very jovial this trip. The Hindenburg was battling headwinds and falling behind schedule by the hour. They were due to moor at the U.S. Naval Air Station in Lakehurst, New Jersey at 6:00 AM on Thursday, May 6, but as the flight progressed that was looking more and more improbable. Still, the passengers found much to enjoy. The food and drink were
as delightful as ever and the service, by Chief Steward Heinrich Kubis and his staff, was impeccable. There were whales to be sighted from the broad, slanting windows and, as Newfoundland approached, icebergs. As for the passengers themselves, they were an interesting mix of business, professional and creative people. The flight cost $400 one way; and those who could afford that in 1937 were men and women used to going first cabin. Multimillionaire Nelson Morris, whose mansion in the Chicago suburb of Homewood was the showplace of the area, was, by far, the wealthiest person on the ship. Other passengers were New York couturier Philip Mangone, poet Margaret Mather and comic actor- Joe Spah. In addition to Morris and Dolan, two other Chicago-area men were on the flight: Clifford O'Hanlon of Park Ridge and Herbert O'Laughlin of River Forest. No other American city was as heavily represented on the passenger list.

Good conversation could usually be found in the lounge or the smoking room until well after midnight, and Bert Dolan and Nelson Morris were usually in the thick of it. A chain smoker, Morris favored the sealed and pressurized smoking room. Not only was the bar close at hand, but it was the only room on the ship where smoking was permitted. The quiet, daylight hours were perfect for reading or catching up on correspondence. Dolan took advantage of these more peaceful moments to write ship's postcards to Lelong customers, perfume buyers at various department stores and members of his extended family. They would receive the cards after he was home in Chicago, of course, but certainly none of them would mind having a souvenir of the biggest airship in the world. On Wednesday a navigation officer named Max Zabel, who doubled as the ship's postmaster, sat in the cramped mailroom above the control car and patiently applied a large circular postmark to the German stamps on each of the letters and cards the passengers had mailed. "DEUTSCHES LUFPOSTEUROPA-NORDAMERIKA LUFTSCHIFF HINDENBURG 5.5.1937," it read. Meanwhile, in the pocket of Bert Dolan's suit jacket was a letter he had written to his wife. He never dropped it in the ship's mail. Perhaps he forgot.

On the east coast of North America, Thursday, May 6, 1937 dawned cloudy and threatening. The Hindenburg was off Nova Scotia before first light, and in the grey dawn it cruised south and west, just off the coast of the Canadian Maritimes and New England. The airship made its first landfall just north of Boston, and flew over the city at 11:40 AM. By 3:57 PM it was circling the Empire State Building while traffic stopped in the streets below as people craned their necks upward to get a look at the giant from Germany. The Hindenburg flew a wide loop over the five boroughs to afford the passengers a breathtaking view of greater New York, then pointed its bow toward New Jersey.

Less than an hour's flying time south of New York's towers, in the midst of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, The Lakehurst Naval Air Station was awash in thunderstorms. The landing of the Hindenburg had been postponed from 6:00 AM when it had been learned that the ship was running some eight hours behind schedule. Captain Pruss had radioed Lakehurst that his ship would land at 6:00 PM, weather permitting. As the after-

A postcard written by Dolan during the last flight of the "Hindenburg". The addressee was a Lelong client at Bollock's Wilshire, a department store in Los Angeles. The card bears the airship's cancellation, dated May 5, 1937 -- the day before the crash.
noon proceeded, the ground crew began to assemble. Navy Lakehurst was low on staff in 1937, and there weren’t enough sailors to make up the 230-plus men needed to haul the airship to the mooring mast. Civilians were hired for $1 each to pull on the ropes, under the close supervision of 96 experienced Navy lighter-than-air officers, chiefs and enlisted men.

At about 4:00 PM the Hindenburg flew briefly through the wet skies over Lakehurst’s big airship hangar and continued on toward the Jersey coast, cruising nearly as far south as Atlantic City, to waste time until landing. But at 6:00 the weather was still too stormy at Lakehurst. The ground crew, now fully assembled, waited. So did workmen tending tank cars laden with diesel fuel and hydrogen gas, and the doctors providing for that night’s return flight to Germany. So did two men radio crew from Chicago, numerous newsmen, camera men and reporters and dozens of people there to greet friends and relatives arriving on the Hindenburg. In houses all over the tiny town of Lakehurst, the wives of Navy airshipmen paused now and then from their chores to glance at the sky and listen for the drone of engines. Dinner would be late tonight.

Aboard the airship, the passengers’ luggage was assembled in the foyer, and tables had been set up for customs inspection. The passengers themselves paced or lounged in the public rooms. Some wanted only to land and get on with the rest of their journey. Others seemed to enjoy the extra cruising. Steward Eugen Nunnenmacher served a tray of sandwiches to help the passengers stave of hunger, as no dinner had been planned.

At 7:00 the sound of the four diesels increased as they were run up to full power. Commander Charles Emory Rosendahl, commanding officer of N.A.S. Lakehurst, had decided that the weather was as good as it was going to get, and had radioed Captain Pruss. “Recommence earliest possible landing.”

The passengers gathered once more at the windows, and saw the airship hangar loom ahead. The sandy field before the giant building was pocked with rain puddles. A few thousand feet away, surrounded by tiny human figures, stood the red-and-white tripod mooring mast. As the setting sun broke intermittently through the clouds in the west, a drizzle, reminiscent of three days ago in Frankfurt, fell on the already drenched ground crew. The Hindenburg made a tight turn and headed into the wind. With the mooring mast dead ahead, it backed its engines, stopping in midair at an altitude of about 240 feet. Moments later the two main tail guys dropped from hatches in the bow and uncoiled toward the sullen ground at the edge of the mooring circle. Dolan, Morris and their fellow passengers watched the absorbing spectacle as the ground crew grabbed the heavy lines and made them fast. It was nearly 7:30 PM. As soon as the ship landed, an American Airlines DC-3 would shuttle them to Newark airport. With luck, Dolan and Morris could get one of America’s Dusters DST “Skysleepers” to Chicago that night. If not, they would stay over in New York and catch the first flight Friday morning. In any case, they were as good as home.

Eight hundred miles west of Lakehurst, Edward Morris eased his car through Chicago traffic. His brother Nelson had sent him a telegram from Europe on Monday, saying that he would be arriving in America today on the Hindenburg. Bert Dolan was with him, Nelson said, but that was a secret. Edward was not to tell Mildred or the children. Morris listened to the car radio as he drove. Suddenly, an announcer broke in with a news bulletin, and Edward Morris could scarcely believe what he was hearing. The Hindenburg had just exploded in flames while landing and had been totally destroyed in little more than half a minute. The devastation was so swift and total that there was little hope that anyone had survived. Numb with fear about Nelson and Bert, and with Bert’s secret weighing on his heart, Morris did the only thing he could do: he drove as quickly as he could to Kenesaw Terrace.

For the Dolan children, May 6 had been a day off. Their Catholic schools were closed in observance of Ascension Day. It was Spring and the days were getting gradually longer. Twelve-year-old Bert, Jr. and ten-year-old Mildred were taking advantage of that fact by playing basketball on the lot adjoining the house when Edward Morris’ car pulled up. Like Nelson, he was a friend of the family. Bert and Mildred went on with their game. Fourteen-year-old Mary Alice was in the house, studying for an exam. Mildred Dolan was on the second floor with her mother-in-law, who was living with them. Mary Alice opened the door to a distraught Edward Morris. Edward, who could be abrupt to the point of rudeness, didn’t waste time on pleasantries.

He asked for Mrs. Dolan, and as she walked down the stairs, he blurted out, “Bert, you were on the Hindenburg, right? Bert’s gone down with the Hindenburg. It was a mystifying opening sentence. No one in the house knew about the crash. Mary Alice didn’t know what the Hindenburg was, let alone what it could possibly have to do with her father. As Morris explained that Bert was aboard the airship with Nelson, and that the ship had just crashed. Bert’s mother, who had been drawn to the top of the stairs by the commotion, fainted. The Dolan’s cook called out the window to young Bert and Mildred, “Come quick! Something awful has happened to your father!”

The rest of the evening was a blur. Mildred, despite Edward Morris’ insistence, could not bring herself to believe that her husband was on the Zeppelin. She telephoned everyone she could think of who could possibly find out if Bert’s name was on the passenger list, but information was scanty and incomplete. At Lakehurst, the remaining fuel in the ship’s tanks burned for hours, hampering rescue efforts. Rescuers and firefighters were working frantically. Slowly, the living and the dead were moved
to the air station dispensary. As the night wore on, the radio reports offered the Dolans some hope, at least. It was becoming clear that there had been many survivors. If Edward Morris was correct, if Bert was on the Hindenburg, he might be alive. By midnight, Mildred and the kids were exhausted and it was clear they would learn no more that night. They went to bed and did their best to sleep.

Friday, May 7 dawned sunny and cool. The Dolans went to Mass and picked up the morning papers, which gave the first confirmation of Edward Morris’ story. The Chicago Tribune listed “Burtis Dolan — Chicago” as missing in the crash of the airship. His name was on the official passenger list provided by the Zeppelin company in Berlin. The papers told of passengers jumping from the windows of the burning ship and surviving. Bert was in good physical condition. If anyone could have gotten away, he could. Surely they would hear from him soon. They had to. Then, the world fell apart. From New Jersey, a priest telephoned Mildred. He had administered the last rites to her husband the night before. Bert was dead. He had been identified by his passport. Apparently he had jumped from the ship, but the burning wreck fell on him. In his hand was the rosary Mildred had given him in LaSalle Street Station on a January day a lifetime ago.

Of the 97 people who had taken off with the Hindenburg, 62 survived. The dead included 13 passengers, 22 crew and one civilian ground crewman from Lakehurst. Nelson Morris had survived, with relatively minor burns, as had the other Chicago passengers, Osburn and O’Laughlin. The news of a Chicago victim travelled quickly, and soon Kenesaw Terrace was filled with reporters and curiosity-seekers. Police had to be called to keep the crowds under control. The little community of Kenesaw Terrace pulled together to comfort the grief-stricken family. The Dolan children stayed home from school once again. Of the four of them, only little four-year-old James failed to understand what had happened. He was too young. Mildred still could not accept the loss of her husband. Confined to her room under a doctor’s care, she tried to comprehend the meaning of the distant disaster that had violated the sanctity of her home and changed her life, and her children’s lives, forever.

The body of Burtis J. Dolan came home to Chicago on Saturday, May 8, and was formally identified by his brother-in-law, Frank Sexton. Flowers soon filled the house to overflowing and scores of friends, relatives and associates attended the wake there. On Monday, May 10, a full military funeral was held. The coffin passed through the portals of St. Mary of the Lake Church under a canopy of crossed swords. At Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, on the shore of Lake Michigan, Bert Dolan was laid to rest to the sound of Taps and a volley of rifle shots. The flag that draped his coffin was folded and presented to Mildred. It would fly at the Dolan house on national holidays for years to come.

Life went on. Nelson Morris saw to it that the family continued to receive income from Dolan’s share in Lelang Importing and set up a trust fund for the children. Bert, Jr. served in the Navy in World War II and worked for Lelang for a time. He went on to become a successful businessman and family man in his own right. Mary Alice and Mildred married and started families of their own. Little James died of cancer as a young man. Mildred Dolan sold the house on Kenesaw Terrace or, if you prefer, on Hutchinson Street, in 1953. It was too big for her to live in alone. She never remarried but continued to live in Chicago, her life made full and rich by her children and grandchildren. Bert, Jr. calls her a “sprightly lady” who drove a car right up until a few days before her death in 1981.

Among the few personal effects returned to the family after the Hindenburg crash was the letter Dolan had left in his coat pocket. It was charred but readable. In it he told his wife, “I know I promised not to fly on this trip, but this was an opportunity I had to take. If anything happens to me, it was God’s will.”

Acknowledgments and Sources

The story of Burtis J. Dolan, Chicago’s only Hindenburg disaster victim, has never been fully told before. I am indebted to Mr. Dolan’s children; Mary Alice Mansfield, Burtis J. Dolan, Jr. and Mildred Sullivan; for all of the personal information in this article. Their memories of May 6, 1937 are still vivid, and their love for their father and mother was abundantly clear in my several interviews with them.

Chicago Historical Society: Chicago Public Library; Cook County Building (Tract Office); Chicago Landmarks Commission; Calvary Cemetery; National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.; Dr. Raymond A. Taylor, former coroner of Ocean County, N.H.; the Zeppelin Museum of Friedrichshafen and Zeppelinheim (Frankfurt am Main), West Germany.

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