

THE 1917 EXPLOSION  
COMMEMORATION COMMITTEE

The eighth meeting of the Commemoration Committee was held on Monday, June 15, 1992 at 1200 at the Maritime Command Museum, HMCS Stadacona, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Present: Blair Beed  
Marjorie Davidson  
Allan Dunlop  
David Flemming  
Marilyn Gurney  
Ruth Johnson  
Janet Kitz  
Franklyn Medjuck  
Carmen Moir  
Kaye Pottie

Absent:  
Louis W. Collins  
Donald Julien  
Jock Murray  
Marie O'Malley  
Reg Prest  
Alan Ruffman

1. Minutes for the meeting on March 4, 1992 were approved on a motion by Kaye Pottie and seconded Marjorie Davidson.

2. Business arising from the minutes.

(5) Blair Beed contacted the Mail Star regarding the possibility of carrying a photograph of survivors signing the register, however they are not interested in doing something until at least September.

(6) Marilyn Gurney wrote to both daily newspapers concerning the possibility of running a series of articles on the Explosion, however she has heard nothing back from either one.

(8) Janet Kitz was informed that the Committee of the Whole for the City of Halifax approved the idea of issuing a commemorative coin. She will contact the City further through Marie O'Malley. Alderman O'Malley will call acting Mayor McCluskey to discuss Dartmouth's possible participation in this project. Blair Beed will contact the Book Room about issuing a special bookmark commemorating the Anniversary.

(OVER)

### 3. City of Halifax reception

Mayor Ducharme has agreed to hold a reception at City Hall for survivors. After some discussion, the committee agreed that the City should honour survivors with a certificate at that time.

### 4. Site markers

Janet Kitz received a report from Alan Ruffman after his meeting with the Heritage Advisory Committee of Halifax and Dartmouth. A sub-committee chaired by Alan Ruffman with David Flemming and Franklyn Medjuck will pursue the matter further, with representatives from both cities' Heritage Committees.

### 5. Accommodations for visiting survivors

Franklyn Medjuck indicated that the Prince George Hotel, Citadel Inn and Cambridge Suites may be able to reserve a block of rooms for survivors who will be attending the Commemoration. Marilyn Gurney will contact the owners of Fresh Start Bed and Breakfast about reserving some rooms there.

### 6. Reports from the members

(a) Marjorie Davidson will have an up-to-date list of survivors for the September meeting and will note those who will be requiring accommodation.

(b) Kaye Pottie reported that she had discovered a large number of mounted photographs of the Explosion at Chebucto Road school. These will be put on display in December.

Symphony Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra will apply for a grant to hold a competition for a commissioned work commemorating the Anniversary. Librarians from both the Halifax and Dartmouth school system are preparing resource kits for the schools and Blair Beed is preparing a walking tour guide to complement these kits.

(c) Ruth Johnson has one more interview with a former resident of Africville to complete. She will have the tape to Janet Kitz by the September meeting.

(d) Carmen Moir reported that the Dartmouth Committee will be meeting in two days time and that many downtown churches are planning events for the Anniversary.

Harry Chapman's book is proceeding on schedule. This 50-page illustrated booklet will be available for distribution in October. It is anticipated that it will sell for \$6.00.

Members of the Dartmouth Committee are also recording interviews with survivors.

A proposal to move the cannon has been approved by Dartmouth City Council, however the Dartmouth Heritage Museum Board have yet to consider the proposal.

(e) Franklyn Medjuck's research on the Jewish community continues, although he has found that many survivors are hesitant to speak of their experiences. He is encouraging the local synagogues to provide Marjorie Davidson with a list of survivors.

Allan Dunlop suggested that a poster which could be used to publicize events connected with the Anniversary be produced. These posters would contain a blank area where specific events could be "filled in." Marilyn Gurney agreed to investigate the possibility of having a design done and between 250 and 500 posters printed.

7. Explosion Poem

Janet Kitz distributed a copy of a poem by Wilbert Forrest Davidson (See copy attached).

8. List of Events

See copy attached.

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned.

The next meeting will be held at 1200 on Tuesday, September 15, 1992 at the Maritime Command Museum.

**Please note the next meeting will be held on Tuesday the 15th instead of Monday the 14th as agreed upon at the last meeting.**

# MESSANGER OF HELL

BY

WILBERT FORREST DAVIDSON

*It was on the 6th December, 1917.  
It was the beautifulest autumn morning that,  
you have ever seen.*

*The sun was brightly shining and everything,  
was swell; but a steamer coming up the  
harbour, was a messenger of Hell.*

*Her decks were brightly blazing, the whole  
ship was a glow*

*She drifted up the harbour, the people  
for to show.*

*They ran out onto the wharfs and to the  
roof tops for to see,  
But little were they to know that she was  
loaded with T.N.T.*

*She continued on up the harbour ramming  
another ship on her way  
And when she got to the narrows, she was  
there to stay.*

*With a thistle and a whistle she exploded  
with a roar  
Blowing the north end of Halifax and  
Dartmouth flatter than the floor.*

*Killing two thousand people and wounding  
five thousand more.*

*And then there was anxiety, misery and  
pain*

## MESSENGER OF HELL

The blood running down the gutters just like  
the drifting rain.

The wounded and the bleeding into the  
streets did flow  
They wondered around aimlessly, they had  
no place to go.

Then they called out the army, the rescue  
for to make  
And for the poor unfortunates the hospitals  
for to take.

They filled every building 'till they did  
overflow, leaving the poor wounded that  
had no place to go.

Then the skys darken and the  
wind began to blow

And out of the snarlling nor'east there  
come the freezing snow.

The wind it blew a gale all night and  
piled the snow up high And God alone  
will only know how many died that night.

And from across the border came a  
voice from Uncle Sam.

Saying hold on down there Halifax we're coming  
on the land.

They were doctors, they were nurses, there were  
medical supplies, there were clothing, there  
were blankets and food also galore  
And their box cars they reached down the  
track probably a mile or more.

The nurses they were lovely. The doctors they were  
swell



# THE UNSUNG SEAMEN

## THE MERCHANT NAVY LIVED IN CONSTANT DANGER

*These nightmare battles in the northern dark were fraught with tenuous communications, garbled reports, no sensors but the naked eyes and ears, sudden cries of disaster and plaintive calls for help, the shock of depth charges and the sound and flash of gunfire, crisscrossing tracers, rockets flaring, star shells burning in the sky, and the underwater thumps and searing blaze that told of torpedoes striking home.*

—The Battle of the Atlantic as described in *The Sea Is at Our Gates*, by Tony German

Some were barely into their teens, others in their 70s, and they did not always have to go away to fight. Instead, the fury of the Second World War came home to Canada's merchant seamen in the form of deadly German U-boats cruising the depths of the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, or heavily armed Nazi ships roaming the Atlantic coast. Further away, in set-

tings ranging from the freezing waters near Murmansk in the Soviet Union to the African coast near the equator, the 12,000 men and boys of Canada's merchant navy ferried desperately needed supplies of food, weapons and gas and oil to other Allied countries. And although they were never formally part of Canada's armed forces, they were in the thick of some of the war's most critical clashes. The biggest was the Battle of the Atlantic, which raged from 1939 until 1943, as the Allies and Nazis fought for control of the ocean. An average of one in four Commonwealth merchant seamen died in that struggle, which—in terms of importance in Canadian military history—some historians rank with the battles of Ypres and Vimy Ridge in the First World War, Dieppe and D-Day in the Second.

In 1941, when the Nazis had overrun mainland Europe, supplies from North America represented Britain's best hope for survival.

One Canadian merchant ship could carry enough food to feed 225,000 people for a week, along with clothing, fuel and weapons. Rear Admiral Leonard Murray, who commanded Canada's regular navy forces on the Atlantic coast during the war, declared: "The real victors of the Battle of the Atlantic were not the navies or air forces, but the Allied merchant seamen." The British, Australian and U.S. governments eventually accorded their merchant seamen the full recognition and benefits given to other veterans. And in June, the Canadian Parliament passed a bill that gives veterans' benefits to 3,200 of the estimated 5,000 remaining survivors of the country's wartime merchant fleet.

Since the war, successive Liberal and Conservative governments had rejected pleas for recognition on the grounds that the merchant navy was a civilian outfit that operated under different conditions from the military. The new legislation, introduced by Veterans Affairs Minister Gerald Merrithew and supported by all political parties, gives merchant seamen access to military hospitals, government-paid medical care at home and increased pension benefits. "It is time that we recognize the great contribution these men made," said Conservative Senator Jack Marshall, who led the battle on Parliament Hill. Earle Wagner, a 68-year-old retired captain and merchant navy veteran who now lives in Halifax, says that "we are grateful that this finally got done." But he adds:

## 'I WILL NEVER FORGET'

Dec. 6, 1917, began normally enough for John Tappen. The 19-year-old apprentice pipe fitter was working in the engine room of a ship anchored along the Halifax waterfront when someone yelled that two vessels had collided in the narrows of the harbor. Rushing on deck, he saw the freighter Imo and the smouldering French munitions ship Mont Blanc drifting apart. The last thing Tappen remembers was watching the crew members of the Mont Blanc, loaded with 2,766 tons of TNT and other explosives, abandon ship. Then, at 9:06 a.m., the Mont Blanc exploded. The shock waves hurled Tappen down a corridor into the interior of the ship on which he was working. "When I regained my senses, I noticed all of the buttons on my vest had been blown off," recalls Tappen, now a 93-year-old retiree living with his son and daughter-in-law in Halifax. Climbing back on deck, he discovered just how fortunate he had been: most of his co-workers were dead. And as Tappen looked out upon the wreckage of the city's north end, he began to grasp the full extent of the catastrophe.

The Halifax explosion was the largest manmade blast before the atomic age—and the worst disaster ever seen in Canada. All told, it killed 1,600 people, left another 9,000 injured and 6,000 homeless. When the final grim tally was complete, 1,600 buildings had been

destroyed and 12,000 badly damaged—most of them in Halifax's working-class north end, which was virtually levelled by the explosion.

Yet the horrible tragedy also produced acts of selfless sacrifice and heroism. Halifax telegraphist Vincent Coleman died at his keyboard while tapping out a warning to an incoming passenger train that the munitions ship was on fire. Many other Halifaxians also rose to the challenge. As Tappen and two of his co-workers made their way to shore, climbing from their boat to another that was next to the dock, they found a group of dockworkers struggling to stay afloat in the icy waters. "I don't think they would have survived long if we hadn't come along," explains Tappen.

All the same, there was little else Tappen and the others could do as they picked their way through the rubble of the dockyard and listened to the trapped men and women crying for help from inside the collapsed buildings. Today, 75 years after the calamity, the details of the carnage on that terrible day remain deeply etched in Tappen's mind. "I'm getting to an age where I have trouble remembering certain things," he says. "But there are some things that I will never forget." And even as the men and women who actually witnessed the explosion shrink in number, it is unlikely that Halifax itself will ever forget its day of destruction.

JOHN DeMONT in Halifax

# HALIFAX BLOWN UP

The tragic  
explosion  
75 years ago  
was the biggest  
man-made blast  
in history —  
until Hiroshima

by Marcus Schioler



**A**s Halifax began to stretch and stir on the morning of December 6, 1917, everything pointed to an ordinary day in a bustling port town. Workers headed off to work and children to school. What few people knew or were concerned about was the fact that at that moment, a French ammunition ship from New York was just entering the harbour, loaded with explosives destined for the Allied forces in Europe. A convoy of ships waited to rendezvous with this munitions barge. Unbeknownst to any, the

*Mont Blanc* was a floating bomb waiting to go off.

A Belgian vessel, the *Imo*, was just leaving the harbour as the *Mont Blanc* pulled in. It was customary in these cases for ships to signal each other with a series of horn blasts in order to make their intentions clear. Something went horrifyingly wrong: the signals were somehow misunderstood and what should have been a routine parallel manoeuvre turned into a head-on collision course.

The captain of the *Mont Blanc* was only too conscious of what a collision would entail, but it became increasing-

ly clear that avoiding the *Imo* was impossible. The ammunition was stored in the stern; he tried desperately to swing the ship around in such a way that the bow would take the brunt of the hit. In the end, it made no difference — the *Imo* ploughed straight into the side of the *Mont Blanc*, causing barrels of benzene to spill over onto the explosives. A massive fire burst out immediately on board the ship.

It would appear that the crew of the *Mont Blanc* wasted little time in getting clear of their vessel. Extinguishing the fire was impossible. The crew knew the ship was sure to blow.



It did so with such force that the explosion was heard 60 miles away. The ship was instantly vaporized. The *Imo*, which had frantically tried to steer clear of the blast, was tossed ashore by the concussion waves. Boats and sailors in the harbour were lost when immense tidal waves set off by the explosion washed over crafts and crew. Fires broke out around the city as stored munition was detonated from the heat. A clock in the telegraph office stopped at exactly 9:06 AM. Tragically, hundreds of children were killed when their schoolhouses collapsed around them. Power lines went down and roads were blocked by

debris which cut off transportation and made it difficult for help to arrive. The area around the harbour was razed and Halifax was left in ruins.

The heat generated in the blast was great enough to melt iron. As a grim reminder of this fact, the melted remains of a cannon from one of the ships lies today in front of the Dartmouth Library. The anchor from the *Mont Blanc* itself was catapulted over five miles from the force of the explosion; it now rests at the Edmonds grounds of Purcell's Cove on Halifax's northwest arm.

To make matters worse, the very next day brought a severe winter

storm to the beleaguered city. Thousands were already homeless and many more would have died without the rapid relief efforts from neighbouring cities. Halifax continues to send an annual Christmas tree to the City of Boston as a gesture of thanks for Massachusetts's tremendous outpouring of support during the catastrophe.

In all, some 1600 people were killed and over 8000 injured. In the blink of an eye, 3000 homes were destroyed. Until the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, the Halifax explosion was the most powerful man-made blast ever to wreak devastation on a city. <sup>2</sup>



The 1917 Explosion: 75th Anniversary Events Planned

(as of September 3, 1992)

<u>Event</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Organized By</u>	<u>Proposed</u>	<u>Confirmed</u>
1. Symposium: <u>The 1917 Explosion: Collision in Halifax Harbour and Its Consequences</u>	Dec. 3-6, 1992	Gorsebrook Research Institute		x
2. Exhibit: <u>"The 1917 Explosion: Revitalization and Reconstruction</u>	Nov. 12, 1992 to Feb. 28, 1993	Public Archives of Nova Scotia		x
3. Exhibit: Military Role in the Explosion	Dec., 1992	Maritime Command Museum		x
4. Exhibit: Medical Relief	Dec., 1992	Dalhousie University Medical School		x
5. 1917 School Classroom	Dec., 1992	Halifax City Schools		x
6. Exhibit: The 1917 Explosion	Dec., 1993	Maritime Museum of the Atlantic		x
7. Publication: Museum Info. Sheet	Nov., 1992	Maritime Museum of the Atlantic		x
8. Publication: Dartmouth's Role in the Explosion	Dec., 1992	Written by Harry Chapman published by Dartmouth Museum Society		x
9. Publication: Comprehensive Bibliography	Dec., 1992	Gorsebrook Research Institute	x	

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<u>Event</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Organized By</u>	<u>Proposed</u>	<u>Confirmed</u>
10. Publication: Comprehensive List of Dead	Dec., 1992	Gorsebrook Research Institute	x	
11. School Kit: Explosion Documents and Curriculum Material	Dec., 1992	Halifax & Dartmouth Schools		x
12. Cataloguing of Mortuary Artifacts	Feb. - Nov., 1992 /	Maritime Museum of the Atlantic		x
13. Interpretive Signs: Explosion-related sites in Halifax and Dartmouth	1993 /	City of Halifax and City of Dartmouth Heritage Advisory Committees	x	
14. Play: <u>The Children's Story</u> directed by Jennette White	Dec. 1, 1992	Neptune Theatre Advanced Youth Collective. Performance at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic		x
15. Readings on the Explosion	Dec., 1992	Dartmouth Schools	x	
16. Music: Special Commissioned work	Dec., 1992	Symphony Nova Scotia and Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra	x	
17. Television Program	Dec., 1992	Screen Star Productions		x
18. Video Production	Dec., 1992	Global Video Inc.	x	
19. Launch of Commemorative Stamp	1993	Halifax Commemoration Committee and Canada Post	x	
20. Sculpture: "The Spirit Swings" in Yetter Park, Dartmouth	Dec., 1992	Theresa MacPhee & City of Dartmouth	x	

<u>Event</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Organized By</u>	<u>Proposed</u>	<u>Confirmed</u>
21. Ceremony: Fort Needham	Dec. 6, 1992	Memorial Bells Committee/ Halifax Commemoration Committee		x
22. Re-enactment of Memorial Service for unidentified victims at Chebucto Road School	Dec. 7, 1992	Halifax City Schools Music Department		x
23. Ceremony: Halifax Harbour	Dec. 6, 1992	Halifax and Dartmouth Commemoration Committees	x	
24. Special Services	Dec. 6, 1992	Various Halifax and Dartmouth Churches	x	
25. Relocate <u>Mont Blanc's</u> Cannon	Dec., 1992	City of Dartmouth	x	
26. Research: Black Role in the Explosion	1992	Ruth Johnson		x
27. Research: Micmac Role in the Explosion	1992	Donald Julien		x
28. Research: Jewish Community in the Explosion	1992	Franklyn Medjuk		x
29. Souvenir pieces of stone from the original Saint Joseph's Church destroyed by the Explosion	June, 1992	Rev. Joseph Christensen, St. Joseph's Church		x
30. Drama/music presentation by school children	Dec., 1992	Halifax Grammar School (Jan Buley)	x	

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<u>Event</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Organized By</u>	<u>Proposed</u>	<u>Confirmed</u>
31. Replace Halifax City Hall Clock Tower damaged in the Explosion	1993	City of Halifax Heritage Advisory Committee	x	
32. Exhibit : Dartmouth and the Explosion	Dec., 1992	Dartmouth Heritage Museum		x
33. Art displays, poems, stories & photographs	Dec., 1992	Halifax City Schools' Music, Language Arts and Art Departments	x	
34. Original Song contest	Dec., 1992	Halifax City Schools' Music Department	x	
35. Poster Presentation	Dec., 1992	Veterans' Council, Camp Hill Medical Centre	x	
36. Book & Photo display	Dec., 1992	Special Collections Department, Killam Memorial Library	x	
37. Book: <u>Who's a Scaredy-cat! A story of the Explosion</u> by Joan Payzant	Sept., 1992	Windmill Press		x
38. Film Production	Dec., 1992	Graham Beck	x	
39. Book: <u>Worse Than War</u> by M. Pauline Murphy Sutow	Oct., 1992	Four East Publications		x

<u>Event</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Organized By</u>	<u>Proposed</u>	<u>Confirmed</u>
40. Book: <u>The Survivors</u> by Janet Kitz	Oct., 1992	Nimbus Publishing		x
41. Play about the Explosion written by Jennette White	Dec., 1992	Neptune Theatre Touring Company		x
42. Art Exhibit curated by Harold Pearse and Alan Ruffman	Dec. 1-12,	Anna Leonowens Gallery		x
43. Granite monument on Lady Hammond Rd. Fire Station commemorating firefighters who lost their lives in the 1917 Explosion	Dec., 1992	Halifax Fire Department		x

David B. Flemming  
03.09.92