The Halifax Herald – “The Cause of the Catastrophe”

The following excerpt is from a newspaper article published in The Halifax Herald on December 8, 1917, two days after the explosion.

The Halifax Herald
December 8, 1917

... On Thursday morning the French steamer Mont-Blanc was steaming up the harbour with Pilot Frank Mackay in charge and reached a point opposite the northern terminals of the C.G.R., while the Belgian Relief steamer Imo was proceeding out in charge of Pilot William Hayes and they were approaching each other. For some inscrutable [incomprehensible / strange / odd] reason the Belgian steamer violated the rules of navigation and the result was that she collided with the Mont-Blanc. Soon the Frenchman burst into flames. She was loaded with 5000 tons of high explosives. The crew abandoned her and all escaped safely to the Dartmouth shore.

Then came the terrific explosion which destroyed the extreme south-eastern part of Halifax, caused the deaths of more than 2000 persons, and perhaps double that number rendered 5000 people homeless, and involved a property loss of from $12 000 000 to $15 000 000 ... because someone had blundered, or worse.

Behind all as responsible for the disaster, is that arch criminal the Kaiser of Germany who forced our Empire and her allies into the fearful war.

The toll of dead of the terrific blast of explosives from the French transport Mont-Blanc, which swept like a death-carrying tornado over the City of Halifax on Thursday morning remains uncounted. The actual number of those who perished will probably never be known. When a large section of the City has been wiped out, whole families have disappeared and the surviving wounded, scattered over a dozen hospitals and countless private house, are still too dazed or too weak to recall what occurred on the dire [terrible] morning, it is extremely difficult to form any accurate estimate of the loss of life. The furious blizzard of yesterday which buried the ruins in snow-drifts, made the task of searching parties almost impossible and the bodies of many victims will probably not be recovered until the debris has been cleared away in months to come. The general opinion continues to be that the list of dead will total from 1,500 to 2,000 and that the injured will number at least 3,000 more.

... Stricken Halifax shrouded [covered] in sorrow is being cheered and encouraged by the flood of sympathetic messages and offers of aid which are pouring in from all quarters at home and abroad. The expressions of sympathy from our American kinsmen are wonderful. The Governors of several States, the Secretary of the Navy, numerous cities all over the Union have tendered [offered] assistance, the great State of Massachusetts has sent a fully equipped relief train, which arrived in Halifax early this morning and a second train, dispatched from Washington, will reach the City today bearing the tangible [physical] proof of American sympathy in this day of distress.

Map of the devastated area

Map published by the Royal Society of Canada details the causes and effects of the Halifax explosion and shows the rings of devastation around the point where the Mont-Blanc exploded.

Photographs of the devastated area

Panorama photographs taken by W. G. MacLaughlan on December 6, 1917, showing the damage done to the Halifax harbour by the explosion.

Richmond school

Photograph of the remains of the Richmond School on Roome Street in Halifax, taken sometime between December 6, 1917 and January 1918.

Public funeral for the dead

Photograph taken during a public funeral service for the unidentified dead on Monday, December 17, 1917.

Support from the United States of America

Photograph taken in December 1917, of American relief workers standing outside the American relief hospital in Halifax.

Response to the disaster

Excerpt from the introduction to the book Views of the Halifax catastrophe: Showing effects of explosion December sixth 1917 that was published in 1917 by Royal Print and Litho, a Halifax printing house.

Introduction

No sooner had the appalling news flashed across the cables than messages of sympathy and offers of practical aid poured in from all parts of the Dominion [Canada] and the U.S.A. The local Relief Committee was inspired and heartened by the prompt [quick] despatch from Boston of a special relief train, bringing a corps of doctors, surgeons, and Red Cross nurses with full equipment .... Premier Borden arrived in Halifax on Friday morning, and issued the following statement expressive of the keen appreciation which all Canada felt at the mag-nanimous [generous] assistance of the American people:

“The people of Canada are profoundly grateful for the generous sympathy of the people of the United States in the terrible disaster which has overtaken the City of Halifax, and they most deeply appreciate the splendid aid which has been of-fered and sent from so many communities of our great kindred nation.”

In an incredibly short space of time ... confusion took on the semblance [appearance] of order, and the eager hands of willing citizens were busily engaged under the direction of committees in ministering [providing] to the maimed [wounded] and injured, reverent [deep and solemn respect] burial of the untimely dead, cater-ing for the hungry and providing for the thousands rendered destitute [penniless] and homeless through the sudden stroke of swift catastrophe which has laid the city low. Not yet. At this hour of writing, has Halifax recovered fully from the shattering blow of that fateful Thursday, the sixth of December; but with optimistic fortitude [strength], with courage and with ardor [passion], is already grappling [beginning] with the Herculean task of reconstruction; and thus it is that the gloom of the present is even now radiantly relieved with the gleam of a splendid vision—The Greater Halifax of Tomorrow. Surely here is ample evidence that there is something in man, frail and human as he is, which nevertheless defies and rises above catastrophe.

Rebuilding the city

Poster published in 1919 showing the building of the new hydrostone district in the North End of Halifax.

“[Centre text] It is not yet twenty months since the North End of Halifax suffered its appalling [horrible] disaster, and lay a wide waste of debris where orderly prosperity had been. Stand on a vantage point and view the north end of Halifax now. Men say the day of miracles is passed; but there is a vision of regeneration [renewal] here that fringes [borders] on the miraculous. As though overnight, the North End has shaken off its inebus [demon] of holocaust. Ruin and desolation have given place to the new order. A new city has risen out of the ashes of the old. We rub our eyes and look again—but the vision does not fade. The new city remains—grows, building by building, street by street, amid the tumultuous [noisy] music of a thousand hammers, the wholesome discord of a thousand saws.

House of Commons Speech
December 6, 2010

Mr. Speaker, 93 years ago today, at 9:04 in the morning, Halifax suffered a great tragedy when it lost nearly 2000 of its men, women, and children and saw thousands more injured due to a tragic Halifax explosion that rocked the city. The collision in The Narrows of Halifax Harbour of the Imo and the Mont-Blanc was the largest man-made non-nuclear explosion in the history of the world.

Neighbourhoods near the explosion were levelled. Halifax was in shock with the destruction, the devastation, the wounded and the dead. Despite an oncoming blizzard, relief efforts from local communities such as Truro, Kentville, Moncton and New Glasgow were sent to Halifax to help. Relief efforts from as far away as Boston arrived in the next days and weeks.

The city of Halifax was shattered that day, but Halifax was not broken. The port city lost many, but those who survived and residents who live there today will never forget this tragedy and will always remember those who sent help during a time of need.

- Member of Parliament Scott Armstrong

An explosion survivor remembers

Transcript of an interview between historian Janet Kitz and Halifax explosion survivor Don Crowdis, published in 2007 as part of a website dedicated to the Halifax explosion.

Interview with Don Crowdis

K. When you were at school, surely, the children in your class even must have been badly affected by the explosion. Like orphans, children with scars and ....

C: Oh sure, but you took it for granted. You see in my growing up the world divided into before the explosion and after explosion, it wasn't that it did, that was the way we spoke. "Oh that musta been a couple'a years before the explosion." And so similarly the crippled or the blind or whatever, they were all just a part of it; and the foundations were a part of things, and the "day goes" were part of things, and the construction workers, and they immediately got categorized and they were the guys who did the digging ... and it was just the way we grew up. It was only later on did you realize that it was not normal.

Lessons learned

Excerpt from a website created by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in collaboration with various research bodies, community groups and individuals.

The world moved on and the Halifax Explosion faded from the public memory outside Nova Scotia … but the influences of December 6 remain, and not just in Halifax.

The tragedy was a spur to many of the international maritime standards and treaties we have today. Marine law in Canada and around the world includes detailed reporting systems, strict regulations on dangerous goods, and professional harbour traffic management.

Halifax’s military background served it well in crisis, in a time when civic disaster and emergency plans were nonexistent. The experience informed other cities as Emergency Measures Organizations, or EMO’s, evolved throughout North America and beyond.

The lessons learned in a true trial by fire pushed progress in science and various medical areas: emergency medicine, psychology and psychiatry, ophthalmology, anaesthesia, orthopedics, reconstructive surgery and prosthetics.

Other sciences have also grown since—and learned from—the Explosion.

The struggle to come to terms with unimaginable disaster, and the grief that followed, coloured [influenced] Canadian literature, art and culture.

Finally, memorials large and small pay their respects to those who died, and those who survived, on December 6, 1917.

Newspapers around the world—even in Germany—carried headlines like “Explosion Horror” on their front pages in the days following. Picture magazines like the Illustrated London News made the most of photography. Postcard books were popular records of events in 1917, even of such unhappy sights as the north end of Halifax. Those collections are treasured archival material today. Of course the Halifax papers carried exhaustive coverage of the disaster and its aftermath. The inquiry got blanket coverage, although editorial points of view were said to vary. Newsreels were in their early days. There is less than ten minutes’ worth of known moving-picture footage from the aftermath of the Explosion. It is preserved at Nova Scotia’s public archives. The archives and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic own hundreds of still photographs, some of which appear in the archives’ online exhibition, A Vision of Regeneration.

Historical context of explosion


So many natural and human-caused disasters have taken place since the First World War that the enduring fascination with the 1917 Halifax Harbour explosion is rather puzzling…No doubt there is truth to the notion that the Halifax Harbour explosion is promoted to some extent as a “world-class” historical event for the benefit of tourists, who are invited to experience it vicariously through books, exhibits, and memorabilia…

In some ways the 1917 explosion will forever remain larger in myth than it ever was in reality. The death toll in the disaster was horrifying, to be sure, but at the time the terrible casualties of trench warfare had been filling headlines for more than three years. Moreover, as is clearly evident from the record of accidental explosions in the munitions industry during the First World War, hundreds if not thousands of civilian men and women on both sides of the conflict had lost or would soon lose their lives in accidents similar to the Halifax Harbour explosion…

Depending on how one interprets size, there are several possible candidates for the largest non-natural explosion prior to the atom bomb. Halifax remains unchallenged in overall magnitude as long as five criteria are considered together: number of casualties, force of the blast, radius of devastation, quantity of explosive material, and total value of property destroyed.

Halifax explosion remembered today


Often when telling the story of the explosion to a group, many express surprise that they have never heard of it. For some it is a statistic in knowledge books listing disasters or explosions. Few know it was studied by those who developed the atomic bomb to understand the force of the blast, or that the collision was used as an example to show US navy personnel what not to do with a ship in similar circumstances ….

In Halifax, December 6th is an honoured day of remembrance. Part of that is remembering the Americans who came unhesitatingly, worked tirelessly and gave money and supplies generously.

Since 1971 the Province of Nova Scotia has sent a Christmas tree to Boston as a token of appreciation for help given by the State of Massachusetts ….

Locally the 1917 Halifax explosion will never be forgotten. It is remembered for the more than 2,000 dead. We remember it for the 387 doctors, the 30 members of the Canadian Army Dental Corps and the 760 Nurses who aided the 9,000 seriously wounded …. It is an event that brought out the best out in people who were complete strangers. It should always be remembered as a shining example of those who give aid to others in times of disaster.

Blair Beed, 1917 Halifax explosion and American response (Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 1999), pp. 132–133.