

Luxury Liner Morro Castle, smoldering off Asbury Park, New Jersey. On its final Havana to New York voyage, a storm and ship fire resulted in the death of 135 passengers and crew.

September 1934

The steel Strike disorders everywhere were terrifying experiences for the news photographers. At Warren, Ohio, three cameramen, Charles Wilk, Cleveland, Manager of World Wide Photos, Mack Baron, of International News, and Jack Hines, Associated Press Staffer, were fired upon and dropped into a ditch as bullets whizzed over their heads. At the same time, they were taking pictures of the food airplane landing in the Warren steel plant enclosure.

Dodging bullets in the steel strike was just one of the many thrills experienced by Buck in his long career as a news cameraman. "Buck," as he is popularly known, has oftentimes been called the "Ace Flying Photographer," and the "Fearless Photographer," and has lived a veritable charmed life amidst the dangers of his career. He is taken the longest chances but has always come out on top." It can't be done," are words that are unknown to him as a Tibetan chant. Now, the Morro Castle disaster... Buck will smile proudly when he recounts that experience. It brought him his greatest fame.

The phone jangled what wildly in the bedroom of Baron's home in Sunnyside, Long Island, one early morning in September 1934. Buck stirred several times in bed, then finally forced himself to answer the phone. He switched on the light, glanced at the time (it was a little after three), then glued his ear to the receiver. It was his office calling: "The liner Morro Castle's afire off the Jersey Coast. Maybe hundreds dead. Get down to North Beach airport right away. We'll have a plane ready for you the hop off at daylight." Instantly but was alert.

As he fairly dived into his flying equipment, he took one glance at the window. Rain was slashing at the panes." Flying weather, eh? Well maybe..."

When he reached the airport in his car, everything was ready. Bill Gulick, a pilot for the O. J. Whitney Flying Service, had already warmed up his plane. They then waited for daylight. Dawn was coming with hardly a break in the weather. Misty rain was falling. They stepped outside the hanger door and could scarcely see an object ahead of them. Both shook their heads. Bill was game to take a chance and go out a little distance. They started and pretty soon were in the thick of it. Baron could barely see the outline of the wingtip in the heavy fog and rain. They kept on going.

The pilot had secured the approximate position of the burning ship before he left the hanger. An accurate judge of the distance and familiar through years of flying with the lay of the land below him, Gulick nosed his plane towards the Jersey shore and kept ongoing. There was no going back, so long as the gas held out.

Buck sniffed. There was a strong smell of smoke in the air. They must be somewhere near the burning liner. The pilot turned the plane in the direction from where the smoke was drifting. Then suddenly, the mist lifted, the clouds rolled back, and the sun came through. They had perfect visibility from an altitude of 500 feet. There, not a half-mile away, was the ill-fated ship spouting flames and smoke.

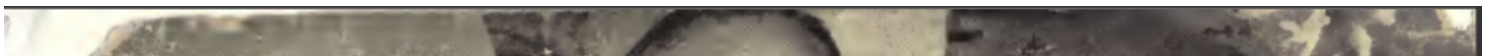
They circled the Marro Castle, and Baron obtained about twelve shots in less the six minutes. They came down to about deck level on the burning ship for a few closeups. They could see a handful of persons clustered on the bow of the ship, waving frantically to them. A half-filled lifeboat was pulling away. They were grieved that they could not aid in the rescue, but they realized they were helpless. Two passages ships and an oil tanker nearby was a welcome sight. Buck asked Gulick to nose down so that he could get a fairly good close-up. The heat was intense. And the smoke nearly choked him. Several times they almost went into a spin, but Gulick's able piloting kept the plane going over and around the ship, until Buck had used all his plates. Then they turned northward.

The return trip was more dangerous. The fog had returned and with it a squall of rain. The weather was getting worse each minute. They figured the best thing to do was to fly as low as possible and follow the shore. Many times they skimmed the waves. A crash seemed inevitable, but finally, with sighs of relief, they sighted the houses in the vicinity of North Beach airport. They came down to a safe landing.

At the airport, Baron learned that a half dozen planes tried to take to the air but were forced to return. It meant that his pictures were exclusive. An hour later, the prints rolling off the ferrotyped machines, to be rushed to newspapers all over the country. It was fully an hour after that before another plane with photographers flew over the ship. It was one of the finest picture scoops in history.

Later, Baron's thrilling pictures were introduced at the inquiry into the disaster. His outstanding shot, the one showing flames and smoke rolling upward from bow to stern, won him the National Headliners Award for best news for photograph of the year.

Any moment of the day or night may bring a flash of another story like the Morro Castle fire, the Argonaut mine disaster, a strike riot, a train wreck, an explosion. Everywhere, the men with cameras are prepared for the dangers, the thrills, the privations. They seek no acclaim, want no special awards. They will modestly tell you: "It's just part of the days work!"



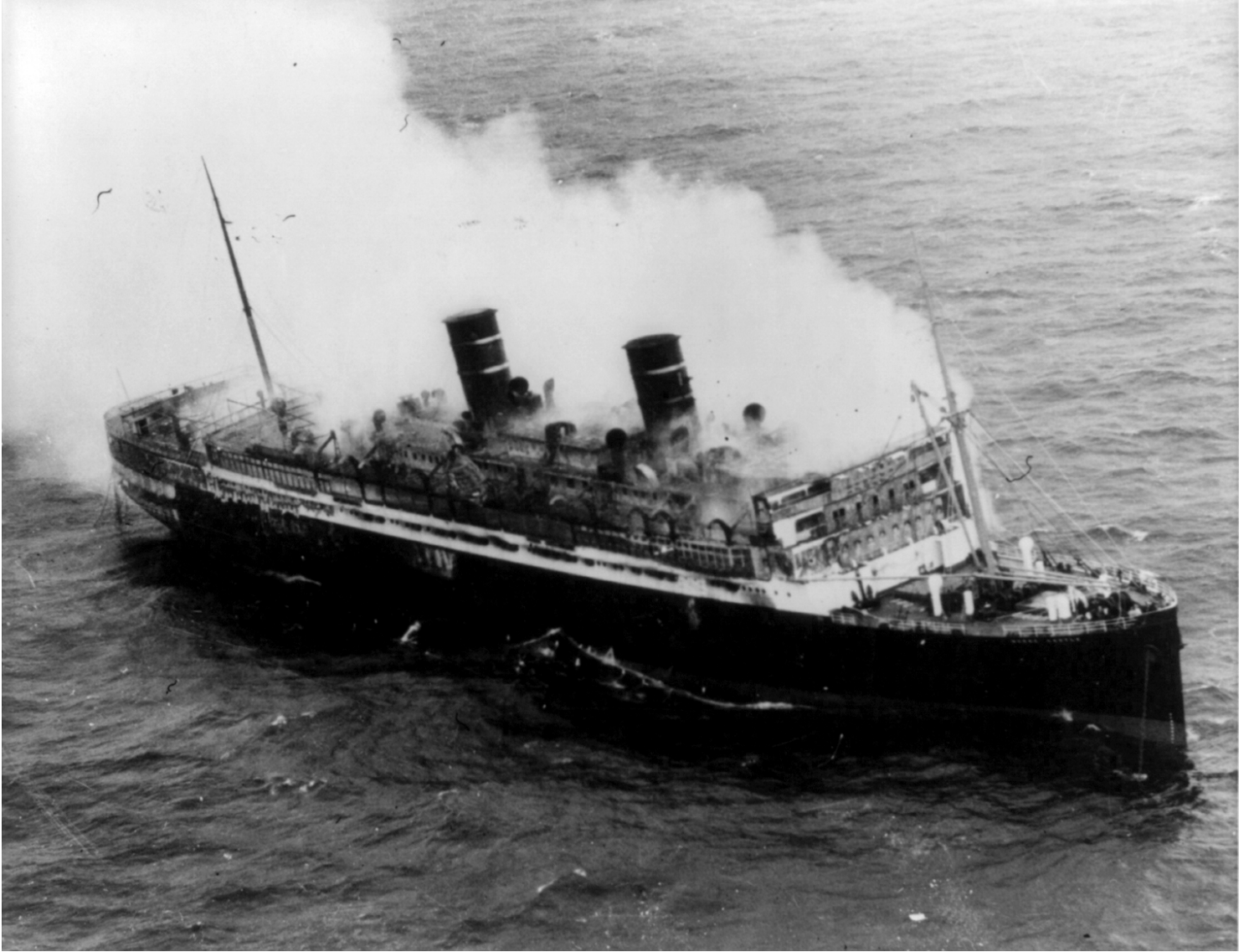


The Story of The News Cameraman

GET THAT PICTURE!

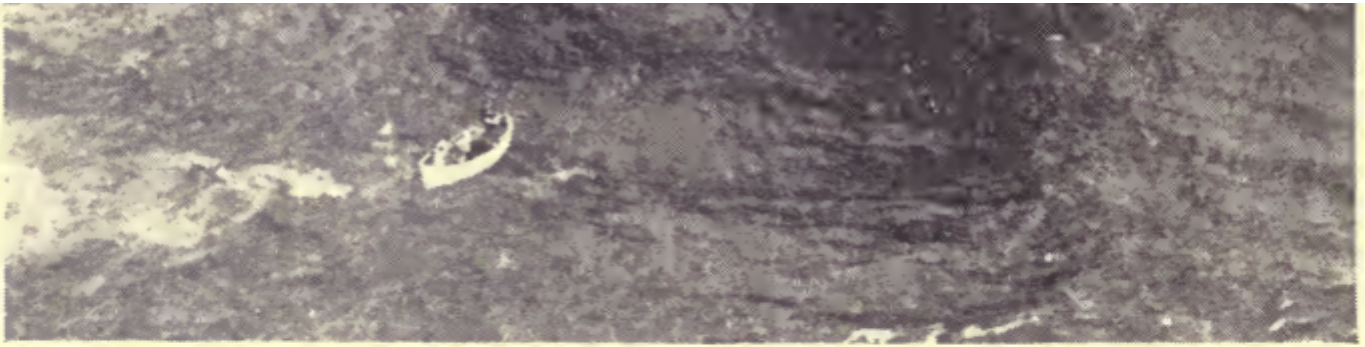
A. J. EZICKSON

New York Times Wide World Photos









© International News Photo

A TRAGEDY OF THE SEAS

Sweeping low out of a thick mist and rain, Mack Baron, International News photographer, made this first picture to be taken of the burning steamship Morro Castle off Asbury Park, N. J., in 1935, in which 134 passengers and members of the crew perished. Note lifeboat with survivors in foreground waiting to be picked up by rescue vessel. Later other photographers appeared over the scene, but Baron and Pilot Bill Gulick had already landed at North Beach, Long Island, with the negatives which were rushed by motorcycle to the New York office for an outstanding picture beat.



