

Date:
December 6, 1917

Place:
Halifax Harbor, Canada
Explosion of the Steamer
***Mont Blanc*.**

Many believe the *Sultana* was the most horrible accident in navigation history. It may surprise you that it was not. The worst accident in the history of navigation did not involve a boiler explosion per se, but it did involve two steamships. The date is December 6, 1917, and the occasion is World War I. The place is Halifax Harbor in Canada. As the French vessel *S.S. Mont Blanc* headed north into the harbor, the Belgium relief ship *S.S. Imo* made its way south. But the *Imo* was on the wrong side of the channel and headed directly into the path of the oncoming *Mont Blanc*.

At 8:45, the *Imo* collided with the *Mont Blanc* by impaling itself nine feet into the *Mont Blanc's* hull. To extricate itself, the *Imo* reversed engines. The metal-on-metal friction generated enough sparks to prompt the *Mont Blanc's* captain to issue an abandon ship order to all the crew members. A fire at the forward section of the ship generated oily black smoke that drew the attention of Halifax citizens who gathered onshore to watch this disaster-in-the-making. *Mont Blanc* crew members were literally rowing to shore for their lives, and as they passed the rescue boats headed toward the *Mont Blanc*, the crew members attempted to dissuade the rescuers rowing toward the French steamship. The warnings, however, fell on deaf ears since the *Mont Blanc* crew members only spoke French. The aban-

doned ship, now adrift and ablaze, started to drift toward Halifax's Richmond neighborhood. Halifax's fire department, with its one motorized truck and a dozen horse-drawn wagons, moved toward the flaming ship. And then all hell broke loose.

The *Mont Blanc* emitted a blast stronger than any man-made explosion in the history of the world previous to the atomic age. What was not known by the captain of the *Imo* and the townspeople of Halifax was that the *Mont Blanc* was carrying munitions and explosives destined for France. Because the French were afraid the Germans would target the *Mont Blanc*, the steamship headed to Halifax to meet a convoy of French ships that would in turn escort the *Mont Blanc* across the Atlantic.

In an effort to keep its mission a secret, the *Mont Blanc* carried no identifying signs or flags. On board the *Mont Blanc* were 228,000 kilos of TNT, two kilos of wet and dry picric acid used in the manufacture of munitions and explosives, and 223,000 kilos of highly-flammable benzol, and the equally flammable guncotton used in firearms. When the *Imo* hull ruptured the hull of the *Mont Blanc*, the sparks ignited a lethal cocktail of picric acid and fumes from the damaged barrels of benzol. What those French crewmen knew that no one else in Halifax knew that day was that something very bad was going to happen, and they couldn't get far enough away. And something very bad did happen.

The *Mont Blanc* was blown nearly 1,000 feet in the air. Every home and apartment and business within a 10-mile radius was either com-

pletely destroyed or damaged instantly. A ball of fire climbed 6,000 feet over the harbor. Smoke extended a distance of 20,000 feet. Such was the concussion that items fell off shelves 80 miles away. The shock wave was felt as far as 200 miles from the explosion. Everything within 400 acres of the explosion was incinerated. A 1,100-pound piece of *Mont Blanc's* anchor was tossed over two miles. The ship's gun barrel was launched over three miles. The *Imo* was blown ashore, killing its captain and bridge crew. Over 1,500 people died instantly. More than 9,000 were injured.

The blast blinded 38 and caused severe eye injuries to about 600. Those were people who were watching the explosion from their windows. The water immediately surrounding the *Mont Blanc* evaporated to the degree that the harbor floor became momentarily exposed. A tidal wave as high as 60 feet washed along both shores. Firefighting efforts were stifled because most of the city's firefighters had been killed. More fatalities occurred the following day when 16- inches of snow fell and further compromised efforts to free those trapped in the rubble and in collapsed structures.

In 1994, a study by scientists and historians concluded the Halifax explosion was unchallenged in overall magnitude. The final toll: 1,950 people dead, 1,630 homes destroyed, and 6,000 people made homeless. All businesses and industry were essentially eliminated. Unbelievably, only one crew member from the *Mont Blanc* was killed.