

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Today is Friday, Dec. 6, the
341st day of 1968. There are 25
days left in the year.
Today's highlight in history:
On this date in 1917, some
1,000 persons were killed and
4,000 wounded when two ammu-
nition ships — one Belgian, the
other French — collided in
harbor at Halifax, N.S.



Arrow points to ill-fated freighter Imo, which was blasted across harbor after collision with munitions ship Mont Blanc. HMS Highflyer is at right.

*GREAT GRANDFATHER MARTIN GUINN
WAS KILLED HERE 1917*

The Day Halifax Blew Up

Fifty years ago the explosion created havoc in the harbor

By Cyril Robinson
Weekend Magazine

THURSDAY morning, Dec. 6, 1917, was crisp, sunny, and cloudless.

In Halifax and across the harbor in Dartmouth children skipped and chattered on their way to school. Dock workers, railwaymen, and trades people were already on the job. Others were heading for work.

Housewives had begun their day's chores or were engaged in early morning gossip with neighbors.

It seemed like just another day in the life of the city's 50,000 residents and the 6,000 in Dartmouth.

It wasn't.

At that moment a terrible drama

was unfolding in the Narrows, the small channel linking Halifax Harbor and Bedford Basin, the back part of the harbor.

It was the third year of World War I and a convoy in Bedford Basin was starting to move. The 5,043-ton Norwegian freighter Imo, carrying relief supplies for war-ravaged Belgium, had left Bedford Basin and was en route to the harbor to join escort vessels for the dangerous North Atlantic trip.

From the opposite direction came the 3,121-ton French vessel Mont Blanc with 200 tons of TNT, 2,300 tons of picric acid, and gun cotton in her holds. And 35 tons of benzol in tins on her fore and after decks.

She carried no flag or marker to

indicate the explosive nature of her cargo.

Aboard the two vessels were veteran harbor pilots, Capt. John Mackey (Mont Blanc) and Capt. William Hayes (Imo), who had brought thousands of ships safely in and out of the port. But today they were having difficulty giving each other a clear sea to pass.

The gap between the two craft was closing fast.

In the forecabin of the steamer Caracas, berthed at Pier Eight, a mere 500 feet away, Able Seaman Edward McCrossan was interrupted in his breakfast by a shout from above: "There's going to be a collision!"

When he and his shipmates reached

the deck the ships were a mere two fathoms apart . . . one fathom . . . then the Imo's bow ripped into the Mont Blanc's starboard side, near the bow.

Thick, black smoke curled up from the munition ship's foredeck and flames appeared two or three inches above her waterline.

Charlie Duggan, a ferry operator who was watching from his home on Hanover street on the Halifax slope of the Narrows, saw the ships come together and grabbed his windbreaker. "There's been a collision in the harbor!" he yelled to his wife. "Maybe I can help."

Duggan shot down the hill to where his 36-foot motorboat lay and was soon chugging toward the burning



The half-ton shank of Mont Blanc's anchor was blown two miles across Halifax to site where children play.

on the street and, overhead, bodies were strewn across telephone wires.

Over in Dartmouth, Mrs. Arthur Pettipas had been watching, too.

She saw a blinding flash of fire before she was flung across the room. Minutes later she regained consciousness under her bed, deaf from a roaring sensation in her head. She started downstairs and saw that the chimney had dropped into the bathroom.

Outside, dazed and bleeding victims stood or lay on the street. Water, from the tidal wave that followed the explosion, dripped from roofs. Some who had been nearer the Narrows and survived said they saw the bottom of the harbor for a fleeting moment.

A woman in the street thrust an injured baby into Mrs. Pettipas's arms and pleaded, "In God's name, hurry it to a doctor!" Blood flowed from wounds in the mother's face and body.

A short time later Mrs. Pettipas saw a four-year-old boy, barefoot and in night clothes. He was covered with blood and soot. "My Mummy was killed," he sobbed. With him was a

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"I saw bodies and pieces of ship falling from the sky," says William Milson, 89, veteran Canadian sailor.

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Mont Blanc, unaware of his peril. Boat crews from HMS Highflyer and HMCS Niobe were moving toward the munitions ship. From another direction came the tug Stella Maris.

But their crews could not see that on the other side of the Mont Blanc the captain, crew and pilot were rowing frantically toward the Dartmouth shore, seeking cover from the inevitable disaster.

Benzol from broken tins on the Mont Blanc's foredeck fed the fire as the freighter drifted toward Pier Eight.

Duggan felt the intense heat on his cheeks and cut the motor of his ferry. It drifted nearer the Mont Blanc.

From ashore came the wail of a siren as the Patricia, the Halifax Fire Department's lone motor pumper, arrived at Pier Eight. Its seven-man crew hurriedly hooked up their hoses.

Aboard the Curacas, McCrossan felt for his tobacco and remembered he had left it below. He went below deck to roll himself a cigarette. The action saved his life.

Tins of benzol were popping from the Mont Blanc's deck and exploding in streaks of flame and smoke resembling a monstrous fireworks display.

In the CNR station at Richmond, Vincent Coleman, a telegraph operator, saw the danger. He tapped out the last message of his life: AMMUNITION SHIP ON FIRE AT PIER EIGHT. GOOD BYE. The message prevented a passenger train from entering Halifax. No one ever saw Coleman again.

Meanwhile Duggan had restarted his engine and was hurrying away,

In one searing instant the explosion ripped up a square mile

coaxing every ounce of speed out of the motor.

He stood up to look back when it happened.

The time was 9:06.

In a thunderous, indescribable roar the Mont Blanc vanished. A yellowish-green jet shot 200 feet in the air, topped by a massive mushroom of smoke that rose more than a mile.

In one searing instant, a square mile of Halifax North was demolished in an explosion that was felt more than 60 miles away.

Factories, schools, homes, collapsed with the dead and injured trapped inside.



Mrs. Marshall Merson escaped harm when this heavy chunk of metal flew through roof of her Halifax home.

One-hundred children died at their desks at Richmond School. Twenty-four children were killed at the Protestant Orphanage and 30 young girls died in the ruins of a printing plant at Richmond.

Pavements split, houses were lifted from their foundations and fires raged everywhere.

Such was the force of the explosion that it flung the half-ton shank of the Mont Blanc's anchor two miles across the city to the far shore of the North West Arm. Many were killed and blinded by flying metal and glass.

The toll: 1,600 dead; many thousands injured; and property damage exceeding \$35 million.

Duggan's ferry was whipped from under him as if by some powerful, unseen giant and an angry, roaring sea sucked him down.

A seeming eternity later, dazed but still conscious, he reappeared on the surface in time to be hammered senseless by a huge wave that flung him on the Dartmouth shore a quarter-mile away.

Stanley Wheeler, 17, a teamster, had been working in the railway yard 100 yards from the Mont Blanc. He was knocked unconscious by a flying piece of wood. When he came to he drove down Water street. He saw people running from their homes, yelling, screaming and sobbing with blood streaming from cuts in their faces and bodies.

The Patricia was destroyed along with six of its crew.

Hoseman Billy Wells was the only member of the Patricia's crew to survive. He had been thrown off his feet by the blast and stripped of his clothing.

He got up and staggered away toward Barrington street where he saw a macabre sight. Bodies of people who had been watching the burning munitions ship when it exploded hung dead over their window sills. Others lay

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deformed boy with a gaping hole in his neck.

Quickly, Mrs. Pettipas found some clothing and ripped off strips for bandages. She cleaned and dressed the children's wounds. She had just finished doing this when a woman appeared with a girl whose arm was bleeding from a deep gash. She cared for her, too.

Among the litter on the Dartmouth shore a sodden, half-frozen body gradually came to life. Charlie Duggan, the ferryman, said, "My God! My family!"

He wheeled about and looked toward the Halifax shore. Where his house had stood there was nothing but ruins. He learned later that his wife, his young baby, his parents, his two sisters and a brother who had lived with him were all dead.

The tug *Stella Maris* was directly under the *Mont Blanc's* bow when the ship blew up. Chief Engineer Alex Campbell had just started to come up from the engine room. He was the only member of the crew to survive.

Campbell was knocked unconscious when the tug went down. When he came to, he was lying on the deck in his underwear and boots, black, blue, and bleeding and surrounded by the bodies of all his shipmates. The wrecked craft had been flung 200 yards.



Russell Urquhart, present mayor of Sydney, N.S., had 12 stitches without anaesthetic in gash around eye.

John Meyers, third officer in the British transport *Middleton Castle*, was only 100 feet away from the explosion. He was blown through the air and landed atop Fort Needham, stark naked but alive.

Seaman McCrossan was one of eight survivors among the *Curacas* 45-man crew. Imo lost its superstructure, six of its 39 crew, and Capt. Hayes, the pilot. Niobe's boat crew, some of whom had actually been aboard the *Mont Blanc* when it blew up, were killed outright. Nine died aboard *HMS Highflyer* and 50 were injured. The *Mont Blanc's* captain, crew, and pilot escaped unhurt. They

had reached the safety of woods on the Dartmouth shore before the explosion.

Arthur Munro, a dockyard employee, hurried to his home on Acadia street after the explosion, mumbling a prayer for the safety of his wife and their children, Thelma, 5, Mildred, 4, and Bruce, 2. He found only a baby's shoe.

A group of soldiers heard a moan from the smouldering wreck of a home in Richmond. They worked feverishly, removing the debris, and rescued Olive Henneberry, an 18-

In some cases it was hard to tell the living from the dead

month-old child. Her parents and five other children were killed.

An exodus from the area began soon after the blast. Capt. Francis Johnson, a Canadian Army dentist, saw a mass of people swarming across the North Common toward Camp Hill hospital where he was getting ready for the day's patients. Some of the people were on foot, some in carts, carriages, or on horseback, and some in wheelbarrows. Many had ugly wounds.

Earlier, he had been fascinated by a huge mass of smoke rising from the direction of the Narrows. Now he noticed that the window was smashed, his shirt front was covered with blood, and he had a sliver of glass in his eye. A colleague removed it and for the rest of the day he helped a surgeon remove wounded eyes of the victims.

Patients overflowed the hospitals and many were cared for in schools, churches, halls, and even outdoors.

A youth named Russell Urquhart (the present Mayor of Sydney, N.S.) lay on a fur coat at the intersection of two streets, suffering from a deep gash around his right eye. Friends sat on his leg and arms and his mother helped while a doctor used 12 stitches to close the wound. No anaesthetic was used.

Percy Ring, a dockyard employee, came to his senses in the temporary morgue at Chebucto Road School. He sat up and looked around him, saw nothing but bodies, and moaned, "What am I doing here?" He left as fast as his condition permitted.

Meanwhile the thousands who were left homeless survived in army tents on the North and South Commons and on the Citadel, at least some protection from the blizzard that followed the explosion.

Throughout the devastated city and in Dartmouth everyone prayed it would never happen again. ◀