

Halifax Explosion Harbour Narrows, Nova Scotia, Canada, December 6, 1917

December 6 was a lazy morning for some people, who had attended the political rallies the night before. They were tired physically and mentally. It had been a long war. Perhaps that is why children were late getting off school that morning. Many people were at home sick with the "flu" or worse. Pneumonia was very prevalent and "pneumonia jackets" were used that year for the first time. Another wonder, Antiphlogestine, had made an appearance in the medical circle. One heard of a few cases of diphtheria but they were isolated and no one gave them much thought.

School attendance was down that morning; many seeing the fire on Mont Blanc, loitered; and business men, too, lingered on their way to the shops. The early risers – the 6:00 factory workers and the 8:00 shift workers – were hard at work. Production was at a high level and scores of factories and foundries in Halifax and Dartmouth worked at full capacity.



Figure 1 HMCS Sackville

Halifax was almost a self-contained city. There was a ready market at her front door for her surpluses, and business was booming. Now, was less than 3 weeks to Christmas, the stores were getting stocked up with all sorts of "goodies". The warehouses at the docks were bulging at the seams with food for home and abroad. Luxury items, jewelry, glass and china were destined to go to H.C. Browne Limited in preparation for a brisk Christmas trade.

Our soldiers depended on the bread line that extended between Canada and "the front". This was constantly

being replenished from the port of Halifax.

It was a bright morning with a chill in the air. The weather forecast testified to this: "fair, frozen ground, light northwest wind, no precipitation, temperature 39.2 maximum and minimum 16.8."

A former Haligonian told me that looking out her window that morning she noted, "There was a barber on the harbor." This was a light white fog suspended a few inches above the water. This fog or haze was not visible from all parts of the city. Many people remember it as being "a clear morning."

This was the usual activity along the waterfront. Many deck hands were busy with the never ending loading



Figure 2 Historic Properties

and unloading tasks that filled their days. Then there were the usual spectators, and sailors and soldiers off duty, with time on their hands; it was an interesting place to go.



Figure 3 Acadia

The troop transports and the freighters awaiting convoy overseas seemed apart from the civilian and admiralty tugs which seemed to be more or less permanent guests on the waterfront. On that morning, between 80 and 100 crafts – vessels, schooners, troop transport, and freighters rested in the tranquil water of the harbor. On board, many were taking their last look at Halifax but were completely unaware of it. Some season sailors, who knew full well the dangers that lurked

outside, felt it was an anxious time. Every day took its toll and the war was on everyone's mind, especially if you were anticipating a trip "over there". Army, Navy and Merchant Marines men with their respective khaki and blue uniforms mingled with the civilian population.

The British Warship Niobe recently purchased by Canada held a place of honor in the harbor. She had proven herself and now she was home and the Canadians were proud of her. The Royal Canadian Navy was only 4 years old and still had much to learn. Her officers were young and inexperienced. The British Navy looked upon it with a benevolent air and aided it in many ways. Indeed, many of the senior officers were on loan from the British Navy.

Across the channel the town of Dartmouth lived very happily in the shadow of Halifax. It accepted the overflow from there and now had factories and industries of its own. The one connecting link was "the ferry". Much larger than our present ferry, it carried everything, horses, people, freight, and never seemed to stop. There were always workers and shoppers on the move. The six mile channel known as the "narrows", between Halifax Harbor and Bedford



Figure 4 Barrington Narrows

Basin was one of the examination points, many ships were forced to go there.

On that morning of December 6, the Imo, an old four-masted Norwegian steamship, prepared to sail. She was on her way to New York to pick up a cargo of Belgium relief supplies. The day before, she had been refueled too late to leave the basin. Captain From, Halifax pilot William Hayes and several members of her crew were on

the bridge. The only unusual thing about it was the fact that she had not been given permission to sail as she was now proceeding up the channel.

Commander F.E. Wyatt, Chief Examining Officer, later testified to this at the inquiry.

The Mont Blanc had arrived from New York the night before, too late to pass the boom. Captain Lemedec produced for Mate Terrence V. Freeman, R.C.N.V.R., Examining officer, and a manifest showing a full cargo of bulk explosives – principal item: 2,300 tons of picric acid. Pilot Francis MacKay came aboard that night and when the Mont Blanc received her clearing early the next morning they proceeded to enter the harbor.

What happened next has never been clearly explained. I hesitate to repeat what has already been written for now it runs something like the fable of the six blind men who came to see the elephant. I can only give you the reports of eye-witnesses who saw it happen.

It was the greatest disaster that ever struck a Canadian city; thousands were killed, hundreds more wounded and blinded. Many survivors say it was "sabotage" and "the Huns were behind it." Others say it was "an accident". But as one woman said, "How could two competent pilots allow such a thing to happen?" How indeed! To the world it is still an unsolved mystery.

I think of the overworked pilots and the pressure they must have worked under. At that time of the year the daylight hours were few and the ships entering and leaving the harbor were many. We know that the harbor tonnage had increased from 2 million to 17 million annually. Fourteen harbor pilots and 8 apprentices handled these ships.

Was disaster pending in the mind of Commander Wyatt when more than two years before "he had informed the then port Commander in a letter that he would 'not be responsible' for what might happen."

What had he meant?



Figure 5 Historic Properties

"For months and months I saw an accident or collision was coming and I could see that there was somebody going to be made the goat for this, and I did not want to be made the goat you could call it intuition or what you like but that was my idea".

Observers said conditions were ideal, there was room to spare, the sea was calm and visibility was excellent. Yet, apparently after the first exchange of whistles it soon became evident that here were two ships wanting to travel

the same lane. One was heavily loaded and the other empty. There was no question as to which ship could move

faster, yet the prow of the Imo buried itself deep in the starboard side of the Mont Blanc. The concealed drums of benzol and picric acid were ripped open and the liquid ran into the hold. The Imo drew back too late; already the spark caused by the impact had ignited the liquid and it began to burn with a bright blue flame. Only then was the Captain of the Imo aware of what the Mont Blanc was carrying and, fearing an explosion, he made haste to steer his ship away to the Dartmouth side.

It was then about a quarter to nine. Onlookers saw the Captain and crew of the Mont Blanc abandon ship and head for shore "rowing like mad men." They made no attempt to put out the fire. They knew what a dangerous cargo she was carrying.

"Captain Lemedec admitted later that the first glimpse of flame out of the ship's hold had been enough for him and his crew."

Symbol for "I have explosives on board."

The damaged Mont Blanc slowly drifted toward Pier 6. Meanwhile, Captain Brannen on the tug Stella Maris received an urgent heliograph signal from the naval look-out to abandon her duties and proceed to the Mont Blanc. Later, she was ordered to put



Figure 6 Telegraph

a line aboard her and pull her away from the shore. Minutes later, they arrived to find the Mont Blanc deserted. They attempted to rig up water hoses but the heat was so intense it drove them back. Then the ships swung with the tide and Pier 6 was ignited by the flames. Now help arrived – a naval steam pinnace. Her sailors climbed aboard and also tried to rig up hoses. The Captain of the Highflyer and some of his crew also

tried to help. Captain Brennan with his tug Stella Maris was attempting to tow the mot Blanc out into the harbor

when disaster struck.

Minutes before Vincent Coleman, a telegraph operator, had watched the panorama from his office at the North Street Station and fearing an explosion he sent the following message to Truro.

"A munition ship is on fire and is heading for Pier 8. Good-bye". This message probably saved thousands of lives. The outside world knew what had happened and help was on the way, yes, minutes after it happened.

The crew of the Mont Blanc in their hurry to save their own necks had given no thought to the fate of the city. There were no heroes aboard the Mont Blanc. One crew member was supposed to have cried, "pou-dar, pou-dar", as he ran for shelter on the Dartmouth side. The harbor pilot William MacKay was swept along with



Figure 7 Ammunition Ship

the rest.

In Halifax the fire bells were ringing and people rushed to their doors and windows to see where the fire was. The new fire engine "Patricia" was now on her way to Pier 9. At that time there were fireboats on the Halifax Harbor and the Halifax Fire Department answered all calls. When the Explosion came, people nearby couldn't remember hearing it; they were in a state of shock. Those further away had difficulty describing it; it was like nothing they had ever heard before and it continued on for minutes. – Shattering, deafening, filling the air. There was no escaping; it was everywhere. Then came the silence. Some people describing it said, "It was as if the whole world stopped." Then came the realization – that something terrible had happened.

Everyone who could move rushed outside, and there in the sky over the north end of the city was a large black cloud suspended over the city like a giant umbrella. Gone was the beautiful morning. Now, everything was dark. And then you heard it – the city coming to life. All around were the dead and the dying of the human voices and the animal noises and the crackling of the fires. The air was thick with black soot and smoke. Fiery inferno had swept the north end of the city. It was like a huge vacuum cleaner – very little remained to be seen. It swept over the entire Richmond District. Approximately two and a half square miles was destroyed before it spent its fury and stopped just short of Africville. Scarcely a window was left intact in the entire city. Many cuts and eye injuries were caused by flying glass. Damage occurred as far as 16 miles and the Explosion was heard in Prince Edward Island and on the Island of Cape Breton.

Minutes later when people looked they couldn't believe their eyes. First, a feeling of disbelief – what had happened? Many people were sure that the Germans had arrived, but those who had watched the fire on the ship knew what had happened. The Mont Blanc was no longer there and neither was part of their city. Those who could walk and think, and lived in the city, immediately started to go to their homes, oblivious to everything. Others, in a state of shock, just wandered around.

It is said that the blast was deflected off Citadel Hill and that saved part of the city. If that is so, then Citadel Hill played a role in the defense of the city – one she had waited 200 years to fulfill.



Figure 8 Explosion Shocked Building

The north end of Dartmouth also suffered, but to a lesser degree. A piece of the Mont Blanc's anchor weighing a half ton landed over two miles away. Her 95 mm stern gun was found in a lake back of Dartmouth. Other bits and pieces turned up here and there over the city. Some are on display at the Citadel Hill Museum. A 20 foot length of heavy steel chain from her deck flew a mile and a half across the harbor, smashed in a wall of a military hospital and killed a number of patients.

The H.M.S. Niobe was badly shattered and suffered heavy casualties but she was still afloat. The Stella Maris was hurtled over Pier 8 and badly damaged. Nineteen of her crew members on board were killed. The Imo was driven over to the Dartmouth side. The Captain, Pilot William Hayes, and most of her crew perished when they went to the aid of the Mont Blanc. The Casacas, a new British steamship at Pier 8 sank, taking with her 49 members of her crew who had gathered to watch the fire. Even the stones on the harbor bottom became flying missiles. In one incident, 64 workmen at a pier were killed by a huge boulder.

After the Explosion came a gigantic tidal wave. It swept over the piers, and up the city streets taking hundreds to watery graves. Ships touched bottom and the effects were felt by ships many miles away. Terror prevailed throughout the city. Most people thought the Germans had fired on the city. There was no way to tell them the truth. Later, when a fire threatened a munition dump, the militia spread the word: everyone was to move to open spaces and parks, to the south Citadel Hill. Point Pleasant Park and the Gulf Lakes were crowded with people – some still clad in night clothes, others were bleeding and moaning, but all very grateful that they were alive.

Another explosion might have happened but for the brave actions of some men. The S.S. Pictou, a Munition ship, was taking on provisions some distance from Pier 8. The deck hands that were loading her saw the fire aboard the Mont Blanc and fearing an explosion aboard her covered the Pictou's hatches. Seconds later the explosion came and the pier roof collapsed and killed all the men. Captain J.W. Harrison saw what had happened and rushed on deck. Single handed he kept the fire that had started under control until help came. Another explosion would have killed hundreds more.

Word quickly spread that the soldiers had flooded the munition dump and the people could go back to their homes – that is, those who had homes to go to. That mass evacuation of people restricted the rescue workers for a short while and this was unfortunate for many died. But the authorities acted in good faith and could not be blamed.

The fire department lost its chief and most of its equipment. Hundreds of fires raged unchecked throughout the city. Overturned stoves caused many of them. Outside fire departments quickly came to help.

It was now that the soldiers and sailors started the work of cleaning up. Their training was invaluable in a city totally unprepared for disaster. It was they who first started to restore law and order, rescuing people and taking the wounded to the hospitals. They played a "big role" in the rehabilitation of Halifax. Later they were aided by help from the outside, but for the first few important hours they were alone. S.H. Prince, in his story of the disaster said: "but the earliest leadership that would be called social was that part of those who had no family ties, much of the earliest work being done by visitors to the city. The others as a rule ran first to their homes to discover their own families were in danger."

People wondered why they behaved like they did. There was little panic. Even now, although 57 years have passed, people are still trying to understand why and how they did some of the things they did. Some displayed super natural strength. Others went 4 days without food or sleep. Many had little clothing yet they survived. "An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior."

This was certainly proven in the Halifax disaster. "In Halifax there was little crying. There seemed to be indeed a miserable and strong consolation in the fact that all were alike involved in the same calamity. There was no bitterness, no complaint, only a great and eager desire to help someone less fortunate..."

"Fire Chief Edward Condon, Deputy Chief Edward Brunt and Engineer Peter Broderick who were proceeding to Deep Water Terminal and the Chief's automobile were hurled in the air and instantly killed."

The ferry was near the Dartmouth shore and felt the concussion from the water even before it was felt in the air. Flying glass caused many injuries and some of the passengers were badly bruised, but the ferry stayed afloat.

Squads of sailors and soldiers worked throughout the night, men and officers alike. Soldiers picketed the streets for many of the shops had no windows and they were well filled with supplies of all sorts, not only food and clothing but also gold and silver items, all exposed to the elements. There was little looting, everyone being numbed by the horror of what had happened.

On Friday, December 7, the official weather report read "9 a.m. W.E. wind velocity 19, snow falling. At noon, N.W. gale, afternoon blizzard conditions - 9 p.m. N.W. wind velocity 34, precipitation 16.0 in snow. Temperature - max. 32.2 - min. 24.8."

The Morning Chronicle was the only paper to get out an edition between Thursday morning and Friday afternoon. Dartmouth had suffered a similar fate and hardly a pane of glass was left intact. Every second person suffered in some manner, many receiving terrible cuts by flying glass.

A relief committee organized soon after the disaster requested:

1. All parents or guardians seeking lost children and all persons who are housing lost children are requested to call at the City Clerk's Office and register.
2. All persons who are homeless and need shelters are also requested to register with the City Clerk when they will be assigned quarters as soon as possible.
3. All persons who are willing to provide accommodations for sufferers are requested to file their names together with accommodations available with the City Clerk...

In Dartmouth a similar notice was issued. Every effort was made to look after the homeless - but many suffered because they were "out of touch" with authorities. Free food and clothing depots were set up throughout the city. Ben's Ltd. had teams on the street with bread. They rang a bell to announce their arrival on the street. One kind man donated a \$100 to be given out in free bread.

The Richmond district was populated mostly by working people. It was an ever changing scene. People came and went and it was impossible to give an accurate census of it. Whose families disappeared and there were none to report.

Mr. A.C. Fraser, Superintendent of the C.P.R. telegraph system, organized a staff that kept going night and day, relaying messages of need, which were quickly answered by the outside world. The Western Union was severely damaged by the

explosion and the storm that followed. It is said that the C.P.R. wires did not fail although only one strand of wire remained.

Special trains left for Windsor and Truro with casualties. Later, a special train with doctors and nurses arrived from Moncton, Sackville, Amherst, Truro, and Kentville.

On Saturday, a Boston Red Cross train armed with doctors, nurses, and supplies arrived. Mr. Rathesky was in charge of this relief unit. When he arrived at Saint John and heard that conditions were more serious than the public realized, he telegraphed the Massachusetts Safety Committee to ship down several carloads of glass and send along some glaziers. Later when he saw the conditions of the streets due to the snow, he ordered 10 auto trucks with drivers.

Members of the General Committee in their dealings with the representative of Massachusetts Governor have warmly commended his work and there is no need of praise they would not bestow. They have been helped by his quick conception of the best solution of problems and his ever failing courtesy in jointly discussing them.

Later, an American Hospital ship arrived and they took many of the desperate cases aboard.

On December 8, the body of Pilot William Hayes from the Belgium relief ship Imowas found near the shore near Oland's Brewery.