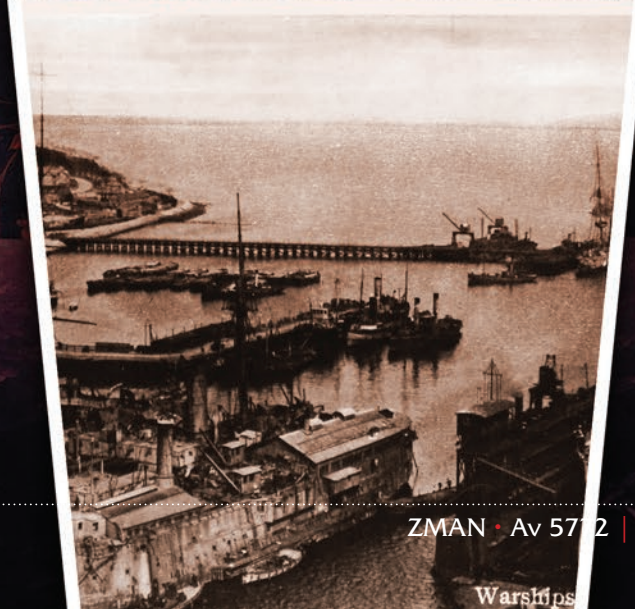


Disaster In Halifax

Chaim Rivkin

The toll reached 2,000 dead, 9,000 wounded and 12,000 homes severely damaged. No, it was not a nuclear attack or heavy bombing raid. Rather, it was the most devastating man-made, non-nuclear explosion in the history of the world. Here is the dramatic account.



9 AM, Thursday, December 6, 1917.

Mothers wave their children off to school and their husbands off to work. Businessmen stroll past shops, offices and factories where laborers are already hard at work. At North Street Station, passengers await the morning trains.

Across the Atlantic, Europe is plunged into the bloodiest war the world has yet seen. Although the fighting will never reach North America, its effect is clearly felt there in many ways. The harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia, serves as a shipping center for the Allied forces. There is a constant bustle of ships carrying transports of soldiers or supplies and munitions to be sent to the front.

A Norwegian ship, the *Imo*, carrying food, clothing and other aid, is on its way out of the harbor, bound for Belgium. At the mouth of the harbor it meets up with a French boat, the *SS Mont-Blanc*, on its way into Halifax. This ship also carries supplies, but, unlike the Belgian ship, it carries explosives and ammunition. The war effort in France hangs on the availability of munitions, and the *Mont-Blanc* is loaded with 3,000 tons of explosives that are to be shipped to the front in France.

However, the French ship does not display any markings to indicate the volatile load it carries. With the German U-boat campaign at its



Downtown Halifax.

height, sinking Allied ships indiscriminately throughout the waters of the Atlantic, having markings would have been suicidal. The submarines could hope for no fatter fish than an explosives-laden boat that would be easily sunk.

And then disaster strikes. The two ships collide. Fire quickly breaks out and the two boats are evacuated as quickly as possible. On the shore, residents gather in large crowds to witness the early morning excitement. Nearly half-an-hour has passed from the time of the impact.

And then tragedy strikes. Without any prior warning, a terrifying explosion rocks the city of Halifax. The flames reach the large store of TNT aboard the French ship. The explosives ignite in a mighty detonation that will not be surpassed until the detonation of the atom bomb. The crowds along the waterfront are obliterated.

Unfortunately, the rest of the city not only witnesses the explosion, but directly experiences the horror of it as well. The entire northern section, the area nearest the harbor, is flattened. Hundreds of fires break out. Two-thirds of those injured are hurt by flying glass as windows across the city are blown apart by the concussion from shockwaves.

By nightfall, a thousand people who had woken up that morning are gone forever. Another thousand wounded will soon follow. Thousands more will be crippled and otherwise wounded for life. Much of the city of Halifax is in ruins. Firefighters, assisted by a persistent snowfall, battle to bring the flames under control. For many trapped

under the debris, the firefighters will arrive too late.

This is the worst man-made disaster in the history of Canada and greatest accidental manmade explosion in the history of humanity.

Port of Halifax

Halifax is a city along the coast of Canada's eastern province of Nova Scotia. It was first settled by the British around 1750. A military base was established there at the same time to protect the harbor—the second largest natural harbor in the world—from attack by the French.

The city grew quickly, but the advent of World War I and the large volume of shipping needed to supply the British war effort caused the population to swell to 50,000, making it the largest city in Canada's Atlantic Provinces. The city benefited from the latest developments in technology and participated in the advances of the new century.

Across the harbor from Halifax lay an older but smaller city named Dartmouth. In 1917, three ferries were kept busy full time servicing the two cities and carrying the traffic between them.

Business and industry grew at a steady



Bird's-eye view of the port of Halifax. Surrounding the harbor are the cities of Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford.



Painting of the British warship *HMS Shannon* forcing the American warship *Chesapeake* into the harbor of Halifax during the War of 1812.



The well-known Halifax Sugar Refinery before tragedy struck.

pace on both sides of the harbor. Factories, mills and smithies were occupied with filling the inflated demands of wartime economy. Modern communications and transportation, schools and universities were a part of daily life in the Halifax region. By 1917, the Halifax fire department even owned a fully motorized fire truck, an exciting innovation at the time.

Still, everything in Halifax revolved around the busy port. The Halifax harbor was one of the world's best. Its sheer size made it perfectly suited to accommodate large volumes of commercial shipping. It was naturally very deep. And because it was not prone to freezing over in the winter, the harbor remained open all year round.

With the outbreak of the "Great War," the harbor of Halifax was strained to its limits. Most of Canada's 400,000 troops that were dispatched by the end of 1917 to fight in the trenches of France were shipped out of Halifax. The hospital ships returning



The port of Halifax today.