

Collision in the Narrows: the 1917 Halifax Harbor Explosion

by Roger Marsters, PhD, Nova Scotia Museum

The morning of 6 December 1917 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, began like any other in this busy wartime port. In the homes, schools, and factories lining its sloping shores, Haligonians started a new day, and in the harbor ships were getting underway, either putting to sea with supplies for war-torn Europe or arriving in port from across the Atlantic. In the course of the next several hours, the city and its 60,000 inhabitants would be forever changed when two cargo ships collided in the constricted passage—the Narrows—connecting Halifax Harbor with the protected anchorage, Bedford Basin, at its northwest end.

Halifax is mainland North America's closest large port to Europe. This status has given it outsized importance in times of transAtlantic conflict, and this was very much the case after 1914. At that time, the shoreline along the Narrows was shaped by rail lines stretching from deep-water shipping terminals westward into the continental interior, to the cities of central Canada and the wheat farms of the prairies. The railway and its links to the shipping

piers provided a livelihood and sustenance for local communities, especially those on the northern end of the Halifax peninsula, adjacent to the Richmond District, and the residents of Africville, a historic African-Nova Scotian community. The shipping terminals were a major industrial hub in the early part of the twentieth century, and represented the city's ambition to serve as Canada's gateway to the Atlantic. This ambition was spectacularly realized during the First World War, as the port became Canada's primary conduit to the battlefronts of Europe.

The port's rail and shipping facilities were quickly integrated into the nation's war effort. Halifax became Canada's primary military embarkation port, as hundreds of thousands of service personnel departed from its deep-water terminals for the battlefields of Europe. It also served as a major convalescent center for wounded soldiers returning home from battle, with reception facilities at Pier 2 and a new 250-bed hospital at Camp Hill. Well before 6 December 1917, Halifax was as fully engaged in the war as any North American city could be.

The steamship *Mont-Blanc*, a 320-foot French freighter, left New York on 1 December, carrying bulk high explosives and other war matériel for France, and headed to Halifax to join a convoy for the trans-Atlantic crossing. It arrived off the entrance to the harbor late in the day on 5 December and waited until first light when the anti-submarine barrier was opened and ships could enter. *Mont-Blanc* passed the Halifax Naval Yard on its port side and entered the Narrows as it headed for the convoy rendezvous in Bedford Basin.

The Norwegian ship *Imo* was under charter for the Belgian Relief Commission and was in port on its way to New York, where it would load food and clothing for the people of occupied Belgium. The 430-



Map shows Halifax, 1918. Inset: Modern-day view of the Narrows looking southwards from Bedford Basin, with Halifax Peninsula upper right, and Tuft's Cove in the foreground (bottom left, by the red and white stacks).

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The French cargo ship Mont-Blanc pulled in to Halifax to join up with a convoy before crossing the Atlantic with munitions, explosives, and supplies for France.

foot steamship left the protected anchorage of Bedford Basin early in the morning on 6 December, passing the Richmond piers and rail tracks to starboard and steered a southeasterly course as it entered the Narrows from the north.

The Narrows, in 1917 as today, serves as a crossroads, a place where peoples and cultures intersect. As the population and activity of the port was growing during the war, indigenous Mi'kmaq people continued to live throughout the Halifax region. The largest such community was at Tuft's Cove on the Dartmouth side of the Narrows, just a few hundred feet away across the waterway from the industrial Richmond District. In Mi'kma'ki—the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq—the arm of the

sea now called Halifax Harbor is one feature of an ancient and enduring landscape comprising much of today's Eastern Canada. Today Mi'kmaq communities are working to restore an indigenous presence on this ancient and important route, in the shadow of the modern bridges and highways that cross the Narrows and link the coast with the hinterland and the rest of the country.

In 1749, British military and settlers occupied a small portion of Mi'kma'ki and renamed it Halifax. For more than two and a half centuries since, the southern entrance to the Narrows has been dominated by naval power—first British, and later Canadian. This reach of the harbor supported military operations in the Seven Years' War,

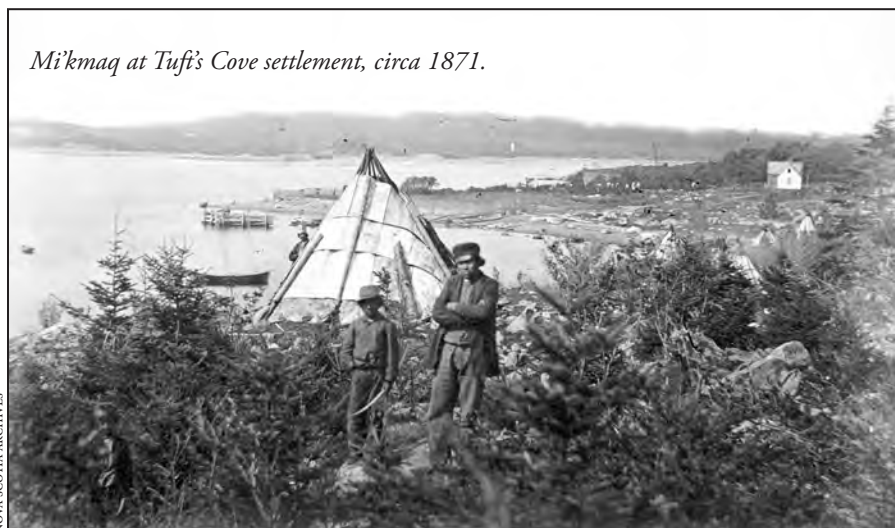
the American Revolution, and the War of 1812, and did so again with the outbreak of global conflict in 1914.

Before 1910, Canada relied on Great Britain's Royal Navy for defense at sea. With its population concentrated in the North American interior, for a long time Canadians showed little interest in developing naval forces. This changed after the outbreak of war in 1914, as recruits from Quebec, Ontario, and the western part of the country joined their brethren on the Atlantic coast in manning the fledgling Royal Canadian Navy's modest fleet.

Wartime conditions and the economic boom they created brought people to Halifax from all over the world. Many were sojourners here: British, Scandinavian, and South Asian seamen in port for a few days; Italian and Ukrainian railway navvies (workers who built railways); itinerant dock workers remitting wages to families in far-away homelands. Others, including Greek merchants and Chinese businesspeople, came and stayed.

As the sun rose over the city, *Imo* and *Mont-Blanc* were steering reciprocal courses for the same narrow passage separating Halifax from Dartmouth and connecting the outer harbor with the anchorage in Bedford Basin. *Mont-Blanc* was carrying nearly 3,000 tons of explosives in its holds, along with highly flammable benzol in barrels on the weather deck. *Imo* was traveling in ballast (empty), and as a result was floating higher out of the water with its rudder partially exposed. As the two ships maneuvered for position in the Narrows, a series of ill-fated moves ended with *Imo* striking *Mont-Blanc's* bow. Although the damage from impact was not severe, when fire broke out on the deck of *Mont-Blanc*, the crew understood their immediate danger and quickly launched lifeboats and abandoned ship. With the French freighter on fire and without a crew on board, it began to drift towards the Halifax side until it came to rest against Pier 6 in the Richmond District. Crowds of onlookers came down to the waterfront to witness the spectacle, unaware of the ship's explosive cargo. The ship burned for about twenty minutes before barrels of petrochemical burst on deck, triggering the blast; explosives in the hold below underwent a sudden,

Mi'kmaq at Tuft's Cove settlement, circa 1871.



violent chemical reaction. The enormous energy released by the explosion tore through the ship; in an instant, *Mont-Blanc* was transformed from a cargo ship to a three-kiloton bomb in the confines of a busy modern harbor.

The explosion's discharged gasses forced enormous heat and pressure outwards in all directions. A sharp change in pressure at the leading edge of this blast

wave—the shock front—drove air, water, and accumulating debris at great velocity through the districts straddling both sides of the Narrows. A roiling cloud of hot gas rose high above the site; chunks and shards of the steel ship were thrown across an eight-kilometer range. Vaporized fuel and chemical by-products of the explosion rained down, coating people and wreckage with a dark, oily film.

Some 2,000 people were killed by the blast and its after-effects; at least 9,000 were injured and many more were made homeless. The city's growing cosmopolitan character is reflected in those claimed by the blast: the explosion's destructive force did not discriminate based on ethnicity or national origin. The Mi'kmaq community on the Dartmouth side was completely obliterated. Uninjured people in the districts immediately surrounding the devastated area provided the first relief, hauling wounded people clear of danger and working to free those pinned in the wreckage. Many first responders were soldiers and sailors from damaged barracks and Canadian, British, and American ships in port.

The explosion disrupted communications linking Halifax City to North Amer-

ica and the rest of the world. Rail lines, roadways, telegraph and telephone lines, and submarine cables all passed through the Narrows and were disrupted by the blast. The explosion also caused a tsunami in the inner harbor, throwing up a surge of water sixty feet above the high-water mark, inundating buildings and facilities and scattering people and debris across several miles. The channel was choked with ruins of wharves, boats, sheds, and ships—both wrecked and adrift. For more than a kilometer along the Richmond shore, rail facilities were largely obliterated. Tracks were lifted from their railbeds, and more than 500 train cars were damaged or destroyed, including most of the city's military hospital cars. Four cars vanished completely. Sixty-one railway employees were killed, and rail links to the deep-water piers, as well as the piers themselves, were destroyed.

The sight of ships colliding and burning had drawn the gaze of many on both sides of the Narrows, caught up in the spectacle but having no idea of the imminent danger. When the blast came, hundreds of people suffered damaged eyes among their injuries. Mass blinding was a distinctive consequence of the Halifax Harbor explosion. Among the first of the medical professionals to reach the city after the blast was a Nova Scotian eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist, Dr. George Cox, who arrived in the outskirts of the city by late in the day and walked several kilometers to Camp Hill Hospital in central Halifax to lend a hand.

Over the next four days, Dr. Cox performed seventy-five enucleations (eye removals) and five double enucleations under chloroform, in addition to dozens of additional procedures using only cocaine as a topical anesthetic. By the end of this time, his instruments were becoming too dull to cut. In all, twelve ophthalmologists treated 592 people suffering from eye injuries, performing 249 enucleations. Relief to the visually impaired in the wake of the disaster contributed directly to the development of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

Although nearly 100 years have passed, the memory and lasting effects of the disaster are still present in the city's everyday life. The Hydrostone neighborhood in the



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(left) Smoke cloud from the explosion.
(below) The Norwegian steamship *Imo* beached on Dartmouth shore after the explosion.



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COURTESY AUSTIN DWYER

North End was built for those displaced by the disaster, and was specifically designed to minimize the risk from fire. Extensive relief assistance from across Canada and the United States, and from around the world, came in the form of food, medical and building supplies, and skilled personnel. The Halifax Relief Commission was established by provincial statute to administer a \$30 million fund for medical care, social welfare, and reconstruction; the Commission continued its work until 1976. Relief from Boston was immediate and ample, reinforcing the special kinship Haligonians have long felt towards that city. Nova Scotians' practice of sending a large Christmas tree as a thank you to the people of Boston has been an unbroken tradition since 1971, with the forty-to-fifty-foot tall tree serving as the city's official Christmas tree.

In the disaster's wake, fragments of *Mont-Blanc*—from the size of a pebble to

The Tug *Stella Maris* and Her Valiant Attempt to Prevent the Halifax Disaster by Austin Dwyer

On the morning of 6 December, the tug Stella Maris had just passed Imo in the Narrows on its way to Bedford Basin, towing two barges of cinders from the dockyard. Shortly afterwards, her crew saw the smoke rising from the Mont-Blanc, and without wasting a moment, her captain, Horatio Brannen, ordered the barges anchored and turned the tug back to assist. By the time Brannen and his crew arrived at the scene, the burning Mont-Blanc had drifted to the Halifax side of the Narrows and was resting against Pier 6, shrouded in great plumes of black smoke. Other ships in the vicinity sent boats and men to the pier to assist, with the goal of pulling the burning freighter away from the pier to keep it from catching fire. The crew of the Stella Maris was in the process of getting a large hawser out of the hold for the task when the Mont-Blanc exploded, killing Captain Brannen and eighteen of his crew. Only five aboard the tug survived. Men from HMS Highflyer and HMCS Niobe, who had come by small boat to help get the burning ship away from the pier, also perished.

The Stella Maris was one of my most challenging painting projects. In 1917, few photographs of unexpected massive explosions existed. Witnesses did not pull phones from their pockets to record events. Without photos of the immediate impact of the collision of ships and attempted rescue, this artist bridged the gap by exercising imagination, employing artistic license. There were many heroes that fateful December day. I centered my attention on the tugboat, while acknowledging my appreciation for the efforts of many other brave souls. —Austin Dwyer



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Looking northwards toward Pier 8 from Hillis & Sons Foundry. The blast flattened this part of the city, killing and severely injuring thousands of people, obliterating buildings, cars, and trains. Windows were broken fifty miles away and the shock waves were felt more than 175 miles from ground zero. The 1,140-pound shaft of the Mont-Blanc's anchor was recovered more than two miles away.

the size of a car—mixed with the rubble of wrecked ships, railways, houses, buildings, and personal belongings that marked the devastated zone. Survivors and relief workers sometimes kept a piece or two as souvenirs of trauma or pride in service. Some fragments were turned to practical ends, as boot-scrapers or paperweights. Most were cleared, dumped, or recycled. After World War II, a few became objects of commemoration, emblems of civic fortitude. Recent work in the harbor has uncovered more artifacts from that day, including an anchor believed to be from the Halifax-based cruiser HMCS *Niobe*, which had been moored a half mile from ground zero and was torn free by the blast and cast adrift. Most every year, erosion or frost heaves up new pieces of this history:



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Homes destroyed on Campbell Road, Halifax.

important reminders that the explosion's impact is not wholly in the past. ⚓

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CANADIAN COAST GUARD PHOTO

Nova Scotia sends a Christmas tree to the City of Boston each year as a thank you for relief efforts Bostonians made in the wake of the Halifax Harbor explosion of 1917.