

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
reads like fiction but  
it's all true

**Nonfiction**

# The Shattered Sky

## The 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbor

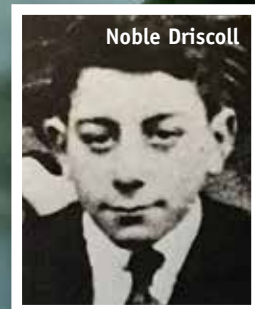
By Kristin Lewis

**As You Read** Look for details that bring the story to life.

**W**hen 13-year-old Noble Driscoll woke up, he found himself in a pile of rubble near what used to be his school. He did not know what had happened, but his mind was filled with terrifying images of smoke and fire.

He stood up and looked around at the charred brick and ash.

Where were his friends? Where was his family? Noble wondered if he was the last person alive.



Gary Hanna

December 6, 1917, dawned cold and clear in Halifax and Dartmouth, two seaside towns in Nova Scotia, Canada, separated by a narrow harbor. That morning, a fine, low mist hung over the water.

By 8 a.m., the two towns were buzzing with activity. Soft smoke curled from chimneys as mothers served up steaming bowls of oatmeal. Children gathered their schoolbooks, and fathers pulled on their coats and headed off to work.

In the northern Halifax neighborhood of Richmond, where Noble lived, horse-drawn wagons clattered down the streets. Factories churned out flour, beer, metalworks, and other goods. A



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

**Along the Waterfront**  
 Left: Halifax before the explosion. Many houses were made of wood, which caught fire after the explosion toppled kitchen stoves.  
 Below: A view after the explosion.

tram rumbled along the waterfront, where sturdy-looking men carried cargo onto giant ships docked in the harbor. From his backyard, Noble had an amazing view of

the Narrows, the aptly named narrowest section of Halifax Harbor.

Noble was fascinated by the vessels that passed in and out of the harbor. Most belonged to the military—minesweepers, submarines, and convoys that carried troops, weapons, and supplies to the war in Europe.

World War I had been raging since 1914. Many countries were involved. On one side, the major players included Great Britain, Canada (then a colony of Great Britain), France, Russia, and the United States. On the other side were Germany, Austria-Hungary (one country at the time), and the Ottoman Empire (which included modern-day Turkey).

Across Europe, gruesome battles were being fought, but this violence was thousands of miles from Halifax and Dartmouth. Noble must have felt safe in his tight-knit harborside neighborhood. In a few minutes, this would change.

A terrible accident was about to happen. Two ships—the *Mont-Blanc* and the *Imo*—were on a deadly collision course. Soon, Noble's neighborhood would be obliterated and thousands would be dead.

### Bad News

Though Noble was far from the fighting, World War I had cast a shadow over Dartmouth and Halifax. It seemed that nearly every day, newspapers brought more bad news from the front lines. Noble had gotten used to seeing soldiers in uniform around town. Some had come back from the war with grave injuries. Others were preparing to go overseas to fight. At Richmond School, where Noble was in seventh grade, the war was a frequent topic of conversation.

Halifax had strategic value for the transportation of supplies and troops and had become an important hub. Halifax was the major North American port closest to Europe, and the shape of the

harbor made it easy to protect from attacks. This was important because fearsome German submarines called U-boats prowled beneath the waves of the Atlantic Ocean beyond the harbor. By 1917, these U-boats had sunk some 3,000 vessels.

Traffic in Halifax Harbor had increased eightfold since the war started. A steady stream of ships passed through daily. The harbor had become as busy as a major highway at rush hour.

### Powerful Explosives

On December 6, the *Mont-Blanc* was due to join a convoy of ships headed to Europe. There was something about the *Mont-Blanc* that only a handful of people beyond the crew knew: It was loaded with dangerous **munitions**. Powerful explosives—in fact, some of the most powerful that existed at the time—were packed into the cargo holds below deck. Above deck were barrels filled with benzol, a flammable liquid

similar to gasoline. In total, the ship carried nearly 3,000 tons of explosive materials.

Around 8:30 a.m., the *Mont-Blanc* entered Halifax Harbor, heading north. At the same time, a relief ship called the *Imo* was leaving the harbor, heading south.

The *Imo* veered out of its lane to avoid another ship that had somehow moved into its path. The pilot of the *Imo* didn't know he had just steered directly into the path of the *Mont-Blanc*.

A catastrophe was taking shape.

### Too Late

As the two ships came into each other's view, they blared their whistles. But the signals must have been misunderstood, because neither ship changed course.

Then, *Mont-Blanc* pilot Francis Mackey turned left. The *Imo* reversed its engines.

But it was too late.

The *Imo* tore into the *Mont-Blanc*.



Map: Steve Staniewicz

Nova Scotia Archives & Records Management (before); Library and Archives Canada/C-09945 (after)

Water gushed through a 20-foot gash in the *Mont-Blanc's* hull. The barrels of benzol toppled and splashed open.

As the *Imo* reversed, the metal on the two hulking ships scraped together.

Sparks flew.  
And then . . .  
WHOOSH!

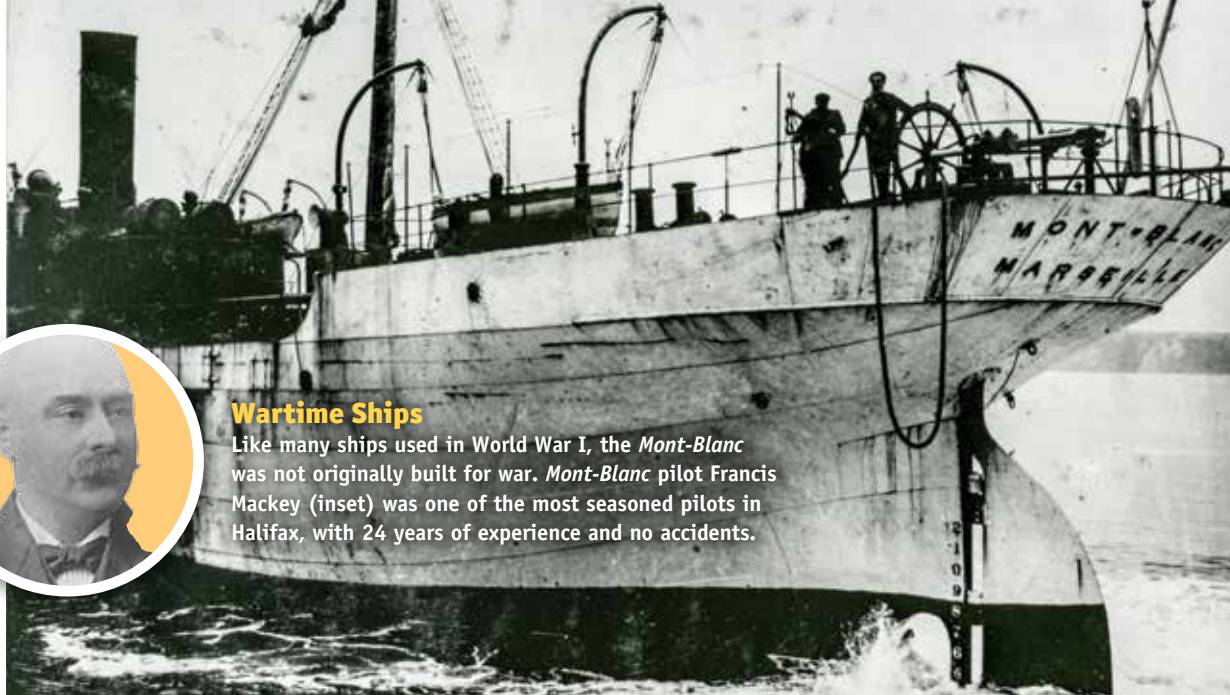
The benzol ignited. Flames raced across the deck of the *Mont-Blanc*.

A plume of thick, black smoke rose into the sky. Water poured into the ship, hissing as it vaporized into steam. Mackey and the *Mont-Blanc* captain, Aimé Le Medec, knew there was nothing they could do. It was only a matter of time before the explosives below deck detonated. The choice was **stark**: Stay on the boat and die, or abandon ship.

Mackey, Le Medec, and the *Mont-Blanc* crew piled into lifeboats and rowed furiously toward Dartmouth. Mackey waved and shouted, trying to alert the other ships in the harbor to the danger. But his efforts were futile. No one seemed to notice.

### Flicking Skyward

Back in Richmond, Noble saw orange-and-blue flames flicking skyward from the *Mont-Blanc*. He left his house and walked toward the harbor to get a better view. Like Noble, many in Dartmouth and Halifax rushed outside to see



### Wartime Ships

Like many ships used in World War I, the *Mont-Blanc* was not originally built for war. *Mont-Blanc* pilot Francis Mackey (inset) was one of the most seasoned pilots in Halifax, with 24 years of experience and no accidents.

the burning ship. Others watched from the windows of homes, shops, and factories. Several boats raced toward the *Mont-Blanc*, hoping to help. Their crews had no idea that their lives were in danger.

The *Mont-Blanc*, having been knocked off course during the collision, was now floating straight toward Noble and his Richmond neighborhood.

Around 9 a.m., the ship drifted into Pier 6 on the Richmond waterfront.

And then, the *Mont-Blanc* exploded.

### Shock Wave

In a fraction of a second, the *Mont-Blanc* was ripped to pieces. At its center, the explosion likely reached 9,000 degrees—more than four times hotter than lava. A tremendous blast of energy shot outward at a speed of 5,000 feet per second—which is to say, it traveled the length of 14 football fields in the time it takes to blink your eyes.

Digitally restored by Joel Zemel—Original Image Courtesy of Janet Maybee and the Mackey Family (Francis Mackey); Maritime Museum of the Atlantic (*Mont-Blanc*)

Library of Congress (embulance); Bettmann/Getty Images (supplies, tents)

This shock wave ripped through Dartmouth and Halifax. Ships were overturned and smashed. Train cars careened off rails. Factories collapsed into heaps of rubble. Doors flew off hinges, trees snapped in two, windows shattered, and shards of glass shot through the air like missiles.

People felt the ground shake 250 miles away. Many in Halifax and Dartmouth wondered if they were under attack.

The shock wave lifted Noble into the air. He landed, unconscious, near Richmond School. For about 10 minutes, black rain fell—a sludge of benzol residue, molten pieces of the *Mont-Blanc*, and other debris.

When Noble came to, he saw that most of the buildings were gone. Fires burned everywhere. His jacket had been blown off. His skin was blackened by the rain. Shards of glass stuck in his hair.

Yet there was more horror to come. The explosion triggered an enormous wave that surged out of the harbor and crashed through Dartmouth and Halifax, toppling more buildings and sweeping people away. This tsunami pushed the *Imo* aground in Dartmouth.

Fortunately for Noble, the wave did not reach him. In a daze, he wandered through the ruined streets toward his house, where only moments before his family had been going about their morning routine.

Like his school, his house had been reduced to a few wobbly walls. But Noble saw his family huddled around the stove, which miraculously was still standing. One of his father's eyes was filled

with glass. And one of Noble's 13 siblings—his little brother Gordon—was missing.

### Rush to Help

The explosion of the *Mont-Blanc* was one of the most powerful explosions in history. Only a few bombs have had more power.

Yet in the midst of unspeakable horror, people rushed to help. Neighbors pulled each other from the burning wreckage of their homes. Soldiers carried wounded men, women, and children to safety. Buildings that still stood were quickly converted to hospitals.

Communities across Nova Scotia mobilized. By the afternoon, trains loaded with nurses, doctors, firefighters, and supplies were streaming into Halifax. Noble and his family boarded a train carrying survivors away from the city. Doctors went from passenger to passenger, binding wounds and treating other injuries. ➔



**Relief Efforts**  
Relief poured into Halifax and Dartmouth (far left and center). In the days after the explosion, many people stayed in their damaged homes, covering broken windows with tar paper to keep out the cold as best they could. Some took shelter in nearby Truro, where the community opened their homes to survivors. Others lived in makeshift tents (above) while temporary housing was being built.

Unfortunately, a blizzard hit the next day, **hampering** relief efforts. Nevertheless, aid was soon pouring in again.

## Looking for Answers

Thousands of people had lost homes, possessions, jobs. Some 2,000 people had died, and at least 9,000 had been injured. Five crew members from the *Imo* died—as well as the pilot and captain—as did one crew member from the *Mont-Blanc*.

People were angry and wanted answers. Some blamed Germany. Some blamed the government for not managing the harbor better. Some blamed the *Imo*. Many blamed Mackey and Le Medec. The men were **vilified** in the newspapers, charged with criminal offenses, and briefly sent to jail. The charges were later dropped.

Historians now say the men were treated unfairly. They had been **scapegoated**. Mackey eventually returned to the sea, but his name had been **tarnished**. (Writer and retired teacher Janet Maybee has been working to clear Mackey's name. You can read the story in her book *Aftershock*.)

## 100 Years Later

Today—100 years later—Halifax is thriving. Walk through the streets along the harbor, and you

## Behind the Scenes

To write this article, I journeyed from New York City to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where I met Janet Kitz.



Kitz has dedicated her life to preserving the stories of survivors of the explosion. Noble Driscoll's story comes from interviews she conducted and donated to the Nova Scotia Archives. Kitz has also written several books about the explosion. Watch our video at Scope Online for a more in-depth look behind the scenes of this article.



will enjoy the scent of delicious seafood wafting from waterfront restaurants. You will hear the horns of ferries and see trains bringing cargo to the enormous ships docked in the harbor.

Yet memories of the catastrophe still seem to ripple through the air. Mention the explosion to nearly anyone, and he or she can probably tell you about a relative who lived through it.

As for Noble? Tragically, his little brother Gordon was never found. The Driscolls pushed on as best they could though. They lived for a while in a nearby town, and they welcomed a new baby in 1919. That same year they returned to

Halifax. By then, World War I had ended and the Driscolls, like people all around the world, were ready to rebuild their lives.

Noble went on to get married and manage a store. He lived in a house in the neighborhood that was built on the ruins of Richmond.

In that neighborhood today, at the top of a hill overlooking the harbor, stands a bell tower. Each December 6, its bells ring in solemn memory of the day the sky shattered. ●

*Special thanks to Roger Marsters from the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Liam Caswell from the Dartmouth Heritage Museum, Barry Smith from the Nova Scotia Archives, Janet Kitz, Janet Maybee, and Nimbus Publishing for their generous research assistance.*

## Writing Contest

How does the author help you, the reader, understand what it was like to live through the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbor? Use text evidence to support your answer. Send your essay to **Halifax Explosion Contest**. Five winners will get *Blizzard of Glass* by Sally M. Walker.

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