

Death of Rolling Stone “Muckracker”: The Michael Hastings Wreck-Video Evidence Only Deepens the Mystery

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This article was published by WhoWhatWhy July 14, 2013. Michael Hastings died June 18 2013 in a mysterious car accident.

Or was it?

Michael Krikorian, an essayist and former Los Angeles Times crime reporter, happened upon the scene a few hours after journalist Michael Hastings’s speeding car slammed into a palm tree and burst into a fireball.

Krikorian has seen his share of fatal car wrecks. But this one was different. As he put it, “This demands a closer examination.”

In accident-investigation parlance, it was a roadway departure—a non-intersection crash in which a vehicle leaves the traveled way for some reason.

But how and why did Hastings’s Mercedes depart the traveled way, and why was it traveling so perilously fast?

In a city where there seem to be as many car wrecks as cars, North Highland Avenue in L.A.’s Hancock Park neighborhood is not exactly Dead Man’s Curve. A fatal car accident there is rare.

*Highland is a four-lane neighborhood artery as straight as a laser, with a narrow, grassy median lined with towering *Washingtonia robusta* palms. In the two miles between Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards, not a single traffic fatality was recorded on Highland from 2001 to 2009, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data. <http://map.itoworld.com/road-casualties-usa#fullscreen> ^[1]*

In the final moments of Michael Hastings’s life, the car he was operating accelerated to a treacherous speed before swerving off the pavement, mounting the median and slamming into one of the palms. There were no skid marks—no apparent attempt to brake before the collision.



Image: Courtesy of Blue Rider Press/Penguin

Hastings, 33, covered the Iraq War as a young correspondent for Newsweek. But he made front-page news (and won the prestigious George Polk journalism prize) for his 2010 Rolling Stone magazine profile of “The Runaway General,” Stanley McChrystal, commander of NATO’s security force in Afghanistan. Hastings’s story portrayed the dismissive contempt with which McChrystal and his staff viewed President Obama and Vice President Biden. The general apologized, calling the profile “a mistake reflecting poor judgment.” But he was forced to resign.

Michael Hastings was carving out a journalism niche as a muckraker, and some see nefarious forces at work in his death.

We asked Michael Krikorian for his take on the curious accident, which happened in his hometown on a block he visits several times a week. He provides the details of new video evidence that offers a few clues about the seemingly inexplicable fatality.—David J. Krajicek

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By Michael Krikorian

Shortly before 9 a.m. on Tuesday, June 18, I was walking with my girlfriend, Nancy Silverton, to get my car, which I had left the night before at her restaurant, Pizzeria Mozza, at Highland and Melrose avenues. Walking west on Melrose, we noticed crime scene tape as we arrived at Highland. Just to the south, a wrecked and charred car was being pulled away from a palm tree in the median.

We lifted the yellow tape and walked down the sidewalk to get access to the alley leading to the lot where my car was parked. A Los Angeles police officer stopped us. Nancy explained she owned the restaurant and I identified myself as a reporter. The officer let us walk on and gave a quick rundown: A man had driven into the tree at 4:30 that morning. He was dead.

My first thought was that another early morning L.A. drunk had killed himself. I told the officer that a security camera located outside the front door of the pizzeria probably captured the crash.

As we talked to the police, a Mozza employee named Gary, who has been staying at a small apartment above the restaurant, approached us to say that he had heard the crash.

"I heard a 'whoosh,' then what sounded like a bump and then an explosion," he said. "I thought the building had been hit."

He said he rushed down and saw the car ablaze. Gary listened as two men who claimed to have witnessed the crash told police the car had sped through a red light at Melrose.

Later, when the pizzeria manager arrived at work, we watched the security camera footage. There's no wonder it was a fatality. The crash ended with a hellish explosion and fire. The officer, watching the video with us, was as stunned as we were. He said, "I have never seen a car explode like that."

Soon, a flatbed truck with the burned Mercedes CL 250 aboard drove slowly by, going north in the southbound lanes of Highland. The front of the car, particularly on the driver's side, was badly damaged. I snapped a couple of poor photos with my iPhone.

The Man Who Brought Down General McChrystal

Nancy and I got in my car and went home. I went on to Watts to do some reporting on another story and later to Gardena. That afternoon, I got an email from a friend to whom I had mentioned the crash. It included a link to an L.A. Times story about the wreck. My friend wrote, "*The driver was a well-known journalist: Michael Hastings. What a drag. Obviously a talented guy. Wonder why he was driving so fast?*"

I went online and read about Michael Hastings, the guy who brought down General McChrystal. The conspiracy theories were already being spun on the web: that a bomb had been planted in the car, or that its controls had been hacked and the crash was engineered remotely by an unseen hand.

For nearly five years, McChrystal served as chief of the Joint Special Operations Command, which oversees the military's commando units, including the Army Delta Force and the Navy Seals. This was not a paper-pushing general. McChrystal was a soldier's general who would go on raids with his men. A reporter brings him down—and then dies in a mysterious crash three years later. If this had happened in Russia, wouldn't we all figure it was some dark military conspiracy?

I'm not a conspiracy guy, but my reporter's instincts told me that this demands a closer examination. So I snooped around.

Mysteries on the Video Tape

"I've never seen an explosion like that," said Terry Hopkins, 46, a former U.S. Navy military policeman who served in Afghanistan, told me. "I've seen military vehicles explode, but never quite like that. Look, here's a reporter who brought down a general. He's sending out emails saying he's being watched. It's four in the morning and his car explodes? Come on, you have to be naïve not to at least consider it wasn't an accident."

I turned to the one piece of evidence I had: the security camera footage.

The camera shows the view from near the entrance of Pizzeria Mozza.

Four seconds into the start of the tape, a minivan or SUV goes by the front of restaurant. Three seconds later, another vehicle goes by, traveling from the restaurant front door to the crash site in about seven seconds. At 35 seconds into the tape, a car is seen driving northbound and appears to slow, probably for the light at Melrose.

Then at 79 seconds, the camera catches a very brief flash of light in the reflection of the glass of the pizzeria. Traveling at least twice as fast as the other cars on the tape, Hastings's Mercedes C250 coupe suddenly whizzes by. (This is probably the "whoosh" that Gary, the Mozza employee, heard.)

The car swerves and then explodes in a brilliant flash as it hits a palm tree in the median. Viewed at normal speed, it is a shocking scene—reminiscent of fireballs from "Shock and Awe" images from Baghdad in 2003.

I have heard and read a wide range of guessed speeds, up to as much as 130 mph. I think it's safe to say the car was doing at least 80.

Driving 80 on Highland is flying. Over 100 is absolute recklessness.

Highland has a very slight rise and fall at its intersection with Melrose. It's difficult to tell by the film, but based on tire marks—which were not brake skid marks, by the way—chalked by the traffic investigators, it seems that the Mercedes may have been airborne briefly as it crossed the intersection, then landed hard. Tire marks were left about 10 feet east of the restaurant's valet stand.

(Later, I drove the intersection at just 45 mph, and my car rose up significantly.)

About 100 feet after the car zooms by on the tape, it starts to swerve. At about 195 feet from the camera, the car jumps the curb of the center median, heading toward a palm tree 56 feet away.

About halfway between the curb and the tree, the car hits a metal protrusion—perhaps 30 inches tall and 2 feet wide—that gives access to city water mains below. This is where the first small flash occurs. This pipe may have damaged the undercarriage of the car, perhaps rupturing a fuel line.

I looked at the tape frame by frame. A second flash immediately follows the first. It might be the brake lights, but it's hard to tell. The next frame is dark. Then comes the first explosion, followed immediately by a large fireball.

I showed the video to a number of people. Everyone had the same reaction: essentially, "Wow!"

"This Was Not a Bomb"

I showed the video to Scott E. Anderson, an Academy Award-winning visual effects supervisor with Digital Sandbox who has engineered explosions for many films.

He viewed the footage more than 20 times at various speeds, including frame by frame. Anderson concluded, "This was not a bomb."

He said a bomb would have propelled the car upward, not forward.

“It’s very hard to blow up stuff well,” Anderson said. “I think too many things would have to go right. Luck would be involved. Good and bad. Does someone doing this to Hastings want to rely on luck? Too many things have to go right. It would have to be perfect. And that’s almost impossible.”

He continued, “It comes down to physics. A bomb would have lifted the car and the engine up. Based on this video, the car doesn’t go up, and the engine goes forward, which makes sense since the car apparently did not hit the tree head on.”

He said the fireball may be enhanced by the recording device.

“That type of surveillance camera has auto exposure so it can change what it sees based by the ambient exposure day or night,” Anderson explained. “This camera is set at night and anything that happens very quickly, be it a flash light or a big ball of fire, the camera won’t react fast enough, so the first flash of light is going to appear much bigger in the viewing. So the initial explosion would always look bigger than it is.”

He suggested a simple demonstration using a cellphone video app: Strike a match in a dark room and it will flare up on camera much more than in reality.

Why Was He Driving So Fast?

The pizzeria video is compelling, but it fails to answer the key question: Why was Michael Hastings traveling so fast?

As Anderson put it, “None of this happens without the speed.”

Some theorize that the car was hacked—operated remotely (like a drone, for example) by someone who wished to harm Hastings.

That may be technologically possible, but is it plausible?

Hastings ran at least two red lights, and possibly a third. Could a hacker have planned for no cross traffic, which might have derailed the mission? If the flash before the dark frame was indeed brakes, that would indicate the brake light was functional. If the car were hurtling along out of his control, wouldn’t Hastings have been plying the brake pedal all along, not merely in the last second before the crash?

And even if the brakes and accelerator were rigged, the steering must have been functional, according to a Los Angeles Police Department officer, speaking on the condition of anonymity. “For nearly a half a mile, that car must have been going straight,” the officer said. “That can’t be done at that speed for that long, even with the best alignment.”

“Stanley Got Him”

The day after the crash, I found myself in the homicide squad room in South Los Angeles. The Hastings topic came up, and one of the detectives said, “Stanley got him. Took his time, but got him. That wasn’t an accident.” (Meaning General Stanley McChrystal.)

On cue, a sign showed up the next day on the now-singed Hasting’s Palm: “This was not an accident.” By nightfall, someone had replaced it with another message: “Go to sleep people. This was an accident.”

Hastings's death was national news briefly, but it was soon pushed aside by subjects deemed more pressing to the mainstream media. The George Zimmerman homicide trial was gearing up in Florida. Edward Snowden, the National Security Agency leaker, was playing Tom Hanks at a Moscow Airport. Istanbul had erupted in the biggest anti-government protests in its history, and political strife in Cairo was taking center stage.

Michael Hastings was put on the mainstream media's back burner—or perhaps on an unlit hibachi behind the garage.

But on YouTube the conspiracy thrived. One video that has received over 8,500 views proclaimed that the plot was so over-the-top that the culprits had removed the bombed car, and in the process, placed another car in front of different trees. It also stated there was no damage to the front of the car.

I saw the car being towed away. It was absolutely mangled on the front, particularly the driver's side. I've lived in Los Angeles most of my life and have seen the aftermath of many car crashes. This was one of the worst. There was no way a driver could have survived.

LAPD Traffic Bureau: 'No Foul Play'

Two days after the crash, the LAPD announced that there appeared to be no "foul play" in the single-car fatal crash. That ignited even more conspiracy talk: The "feds" had gotten to the LAPD and were hushing it up.

A week after that statement, the lead investigator on the case, Detective Connie White from LAPD's West Traffic Bureau, contradicted that. When I asked her if "foul play" had indeed been ruled out, she replied, "No. Nothing has been ruled out."

White said the investigation was nearly complete, but she refused to give details. She said an official report, including toxicology results on Hastings's remains, may be weeks away.

As far as a bomb or car-hacking, White said, "At this point there is nothing that leads us in that direction."

When asked if any explosive materials had been discovered on the car or at the crash scene, White sounded like she chuckled.

She said, "Oh, boy. Hold on."

I thought maybe I had asked a touchy question, and I expected a "no comment." But she returned to the phone and said, "No." The way she said it, I wondered if she had shared a laugh with other detectives about my question.

She added, "If this were anything other than an accident, other departments would have been brought in to investigate," alluding to homicide, the bomb squad or a terrorism unit. (Though one might think "other departments" would have been needed in any case—simply to determine whether it was an accident or not.)

On TV, Hastings Provokes another General

I've seen a number of people use the word "fearless" to describe Hastings. The word has different meanings to different people. To some, it might be how well someone held up in

the second battle of Fallujah.

I have no idea how Hasting was in the trenches. But I watched him in action on Piers Morgan's CNN show last November against retired General David Kimmit, an admirer of General David Petraeus. At one point, Kimmit told Hastings that his impressions about Iraq after Petraeus were wrong. Kimmit added that he knew this because he has been back to Iraq, working in the private sector.

Exasperated, Hasting threw up his hands, gave his unique smirk and proclaimed, "I've spent more time in Iraq than you have, man."

Hastings went on to chide Kimmit for profiting off the war in the private sector. "I'm glad the general was able to make money off his services," he said.

In that TV vignette, I could see why a guy like Hastings would piss off the military brass and would be so admired by fellow journalists.

I hope that someone will be able to explain why Hastings's Mercedes was speeding like a silver bullet. Maybe the answer will show up in the toxicology results. I know this much: American journalism has lost a pit bull of an investigative reporter.

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