

Explosion at Halifax, Nova Scotia – David Gray

In December 1917 two ships collided in the harbour at Halifax, Nova Scotia. One ship, full of ammunition, exploded and caused a catastrophic disaster. I will begin with the short articles below, published immediately after the explosion, which give the first known details of the incident:

**“Thursday 6th December 1917 – Montreal Correspondent:
Munition Ship Blown Up – Hundreds Killed – Collision at Halifax
N.S.**

A large section of the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, is ablaze.”

[Later]:

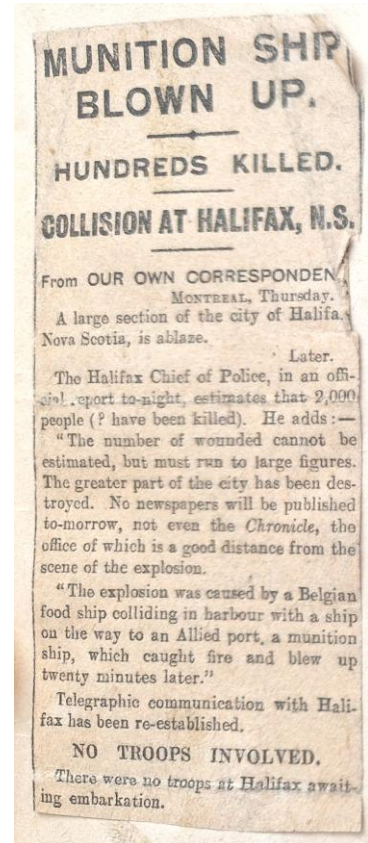
“The Halifax Chief of Police in an official report tonight, estimates that 2,000 people (have been killed). He adds: ‘The number of wounded cannot be estimated, but must run into large figures. The greater part of the city has been destroyed. No newspapers will be published tomorrow, not even the *Chronicle*, the office of which is a good distance from the scene of the explosion.

The explosion was caused by a Belgian food ship colliding in harbour with a ship on the way to an Allied port, a munition ship, which caught fire and blew up twenty minutes later.’

Telegraphic communication with Halifax has been re-established.

NO TROOPS INVOLVED

There were no troops at Halifax awaiting embarkation.”

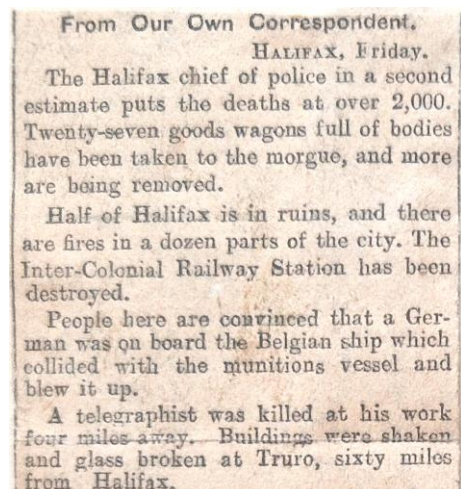


“From our own correspondent, Halifax, Friday” [7th]

“The Halifax Chief of Police, in a second estimate puts the deaths at over 2,000. Twenty-seven goods wagons full of bodies have been taken to the morgue, and more are being removed. Half of Halifax is in ruins, and there are fires in a dozen parts of the city. The Inter-Colonial Railway Station has been destroyed.

People here are convinced that a German was on board the Belgian ship which collided with the munitions vessel and blew it up.

A telegraphist was killed at his work four miles away. Buildings were shaken and glass broken at Truro, sixty miles from Halifax.”

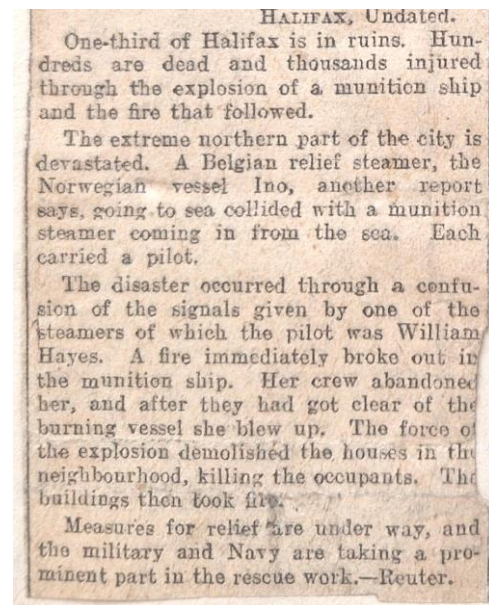


"Halifax, Undated.

One-third of Halifax is in ruins. Hundreds are dead and thousands injured through the explosion of a munition ship and the fire that followed.

The extreme northern part of the city is devastated. A Belgian relief steamer, the Norwegian vessel 'Ino', another report says, going to sea collided with a munition steamer coming in from the sea. Each carried a pilot.

The disaster occurred through the confusion of the signals given by one of the steamers of which the pilot was William Hayes. A fire immediately broke out in the munition ship. Her crew abandoned her, and after they had got clear of the burning vessel she blew up. The force of the explosion demolished the houses in the neighbourhood, killing the occupants. The buildings then took fire.

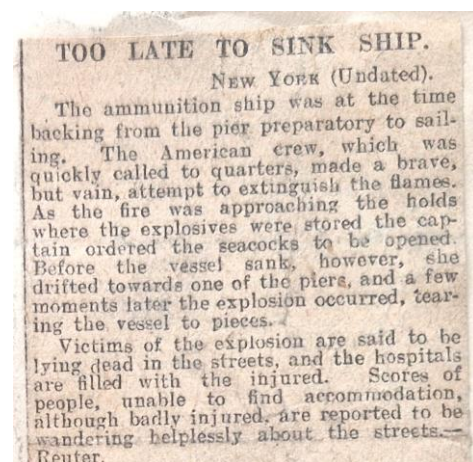


Measures for relief are underway, and the military and Navy are taking a preeminent part in the rescue work – Reuter.”

“TOO LATE TO SINK SHIP

New York (Undated).

The ammunition ship was at the time backing from the pier preparatory to sailing. The American crew, which was quickly called to quarters, made a brave, but vain, attempt to extinguish the flames. As the fire was approaching the holds where the explosives were stored the captain ordered the seacocks to be opened. Before the vessel sank, however, she drifted towards one of the piers, and a few moments later the explosion occurred, tearing the vessel to pieces.



Victims of the explosion are said to be lying dead in the streets, and the hospitals are filled with the injured. Scores of people, unable to find accommodation, although badly injured, are reported to be wandering helplessly about the streets – Reuter.”

“3,000 TONS OF EXPLOSIVES

New York, Friday.

A telegram from St. John's says that 3,000 people were injured at Halifax. The munition ship had a cargo of 3,000 tons of high explosives. Two square miles were devastated. Residences and public buildings are crowded with wounded. Soldiers are patrolling the streets. There is no electric light or tramway-car service.

From Truro, Nova Scotia, it is reported that the bodies of twenty-five railway workers were found between Deep Water and Richmond. From Toronto it is reported that all the telegraphists at Halifax were either killed or wounded. A Montreal message says that the country around Rockingham, Halifax, to a point three miles away was laid waste. None of the Deep Water quays has been destroyed. — Exchange.”

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“AMHURST (Nova Scotia), undated.

The number of dead at Halifax is estimated at from 800 to 1,000. A fierce storm was raging in the harbour at the moment of the disaster. An American munition steamer was moving from a pier off Rockingham, a suburb, at 8 a.m., when it was rammed broadside on by another vessel (the Belgian relief ship Iowa, another telegram says). Instantly, a tremendous explosion occurred, destroying both ships, killing their crews, and damaging other shipping in the harbour.

The terrible concussion destroyed both the telegraph and telephone installations for a distance of thirty miles round Halifax. All the warehouses along the waterfront were damaged for a distance of a mile and a half, and goods wagons were blown off the rails for a distance of two miles from the scene. The roof of the railway depot in North Street also collapsed.

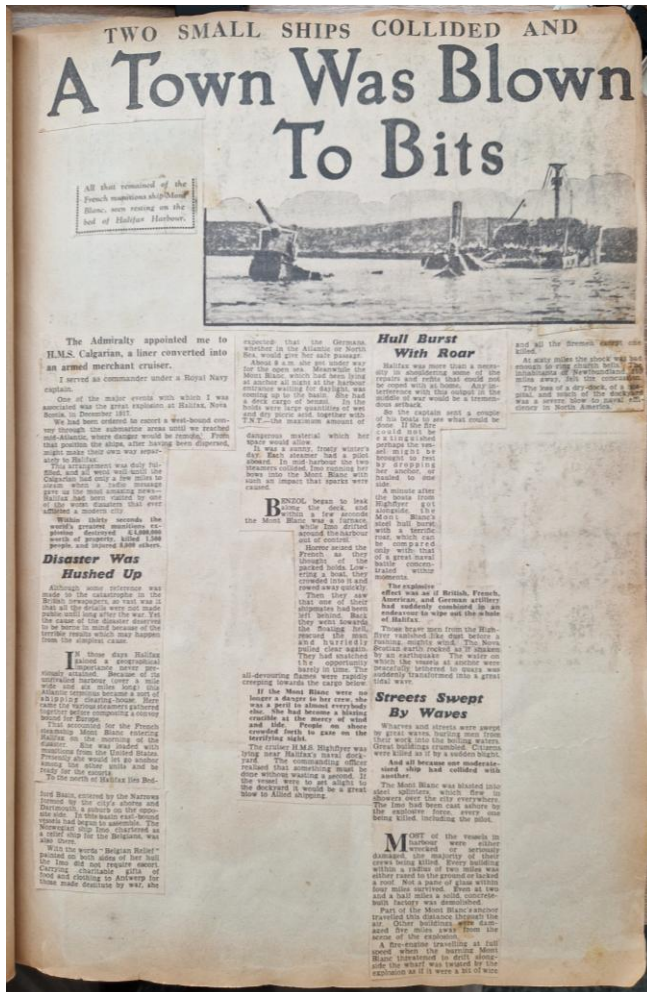
The fire was brought under control in the afternoon. The suburb of Richmond has been destroyed, and not a house in Halifax itself has escaped damage. Pieces of iron and shrapnel have been picked up three miles from the water front. — Reuter.”

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The article *left*, was written after the war when full details of the disaster were finally allowed to be published in the U.K. press. These are the memories of a British Naval Commander who was serving in convoys during the First World War. Unfortunately, this story is taken from newspaper cuttings pasted into a scrap book during WWII, and the name of the writer has not been included.

"The Admiralty appointed me to H.M.S. Calabrian, a liner converted into an armed merchant cruiser. I served as commander under a Royal Navy captain.

One of the major events with which I was associated was the great explosion at Halifax, Nova Scotia, in December 1917.

We had been ordered to escort a west-bound convoy through the submarine areas until we reached mid-Atlantic, where danger would be remote. From that position the ships, after having been dispersed, might make their own way separately to Halifax.

This arrangement was duly fulfilled, and all went well until the Calabrian had only a few miles to steam when a radio message gave us the most amazing news – Halifax had been visited by one of the worst disasters that ever afflicted a modern city.

Within thirty seconds the world's greatest munitions explosion destroyed £4,000,000 worth of property, killed 1,500 people, and injured 8,000 others.

Disaster Was Hushed Up

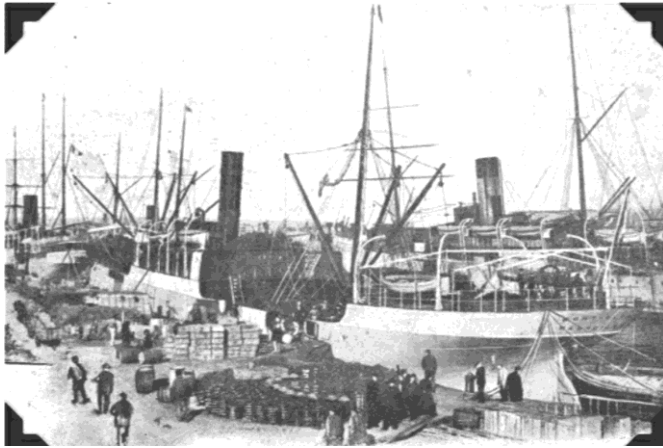
Although some reference was made to the catastrophe in the British newspapers, so vast was it that all the details were not made public until long after the war. Yet the cause of the disaster deserves to be borne in mind because of the terrible results which may happen from the simplest cause.

In those days Halifax gained a geographical importance never previously attained. Because of its unrivalled harbour (over a mile wide and six miles long) this Atlantic terminus became a sort of shipping clearing-house. Here came the various steamers gathered together before composing a convoy bound for Europe.

That accounted for the French steamship *Mont Blanc* entering Halifax on the morning of the disaster. She was loaded with munitions from the United States. Presently she would let go anchor among the other units and be ready for the escorts.

To the north of Halifax lies Bedford Basin, entered by the Narrows formed by the city's shores and Dartmouth, a suburb on the opposite side. In this basin east-bound vessels had begun to assemble. The Norwegian ship *Imo*, chartered as a relief ship for the Belgians, was also there.

With the words 'Belgian Relief' painted on both sides of her hull the *Imo* did not require escort. Carrying charitable gifts of food and clothing to Antwerp for those made destitute by war, she expected that the Germans, whether in the Atlantic or North Sea, would give her safe passage.



Mont Blanc before the explosion

About 8 a.m. she got underway for the open sea. Meanwhile the *Mont Blanc*, which had been lying at anchor all night at the harbour entrance waiting for daylight, was coming up to the basin. She had a deck cargo of benzol. In the holds were large quantities of wet and dry picric acid, together with T.N.T. - the maximum amount of dangerous material which her space would allow.

It was a sunny, frosty winter's day. Each steamer had a pilot aboard. In mid-harbour the two steamers collided, *Imo* running her bows into the *Mont Blanc* with such an impact that sparks were caused.

Benzol began to leak along the deck, and within a few seconds the *Mont Blanc* was a furnace, while *Imo* drifted around the harbour out of control. Horror seized the French as they thought of the packed holds. Lowering a boat they crowded into it and rowed away quickly. Then they saw that one of their shipmates had been left behind. Back they went towards the floating hell, rescued the man and hurriedly pulled clear again. They had snatched the opportunity barely in time. The all-devouring flames were rapidly creeping towards the cargo below.

If the *Mont Blanc* were no longer a danger to her crew, she was a peril to almost everybody else. She had become a blazing crucible at the mercy of wind and tide. People on shore crowded forth to gaze on the terrifying sight.

The cruiser H.M.S. *Highflyer* was lying near Halifax's naval dockyard. The commanding officer realised that something must be done without wasting a second. If the vessel were to set alight to the dockyard it would be a great blow to Allied shipping.

Hull Burst With Roar

Halifax was more than a necessity in shouldering some of the repairs and refits that could not be coped with at home. Any interference with this output in the middle of war would be a tremendous setback. So the captain sent a couple of his boats to see what could be done. If the fire could not be extinguished perhaps the vessel might be brought to rest by dropping her anchor, or hauled to one side.

A minute after the boats from *Highflyer* got alongside, the *Mont Blanc*'s steel hull burst with a terrific roar, which can be compared only with that of a great naval battle concentrated within moments.

The explosive effect was as if British, French, American and German artillery had suddenly combined in an endeavour to wipe out the whole of Halifax.

Those brave men from the Highflyer vanished like dust before a rushing, mighty wind. The Nova Scotian earth rocked as if shaken by an earthquake. The water on which the vessels at anchor were peacefully tethered to quays was suddenly transformed into a great tidal wave.

Streets Swept By Waves

Wharves and streets were swept by great waves, hurling men from their work into the boiling waters. Great buildings crumbled. Citizens were killed as if by a sudden blight.

And all because one moderate-sized ship had collided with another.



Imo after the explosion

The Mont Blanc was blasted into steel splinters, which flew in showers over the city everywhere. The Imo had been cast ashore by the explosive force. Everyone being killed, including the pilot.

Most of the vessels in harbour were either wrecked or seriously damaged, the majority of their crews being killed. Every building within a radius of two miles was either razed to the ground or lacked a roof. Not a pane of glass within four miles survived. Even at two and a half miles a solid concrete built factory

was demolished. Part of the Mont Blanc's anchor travelled that distance through the air. Other buildings were damaged five miles away from the scene of the explosion.



The Devastation

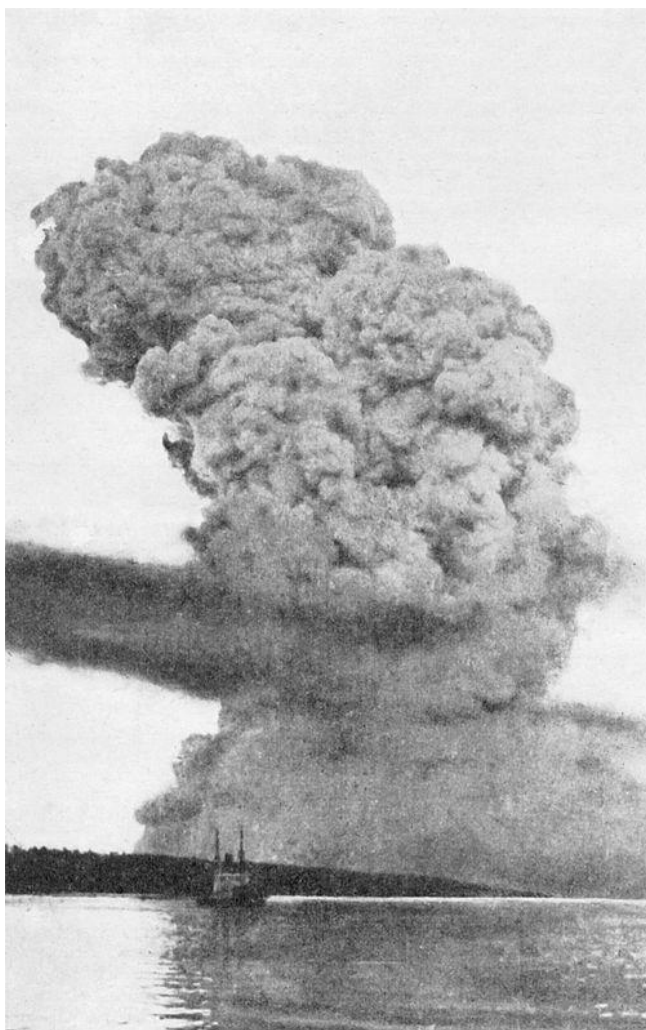
A fire engine travelling at full speed when the burning Mont Blanc threatened to drift alongside the wharf was twisted by the explosion as if it were a bit of wire, and all the firemen except one were killed.

At sixty miles the shock was bad enough to ring church bells. The inhabitants of Newfoundland, 160 miles away, felt the concussion. The loss of the dry-dock, of a

hospital and much of the dockyard was a severe blow to naval efficiency in North America."

The modern version of events is now summarised below:

On the morning of 6th December 1917, the French cargo ship **SS Mont Blanc** collided with the Norwegian vessel **SS Imo** in the harbour of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. *Mont-Blanc*, laden with high explosives, caught fire and exploded, devastating the Richmond district of Halifax. At least 1,782 people were killed, largely in Halifax and Dartmouth, by the blast, debris, fires, or collapsed



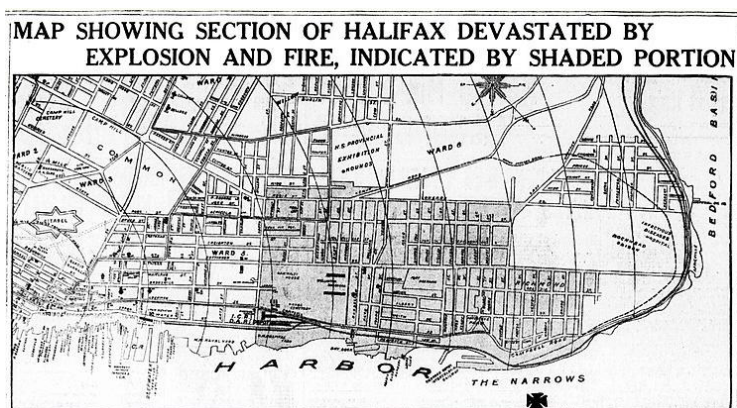
The explosion

buildings, and an estimated 9,000 others were injured. The blast was the largest human-made explosion at the time. It released the equivalent energy of roughly 2.9 kilotons of TNT.

Mont Blanc was under orders from the French government to carry her cargo from New York City via Halifax to Bordeaux, France. At roughly 8:45 am, she collided at low speed, approximately one knot (1.2 mph or 1.9 km/h), with the unladen *Imo*, chartered by the Commission for Relief in Belgium to pick up a cargo of relief supplies in New York. On *Mont Blanc*, the impact damaged benzol barrels stored on deck, causing them to leak vapours which were ignited by sparks caused when the two ships moved apart, setting off a fire on board that quickly grew out of control. Approximately 20 minutes later at 9:04:35 am, *Mont-Blanc* exploded.

Nearly all structures within an 800-metre (half-mile) radius, including the community of Richmond, were obliterated. A pressure wave snapped trees, bent iron rails, demolished buildings, grounded vessels (including *Imo*, which was washed ashore by the ensuing tsunami), and scattered fragments of *Mont Blanc* for kilometres.

Across the harbour, in Dartmouth, there was also widespread damage. A tsunami created by the blast wiped out a community Mi'kmaq who had lived in the Tufts Cove area for generations.



Relief efforts began almost immediately, and hospitals quickly became full. Rescue trains began arriving the day of the explosion from across Nova Scotia and New Brunswick while other trains from central Canada and the Northeastern United States were impeded by blizzards. Construction of temporary shelters to house the many people left homeless began soon after the disaster. The initial judicial inquiry

found *Mont Blanc* to have been responsible for the disaster, but a later appeal determined that both vessels were to blame. The North End of Halifax has several memorials to the victims of the explosion.