

**THE GARRISON RESPONSE TO  
THE HALIFAX DISASTER, 6 DECEMBER, 1917**

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### INTRODUCTION

The bare facts of the 1917 disaster in Halifax harbour are well known: at 9:05 am on 6 December, the French munitions ship *Mont Blanc* blew up after colliding with the Norwegian vessel *Imo*. The explosion killed or injured nearly one-quarter of the city's population, rendered several thousand more homeless, and destroyed more than 1,600 dwellings. An entire section of the city covering 132 hectares had to be

rebuilt from scratch.<sup>1</sup> No Canadian city has ever experienced a comparable disaster in terms of the number of casualties and total property damage.

Popular histories emphasize the horrific aspects of the disaster; the suffering of survivors and heroic actions of victims are focal points of these narratives. The story of Vince Coleman, for example, a railway telegraph operator who remained at his post, is a popular “Heritage Minute” created by Historica Canada. Media coverage on the anniversary of the disaster frequently singles out the relief organized by the State of Massachusetts as an example of one community helping another in a desperate time of need.

A surprising gap in the historiography of the Halifax explosion is the role of the Garrison of Halifax Fortress, both in the immediate aftermath and in the weeks following the disaster. In his 2002 book, *The Royal Canadian Navy and the Halifax Explosion*, John Griffith Armstrong observed that “the Militia had massive resources at its disposal” – superior in many respects to what the Navy could draw on. Indeed, more men and supplies from other military districts were available than ended up being utilized because the Garrison at Halifax “proved remarkably self-sufficient.”<sup>2</sup> As Armstrong points out, “soldiers train for war,” and a disaster on the scale of the explosion created war-like conditions. Hence, in his view, “the militia organizational structure provided a template for effective reaction to the crisis.”<sup>3</sup> In a recent personal communication, Armstrong reiterated this point, stating that the “garrison was the best source of competent, fit manpower in the city.”<sup>4</sup>

This assessment corresponds with that of civilian authority in the hours following the explosion. In his unpublished official history, Archibald MacMechan wrote that when disaster struck, the civic government “turned at once to the organization that had plenty of men and full control of them—the military.”<sup>5</sup> Author Janet Kitz, another chronicler of civilian relief efforts, also credits the singular role played by “large numbers of servicemen stationed in and around the city... Prepared as they were for war, and used to working together under command, their presence was invaluable.”<sup>6</sup>

In his book published in 1920, M. Stuart Hunt wrote that the explosion:

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Bird, *The Town that Died* (Halifax: Nimbus Classics, 1995); Janet Kitz, *Shattered City* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> John Griffith Armstrong, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong, *Explosion*, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Armstrong, personal communication, 28 February 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Metson, *The Halifax Explosion* (1978) which contains Archibald MacMechan’s unpublished official history

<sup>6</sup> Janet Kitz, “The Explosion Mortuary Artifacts,” in Alan Ruffman & Colin Howell, eds. *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour* (Halifax: Gorsebrook Research Institute, 1994), p. 12.

## Garrison Response to the Halifax Explosion

...placed a great burden upon the Garrison and proved its great value in a sudden emergency. Every officer and man of every Military Unit and Department, with all the military facilities of the Garrison were rushed into the work of removing the dead and wounded, fighting fires, preparing shelters, transporting and feeding the destitute, doing police duty and the hundred and one things that came to the hands of a willing, well-trained body of troops.<sup>7</sup>

There were approximately 5,000 military members in Halifax at the time of the disaster, of which 3,300 belonged to Garrison units, and the rest were either returned soldiers or troops waiting to embark overseas. Most of the latter were Canadian Expeditionary Force, however the British Expeditionary Force also had about 320 soldiers, recruited in the United States, housed in barrack huts on the North Common across from the Armouries.<sup>8</sup> A CEF Depot Battalion had just been formed the previous September to process draftees under the Military Service Act, but this unit was not fully mobilized when the explosion occurred.<sup>9</sup> Five Artillery units (three Canadian Garrison Artillery plus PEI Heavy Battery and 10<sup>th</sup> Siege Battery) and four Royal Canadian Engineers Companies (1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> plus one administrative unit), were directly attached to Halifax Fortress. Two infantry regiments manned outforts at McNab's Island (63<sup>rd</sup> Halifax Rifles) and York Redoubt (66<sup>th</sup> Princess Louise Fusiliers). Fort Ogilvie in Point Pleasant Park was also manned. Batteries supplemented the outforts: at Ives Point on McNab's Island (Royal Canadian Engineers), Sandwich Battery on the mainland near Herring Cove, and Connaught Battery near Purcell's Cove - manned in 1916 by the 1<sup>st</sup> (Halifax) Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery – and Point Pleasant Park Battery.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, a Composite Battalion was quartered at Wellington Barracks (now Base Stadacona). Formed in 1914 to replace the Royal Canadian Regiment when the latter was deployed to Bermuda, the 800-strong battalion performed guard duties at various strategic points throughout the city. No. 6 Special Service Company, No. 6 Casualty Company and a small complement of RCR members shared quarters at Wellington Barracks with the Composite Battalion. All of these units suffered significant casualties from the explosion, the worst affected being the Composite Battalion with five killed or missing and 220 wounded.<sup>11</sup>

The Canadian Army Medical Corps [AMC] numbered about 600 – a large complement due to the need for treating returned soldiers and inspecting troops embarking overseas. The Military Hospitals Commission (MHCC) had a casualty clearing station ("B" Unit) at Pier 2, and the AMC had a Training

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<sup>7</sup> M. Stuart Hunt, *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Veteran Publishing Co., 1920), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Armstrong, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Hunt, p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> Sarty & Ellis, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> "Synopsis, Explosion Casualties – Halifax Fortress" LAC RG 24 HQ86-1-3, 12 January 1918. On this date the GOC reported that one CB member remained missing, along with one member each from the RCR, SS and Casualty Cos.



Depot. Besides the Garrison Hospital at the corner of Gottingen and Cogswell Streets, the army operated a quarantine hospital at Rockhead in the north end. A brand new military hospital at Camp Hill – with a capacity of 300 beds – was not yet operational, but it was pressed into service the day of the disaster. CAMC staff and military medical facilities played a very significant role in treating the thousands of casualties injured by the explosion. At the height of relief efforts there were more than 40 hospitals treating patients in Halifax; many of these were fully or partially staffed by military members. Lt-Col. F. McKelvie Bell's official report will be discussed later in this narrative.

Due to the multiplicity of roles performed by Halifax, as an embarkation port for troops, as a strategic naval base requiring elaborate defences against enemy attack, as an assembly point for ocean convoys, as an artillery training facility, as a casualty clearing station, and as administrative headquarters for the entire Maritime region, the military organization in Halifax was both extensive and multi-faceted. On 6 December, Halifax hosted troops from no less than sixteen non-Garrison units, many of them CEF.<sup>12</sup> These included a Forestry Battalion (5<sup>th</sup>), a Reserve Battalion (26<sup>th</sup>), and elements of the Royal Canadian Regiment and Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery.

The Halifax Defence Complex before the First World War has been described as “a patchwork of a dozen properties within the city proper” that were “too small, too old, and...crowded in by commercial development.”<sup>13</sup> In 1893 the British Garrison Artillery in Halifax totaled 316 all ranks, stronger than Gibraltar, Malta or Singapore.<sup>14</sup> The local militia brigade attached to Imperial forces, the Halifax Garrison Artillery, was even larger, such that the total complement of artillery troops in the city exceeded 700.<sup>15</sup> Seaward-looking forts and batteries were upgraded in the late 1800s, but the state of military properties surrounding the Citadel deteriorated. A systematic inspection in early 1915 revealed “disgraceful conditions” at the Canadian Permanent Army Service Corps depot in Glacis Barracks, where the offices were “nothing better than fire-traps, heated by bee-hive stoves and lighted by oil lamps.” (A century earlier, the regulation allowance for lighting barracks had been “one candlestick for every twelve men.”)<sup>16</sup> Wooden buildings at Artillery Park were “gloomy” and “dilapidated,” with latrines “improvised with boards and buckets,” unheated lavatories “covered with ice,” and “rooms infested with bedbugs.”

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<sup>12</sup> For example, four Artillery drafts (72<sup>nd</sup>, 73<sup>rd</sup>, 74<sup>th</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup>) and one Railway Construction draft (27<sup>th</sup>) were in Halifax on the day of the explosion; none suffered serious casualties. LAC RG 24 HQ649-1-86, GOC, MD 6 to Director of Records, 9 Dec 1917.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Sarty, “The Halifax Military Lands Board: Civil-Military Relations and the Development of Halifax as a Strategic Defended Port, 1905-1928,” *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* XII, No. 2 (April 2002), p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Canadian Military Gazette*, VIII no. 4 (15 February 1893), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII no. 22 (15 November 1893), p. 332.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Whitfield, “Barracks Life in the Nineteenth Century,” *Material Culture Review* 15 (Summer 1982).

Roger Sarty concluded that these conditions were caused by a combination of miserly prewar budgets and wartime expansion:

These...buildings...had been in marginal condition when the British left. They had been closed or relegated to use as storehouses, leaving sufficient accommodation only for the peacetime garrison; then on mobilization the run-down structures had to be fully employed once more.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, maintaining healthy, wholesome living arrangements for soldiers was not just a Canadian problem – the British grappled with “faulty...latrines and urinals” at the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers’ barracks in Halifax long before the issue resurfaced in 1915. Sanitation, hospital accommodation, and housing for married troops in Halifax all needed attention in 1868, Imperial authorities reported, although it was noted with satisfaction that improved lighting in barracks, using “Albertine oil” instead of candles, provided “economy to the public and advantage to the soldier.”<sup>18</sup> Achieving equilibrium between those two prerogatives preoccupied Ottawa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century no less than it had London a half-century earlier.

Surprisingly, the morale of the troops stationed in Halifax remained high, at least according to the 1915 inspector, who was “deeply impressed with the enthusiasm and efficiency of the garrison, and amazed that they could sustain it in the squalor of many buildings in the main barracks and depots on the city peninsula.”<sup>19</sup> Presumably the brick and freestone Wellington Barracks in the north end – though built in the 1850s – offered a somewhat higher standard of accommodation. Another bright spot on the urban military landscape was the Armouries, a massive drill hall erected next to the North Common in the 1890s, replacing a much older wooden structure. Militia officers were not happy with the new location, protesting that the old site on Spring Garden Road was “better suited for the purpose,” but the imposing sandstone façade of the Armouries at least demonstrated the willingness of the Dominion government to invest in Halifax’s military infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the building opened the same year that Canada sent a contingent of volunteers to the South African war was purely coincidental.

Ironically, some of the very properties deemed inadequate a few years before were pressed into service during the 1917 emergency, whereas the Wellington Barracks – particularly the Officers’ Quarters nearest the harbour – suffered major damage and “remained a semi-ruin” well into the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> Even

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<sup>17</sup> Sarty, “Military Lands Board,” p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, Vol 43, Army Medical Department Report for 1868, Vol 10, p. 67. Albertine oil, an early form of kerosene, was named after petroleum discoveries in Albert County, New Brunswick.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> *Canadian Military Gazette*, VIII no. 19 (1 October 1893), p. 279.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas H. Raddall, *Halifax, Warden of the North* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1950), p. 276.

the Citadel, strategically marginalized by more modern emplacements at the harbour mouth, succeeded in protecting its occupants (and a large portion of the civilian south end) from the shock wave of the explosion. Still, problems identified before WWI were never adequately addressed, such that Thomas Raddall described the Halifax Fortress in 1928 as a “military mausoleum in which the khaki caretakers walked like spectres from the past.”<sup>22</sup>

During WWI, the Halifax military establishment fell within Military District 6 [hereafter MD6], which included all three Maritime provinces.<sup>23</sup> General Officer Commanding [GOC] MD6 was Major-General Thomas Benson, who had held the post since November 1915. A Senator’s son from St. Catharines, Ontario, Benson graduated from Royal Military College in 1883 and followed his older brother Frederick into the British Army, specializing in gunnery. Returning to Canada in 1905, Benson was posted to Halifax as a Lieutenant-Colonel. In 1910 he became head of the Permanent Force and promoted to Master-General of Ordnance in 1913.<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hunt describes Benson as having “a broad outlook, an attractive personality, and good judgment.” Other sources suggest strained relations between Ottawa and Halifax on matters pertaining to manning and preparedness.<sup>25</sup> Benson retired in 1918 to British Columbia, dying there two years later at age 60. A brief obituary in the Toronto *Globe* noted that “war problems on the Atlantic seaboard and the [Halifax] explosion wore on him considerably.”<sup>26</sup>

The day of the explosion, Chief of General Staff Willoughby Gwatkin in Ottawa wired Maj-Gen Benson: “Urgent. Is there any possible way in which Militia Council can assist?”

“Many thanks,” Benson replied, “Situation well in hand. Full report later.”<sup>27</sup>

On the evening of December 6<sup>th</sup>, Benson sent a synopsis of the day’s events to Gwatkin:

- *Ship loaded with ammunitions accidentally blew up in Harbour at 9 o/c this morning destroying northern part of city.*
- *Twelve, possibly more, soldiers killed, others more or less injured seriously.*
- *Wellington and other barracks seriously wrecked.*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> At the time of the explosion a separate Military District (No 7) had been organized in New Brunswick with HQ in Saint John.

<sup>24</sup> A.H. Young, *The War Book of Upper Canada College Toronto* (Toronto: Printers Guild, 1923), p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> Hunt, p. 6.; For a full discussion of Benson’s relations with Ottawa, see Roger Sarty’s PhD thesis, “Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence, 1860-1945” (University of Toronto, 1983). Also see Roger Sarty and Bruce Ellis, “Connaught Battery and the Defence of the Atlantic Coast, 1906-1941.” *Canadian Military History* 18 No 2 (Spring 2009), pp. 1-10.

<sup>26</sup> Toronto *Globe*, 11 Sept 1920, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol. 1 GOC MD6 to CGS, 6 December 1917.

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- *Many citizens killed and injured numbers not ascertainable.*
- *Have used all available soldiers for relief work and patrol duties day and night.*
- *Have assistance from British and American ships in harbour.*
- *All hospitals full to capacity. Have erected hospital and other tents on Common.*
- *Assisting city feeding and housing homeless and Collecting wounded and dead.*
- *Nearby towns rendering civil assistance.*<sup>28</sup>

The following day, December 7<sup>th</sup>, Maj-Gen Benson requested two eye specialists be sent from Montreal; Ottawa informed him that “large quantities of medical supplies” were on their way, and medical personnel from Military Districts 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 were standing by. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, Benson received word that “5,000 blankets, 1,000 sets underwear, 1,000 pairs socks, 500 Greatcoats” and medical stores had been shipped by MD 5 (Quebec).<sup>29</sup> On the third day following the disaster, December 9<sup>th</sup>, Benson was able to inform the Militia Council that the “[m]edical situation [was] well under control,” that men for guard duty were “not required,” and that “Engineer end of it also under control.”<sup>30</sup> Under normal circumstances, Benson had approximately 800 men of the Composite Battalion at his disposal for routine guards and fatigues duties.<sup>31</sup> These did not include units assigned to the various forts and batteries, as well as Expeditionary Force members awaiting embarkation overseas. Hence, in the short term, the Garrison was able to draw on double or even three times the number of regular duty troops for emergency rescue and recovery work. Accordingly, on the 9<sup>th</sup>, Benson requested that no more troops be sent to Halifax because “more than half our barrack accommodation [was] destroyed” and there were over 900 CEF members in the city waiting to go overseas.<sup>32</sup> An officer sent from Ottawa to survey the damage in Halifax reported the same day that “affairs here are well in hand [and] Military have done excellently... Ordnance is well able to meet all probable wants at present.” Indeed, this officer suggested the army capitalize on the disaster by “building huts which will be suitable for soldiers on demobilization” although housing “six thousand homeless” civilians was the first priority.<sup>33</sup> This suggestion was endorsed by Maj-Gen Benson a week later.

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<sup>28</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ 71-26-99 vol 1.

<sup>29</sup> LAC MG 26 Sir Robert Borden papers, Correspondence Vols 89-90, Microfilm C-4325 “Halifax Disaster 1917-1918,” 10 December 1917, pg 46460.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pg 46462.

<sup>31</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 2323 file HQS-66 vol 10 “Halifax Reconstruction” 31 May 1918.

<sup>32</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ 71-26-99 vol 1, Maj-Gen Benson to Secretary, Militia Council, 9 Dec 1917.

<sup>33</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ 71-26-99 vol 1, Telegram Col. Hallick to Gen Biggar, 9 Dec 1917.

The job of building those huts fell to an energetic Michigan-born, Ottawa-based engineer, Col. Robert “Bob” S. Low, who was already in Halifax on December 9<sup>th</sup>. More will be said of his activities in due course, but suffice it to say that barely had Bob Low touched ground than he began issuing orders and requisitions for “motor trucks and chauffeurs,” with “plenty of spare parts, chains, etc.” They should be shipped on “special trains,” he wired Ottawa, with placards stating “Relief Halifax” so that the railway would “speed them here.”<sup>34</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that most transport in 1917 Halifax, disaster or not, was horse-drawn, Col. Low would get his trucks, and much more besides. Over 500 carpenters and glaziers – all military – were on their way to Halifax by December 10<sup>th</sup>, over half of them from Ontario.<sup>35</sup>

### HEADQUARTERS

The “central ganglion of the entire military system for Halifax and its environs”<sup>36</sup> was a nondescript brick mansion at the foot of Spring Garden Road. Sandwiched between the Academy of Music and St Matthew’s Church, the building had served as military headquarters since Confederation.<sup>37</sup> A planned exit in 1914 to more modern offices never happened, although due to wartime expansion some administrative staff did move to the Dennis building on Argyle Street.<sup>38</sup> The Commandant’s residence during the Imperial period had been a mansion at the corner of Spring Garden Road and Queen Street known as “Bellevue,” but Canadian GOC’s preferred quarters in Artillery Park and Bellevue was converted into an Officers’ Mess.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> LAC MG 26 Borden papers, C-4325, pg 46463.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pg. 46465.

<sup>36</sup> Archibald MacMechan’s words, from his account “The Halifax Disaster” published for the first time in Graham Metson’s 1978 book *The Halifax Explosion December 6, 1917* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson), p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Photos of the Headquarters building are rare. In 1917, MacMechan described it as an “old-fashioned wooden dwelling house” with “[t]he only outward sign of its purpose... the Royal Arms carved and brightly painted over the entrance.” (p. 32) Nova Scotia Archives has a photo dated 1928 in “NSA Photograph Collection: Army – General – Headquarters Office,” Scan No. 201208044 (Image is not online). Prior to its use as Garrison HQ, it was the home of Robert Grieve Noble (1792-1872), founder of Robert Noble & Sons, hardware and general merchants, Halifax. According to Thomas Raddall’s *Warden of the North* (p. 276), the garrison headquarters was on Spring Garden Road in 1928; in Might’s 1935 *Halifax-Dartmouth City Directories*, the former Headquarters on Barrington Street is listed as the “Georgian Building” with several commercial tenants.

<sup>38</sup> Sarty, “Military Lands Board,” p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> John Armstrong, personal communication, 7 March 2014; LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, “Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec 6/17”, p. 3.

The Adjutant-General on duty at Headquarters on the morning of December 6<sup>th</sup> was Colonel W. Ernest Thompson.<sup>40</sup> According to Archibald MacMechan, Thompson's immediate reaction on hearing news of the disaster was "to direct and organize the military forces available." Duty boats were immediately summoned to convey troops from McNab's Island and York Redoubt. Second priority was to equip soldiers with the tools required for rescue work, i.e. "boots, blankets, picks and shovels." The first responders dispatched from Headquarters were a detail of Princess Louise Fusiliers who picked up blankets at H.M. Ordnance Yard and hurried north within a half-hour of the explosion. By noon, Col. Thompson reported later, "we had all out troops out and working... carrying dead and wounded to vehicles of all kinds... [and] digging out bodies from the ruins."<sup>41</sup>

### CITADEL

In 1917, the Citadel's imposing presence loomed as always over central Halifax, but batteries and searchlights nearer the harbour entrance had lessened its strategic importance.<sup>42</sup> In 1908 the Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery built a drill shed on the south ravelin, used for training purposes, and the Signal Corps erected a time ball mechanism on the southeast salient to supplement the timekeeping function of the one o'clock gun. A new Signal Station was built on the ramparts near the time ball; according to Brenda Dunn this occurred between 1916 and 1920. Dunn also reported that "140 men of the Royal Garrison Artillery and First Coastal Artillery were stationed at the Citadel" in the spring of 1915. German POWs were interned at the Citadel during the early part of the First World War but they were all gone by October 1916.<sup>43</sup>

On the day of the explosion the Citadel chiefly served as a refuge for people seeking medical treatment. A second wave of refugees arrived when reports circulated that another explosion was imminent. Medical Corpsman Leslie Reid recalled the side of Citadel Hill being "black" with people, but many were afraid to go indoors in spite of the Cold.<sup>44</sup> RCGA Quartermaster Maj A.M. Bauld arrived at the Citadel minutes after the explosion; he found broken windows and doors, but no one inside seriously hurt. The

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<sup>40</sup> William Ernest Thompson (1865-1941) was a native Haligonian. His father was born in England and his mother was from New Brunswick, according to the 1921 Dominion census. He and his wife Maud lived at #88 Spring Garden Road. In 1919 Thompson succeeded Lessard as GOC of MD 6.

<sup>41</sup> MacMechan, "Halifax Disaster," in Metson, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Barry Gough and Roger Sarty, "Sailors and Soldiers: The Royal Navy, the Canadian Forces, and the Defence of Atlantic Canada, 1890-1918," in M. Whitby, R. Huebert & F. Crickard, eds. *A Nation's Navy* (1998).

<sup>43</sup> Brenda Dunn, *The Halifax Citadel, 1906-51. The Canadian Period.* (Parks Canada HDC, 1977), pp. 2-6, 99-102. I am grateful to David Reynolds for providing me with a copy of this report.

<sup>44</sup> "The Halifax Explosion & Going to Siberia," *Cape Breton's Magazine* Issue 34 (1983), p. 11.

regimental surgeon and his sergeant – both named Morton – were busy attending to wounded elsewhere in the city, so Major Bauld and a medical orderly administered first aid as best they could to citizen and soldier alike. One of the barrack rooms was turned into a “temporary shelter” and “hot tea, bread, and jam was served...while they waited... [for] the doctor.” Eventually Dr Morton arrived, treated patients until late in the afternoon, then rushed off to Camp Hill Hospital where more serious cases needed attention.<sup>45</sup>

### WELLINGTON BARRACKS

The Wellington Barracks, a cluster of buildings at the corner of Gottingen and Russell Streets, housed approximately 800 members of the Composite Battalion, tasked with guarding various points around the city and environs. About half that number were at their regular posts; Archibald MacMechan pegged the Battalion losses at 10 killed and 377 wounded.<sup>46</sup> According to MacMechan, there were 29 members of the Composite Battalion on guard duty the morning of the explosion; all were either killed or wounded. Most of the fatalities occurred at the North Ordnance yard, the Dry Dock and at Pier 8, near the explosion epicentre. For the others in barracks that morning, casualties were light because most of the men were outside on the parade ground. In a final tally submitted to Militia headquarters in January 1918, GOC Benson placed the death toll at 18, including four Composite Battalion members, three No 6 Special Service Company members, two 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment (PLF) members and two members of the Military Hospitals Commission Command “B” Unit at Pier 2.<sup>47</sup>

The two large brick and freestone barrack blocks – one men’s and the other officers’ – suffered extensive damage. Windows were shattered, portions of the roof collapsed, and interior partitions were in disarray; however the buildings themselves remained structurally sound. Quick action in the Officers’ barracks prevented a fire from breaking out due to an overturned stove.<sup>48</sup> Three days later, a detail of 25-30 BEF volunteers from the Armouries spent the day cleaning up the Barracks. Falling pieces of the slate roof hampered their efforts.<sup>49</sup> The only confirmed fatality at Wellington Barracks was 18-year-old bandsman from No. 6, Special Service Company, Private Emery Haliburton Rost. A native of Mahone Bay, NS, Rost was 16 when he enlisted in the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion, but due to his young age did not go

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<sup>45</sup> Metson, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Metson, p. 32. Stuart Hunt’s figures differ slightly, stating that six Composite Battalion men were killed outright and one officer and two NCO’s succumbed to their injuries later in hospital.

<sup>47</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6536 file HQ 86-1-3, “Synopsis. Explosion Casualties – Halifax Fortress,” 12 January 1918.

<sup>48</sup> MacMechan, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, “My Experience in the Halifax Disaster,” LAC R5570-0-3-E Vol. 1 (MIKAN No. 102440).

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overseas.<sup>50</sup> He was killed when a large piece of plating, probably from *Mont Blanc*, crashed through the roof and into the bandsmen's room.<sup>51</sup> The Colours of the Royal Canadian Regiment, stored at Wellington Barracks while the Regiment was posted to Bermuda, almost became another casualty of the explosion. Fortunately, they were recovered "[s]ome days later, tattered and coated in snow and ice."<sup>52</sup>

Married quarters along Russell Street were much more vulnerable than Wellington Barracks, being of wood and brick construction and facing the full force of the blast. These five buildings were "totally destroyed."<sup>53</sup> The Explosion Book of Remembrance (Nova Scotia Archives online) lists Gunner Frank Robinson and "Baby Robinson" as fatalities at Wellington Barracks – both must have been occupants of married quarters.<sup>54</sup> MacMechan also notes that 152 NCO's lived outside barracks in Richmond, the neighbourhood near Fort Needham hardest hit by the explosion; casualties among those military families brought the toll of dead and wounded even higher. Archibald MacMechan noted that 152 NCO's lived outside barracks in Richmond, the neighbourhood near Fort Needham hardest hit by the explosion. For example, according to official records, 37-year-old Lt. Francis Howley of the 26<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion resided at 73 North Albert Street. Howley, his wife and five-year-old daughter were all at home when they died.<sup>55</sup>

Private Fred Felepchuk, RCR, a miner from Glace Bay NS, was a guard at Richmond Pier; he left behind a widow and four children.<sup>56</sup> Another explosion victim was found carrying his CEF discharge papers. John Hurley enlisted in August 1916 in Toronto; his Attestation form stated that he was 47 years old and a

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<sup>50</sup> Private Rost's Attestation papers and service record, including details of his death, are accessible online at Library and Archives Canada's "Soldiers of the First World War" website. In the Canadian First World War Book of Remembrance, (p. 319), he is listed as belonging to the 246<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Emery's brother Earle Alexander also served in the C.E.F. as a Private in the Nova Scotia 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion; he was killed in action at Hill 70, 16 August 1917. Emery enlisted ten weeks after his older brother; he outlived him by fifteen weeks.

<sup>51</sup> MacMechan, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Canadian Regiment, 1883-1933* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Company, 1936), pp. 164-165.

<sup>53</sup> Armstrong, p. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Frank Robinson's Attestation Papers were not located. Given his Gunner's rank, he may have belonged to an artillery unit.

<sup>55</sup> "Casualty Report – Halifax Explosion," LAC RG 24 Vol 6536 file HQ-86-1-3; NSA Halifax Explosion Remembrance Book (online). Howley was a native of Stratton, Gloucester, England; his middle name is given as "Joseph" in the January 1918 Casualty Report; the NSA Remembrance Book states that it is "John."

<sup>56</sup> Pte Felepchuk is buried near the southwest corner of Fort Massey cemetery in Halifax; his Attestation Papers are posted online.



“bushman.” The previous April in Montreal, Hurley had been discharged from a Forestry Battalion (242<sup>nd</sup>) for medical reasons. He was a crew member on *SS Calonne*, one of the vessels in harbour.<sup>57</sup>

### WELLINGTON MAGAZINE

A second major explosion was averted by quick action of Lieut. Charles A. McLennan of the 76<sup>th</sup> Regiment (Colchester & Hants) who mustered some Composite Battalion soldiers and sailors from HMS *Changuinola* to fight fires around the magazine at Wellington Barracks. At one point McLennan doused hot coals from an overturned heater with a fire extinguisher; the resulting smoke and steam sparked a stampede of panic-stricken sailors and soldiers from the area. Fortunately some soldiers stayed behind and helped McLennan secure the magazine.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, hundreds of people fled to the outskirts of the city or into the south end as word spread that another explosion was imminent. One source reports that soldiers were going door to door ordering residents to evacuate their homes and seek shelter in the south end.<sup>59</sup>

The magazine “scare” was probably the most disruptive event of the first day besides the obvious difficulties of rescuing survivors and fighting fires. It should be noted that there was more than one magazine at risk – three small naval magazines were located near the water’s edge in addition to the larger army magazine on the Wellington Barracks grounds. According to Maj-Gen Benson, sailors threw ammunition into the harbour from the naval magazines until ordered to stop by an army Ordnance officer.<sup>60</sup> The action at the army magazine seems to have been conducted by mainly soldiers.

### ARMOURIES

The Armouries served as headquarters for multiple units: The 1<sup>st</sup> Depot Battalion, created in September 1917 to process conscripts under the Military Service Act; the 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> batteries, Canadian Field Artillery, with recruits from Ontario, and the aforementioned American recruits for the British Expeditionary Force. The latter were inside the Armouries when the explosion occurred; none were killed but broken glass and debris injured many. Subsequent inspection of the roof determined that it had to be replaced.

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<sup>57</sup> John Hurley discharge certificate, MMA Acc. No. M87.2.187 C, reproduced in Janet Kitz, *Shattered City*, p. 109. Attestation states “Horley” but service number (103466), age and place of origin (Toronto) agrees with discharge document.

<sup>58</sup> MacMechan in Metson, pp. 29-31; Armstrong, pp. 58-60. The *Toronto Globe* (10 Dec 1917, p. 2) reported that members of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were guarding the magazine and saved it from the fire. Neither MacMechan nor Armstrong mention the 72<sup>nd</sup> Btn.

<sup>59</sup> Frank Rasky, *Great Canadian Disasters* (Toronto: Longmans Green, 1961), p. 159.

<sup>60</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ HQ 71-26-99 vol 2, GOC Benson to Militia Council, 15 Dec 1917.

Other units were parading outside the Armouries and escaped serious injury. Col. Flowers, CO of the Depot Battalion, “immediately detailed three...rescue parties,” one party went to Pier 2 where a Casualty Clearing Station was located, and the other two headed into the north end. Meanwhile, Flowers ordered pickets to be set up outside the Armouries to “commandeer all passing vehicles” for use as ambulances. Four dressing stations were established on the Common with supplies obtained from the Cogswell Street Military Hospital. As the rumour spread that another explosion was imminent, women and children from the north end fled to the Common seeking shelter and/or medical treatment. The army huts in front of the Armouries were soon filled with civilians as Depot Battalion members distributed bedding, blankets and hot broth.

By 8:00 pm that evening, four hundred tents were “erected on the Common, as well as an emergency marquee hospital.” The tents had wooden floors, “cots, blankets, light and heat.”<sup>61</sup> The speed with which this was accomplished is impressive given the chaotic circumstances, and speaks highly of the Ordnance, Army Service Corps and Engineers who coordinated and executed the operation. However the tents were not used because the injured were being treated elsewhere. A blizzard on December 7 also hampered use of the tent village.

Another example of cool-headed military efficiency was careful recording of the names of “all those who passed through the hands of the medical officers” administering aid on the Common. These names were displayed on each hut so that family members searching for loved ones could easily ascertain who was inside.<sup>62</sup>

An American B.E.F. volunteer from Philadelphia recounted how one of the huts on the Common being commandeered as a temporary hospital resulted in cramped quarters for some of his comrades:

By this time [Friday, 8 Dec] one of our huts was taken over as a temporary hospital. Our beds were of the “upper and lower” kind accommodating two on top and two below, so that when this hut was taken over we had to make room for the men of that hut. This was done by putting three men in where there were just enough room for two! Those huts were in very bad shape after the explosion. The roofs and windows in some cases

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<sup>61</sup> Metson, p. 36. Sources differ on the number of tents erected on the Commons – MacMechan states 400, McKelvey Bell says 250. The confusion may be due to a field hospital using marquee tents also being erected at the same time as the regulation Bell tents. On 16 December a representative of the Quartermaster-General’s office in Ottawa offered 400 to 500 marquee tents with “board floors and coal stoves” to the City of Halifax, each one capable of accommodating a small family “even with winter climatic conditions.” It was stated that 500 tents could be erected in two weeks, which makes the speed of the operation on 6 December even more impressive. LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 2, Lt-Col Hallick to R.T. MacIlreith, Halifax Relief Committee, 16 Dec 1917.

<sup>62</sup> Metson, p. 37

were very badly shattered; so on Friday morning when “revellé” [sic] sounded we had, in most cases, a nice blanket of snow covering us.<sup>63</sup>

## OUTFORTS

Point Pleasant Park illustrates both the assets and liabilities that Halifax Fortress faced in WWI. The Park contained multiple fortifications, some dating back to the War of 1812, but only Fort Ogilvie was manned. The Halifax garrison suffered a chronic manpower shortage, and tactical considerations dictated that defensive works should be placed closer to the harbour mouth. Consequently a new battery, named Connaught after the Governor-General who took a personal interest in its construction, was begun in 1912 on a height of land south of Purcell’s Cove.<sup>64</sup> An anti-submarine net was installed between the peninsula and McNab’s Island, where another Battery with searchlights guarded against night attack. Thus by 1917, a total of five outforts protected the entrance to Halifax harbour. Innermost was Fort Charlotte (George’s Island); next came Fort Ogilvie at Point Pleasant Park; then Fort Hugonin and Fort McNab on McNab’s Island; and finally York Redoubt. Three batteries at Ives Point on McNab’s Island, Connaught Battery near Purcell’s Cove, and Sandwich Battery at York Redoubt supplemented these defences. (See Map, pg 16). The challenge on the morning of 6 December was getting these men to the afflicted area on the peninsula.

The 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment (Halifax Rifles) manned the forts on McNab’s Island and consequently escaped the full force of the explosion. Nevertheless, fourteen injuries were reported, mostly cuts about the head and neck and a few badly sprained backs.<sup>65</sup> Jean Holder’s father was stationed on McNab’s Island; he had been ordered to lead a funeral party that afternoon for a deceased soldier. Years later his daughter asked him “if, with all the death and destruction around that day, the funeral was held”:

His answer was to the point, ‘We were under military orders to conduct that funeral and that’s what we did.’ He remembered that as the procession marched along the streets, soldiers stopped what they were doing, and saluted... [His o]rders were not changed until after the funeral when the soldiers assembled to get the duty boat... [back] to McNab’s Island. New instructions were [given] to assist with relief and rescue...<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Anonymous, “My Experience in the Halifax Disaster,” MSS, n.d. LAC R5570-0-3-E Vol. 1 (Online MIKAN No. 102440).

<sup>64</sup> Harry Piers, G.M. Self and Phyllis R. Blakeley, *The Evolution of the Halifax Fortress, 1749-1928* (Halifax: PANS, 1947), p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6536 HQ 86-1-3 “Explosion Casualties – Halifax Fortress,” 12 Jan 1918.

<sup>66</sup> NSA MG 27 Vol 9 No 4, Halifax Explosion Collection, Reminiscence of Jean Holder, 6 Dec 1985. Holder’s rank and unit have not been determined.

## Garrison Response to the Halifax Explosion

Because of the funeral detail, Holder's father was staying with his wife and six children on Cunard Street on the morning of 6 December. Their home was severely damaged but no one was injured.

Another soldier from McNab's Island was not so lucky. Five months shy of his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, Sapper Claudin Gaudet of 1<sup>st</sup> Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, was in Halifax, on a day pass from Ives Point Battery; his greatcoat was found draped over a dead infant. In the pocket was a letter from his brother Sylvain relating the latter's experiences in the trenches. "Stay in Halifax" his brother wrote, "this war is no picnic."<sup>67</sup> Claudin's remains were returned to his home village in St. Joseph, NB.

The 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Princess Louise Fusiliers were stationed at York Redoubt for the duration of the war. Stuart Hunt reports that this unit, led by Commanding Officer Lt-Col. R. B. Simmonds, "played a prominent part in relief work." Lt-Col. Simmonds "was in command of all military and naval relief parties engaged in rescue work in the devastated area." Later on he was tasked with providing "food, clothing and shelter for the families of all soldiers who had suffered in the explosion." Simmonds also supervised the work of "a large number of mechanics" who made repairs to 160 houses in Halifax.<sup>68</sup>

Sometimes soldiers provided relief in unexpected ways. Louis W. Collins (1922-2007) was a high school principal, Order of Canada recipient and Halifax's honorary civic historian. In the late 1970s he spoke with Cheryl Lean about his family's experiences during and after the explosion. The Collins family home was on Liverpool Street:

As evening fell, our cellar housed some five adults and three children [including a]... neighbour's pregnant wife and her children. This woman had been in a state of shock from the mement [sic] of the Explosion. A section of a ship's anchor had cut through the roof of her house next door and had passed through the floor of the bedroom where she had been standing a moment earlier and had finally embedded itself in the cellar floor. Her husband was stationed with the Army at York Redoubt... His requisitions of Army supplies helped to maintain the little community that huddled together for warmth through the stormy days and nights that followed

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<sup>67</sup> Kitz, "The Explosion Mortuary Artifacts" in Ruffman & Howell, *Ground Zero*, p. 24. Original letter is in French, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic Accession No.: M87.2.139 C. MMA also holds a second letter from Claude's cousin Agathe, Acc. No. M87.2.139 D and his leave pass, Acc. No. M87.2.139 E. Mortuary records give Gaudet's first name as "Claud" however he appears in the 1901 Dominion Census as two-year-old son Claudin of Philias and Eva Gaudet of Memramcook West, NB. His grave was photographed for this project (see Appendix). Claudin's brother survived WWI; he died in Waltham, Massachusetts in 1963. See NARA Washington, D.C. Index to Naturalization Petitions and Records of the U.S. District Court, 1906-1966, and the U.S. Circuit Court, 1906-1911, for the District of Massachusetts Microfilm Serial M1545 Microfilm Roll 55; NARA World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942 State Headquarters Massachusetts Microfilm Series M2090.

<sup>67</sup> Hunt, p. 261.

<sup>68</sup> Hunt, p. 261.

until the houses were habitable again. Army issue jam long remained a vivid memory for some of those survivors.<sup>69</sup>

While Composite Battalion troops were tasked with searching for survivors, clearing debris, and patrolling the devastated area, the grim task of burying the dead fell to others. An early winter storm hampered rescue operations on the day after the explosion, nevertheless “men of the Garrison Artillery were brought in...from the outforts and assigned to various duties,” one of which was “digging graves in the cemeteries.”<sup>70</sup> Military members were also called upon to perform the “sadly essential tasks of...mortuary workers, most of whom were soldiers or volunteers, not professionals.”<sup>71</sup>

Infantry instructor Ken MacLeod was one of the soldiers who tended corpses in the makeshift morgue in the basement of the Chebucto Road school. “[T]he job we had [was] cleaning the faces of the dead” so that relatives and friends could more easily identify them, MacLeod recalled in a 1983 interview. “And there were some awful sights there, too,” he added. “Some of them, wasn't much of a face on them.” As Janet Kitz observes, such a task would be “difficult and distressing” for anyone, but MacLeod, in typical soldierly fashion, simply chalked it up to “dirty work.” Whether due to a sympathetic commander or merely the abnormal disruption to routine orders, MacLeod says that they were given three days’ leave after spending one day at the morgue.<sup>72</sup>

Although troops “were not relieved from the gruesome duty of removing bodies until January 11, 1918,” a mass funeral was held for 95 unidentified dead on the afternoon of 17 December. While “the band of the Princess Louise Fusiliers played the funeral march,” 3,000 mourners gathered at the Chebucto Road school as “soldiers carried the caskets, each surmounted by a wreath, from the mortuary and laid them in rows.” More funerals were to follow, with interments in Fairview Cemetery for the Protestants and Mount Olivet Cemetery for the Roman Catholics. The final toll of unclaimed bodies at

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<sup>69</sup> Louis W. Collins, “Reflections on the Halifax Explosion of 1917” in *Halifax 09:06, December 6, 1917 a photo-documentation of the Halifax explosion*. Halifax, N.S.: West House Museum, 1977. Nova Scotia Archives library reference F5249 H173 W516.

<sup>70</sup> Metson, p. 38.

<sup>71</sup> Kitz, *Shattered City*, p. 107.

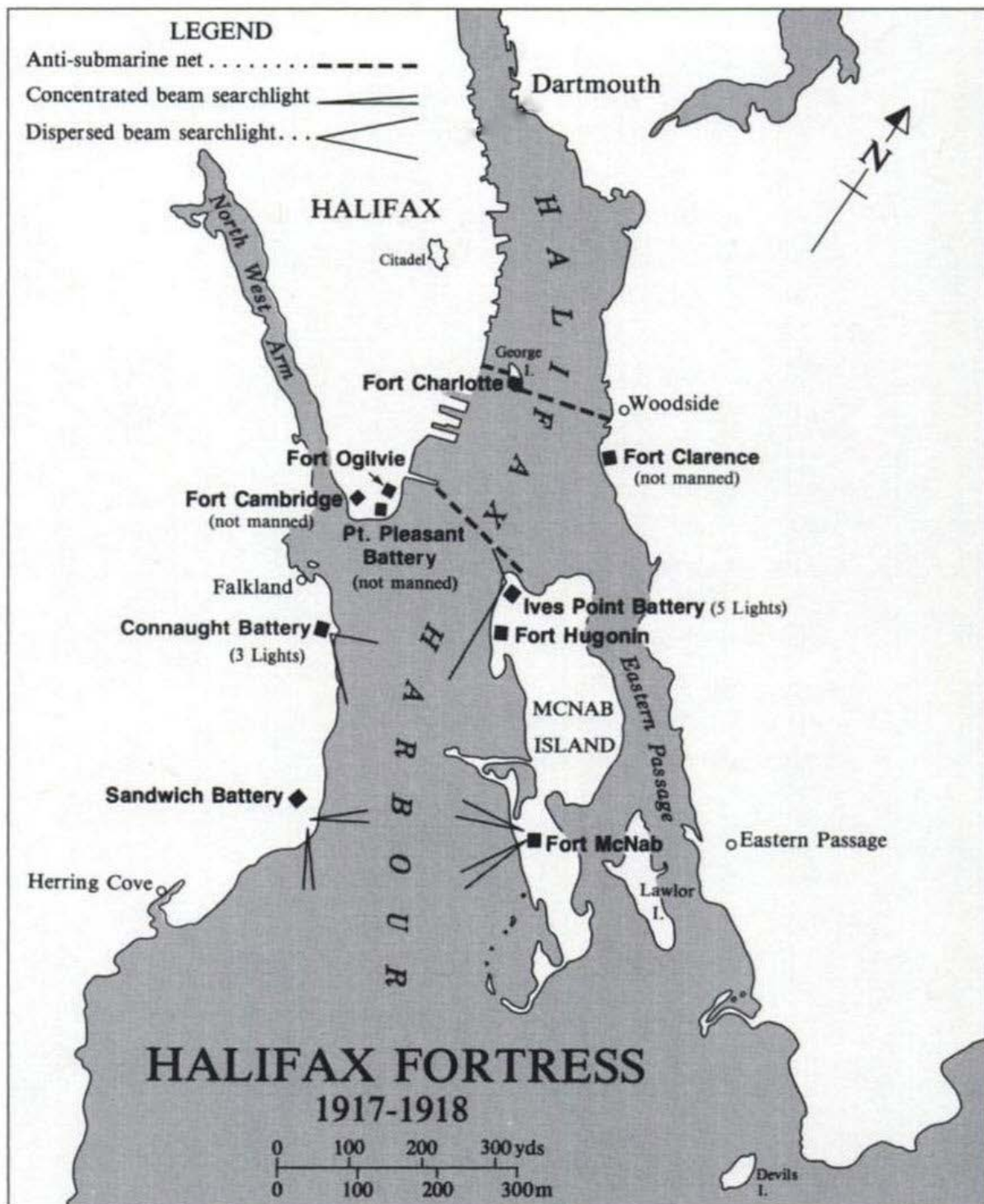
<sup>72</sup> “The Halifax Explosion & Going to Siberia.” *Cape Breton’s Magazine* Issue 34 (1983), p. 8. Sergeant MacLeod served with the 206th Battalion, C.E.F., in Siberia and was called up again in the Second World War. See Bonnie Thornhill and W.J. MacDonald, eds. *In the Morning: Biographical Sketches of the Veterans of Victoria County, Cape Breton* (Cape Breton University Press, 1999), p. 141.

## Garrison Response to the Halifax Explosion

the Chebucto Road mortuary was 150, however workmen continued to find remains as the rubble was cleared away weeks and even months later.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Kitz, *Shattered City*, pp. 108, 112.



Harbour defences and the Halifax fortress, 1917-1918. [DHist/DND]

SOURCE: Hadley, Huebert & Crickard, eds. *A Nation's Navy* (1998), xiv.

Fig. 1. Halifax Fortress, 1917-1918

## RECOVERY

An American volunteer from Philadelphia recounted his experiences searching for bodies in the Collapsed InterColonial Railway station on North Street. He reported seeing disabled soldiers among the dead and wounded who he believed were returned men from overseas, however special trains used for that purpose were not in the station that day.

Footage shot by official military photographer MacLaughlan shows soldiers marching in the devastated area with what looks like either shovels or shouldered rifles – presumably they were part of a recovery or security detail.<sup>74</sup>

The critical first hours after the explosion were burdensome enough on military personnel searching through debris, recovering bodies, putting out fires, etc., but the long process of reconstruction also began literally within hours of the catastrophe. Army Engineers made emergency repairs to the Military Hospital on Cogswell St., to Rockhead quarantine hospital in the north end, and a third hospital at Chain Lakes. Military engineers also took over a sash & door factory in Windsor “in order to rush windows to Halifax.” Civil and military telegraph lines were repaired, all coal and oil stoves that could be found were confiscated, and repair parties fanned out across the peninsula to restore telephone and electrical services. Modifications were made at Chebucto Road School so that it could be used as a morgue, and Pier 2 underwent emergency repairs “as this accommodation was urgently required.” It was reported that all military and civil telephone lines in the city except for Rockhead hospital were virtually fully restored by Sunday morning, December 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>75</sup>

Official records reveal the remarkable response from other Military Districts in Canada, notably No. 7 (New Brunswick), MD 5 (Quebec) and MD 2 (Ontario). For example, MD 7 in Saint John sent 2,500 blankets to Halifax on his own authority just nine hours after the explosion.<sup>76</sup> Soon after, Chief of General Staff Gwatkin ordered GOC’s of Military Districts 5 and 7 “to do anything they can to help” Halifax.<sup>77</sup> On Dec 11<sup>th</sup>, MD 7 sent 70 stretchers, 1,000 straw mattresses (“palliassees”), 15,000 sheets and 1,500 pillow cases.<sup>78</sup> The Federal Minister of Public Works insinuated that the Militia had not done all it could, but General Fiset retorted that the “Militia Department has anticipated every demand made on it

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<sup>74</sup> W.G. MacLaughlan NSA Accession no. 1984-36 Film no. Fb 16; available online at <http://www.novascotia.ca/nsarm/virtual/explosion/macLaughlan.asp> The clip “Scene no. 1” is captioned “people walking in devastated area.”

<sup>75</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 1 Brig-Gen Ashton to Deputy Minister, Militia & Defence, 15 Dec 1917.

<sup>76</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ 71-26-99 Vol 1. GOC MD 7 to Militia HQ, Ottawa, 6 Dec 1917.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. CGS to GOC MD 6, 6 Dec 1917.

<sup>78</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 1 Brig-Gen Ashton to Deputy Minister, Militia & Defence, 12 Dec 1917.



to date...as regards engineers, bakers, glaziers [i.e., tradesmen specializing in working with glass], army medical supplies, ordnance and all others.” Fiset went on to state that “[s]pecial officers representing every branch of the service were sent to Halifax [on] same date as disaster.”<sup>79</sup>

Less than a week after the disaster, Halifax Supplies & Transport informed Ottawa that they had sufficient supplies on hand to feed 850 civilians plus troops until the end of January 1918 “on existing contracts.” The only urgent request was for motor transport; Halifax desperately needed five three-ton trucks, two touring cars and five mechanics to service them.<sup>80</sup> Ottawa replied that all available Mechanical Transport equipment was already on its way to Halifax: three ambulances, fifteen trucks, a car and a detachment of 40 mechanics.

### RELIEF

The most extensive military response to the disaster came in the form of medical services, both in the immediate aftermath and in the weeks following the explosion. Four AMC medical officers and twelve orderlies from Military District 4 entrained at Montreal for Halifax on Saturday evening, December 8<sup>th</sup>. Within 48 hours, 34 Medical Officers, 54 Nursing Sisters and 26 Other Ranks from six Military Districts had either arrived in Halifax or were on their way there. Two hundred more other ranks already in Halifax “awaiting transport overseas” were seconded to medical relief. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Assistant Director of Army Medical Services in Halifax wired Ottawa with a request for “fifty more” medical orderlies. This request was immediately filled by Military District 2 in Toronto.<sup>81</sup>

Also on 10 December, Lt-Col. McKelvie (sometimes spelled “McKelvey”) Bell, A.M.C. C.E.F., was appointed head of the Medical Relief Committee to coordinate medical services between military and civilian agencies. His unpublished report in January 1918 to the Director General of Medical Services in Ottawa is a key piece of evidence, although it differed in some respects from the so-called final report submitted to the Halifax Relief Commission by Dr David Fraser Harris of Dalhousie University.<sup>82</sup> The latter report was intended to supersede Lt-Col. Bell’s interim report, but it was never published or even made public. Its contents are discussed in a paper by Dr John Murray for the Halifax Explosion 75<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 1, “Agenda having reference to action taken by this Department...”, p. 2: Wire, Gen Fiset to F B Carvell, 12 Dec 1917.

<sup>80</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 1, Brig-Gen Ashton to Deputy Minister, Militia & Defence, 15 Dec 1917.

<sup>81</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 1, GOC MD 4 to Sec’y, Militia Council, 8 Dec 1917; ADMS MD 6 to DGMS, Ottawa 10 Dec 1917; Adjutant-General to GOC MD 2, 10 Dec 1917; “Medical Officers, Nursing Sisters and Other Ranks who have proceeded, or are proceeding tonight [to] Halifax, Dec 10, 1917.”

<sup>82</sup> Lt-Col. Bell also authored a fictionalized account of the explosion, *A Romance of the Halifax Disaster* (1918).

anniversary conference in 1992. Harris's report was disorganized and not well received by the Relief Commission, however Murray noted that it contained good information that was used by other agencies to record their relief efforts.<sup>83</sup>

While Lt-Col. Bell is generally credited with leading medical relief from the military side, John Murray observes that the initial medical response was organized by Col. Paul Weatherbe, a military engineer. Weatherbe formed a medical relief committee after touring the devastated area on the morning of the explosion.<sup>84</sup> He quickly established dressing stations near the scene of the disaster, as well as a dispensary and a medical supply depot managed by the Red Cross at the Technical College. Joseph Scanlon, a Carleton University academic who specializes in the study of disasters, asserts that Col. Weatherbe "designed a medical response system that is still impressive when viewed in the light of all we know today."<sup>85</sup>

Be that as it may, it was Lt-Col. Bell who oversaw the military's medical response over the long term. In his report of 31 January 1918, Bell noted that the initial "brunt of the medical work fell...upon Cogswell Street Military Hospital." Even though it was "nearest to the explosion" and "greatly damaged," the hospital treated more than 400 casualties. According to Lt-Col. Bell, "No Military or Semi-Military Hospital at any time... [ran] short of medical supplies of any kind and the District Medical Stores were opened to all hospitals and first aid workers..."<sup>86</sup>

Interestingly, Lt-Col. Bell took exception to press reports "in local as well as U.S. papers" lauding the Massachusetts Medical Unit of the National Guard installed at Bellevue, the Commandant's residence at the corner of Spring Garden Road and Queen Street. The Unit arrived in Halifax on the morning of 8 December, and by nightfall moved into the residence "completely equipped from kitchen to operating room, stocked with food and medicines." Bell credited local units of Engineers, Army Medical Corps and Ordnance Corps who transformed Bellevue from an RCGA Officers' mess into a fully operational hospital

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<sup>83</sup> T.J. Murray, "The Missing Report of Dr. David Fraser Harris," in Howell & Ruffman, eds., *Ground Zero*, pp. 229-250. Lt-Col. Bell also published a fictionalized account of the explosion entitled *A Romance of the Halifax Disaster* (1918).

<sup>84</sup> T.J. Murray, "Missing Report," in Howell & Ruffman, p. 234. Weatherbe was a graduate of Royal Military College and the son of a former Chief Justice of Nova Scotia.

<sup>85</sup> HazNet Special Edition (Winter 2014) online newsletter <[www.crhnet.ca](http://www.crhnet.ca)>

<sup>86</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, "Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec. 6/17", p. 3.

in ten hours. Two days later, the AMC Training Depot outfitted the YMCA with 160 beds and a “complete X-ray outfit,” including the operator.<sup>87</sup>

Army Medical Corpsman Leslie Reid witnessed the explosion and took part in rescue efforts. Interviewed in 1983, he recalled being transferred from the Citadel to Wellington Barracks so that his unit could tend to patients at the tuberculosis ward on Pier 2. He and his mates were on parade when the explosion happened; although knocked to the ground with “all kinds of pieces of the ship around us,” Reid was unhurt. He spent the day driving a truck and taking wounded to the hospital:

We were taking them out of the married quarters—families of men who were overseas. They were all wounded and all smashed up. We were digging them out and taking them to the hospitals, all over the place. And some of them were so badly wounded from glass and other things, we just had to carry the four ends of the mattress... And the next day, we were taking glass out of their faces, and there was lots of crying and howling, as...medical supplies for killing pain were all used up.

When the emergency hospital opened at Bellevue on Spring Garden Road a few days later, Reid was posted there. He was the sole caregiver for a young mother who “had her head almost cut off” and her three-month-old baby. For four nights running, Reid stood watch from six o’clock to seven the next morning. Reid was relieved when nurses arrived from Massachusetts and Montreal to take over round-the-clock care, but he never forgot the experience. In 1983, he sent flowers to the woman he had watched over in 1917, just as he had done “every year” since.<sup>88</sup>

The imprint of those chaotic initial hours must have been equally profound for many others. In his general remarks, Lt-Col. Bell asserted that without the “coolness and rapidity” of the Army Medical Corps response, things could have been a lot worse:

...had such a disaster occurred in any port not well organized for relief work and without great military assistance, the number of deaths and the amount of suffering would have been tremendously increased. The populace were thrown into a greater panic by the announcement that a second explosion was to come.... [and] a large proportion of those injured ran away terror stricken...and left the whole burden of relief upon the military and the few hundreds of civilians who remained.<sup>89</sup>

Granted, the mass exodus lasted only a few hours, but Bell’s point is noteworthy: the military first responders remained at their posts at a critical moment and served as an example to others.

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<sup>87</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, “Intermediate Medical Report,” attached memo: “Special Report – Training Depot, A.M.C.,” p. 26.

<sup>88</sup> “The Halifax Explosion & Going to Siberia,” *Cape Breton’s Magazine* Issue 34 (1983), pp. 10-11.

<sup>89</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, “Intermediate Medical Report,” p. 8.

### AMC TRAINING DEPOT

The activities of the Canadian Army Medical Corps Training Depot on the day of the explosion are worthy of note. The unit – numbering more than 400, about half of whom belonged to a draft from Montreal – was on parade at the time of the explosion and suffered only minor casualties (seven injured). As already mentioned, Leslie Reid was there and he recalled seeing only one Corpsman hurt with a broken leg.<sup>90</sup> The uninjured NCO's and men were immediately organized into rescue parties and “cleared...the married quarters of the women and children”; “[e]stablished first aid stations at the Medical Inspection Room and the barrack entrance”; and “organized the regimental drums for rescue work.” The men were then engaged in general first aid work and assisting injured civilians and military personnel. Some Depot members were sent to Camp Hill and Cogswell Street Military Hospital, while others made their way to “the Victoria General Hospital, Y.M.C.A....[and the] Dockyard.”<sup>91</sup>

The magnitude of the medical crisis on 6 December becomes apparent when major hospitals like Cogswell Street and the Victoria General could not cope with the demand and authorities were forced to establish several emergency hospitals. Again, the military played a leading role. Camp Hill Convalescent Hospital was originally intended to serve disabled veterans returning from overseas; Harry Piers described it as “large but lightly constructed.”<sup>92</sup> It was quickly put to use; Colonel McKelvie Bell reported that the hospital – with a capacity of 280 beds – admitted over 1,400 patients the first day, “every patient being given at least a mattress...”:

The scene at this hospital was one which cannot well be described. Patients were brought in ambulances, carts, wagons, motor cars, or carried on the arms of friends and placed upon the floors in wards, halls, and offices until it was with difficulty that one could pass through the halls.<sup>93</sup>

On Christmas Eve 1917, Camp Hill still held 340 patients, more than any other hospital in Halifax that week. (The second largest hospital, the civilian Victoria General, accommodated 167 disaster victims on Christmas Eve).<sup>94</sup>

An American coastal passenger steamer formerly owned by Eastern Steamship Lines, USS *Old Colony*, happened to be in the harbour and escaped serious damage. With CAMC assistance, it was turned into a 150-bed floating hospital the day of the disaster with US Navy surgeons in charge. From December 9<sup>th</sup> to

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<sup>90</sup> “The Halifax Explosion & Going to Siberia,” p. 10.

<sup>91</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, “Intermediate Medical Report”, attached memo: “Special Report – Training Depot, A.M.C.”, pp. 25-26.

<sup>92</sup> Piers, *Halifax Fortress*, p. 63.

<sup>93</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, “Intermediate Medical Report”, pp. 2-3.

<sup>94</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 4550 file 86-4-2, “Halifax Medical Relief Committee, Daily Consolidated Report, 24/12/17”

the 11<sup>th</sup>, three more emergency hospitals began accepting patients in the south end of Halifax: at St Mary's College (100 beds), the YMCA (160 beds), and the Halifax Ladies' College (200 beds). The latter facility was operated by a medical team of twenty doctors and seven nurses from the State of Maine.<sup>95</sup> Under authority of the GOC, a train left Halifax on the 6<sup>th</sup> carrying 150 seriously wounded victims to Truro; an additional 150 patients were taken to New Glasgow on December 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>96</sup>

Just before Christmas, another emergency hospital was opened at the Waegwoltic Club on the Northwest Arm with a capacity of 70 beds. By the end of January 1918, only the Waegwoltic, Bellevue and the YMCA were still operational; all three were staffed by the AMC Training Depot.

Lt-Col. Bell's report also enumerated nursing services up to the end of January 1918, recording a total of 337 nurses participating in the relief effort. Surprisingly, only thirteen nurses were from Halifax – American units contributed 151 nurses, about a third of which belonged to the Massachusetts division of the American Red Cross. Canadian nurses numbered 211, of which 76 were military nursing sisters, mostly from Kingston and Toronto.<sup>97</sup> Most of the nurses – military and civilian – worked in the hospitals or at dressing stations, but a special detail also canvassed more than 2,800 dwellings over a four-day period, treating nearly 1,000 injured persons.<sup>98</sup>

Remarkably, according to Lt-Col. Bell, at no time except possibly on the first day was there a shortage of medical staff, on account of surgeons and nurses coming to Halifax "voluntarily from the surrounding cities, from the United States and from other parts of Canada." A striking example of this humanitarian surplus was a team of "fifty doctors and fifty-two nurses" who arrived in Halifax on December 10<sup>th</sup> from Rhode Island. Finding all hospital facilities fully staffed, they were assigned to go door to door in the worst-hit neighbourhoods "to see what patients were left uncared for in their homes or in the homes of friends." Having fulfilled this mission after two days, half the doctors boarded a train and returned to Rhode Island.<sup>99</sup> In addition to medical teams from Massachusetts, Maine and Rhode Island, an American Red Cross Unit from Boston received assistance from the Army Medical Corps in Halifax.

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<sup>95</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, "Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec. 6/17", "American Units" p. 14. It was reported that the Maine Unit brought its own equipment and treated patients within a few hours of their arrival." Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, "Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec. 6/17", p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, "Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec. 6/17", p. 17.

<sup>98</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, "Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec. 6/17", p. 18.

<sup>99</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6359 file HQ 71-26-99-3 vol 1, "Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec. 6/17", p. 5.

Another little-known aspect of the relief effort is the cooperation between military authorities and the Halifax Relief Commission in dealing with affected families and individuals in the months and even years after the disaster. The Military Hospitals Commission received many claims for assistance, some pertaining to injuries and others requesting aid in securing employment or vocational training.<sup>100</sup> Civilian claims were usually forwarded to the Halifax Relief Commission, but the Military Hospitals Commission Command and its successor, the Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-Establishment, also handled cases from time to time. Although the number of cases was relatively small, it does show that military involvement in the Halifax disaster did not end with the physical rebuilding of the city. It also suggests that there may have been some confusion on the part of explosion survivors and the general public as to the relationship between the Halifax Relief Commission and military authorities.<sup>101</sup>

### RECONSTRUCTION

The day after the explosion, Colonel Robert Smith Low was ordered by military authorities in Ottawa to undertake "emergency repairs and to provide temporary accommodation" at Halifax. Low was a natural choice for the job, having supervised construction of four army camps for the federal government: Valcartier near Québec City (1914), Camp Hughes in Manitoba (1915), Camp Borden in Ontario (1916) and Sarcee Camp outside Calgary (1916). He also knew Halifax, growing up there and joining his father's firm at the beginning of his career. The company Low worked for, Bate, McMahon & Co., was one of the largest firms in Ottawa.<sup>102</sup> According to Suzanne Morton, "Bob" Low was "[t]he single most influential person in reconstruction operations."<sup>103</sup>

As previously mentioned, orders and instructions began flowing from Low's headquarters in the Halifax Hotel on Hollis Street as soon as he arrived a few days after the explosion. The same day he wired Col. E.E. Clarke, Director of Transport in Ottawa for trucks and chauffeurs, Col. Low issued a public appeal to "all workmen, foremen, superintendents, timekeepers and other help who have been with him in the

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<sup>100</sup> The Military Hospitals Commission was created on 30 June 1915 (P.C. 1540) "to deal with the provision of hospital accommodation and convalescent homes in Canada." Renamed the Invalid Soldiers Commission on 21 February 1918, this was absorbed into the new Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-Establishment proclaimed on 24 May 1918 (8-9 Geo. V, ch. 42). [LAC website]

<sup>101</sup> Case files with respect to this subject may be found in LAC RG 38 Vol 155, files 8-489 vol 1; NCF vols 1 & 2.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Smith Low born about 1875 in Michigan but grew up in Halifax and began his career there in his father's firm. When called to Halifax he was employed by the Ottawa contracting firm Bate & McMahon. He died at Ottawa on 16 Jan 1919. According to the *Globe* he was buried in Halifax. Morton, pp. 81-82; Toronto *Globe* 17 Jan 1919, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Suzanne Morton, "The Halifax Relief Commission and Labour Relations during the Reconstruction of Halifax, 1917-1919," *Acadiensis* 18 No 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 81-82.

construction of different camps in Canada” to “report at once” to his company’s head office in Ottawa “if they are prepared to come to Halifax on reconstruction work.”<sup>104</sup> Soon “an army of carpenters, masons, plumbers, electricians and other tradesmen was mobilized”<sup>105</sup> under Low’s supervision.

Of course, reconstruction was not confined to replacing civilian housing. Just three weeks after the explosion, Maj-Gen Benson informed Ottawa that slightly over \$42,000 had been expended for repairs “to Military buildings damaged by the explosion.”<sup>106</sup> The greatest expenditure was to Wellington Barracks (\$10,800), where the heating, lighting and water systems in the Officers’ Quarters were “destroyed” and the roof, doors, windows and “a large portion” of interior walls were “wrecked.”<sup>107</sup> Other buildings also required major repairs, led by the Discharge Depot at Pier 2 (\$7,500); the two Military Hospitals, Cogswell St. (\$2,700) and Rockhead (\$2,600); South Barracks (\$2,700) and the Armouries and associated Huts on the Common (\$2,200). Compared with King’s Wharf (\$1,100) and Pavilion Barracks (\$800), Glacis Barracks survived relatively unscathed at \$350 in repair costs. Damage to the Citadel proper was relatively minor as well: the “New Block” incurred \$250 in repairs; \$220 was spent on Cavalier Barracks; and Citadel Casemates required \$100. Scarcely a military property on the peninsula escaped at least some damage. The least affected installations were on the harbour islands: McNab’s, George’s and Lawlor’s Islands incurred a cumulative repair cost amounting to a negligible \$73.<sup>108</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From the army’s perspective, they had reacted appropriately and competently to the crisis that befell Halifax on 6 December 1917. Maj-Gen Benson applauded his Staff and the “troops quartered in Halifax Fortress – they worked day and night to do all that was possible to assist all concerned in this terrible disaster.”<sup>109</sup> But not everyone agreed with this assessment. The day after the explosion, a staff officer in the Quartermaster General’s office notified the Officer Commanding the C.R.C.A. that “a number of men

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<sup>104</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 1, Col. R.S. Low to Col. E. E. Clarke, 9 Dec 1917; Toronto *Globe*, 10 Dec 1917, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> See NSA Virtual Exhibit “A Vision of Regeneration” <<http://www.novascotia.ca/nsarm/virtual/explosion/>>

<sup>106</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 2, GOC MD 6 to Sec’y Militia Council, MGO Branch, 31 Dec 1917.

<sup>107</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 2, MGO Branch to Minister, Militia & Defence, 14 Dec 1917, p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ 71-26-99 vol 2, GOC MD 6 to Sec’y Militia Council, MGO Branch, 31 Dec 1917.

<sup>109</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ71-26-99 vol 2, GOC to Militia Council, 15 Dec 1917.

belonging to various Units are walking aimlessly or loafing about the city.” He reminded the O.C. that all Officers, NCO’s and men not “on duty under proper authority” were to be confined to barracks.<sup>110</sup>

On the very day that Benson submitted his complimentary report, Minister of Militia & Defence S. C. Mewburn received a memo from his Parliamentary Secretary, F.B. McCurdy, expressing quite a different view. A wealthy Halifax financier who represented Shelburne/Queen’s County in the federal Parliament, McCurdy was campaigning in his riding when the explosion occurred. Hurrying back to Halifax, McCurdy heard reports questioning “the state of order, efficiency and character of services performed by officers” in Halifax during the emergency. Although no individuals or incidents were specified, McCurdy suggested that “every officer on active service here” and “the O.C.’s of every unit” should account for their actions and the disposition of their units on 6 December by filling out a detailed questionnaire. McCurdy requested authority to proceed and suggested that an inquiry should follow the gathering of questionnaires.<sup>111</sup>

Mewburn did not act on McCurdy’s proposals, nevertheless the memo does hint at an undercurrent of ill feeling toward the military not unlike the post-explosion campaign against the Royal Canadian Navy. As J.L. Granatstein wrote in the introduction to John G. Armstrong’s book on the subject, the RCN was “vilified by Haligonians and blamed for the disaster.”<sup>112</sup> However unfair these accusations were, the garrison was never tarred with the same brush. Why then is the Garrison’s response to the Halifax disaster such a muted theme in the popular mythology of the event?

Consider, for example, the annual memorial ceremonies at Fort Needham, the site of a commemorative bell tower overlooking ground zero. Aside from a representative from Maritime Forces Atlantic laying a wreath, the military context of the disaster and its aftermath is barely acknowledged.

The following passage from Halifax Regional Municipality website about the Explosion further illustrates the point:

*Not surprisingly, hospitals were unable to cope with so many wounded. There was also a desperate need for housing, and the misery was compounded by the blizzard that struck the city the following day, dumping 16 inches of snow over the ruins and their sooty, oily covering.*

*With astounding speed, relief efforts were set in motion. Money poured in from as far away as China and New Zealand. The Canadian government gave \$18 million, the British government*

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<sup>110</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 4538 file 9-6-2 vol 1, Major [illeg.] to O.C., C.R.C.A., 7 Dec 1917.

<sup>111</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file HQ71-26-99 vol 2, F B McCurdy to General Mewburn, 15 Dec 1917. A copy of McCurdy’s proposed questionnaire was appended to the 15 December memorandum.

<sup>112</sup> Armstrong, viii.



*almost \$5 million, but most Haligonians remember the generosity of the state of Massachusetts, which donated \$750,000 in money and goods and gave unstintingly in volunteer assistance through the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee. Nova Scotia sends a Christmas tree to the city of Boston each year in gratitude.*<sup>113</sup>

Despite the “astounding speed” accomplished mainly by military personnel, (Maj-Gen Benson noted in his report that civic authorities did not formally organize relief operations until three days after the explosion); despite the extraordinary logistical feat by military engineers of constructing emergency housing just hours after the explosion; despite the clockwork-like efficiency of Canadian Army Medical Corps units in opening emergency hospitals, including the one used by the Massachusetts Medical Relief team, there is no mention of garrison troops at all on the HRM website.

As infantry instructor Ken MacLeod termed it, soldiers did the “dirty work” of recovering bodies, fighting fires, transporting wounded, guarding property, and all the myriad tasks that needed to be done. The anonymous Irishman from Philadelphia who found himself in the Armouries when the explosion happened and who spent the day clearing debris at the Intercolonial railway station and the Richmond District concluded his recollection of the day on a sour note, stating “not as much as ‘thank you boys’ has ever come from any direction for the services rendered humanity there on that terrible occasion.”<sup>114</sup>

In May 1918 Maj-Gen Louis Jackson of the Royal Navy assessed the state of Halifax’s defences and made several recommendations for improvements and future contingencies. Describing Halifax as “a point of first rate importance in the Imperial Military System,” Jackson warned that Halifax might well be attacked due to the “development of submarine and aerial warfare.”

Maj-Gen Jackson was critical of Halifax’s military infrastructure, stating that “the whole military machine” was not “designed... [to] work with the utmost efficiency and promptitude”:

The various military buildings are widely scattered... Many of the buildings are old and unsuited to modern requirements. The accommodation was quite inadequate before the war, and now, though it has been added to during the war at considerable expense by structures of a temporary character,...most of the buildings that have recently been put up, must be pulled down within a very few years because they are on common land. The wharfage and attached stores and offices are situated where there is no possibility of extension, at a distance from the barracks and with bad approaches.<sup>115</sup>

Given these apparent shortcomings from a military point of view, it seems even more remarkable that the Halifax Garrison was able to respond to the catastrophe of 6 December 1917 as speedily and

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<sup>113</sup> <https://www.halifax.ca/halifaxexplosion/>

<sup>114</sup> Anonymous, “My Experience in the Halifax Disaster,” LAC R5570-0-3-E Vol. 1 (MIKAN No. 102440).

<sup>115</sup> LAC RG 24 Vol 2323 file HQS-66 vol 10 “Halifax Reconstruction” 31 May 1918.

## Garrison Response to the Halifax Explosion

efficiently as it did. Civil order was maintained, there was no widespread panic, and martial law was not declared. Within a week, normal operations resumed in the city, except of course in the devastated area.

It would take many years for Halifax to fully recover from the traumatic effects of the disaster, but for the Garrison, the explosion was in some ways their finest hour. Temporarily at least, the stigma of being home defence troops was forgotten, and they proved their mettle under conditions as trying as anything experienced by their battle-hardened comrades. Militia, Permanent Force and CEF units worked together and coordinated rescue, relief and reconstruction activities with amazing speed and efficiency. The military role in the Halifax disaster is a story that needs to be told if we are to fully understand what happened on – and after – that unforgettable day.

## SOURCES

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Library and Archives Canada

NOTE: The following list includes files consulted for this project, although not all were cited in the report.

Collection	File	Vol.	Description	Scope
MG 26-H	Sir Robert Borden fonds	<b>C-4325</b>	[MICRO] Correspondence re: Halifax Disaster	1917-18
MG 30-E90		<b>1</b>	Anonymous account related to the Halifax explosion, 15pp	n.d.
RG 6E	350	<b>621</b>	MICRO T-102; CHIEF PRESS CENSOR'S FILES	1915-20
RG 9 II-B-10	none given	<b>56</b>	Special Service Company, MD No. 6	n.d.
RG 38	N.C.F. Vol 1	<b>155</b>	Central registry files of Veterans Affairs	1916-83
RG 38	N.C.F. Vol 2	<b>155</b>	Central registry files of Veterans Affairs	1916-83
RG 38	8-489 Vol 1	<b>155</b>	Central registry files of Veterans Affairs	1916-83
RG 24	HQ-54-11-19	<b>372</b>	HISTORY OF WORK BY MILITIA UNITS AND DETACHMENTS ON ACTIVE SERVICE DURING THE WAR	1919
RG 24	HQ-54-21-4-136	<b>492</b>	NO 006 SPECIAL SERVICE COMPANY , HALIFAX , NOVA SCOTIA	1917-20
RG 24	HQ-54-21-4-168	<b>497</b>	006TH BATTALION , CDN GARRISON REGIMENT , M D NO 006 , BOXES 497 - 498	1918-23
RG 24	HQ-54-21-4-168	<b>498</b>	006TH BATTALION , CDN GARRISON REGIMENT , M D NO 006 , BOXES 497 - 498	1918-23
RG 24	HQ-54-21-8-60	<b>819</b>	STATEMENT OF NUMBERS , CEF	1918-19
RG 24	HQ-54-21-11-124	<b>853</b>	TROOPS OF PERMANENT FORCE , ACTIVE MILITIA AND CEF EMPLOYED ON GUARD DUTY IN M D 006 , BOXES 853-854	1917-18
RG 24	HQ-54-21-11-124	<b>854</b>	TROOPS OF PERMANENT FORCE , ACTIVE MILITIA AND CEF EMPLOYED ON GUARD DUTY IN M D 006 , BOXES 853-854	1917-18
RG 24	none given	<b>1034</b>	Military District 6 - No. 35 - Composite Battalion (Daily Orders)	1917
RG 24	none given	<b>1035</b>	Military District 6 - No. 5 - Composite Battalion - Details Company (Daily Orders)	1917-18
RG 24	none given	<b>1036</b>	Military District 6 - No. 5 - Composite Battalion - Details Company (Daily Orders)	1917-18
RG 24	none given	<b>1038</b>	Military District 6 - No. 5 - Composite Battalion - Details Company	1918
RG 24	none given	<b>1097</b>	Military District 6 - No. 3 - Special Service Company	1917/08
RG 25	1917-6342	<b>1210</b>	DISASTER AT HALIFAX	1917-39
RG 24	GAQ-5-55	<b>1825</b>	HALIFAX EXPLOSION	n.d.
RG 24	GAQ-8-15Q	<b>1832</b>	10TH HALIFAX SIEGE BATTERY	n.d.

RG 24	HQS-66	<b>2320</b>	HALIFAX DEFENCE SCHEME , BOXES 2320-2326	1903-38
RG 24	HQS-66	<b>2323</b>	HALIFAX DEFENCE SCHEME , BOXES 2320-2326	1903-38
RG 24	MD2-22-1-245	<b>4273</b>	HALIFAX DISASTER RELIEF	1917-19
RG 24	MD5-1-1-103	<b>4503</b>	HALIFAX DISASTER ASSISTANCE - GENERAL , VOLS 1-3	1917-18
RG 24	MD6-4-6-2	<b>4538</b>	HALIFAX EXPLOSION & FIRES - 6 DECEMBER 1911	1917-18
RG 24	MD6-86-1-3	<b>4547</b>	HALIFAX EXPLOSION - CASUALTIES , VOLS 1-2	1917-19
RG 24	MD6-86-2-1	<b>4548</b>	HALIFAX EXPLOSION - ENQUIRY REPORTS , VOLS 1-2	1917-18
RG 24	MD6-86-4-1	<b>4549</b>	HALIFAX EXPLOSION - RELIEF WORK - GENERAL, VOLS 1-4	1917-19
RG 24	MD6-86-4-2	<b>4550</b>	HALIFAX EXPLOSION - MEDICAL AID , VOLS 1-2	1917-19
RG 24	MD6-133-52-1	<b>4565</b>	ORGANIZATION OF SPECIAL SERVICE BATTALION NO 6 , VOLS 1-2	1916-18
RG 24	AHQ-71-26-99	<b>6358</b>	EXPLOSION & CONSEQUENT FIRE , HALIFAX	1913-17
RG 24	AHQ-71-26-99	<b>6359</b>	LIST OF OFFICERS & MEN WHO GAVE VALUABLE SERVICE - HALIFAX EXPLOSION	1918-32
RG 24	HQ-649-1-86	<b>6536</b>	SOLDIERS KILLED IN EXPLOSION AT HALIFAX	1917-18

Nova Scotia Archives Virtual Exhibits:

“A Vision of Regeneration” <<http://www.novascotia.ca/nsarm/virtual/explosion/>>

“The Royal Engineers in Halifax” <<http://www.novascotia.ca/nsarm/virtual/royalengineers/>>

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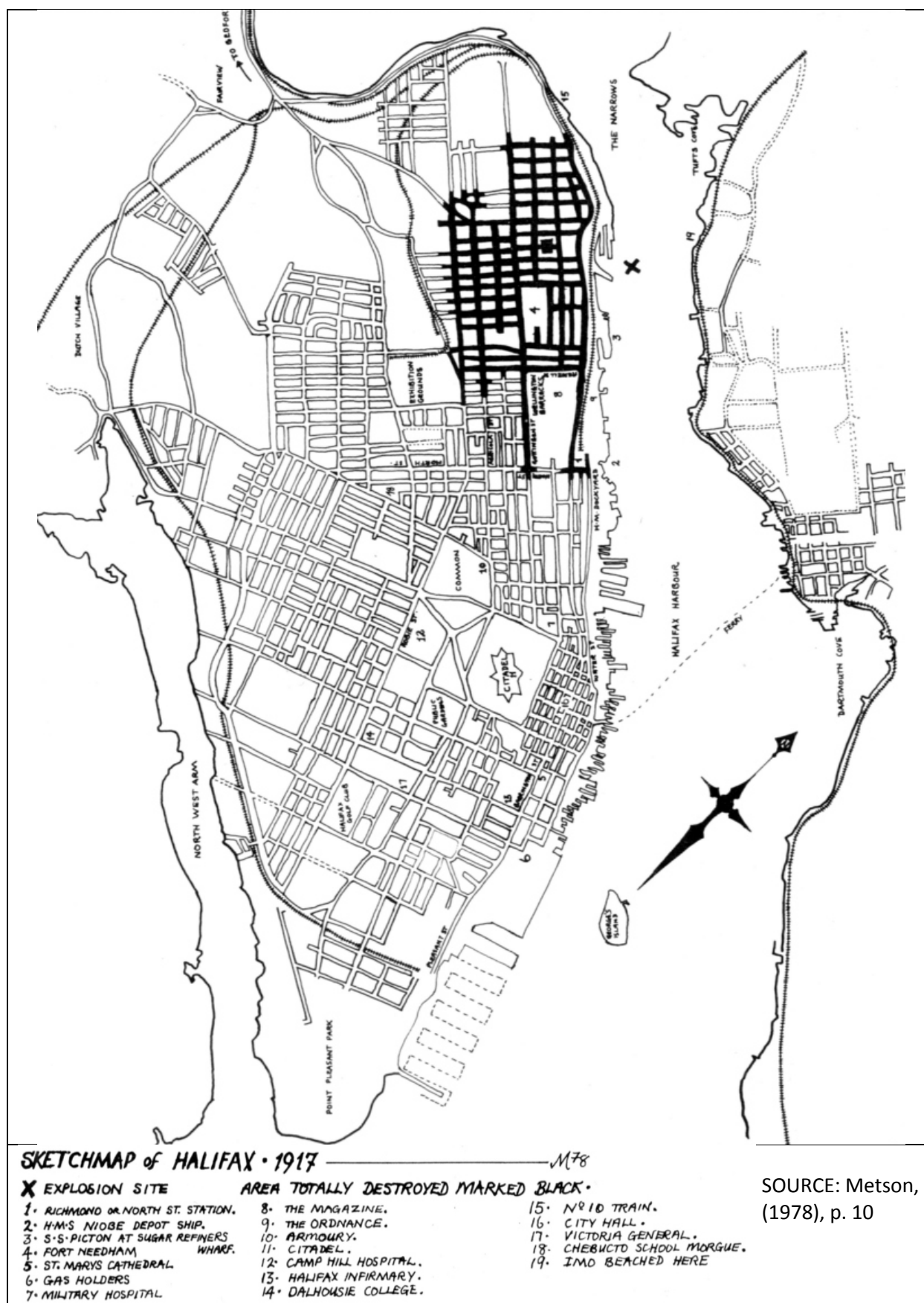
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## APPENDIX A: GARRISON RESPONSE TO THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION – IMAGES







1900 Halifax from Citadel LAC PA-118417 (Below) Postcard looking north from Grain Elevator (Pier 2)

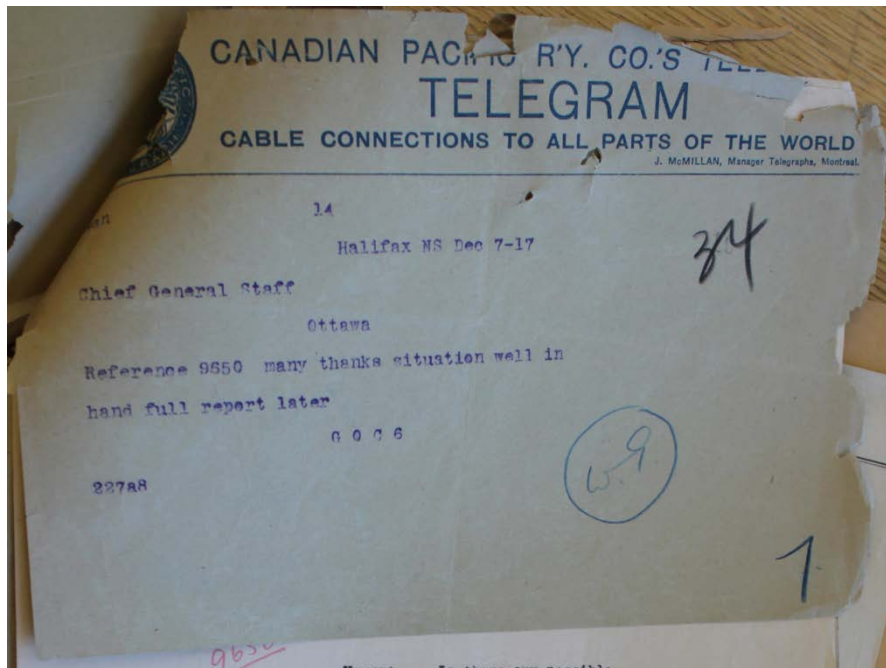






"Detachment No. 4 Company. 1st Regt. Canadian Garrison Artillery, Fort Charlotte, Halifax," 1914. Photo by Climo.  
 SOURCE: NSA Schooner Books coll. Neg. no. N-6963  
 (Below) *Ottawa Citizen* 11 Dec 1917 SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 3





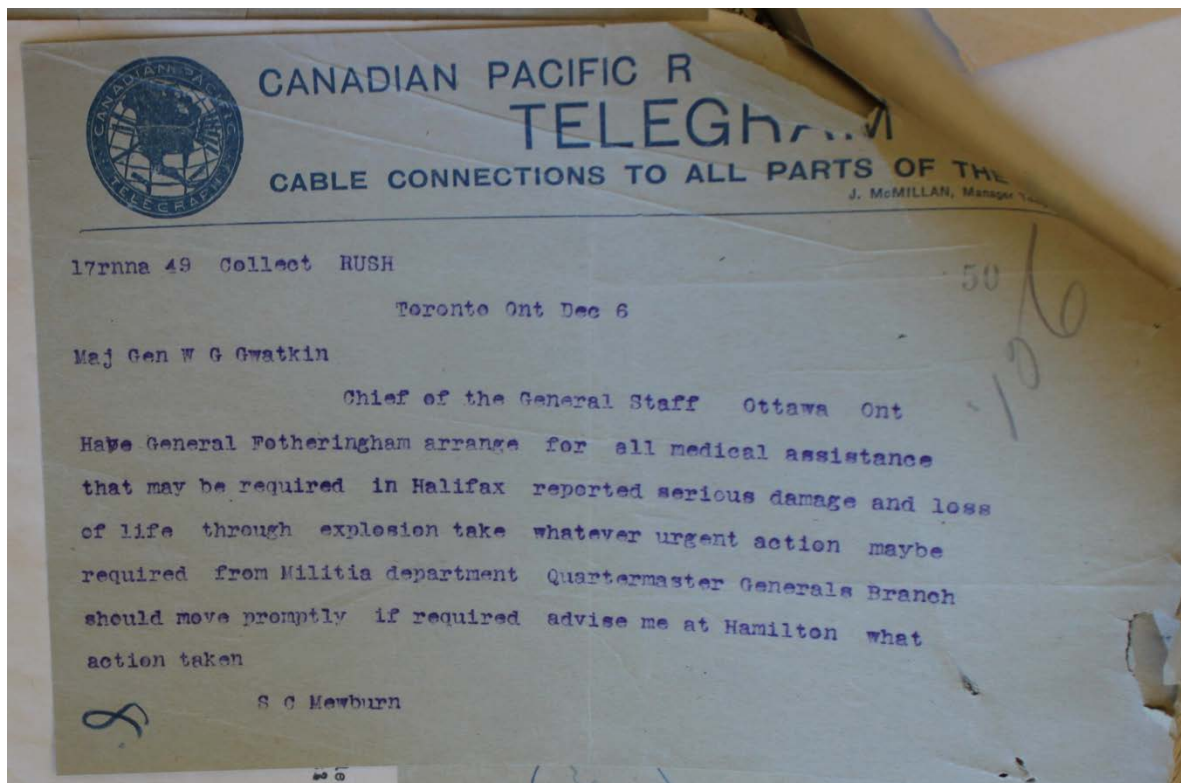
CGS Watkin's message the day of the explosion:

"Urgent. Is there any possible way in which Militia Council can assist?"

GOC Maj-Gen Benson's reply:

"many thanks situation well in hand full report later."

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 1



Telegram from Minister of Militia & Defence S. C. Mewburn to CGS Gwatkin, 6 December 1917.  
"take whatever urgent action maybe [sic] required"



CLASS OF SERVICE		SYMBOL
Message		
Day Message		W L
Night Message		N L
Night Letter		N L

If neither of these two symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

# GREAT NORTH WESTERN TELEGRAM

TELEGRAPH AND CABLE

Z.A.LASH, PRESIDENT	HEAD OFFICE, TORONTO, ONT.	Geo.D.PERRY, GENERAL MANAGER
---------------------	----------------------------	------------------------------

74.MO 0 115  
HALIFAX NS DEC 8-17

MAJ NORTON  
22 VICTORIA ST OTTAWA ONT

ARRIVED THIS AFTERNOON FOUND CONDITIONS BAD ALL NORTH PART OF CITY DESTROYED DEAD WILL REACH TWO THOUSAND WOUNDED FIVE THOUSAND STOP PIER TWO INTERIOR DEMOLISHED HAVE ARRANGED TO REBUILD AT ONCE SHOULD BE FINISHED IN MONTH STOP CAMPHILL ALL RIGHT FULL OF WOUNDED PINEHILL ASLO SENT OVER MEN TO SYDNEY ONEIL TOOK THEM TONIGHTSTOP NAVAL AUTHORITIES STATE THEY CAN HANDLE SHIPS WILL BE PLACED FOR US TO DO SO IT WOULD BE BETTER IF SMALL BOATS WENT TO STJOHN STOP TELL KIDNER ARTHUR WAS IN HAMILTON SO IS ALL

SOURCES: (above) LAC RG 38 Vol 155 8-489 Vol 1; (below) RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 1

## CANADIAN PACIFIC R.Y. CO.'S TELEGRAPH

# TELEGRAM

FORM T. D. 1

### CABLE CONNECTIONS TO ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD

J. McMILLAN, Manager Telegraphs, Montreal.

Halifax NS Dec 8th. 17  
OTTAWA:

Secy Militia Council,

Reference your 9855 if further assistance required will wire stop medical situation well under control stop please hasten medical supplies when ordered from time to time stop men for guard duties not required stop engineer end of it also under control stop return of killed and injured will be wired as soon as it is possible to give you an accurate reply.


G O C M D 6.

415pm

General Elliot.

123

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Day Message	Nite
Nite	N L



## GREAT NORTH WESTERN TELEGRAM

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Day Message	Nite
Nite	N L

Z.A.LASH, PRESIDENT      HEAD OFFICE, TORONTO, ONT.      GEO.D.PERRY, GENERAL MANAGER

---

101 MO 0 39 COLLECT

HALIFAX NS DEC 9-1917

MILITARY HOSPITAL COMMISSION

OTTAWA ONT


SITUATION HERE SERIOUS BUT BEING RAPIDLY GOT UNDER CONTROL CAMPHILL  
 RMXXX AND PINEHILL OF UTMOST USE AMERICAN AID NOW ON  
 GROUND MOST USEFUL SEEMS TO BE NO LACK OF SUPPLIES  
 HAVE NOT YET SEEN SHARPLES WILL WIRE AGIN TOMORROW

J S MCLENNAN

335P

(14)

(Above) "Seems to be no lack of supplies" (Below) "Big explosion here today...but none of staff hurt" SOURCE: LAC RG 38 Vol 155 8-489 Vol 1



## CANADIAN PACIFIC R'Y. CO.'S TELEGRAPH TELEGRAM

CABLE CONNECTIONS TO ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD

J. McMILLAN, Manager Telegraphs, Montreal.

a194 ra t 16 Collect

Halifax N S Dec 6-17

T B Kidner

Military Hospital Commission, Ottawa

Big explosion here today broke all windows and prevented work but  
 none of staff hurt

F. H. Sexton

753pm,

8-489

DEC 7 1917

ASST. MGR.

TELEGRAPHIC BRANCH

(21)





"Dead at Halifax" Bain Collection, Library of Congress LC-DIG-ggbain-25898 Call No. LC-B2- 4444-8  
Note two soldiers, Army-issue stretchers, and horse-drawn sleigh.



"The Duke of Devonshire, Governor-General of Canada, addressing Voluntary Aid Detachment staff after the Halifax Explosion" SOURCE: W.G. MacLaughlan. LAC C-00692 NOTE: Metson (1978) gives different reference: PA-30960 (p. 101). Circled officer is probably Lt-Col McKelvie Bell.



Maj-Gen Thomas Benson  
*War Book of Upper Canada College, p. 97*



Col W. Ernest Thompson  
*Hunt, Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War, p. 401*

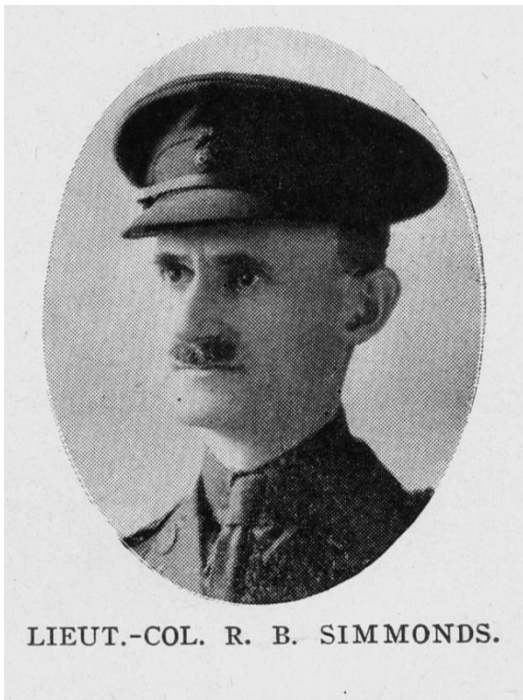


Col F. McKelvie Bell  
 Ernest J. Gillis collection, NSA neg. N-7142



*Ottawa Evening Journal, 16 Jan 1919, p. 1*





LIEUT.-COL. R. B. SIMMONDS.

LCol Simmonds directed relief parties in the devastated area  
 LCol LeCain's 21-year-old son died of wounds sustained in the explosion

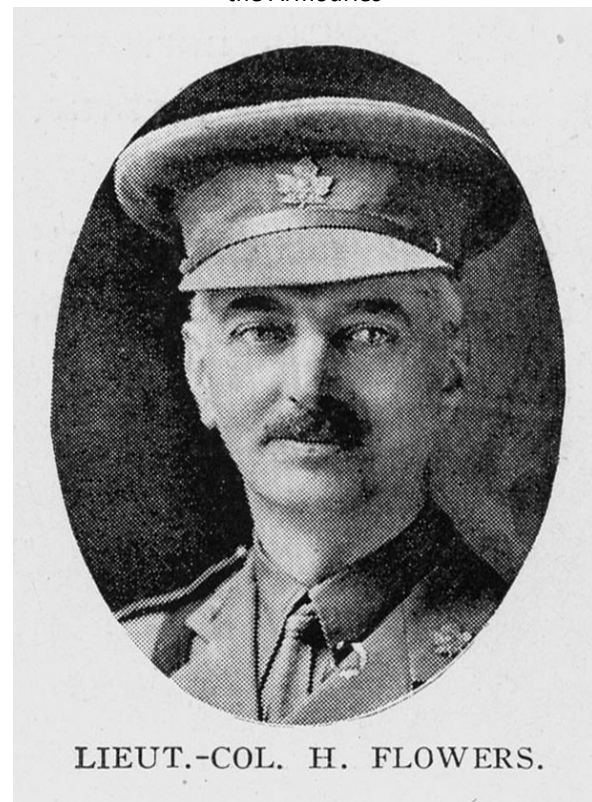


LIEUT.-COL. A. W. DUFFUS.

LCol Duffus commanded 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery  
 LCol Flowers commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Depot Battalion at the Armouries



LIEUT.-COL. G. A. LECAIN.



LIEUT.-COL. H. FLOWERS.

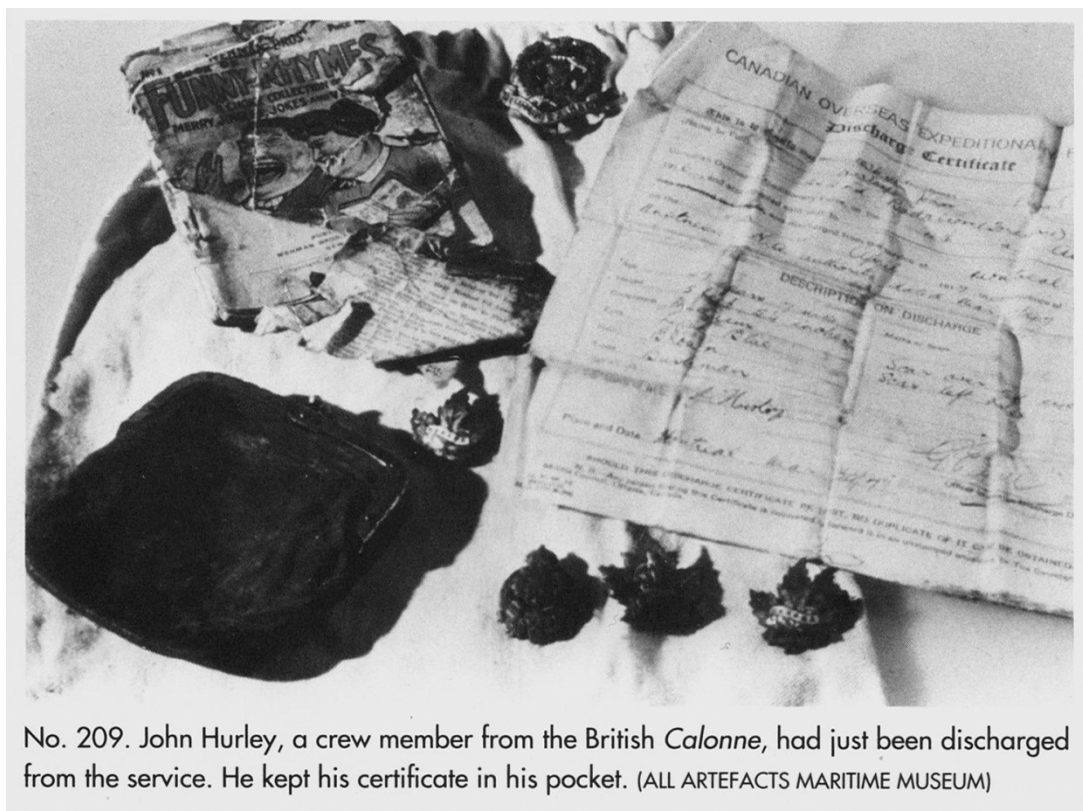
All images from Hunt, *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War*



Sergeant Ken MacLeod of Baddeck, NS was an infantry instructor assigned to wash bodies of the dead in Chebucto School morgue. (Right) Army Medical Corpsman Leslie Reid of New Waterford, NS tended to seriously wounded civilians in "Bellevue," the emergency hospital set up for the Massachusetts



National Guard Relief Unit. (*Cape Breton's Magazine*, issue 34, 1983)



No. 209. John Hurley, a crew member from the British *Calonne*, had just been discharged from the service. He kept his certificate in his pocket. (ALL ARTEFACTS MARITIME MUSEUM)

SOURCE: Kitz, *Shattered City*, p. 109





(Above) Military Headquarters on Pleasant St (now Barrington), foot of Spring Garden Road. 1928 photo taken after Imperial Coat of Arms was removed from portico and building was sold. SOURCE: NSA, "Army – General – Headquarters Office, Scan no. 201208044



View of Halifax from George's Island (Fort Charlotte), 1917. The rear of Military Headquarters (circled) can just be seen; the rest of the building is obscured by trees. The Academy of Music is large building just to the right; St Matthew's church on Pleasant St (now Barrington) is the shorter of two spires to the left. In left foreground, the Royal Engineers wharf. SOURCE: "Halifax – View of Waterfront" (detail) Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Library of Congress LC-USZ62-132355 Call No. LOT 11454 (



Massachusetts National Guard Medical Unit in front of "Bellevue", Dec 1917. SOURCE: NSA Nathaniel Morse coll. Neg. no. N-7079. (Below) "Bellevue," former residence of Imperial Commandant, corner of Spring Garden Rd and Queen St., prior to demolition in 1955. SOURCE: *Halifax Mail Star* 4 August 1955, p.1







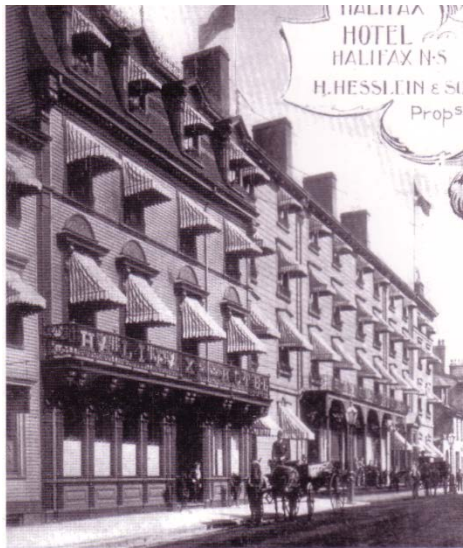
Group of officers and ladies at Fort Sandwich, Halifax, Nova Scotia, August 1907. Reading from left to right, the names are: Top row: Major K. D. Bell, R.A. (of Bermuda), Major J. A. Marshall, Capt. E. H. Robinson, Lieut. G. H. Maxwell, Capt. E. Flowers, Lieut. S. C. Oland, Capt. G. A. Daynes. Second row: Lieut. A. P. Boxall, Major Chas. Leigh, Colonel S. Wishart, Mrs. Minden Cole, Colonel C. W. Drury, C.B., Lieut.-Col. W. G. Hurdman, Capt. G. M. Campbell, Lieut.-Col. F. H. Oxley, R.O., Lieut. A. D. Macdonald. At right: The Earl of Stradbroke, Captain R. J. MacHugh. Sitting: Lieut. Hogan, Lieut.-Col. J. A. C. Mowbray, Captain C. D. Murray, Lieut.-Col. T. Benson, Mrs. Benson, Mrs. Drury, Mrs. Humphrey, Major H. C. Thacker, Major A. H. Macdonell, Countess of Stradbroke, Mrs. Hensley, Major G. W. C. Hensley.



Creator: Logsdon, Charles Joseph (1861-1931)  
 Title: Halifax. Officers & Ladies. Fort Sandwich  
 Date: August 1907  
 Extent: 1 slide: b&w ; (8x8.5cm)  
 Notes: From a set of two boxes of magic lantern slides depicting British Army volunteers in Canada in the early 1900's.  
 Rights Info: No known access restrictions  
 Repository: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

(Left) Lt-Col T. Benson and Mrs Benson





Col Bob Low established his headquarters at the Halifax Hotel two days after the disaster.  
 IMAGE SOURCE (Top left): Ruffman, *Titanic Remembered* (1999). (Above right and below)  
 Reconstruction Office at Halifax Hotel. SOURCE: NSA, Places: Halifax Explosion, Nos. 22 & 23  
 “Temporary Reconstruction Offices, Halifax Hotel” Photos by W.G. MacLaughlan.



One poster says: “We Shall Never Rebuild Halifax Unless Everybody Works”





(Above) Emergency relief hospital in YMCA gymnasium, Barrington Street. Three CAMC members at top right. SOURCE: NSA, Lola Henry collection, Acc. No. 1979-237.8. (Below) Soldiers unload ambulance at St. Mary's College which was used as a hospital. SOURCE: Bettmann/CORBIS







**Piers' notes:** No. 40. Wellington Barracks: Officers' Quarters, entire Southwest front facing Parade Ground; 1870. Looking East from North end of Block "C" Married Soldiers' Quarters. Doors marked ABCDE. Mess Room in centre.  
SOURCE: Royal Engineers NS Archives no. 6969 (Piers no. 40) / neg. N-4260



*Wellington Barracks - Officers Quarters*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



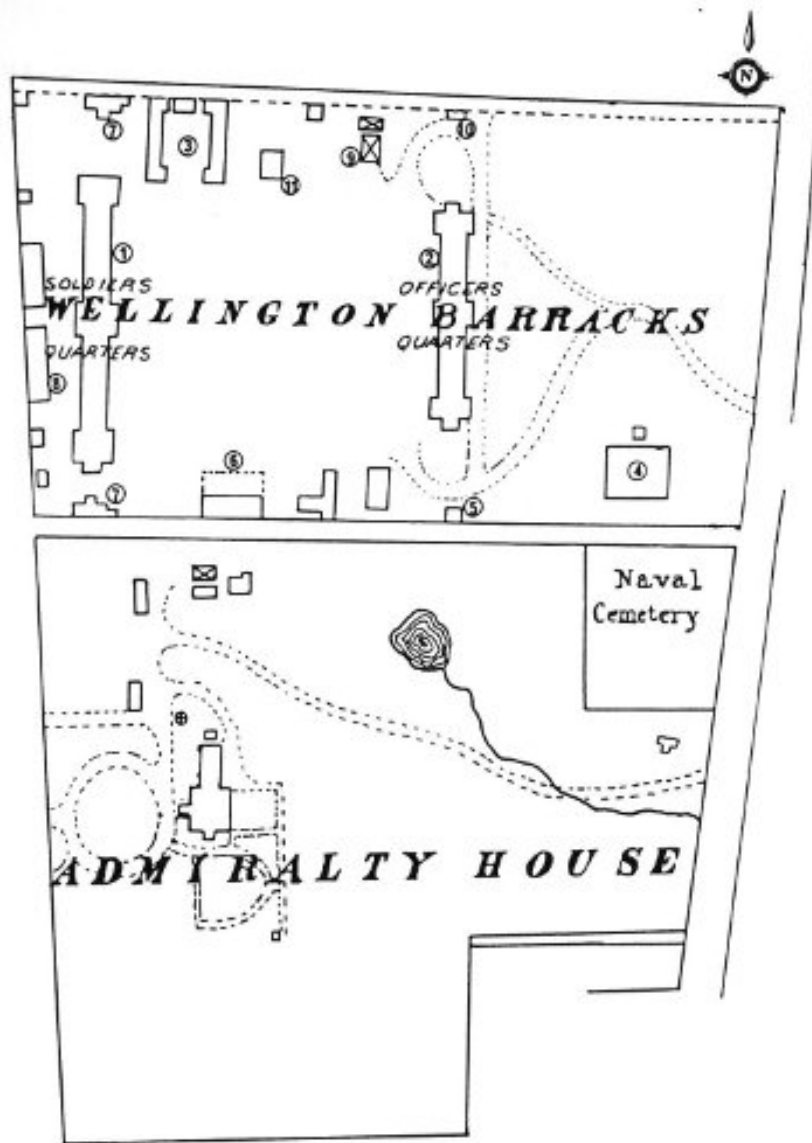


*Naval Hospital & Barracks*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2 (NOTE: Vessel at left in above photo is HMCS *Niobe* Depot Ship. Vessel shown below is USS *Old Colony*, which was turned into an emergency hospital by C.A.M.C. personnel.)



*H.M.S. Dockyard,*



Wellington Barracks circa 1890

Legend

- |                                     |                       |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. 'A' Mess (Soldiers Quarters)     | 7. Latrines           |
| 2. Officers Quarters                | 8. Main Gates         |
| 3. Married Quarters (finished 1887) | 9. Stables            |
| 4. 'C' Magazine                     | 10. Officers' Latrine |
| 5. Shell Store.                     | 11. Well              |
| 6. Coal Store                       |                       |

SOURCE: [http://regimentalrogue.tripod.com/blog/index.blog?topic\\_id=1128990](http://regimentalrogue.tripod.com/blog/index.blog?topic_id=1128990)



Wellington Barracks, Hopkins Atlas (1878) – Plate T (detail)





*Wellington Barracks. - Q. M. Stores & Fuel Yard.*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



**Piers' notes:** No. 277. Wellington Barracks: Quartermaster's Stores and Office, and Carpenter's Shop, of brick, 2½ storeys high, with later brick extension for Painter's Shop, Bread and Meat Stores, 1½ storeys high; roof of Admiralty House barn in right distance; the Coal Store is just out of view to left; at "southern" side of the Barracks property; 1880 or 1881. Looking East-southeast from Parade ground at Southeast end of Soldiers' Quarters. The main building is 23 feet high to eaves, and the extension 12½ feet to eaves. These buildings must have been erected sometime between 1878 and 1880.

SOURCE: Royal Engineers NS Archives no. 6976 (Piers no. 277) / neg. N-1480





*Magazine - North Ordnance*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



*R.S.I. - Wellington Barracks & Married Quarters*





*Married Quarters, Wellington Barracks*

SOURCES: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2; (Below): NSA Royal Engineers no. 6972 (Piers no. 200)



**Piers' notes:** No. 200. Wellington Barracks: Married Soldiers' Quarters, Block A, northeast front, of wood, 2½ storeys high with verandas; near Northwest end of Soldiers' Quarters; about 1878. Looking West-northwest from edge of Parade Ground.



**Piers' notes:** No. 385. Wellington Barracks: Married Soldiers' Quarters, Block B, back or northeast side, of wood with brick ends, in 3 bays, 2½ storeys high; with end of Soldiers' Quarters in left distance, boundary fence to right; date uncertain, (187?). Looking West-southwest, apparently from eastward of site of Block C, which could not have been built when this photograph was taken.

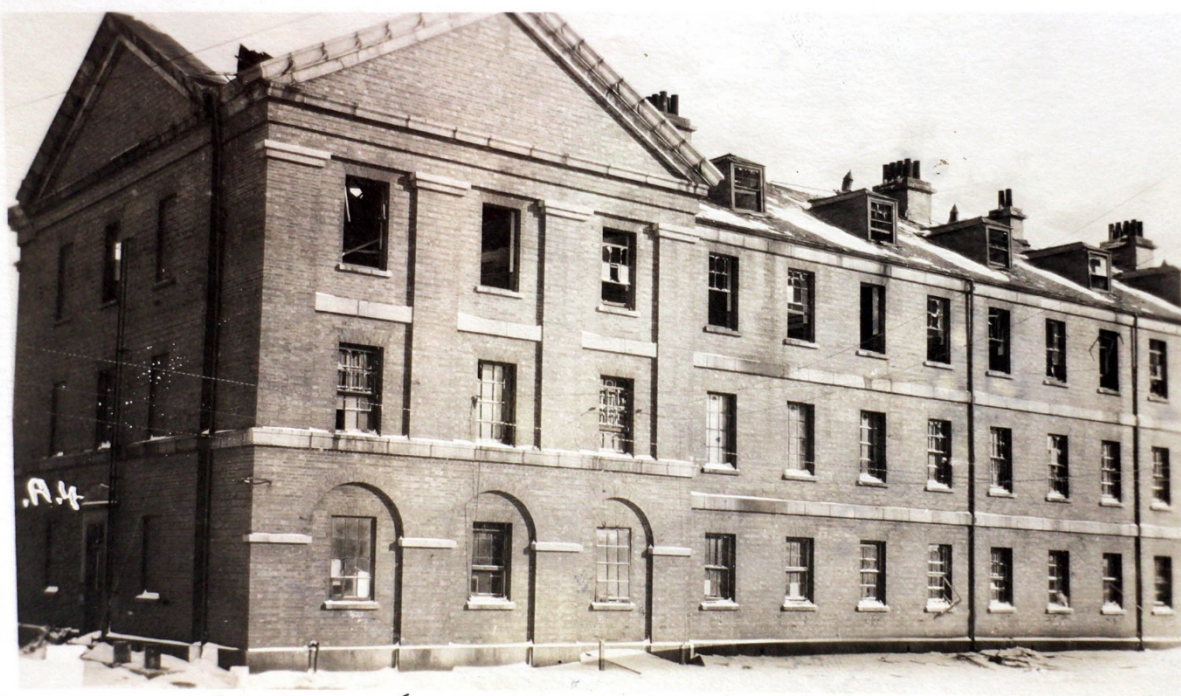
SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers no. 6974 (Piers no. 385) N-1483



Explosion damage, Married Quarters, Wellington Barracks  
LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2

*married quarters Wellington Barracks*





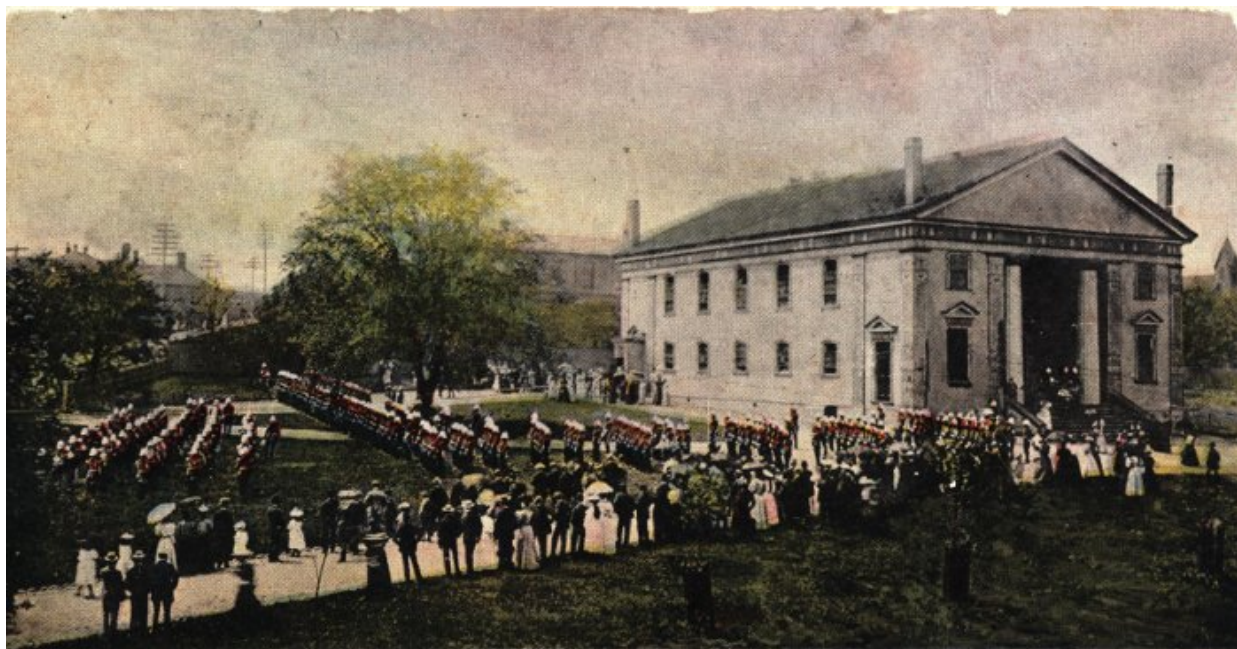
*Officers' Quarters, Wellington Barracks.*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



*Engineers' Yard, Wellington Barracks*





CHURCH PARADE, GARRISON CHAPEL

HALIFAX, N.S.

Warwick Bros & Rutter, Limited, Publishers, Toronto 1432

The Garrison Chapel served Imperial forces; a civilian congregation took it over after their departure and renamed it Trinity Anglican. The explosion ripped the entire roof off of the structure. SOURCES: (Above) Internet; (Below) LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2





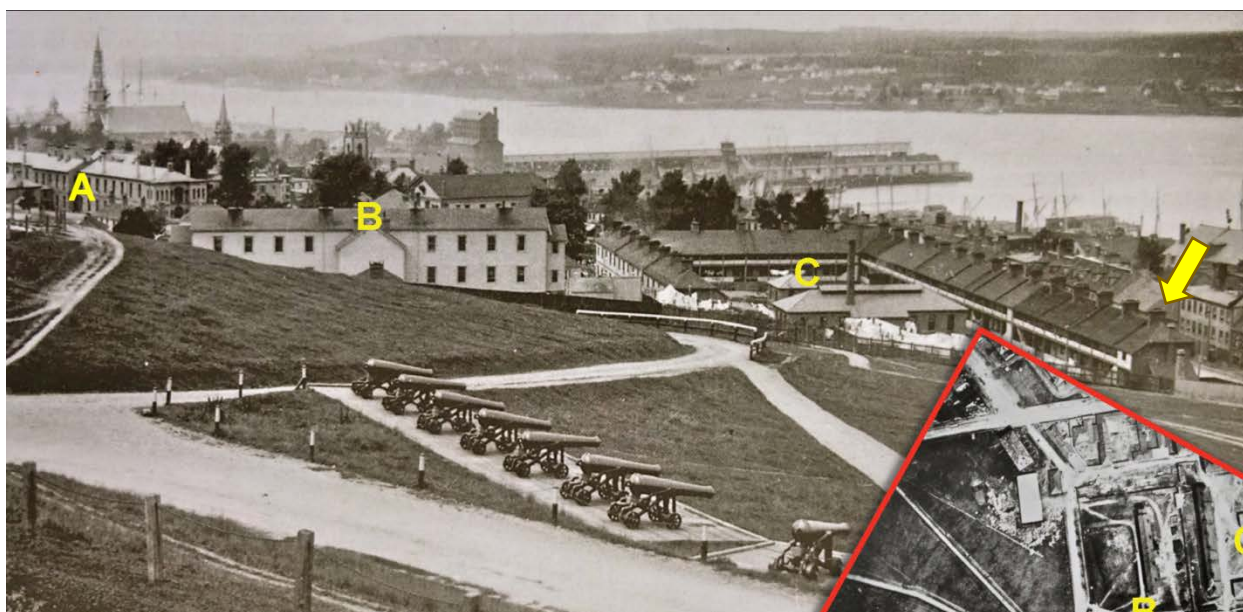


Garrison Military Hospital, Cogswell Street SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers no. 6899 (Piers no. 48) N-9386 (Below): "Transferring Stretcher Cases...to a Military Hospital Train" *Illustrated London News*, 5 Jan 1918, pp. 6-7 (NSA Newspaper Collection)



RESCUE WORK: TRANSFERRING STRETCHER CASES FROM AN AMBULANCE-WAGON  
TO A MILITARY HOSPITAL TRAIN.





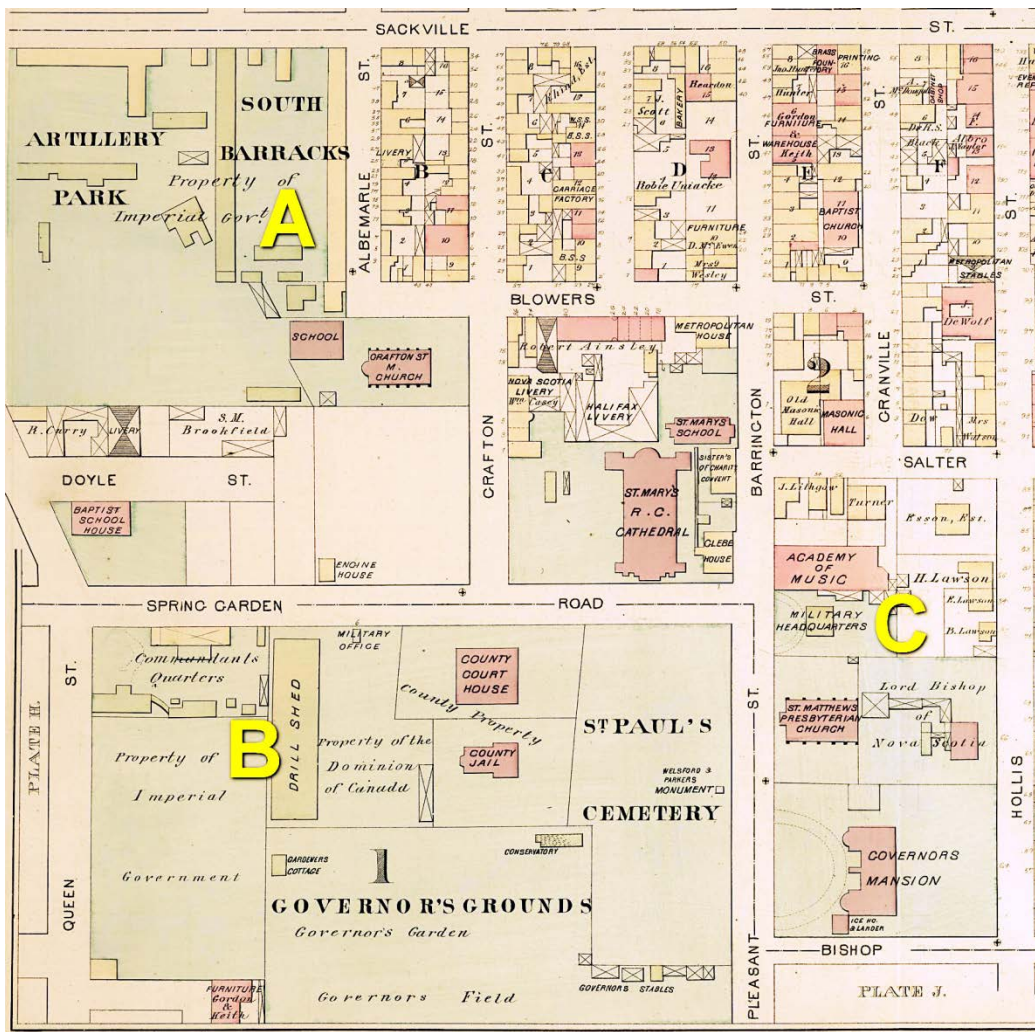
Military Hospital (A), Glacis Barracks (B) and Pavilion Barracks Married Quarters (C) in 1886 photo looking north from Citadel Hill. Pier 2 juts into harbour. SOURCE: NSA Notman no. 10196 N-6112. (Image adapted from Werle, "Revisiting Canada's First Aerial Photography of 1882/83" online Powerpoint presentation, Sept 2013)

(Below) Pavilion Barracks Married Quarters from Brunswick Street in 1876.

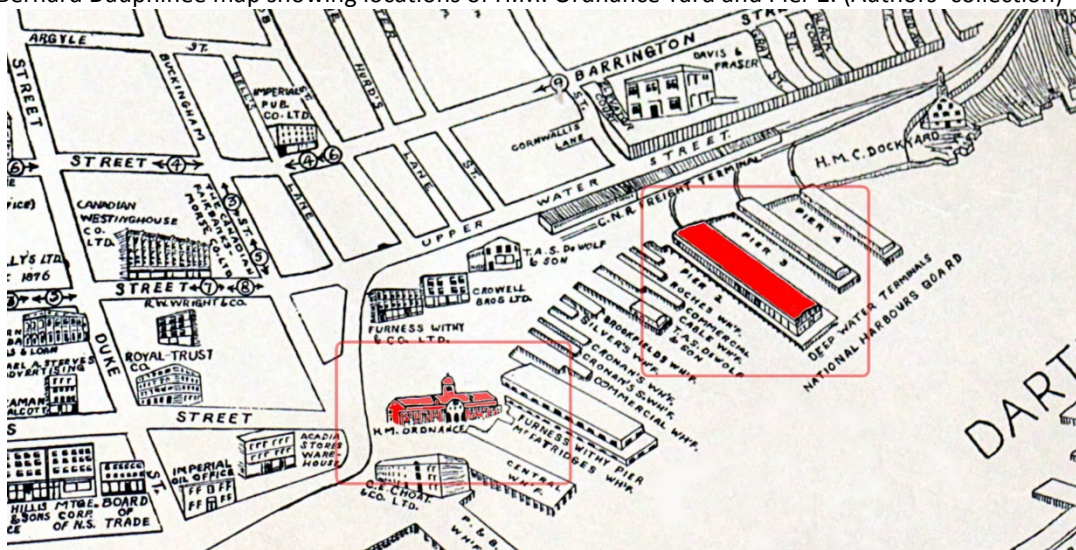
SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers no. 6945 neg. N-6438 (Arrows indicate southern end of building).

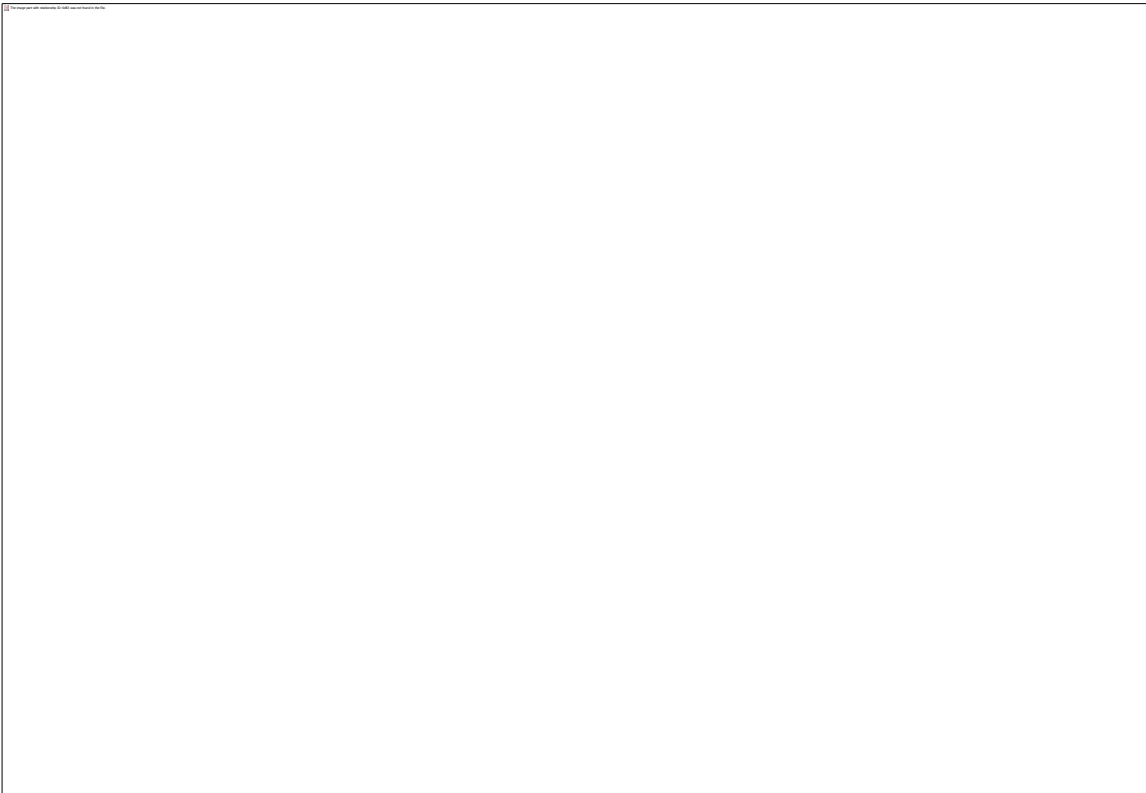






Detail of Hopkins Atlas (1878) showing South Barracks (A) at Artillery Park; WWI Officer's Mess (B) at "Bellevue," formerly Commandant's Residence; and Military Headquarters (C) on Barrington Street. Drill shed next to Bellevue was used by Militia prior to opening of Armouries in 1899. (Below) Detail of 1937 Bernard Dauphinee map showing locations of H.M. Ordnance Yard and Pier 2. (Authors' collection)





SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



**Piers' notes:** No. 49. Glacis Barracks, off Cogswell Street, showing both blocks; 1870. Show roadway from Gottingen Street up to Citadel; end of Guard Room (No. 188) at left. Looking East-southeast, from near back of "Ball Court".

Royal Engineers NS Archives no. 6895 (Piers





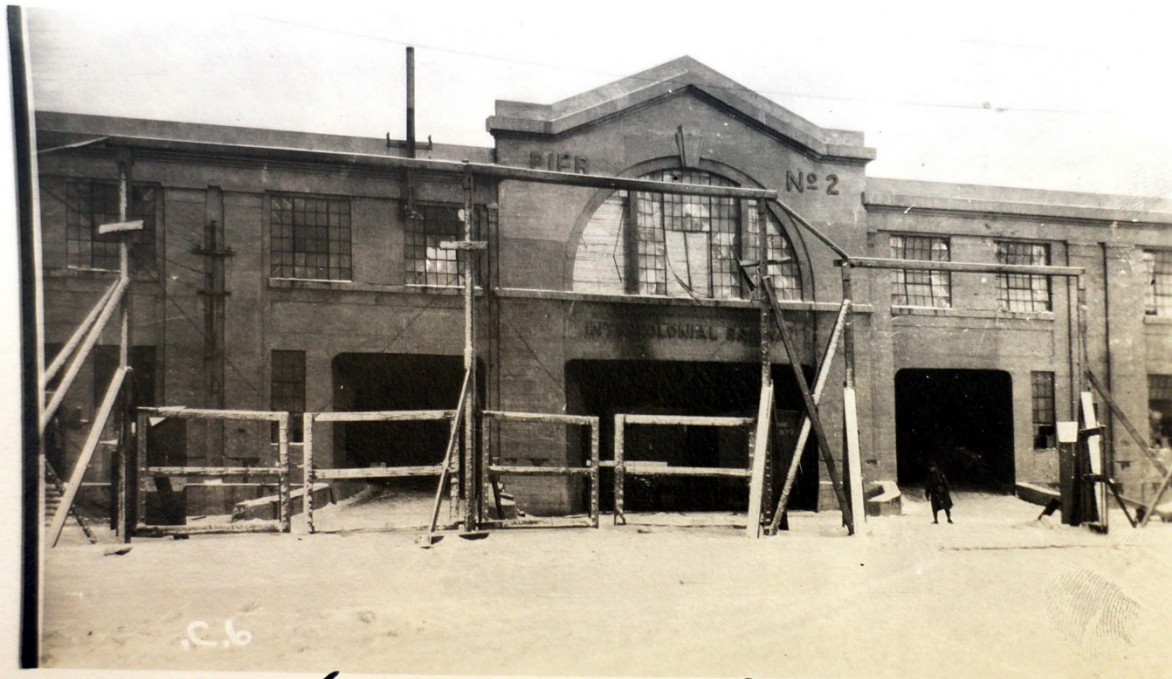
*Glacis Barracks - Married Quarters*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



*Glacis Barracks - Married Quarters*





*Entrance No. 2 Pier.*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



*Ground floor - Pier No. 2*





*Pier No. 2 - North side .*

SOURCE: LAC RG 24 Vol 6358 file AHQ-71-26-99 Vol 2



*South side - Pier No 2.*





"Aftermath of the Halifax Explosion 1917" NSA, Halifax Relief Commission Coll. #36, Acc. No. 1976-166 (W.G. MacLaughlan photo) (Below): "Scenes of havoc and rescue-work after the disaster" *Illustrated London News*, 5 Jan 1918, pp. 6-7 (NSA Newspaper Collection)





(Above) "Soldiers engaged in rescue work" DND photo / LAC / PA-022744

(Below) "Aftermath of the explosion" Library of Parliament Collection / LAC / C-001833

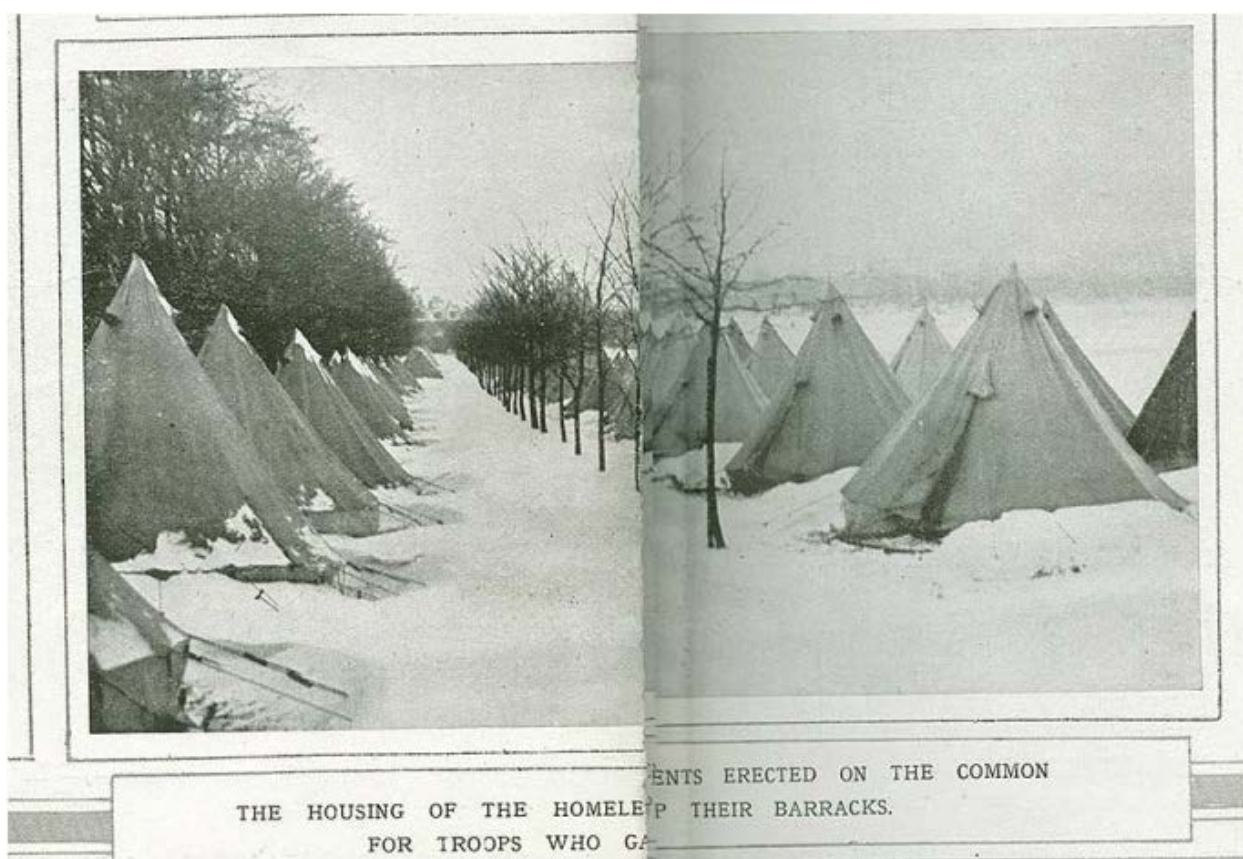






SOURCE: <http://escapingelegance.com/2013/12/06/remembering-the-6th-of-december-halifax-explosion>  
 [Original source/s not specified] (Below): Note soldier holding infant; photo by MacLaughlan.





"Tents Erected on the Common for Troops who gave up their Barracks" *Illustrated London News*, 5 Jan 1918, pp. 6-7 (NSA Newspaper Collection)

(Below) "Protestant Service at Funeral of Unidentified Dead, Dec 17, 1917" NSA Halifax Regional Library Accession no. 1983-212 (Cox Brothers photo)

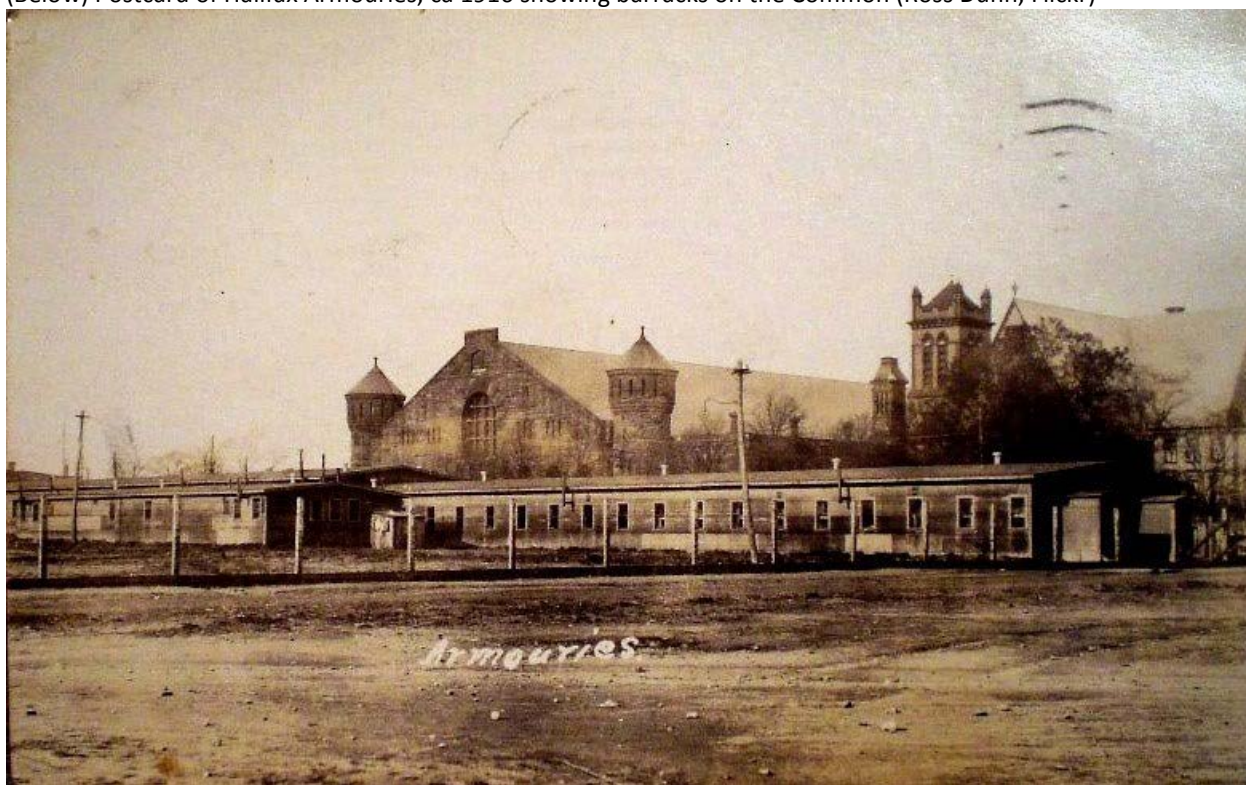


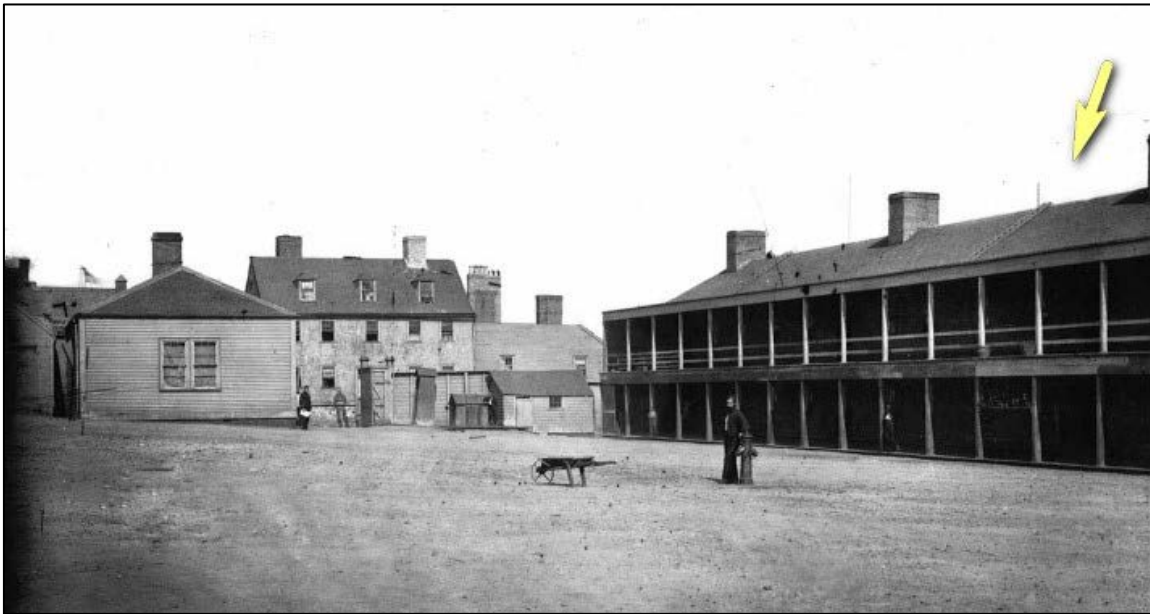




"People waiting for food supplies at Armouries," Dec 1917 NSA Nathaniel Morse Coll. N-7082. (Note broken windows)

(Below) Postcard of Halifax Armouries, ca 1916 showing barracks on the Common (Ross Dunn, Flickr)

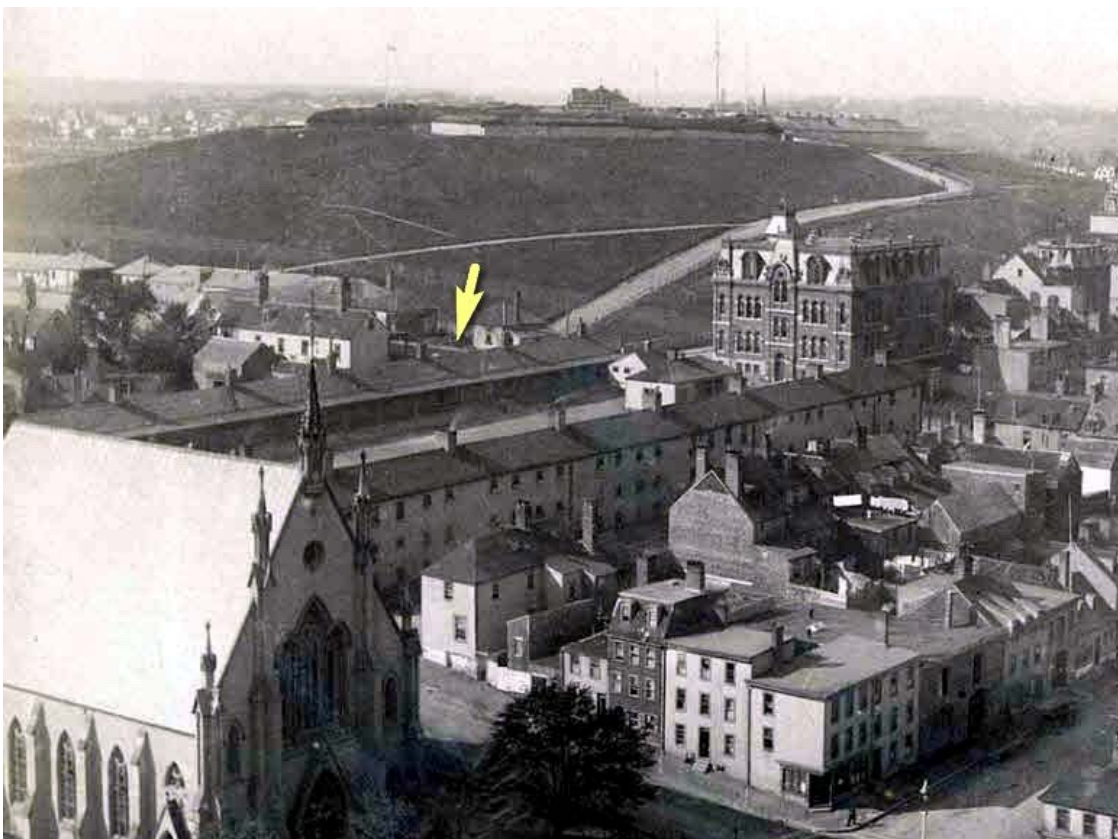




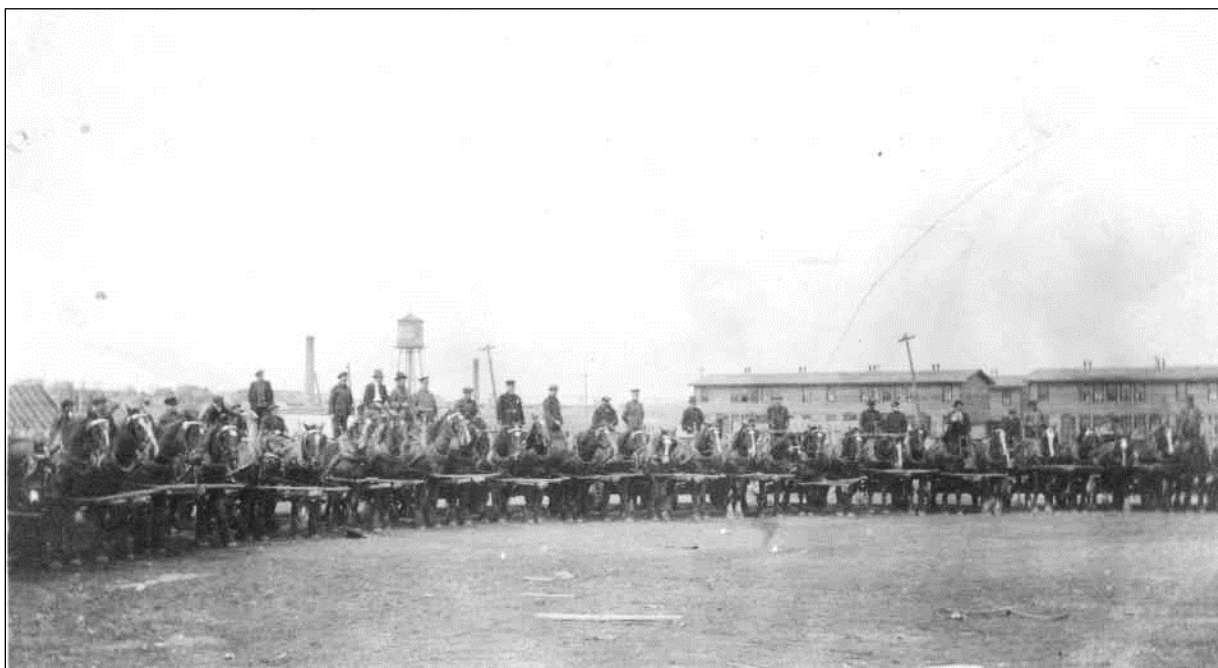
**Piers' notes:** No. 54. South Barracks (Royal Engineers' Quarters), Sackville Street: South Barracks, northern half of western front, with veranda, of wood, 2½ storeys high (built about 1795); showing also Parade Ground, Gate and Guard Room, with houses nos; 77 and 79 on north side Sackville Street (site of High School); 1872. Looking North from west end of Cook House at South end of Parade Ground.

Arrow denotes west block of South Barracks. SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers no. 6968 (Piers no. 54) N-2068

(Below) View looking northwest from St Mary's church steeple, 1888. Notman photo (cropped). SOURCE: NSA, Notman Studio NSA Acc. No. 1983-310 no. 64263 Neg. N-1392. Arrow denotes west block of South Barracks.







"Workers, horses, and wagons lined up to clear-up after the Halifax Explosion with barracks and water tower in background" SOURCE: HRM Archives, John and Beatrice Alley photograph collection Retrieval code: CR16-63b



Photo caption: "Reconstruction Workmen Willow Park Halifax, N.S." Description: "Image reproduced courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. This camp for reconstruction workmen was located on the Exhibition Grounds at the corner of Almon and Windsor streets. It was completed in April 1918 and housed nearly 2000 men." – NSA "A Vision of Regeneration" Virtual Exhibit PHOTO SOURCE: NSA, NSM Z4744 file P17 (MacLaughlan photo)



# STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!



DOES WORK WITH TELE-  
PHONES, TELEGRAPH  
INSTRUMENTS OR VISUAL  
SIGNALLING APPEAL TO  
YOU? IF SO COME AND SEE  
US, TWO BLOCKS UP THE  
HILL FROM THE STRAND THEATRE.  
FORTRESS SIGNAL COY. R.C.E.  
SOUTH BARRACKS HALIFAX N.S.

WWI recruitment poster for Fortress Signal Coy. R.C.E., South Barracks SOURCE: Acadia University Library Acc. No. 1900.237-WWI < <http://openarchive.acadiau.ca/cdm/search/collection/ww1posters> >






(Above) Signal Station (built ca 1916-20) and Time Ball (built 1908), southeast salient, Citadel ramparts. SOURCE: CSTM/CN Photo Collection, Canada Science and Technology Museum, reproduced Brooks (2000), p. 72. (Below) WWI recruitment poster for No. 8 Siege Battery, C.E.F., n.d. SOURCE: Acadia University Library Acc. No. 1900.237-WWI < <http://openarchive.acadiau.ca/cdm/search/collection/ww1posters> >

**This Man would not trade places with you**

**WHY?**



**Because he is going to help reinforce No. 8 R. C. G. A. Siege Battery, C.E.F. now overseas**

**The 2nd Reinforcing Draft of 50 Men**

**will sail as soon as up to strength. Each man is issued with full mounted kit. This is YOUR chance to go overseas without delay.**

**Apply at the Parade or Depot Co'y. R. C. G. A. Citadel**



# No. 10 Halifax Siege Battery

The First Complete Unit of its Kind to be Raised Locally

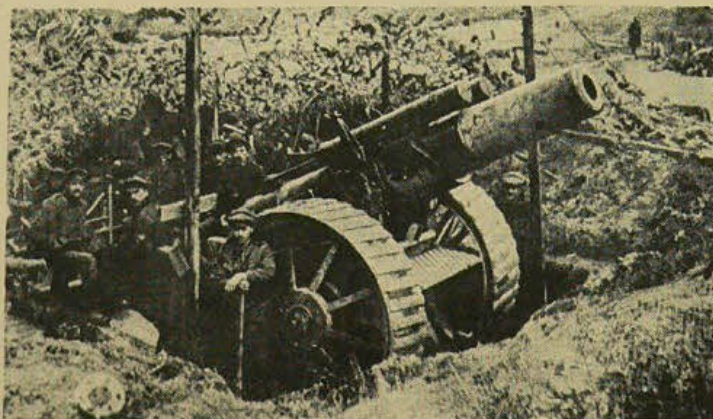
## Wants YOU

Artificers

Mechanics

Tailors

Cooks



Signallers

Telephonists

Wheelers

Clerks

### The Bigger the Men -- The Larger the Guns

If Your Height is 5ft. 8in. or better

## COME

Make this Battery Worthy of Halifax  
Headquarters--South Barracks,  
Sackville Street

WWI recruitment poster for No. 10 Halifax Siege Battery, n.d. SOURCE: Acadia University Library Acc. No. 1900.237-WWI < <http://openarchive.acadiau.ca/cdm/search/collection/ww1posters> >



**THE**  
**Canadian Army**  
**Medical Corps**

**WANT RECRUITS FOR**

**A. M. C. Reinforcements**  
**(OVERSEAS)**

**AND**

**No. 1 Field Ambulance Corps**  
**(HOME SERVICE)**

**Special Training    Interesting Work    Men Urgently Needed**

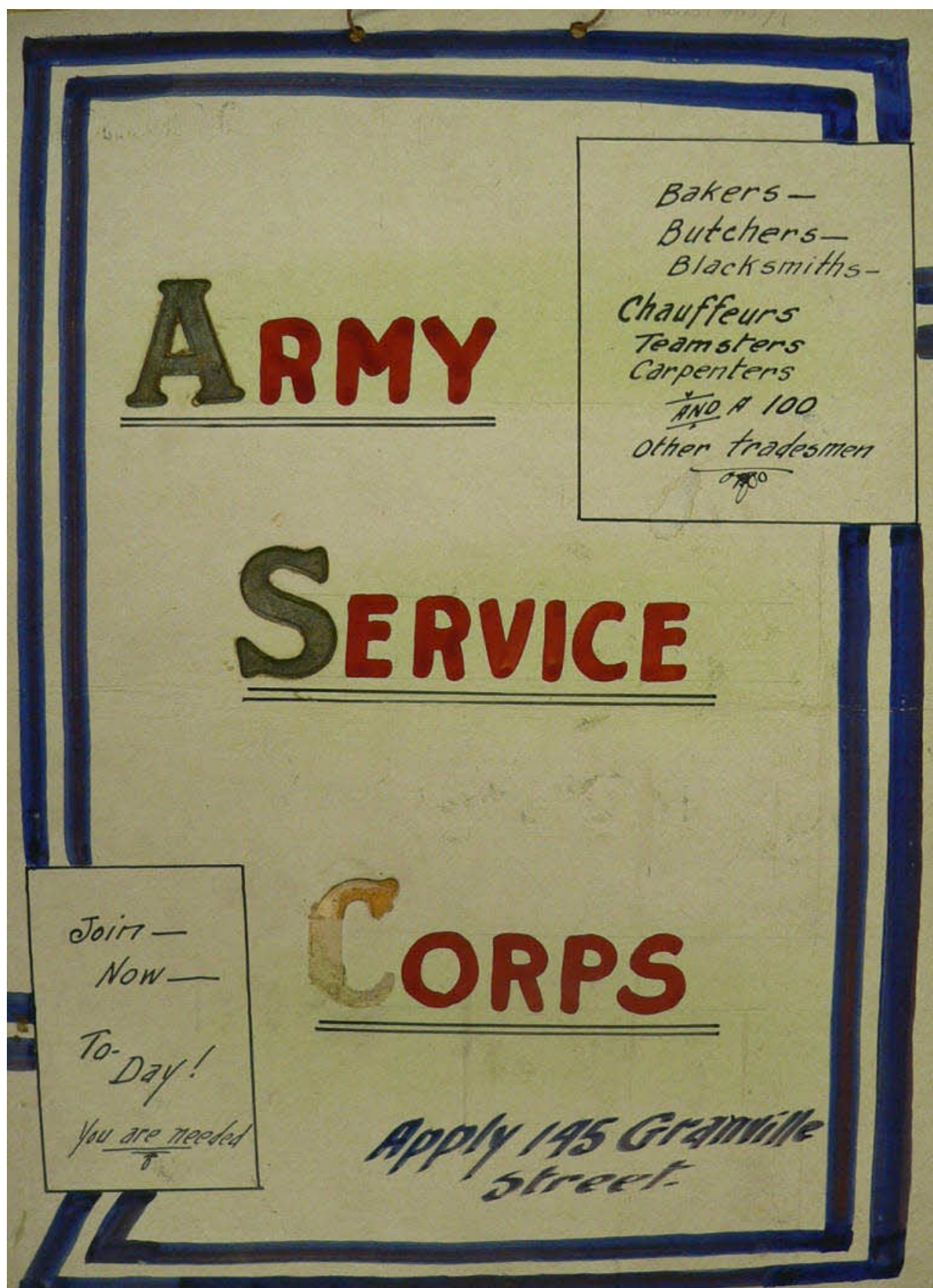
**HELP TO NURSE RETURNED MEN**

**Men rejected for Infantry and Artillery acceptable for  
this branch of the service. Present yourself at  
119 HOLLIS STREET, or MILITARY HOSPITAL,  
COGSWELL STREET, HALIFAX.**

**SIGN UP TO-DAY**

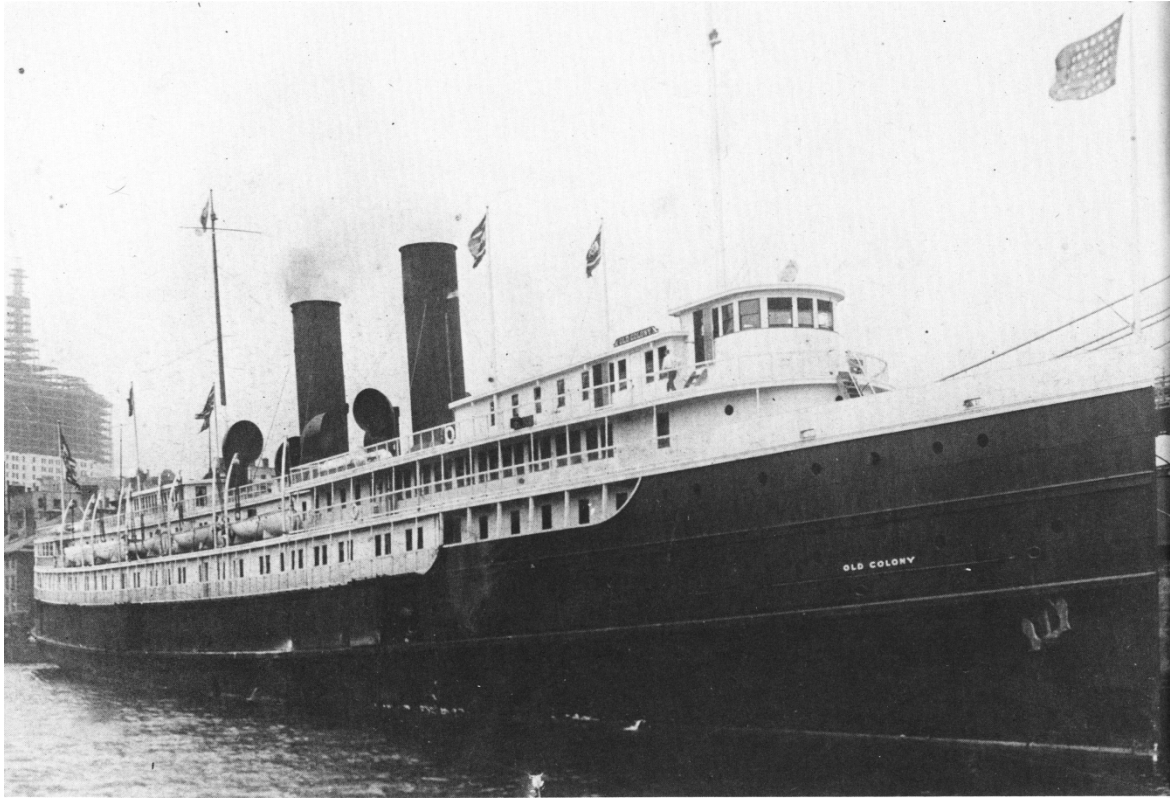
WWI recruitment poster for Canadian Army Medical Corps, n.d. SOURCE: Acadia University Library Acc. No. 1900.237-WWI < <http://openarchive.acadiau.ca/cdm/search/collection/ww1posters> >





WWI recruitment poster for Canadian Army Service Corps, n.d. SOURCE: Acadia University Library Acc. No. 1900.237-WWI < <http://openarchive.acadiau.ca/cdm/search/collection/ww1posters> >

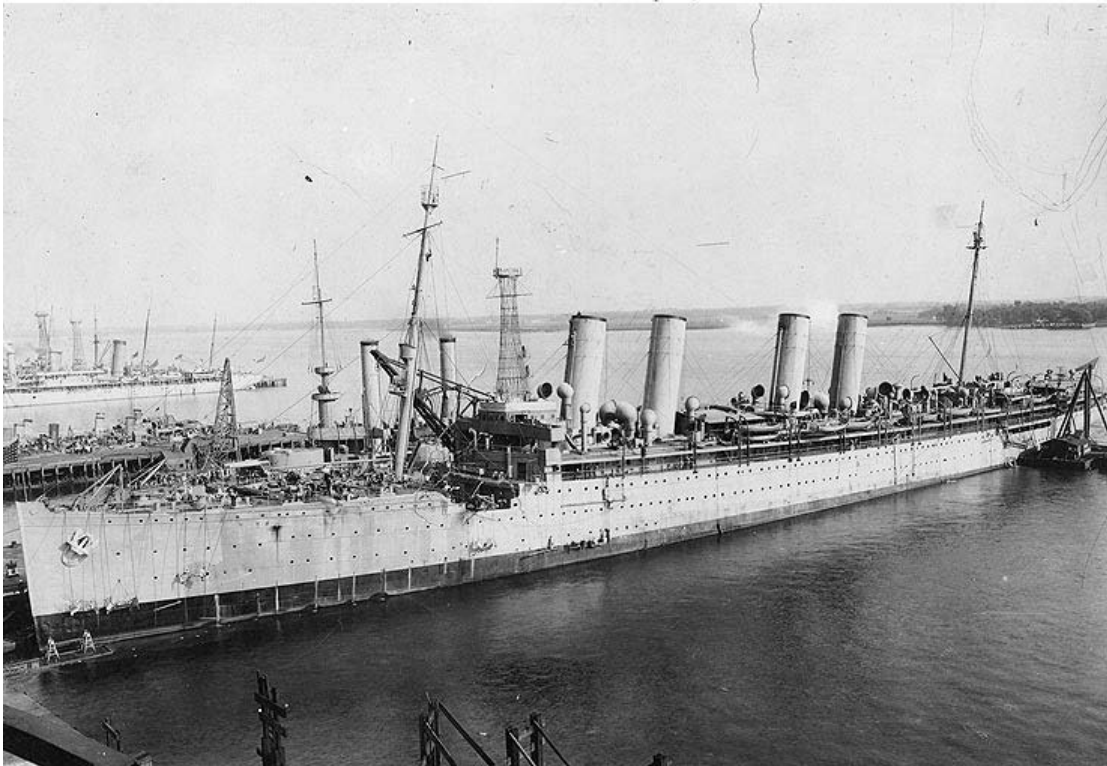




The Deer Isle - Stonington Historical Society

USS *Old Colony* was turned into a 150-bed hospital just hours after the explosion. (Cram, 1980, p 22).  
 Crew from USS *Von Steuben* (ex-*Kronprinz Wilhelm*) participated in relief efforts on Dec 6.  
<http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-usn/usnsh-v/id3017.htm>

Photo # NH 97998 USS *Von Steuben* in port, 31 October 1917





(Above) "Temporary Housing constructed by Halifax Relief Commission on Garrison Grounds, Bell Road and North Park Street, 26 January 1918" NSA Halifax Relief Commission N-7023 (Gauvin & Gentzel photo)

(Below) "Temporary housing under construction at Exhibition Grounds, corner Almon & Robie Streets, 26 January 1918" NSA Charles Vaughan coll. N-7046 (Gauvin & Gentzel photo)







Halifax, N.S.: Administration Buildings for the Halifax Relief Commission at the foot of the Citadel. Photo taken 5 days after work commenced.

11206721465\_394f0e2fc6



Halifax, N.S.: The Administration Buildings for the Relief Commission erected at the foot of the Citadel, showing progress after 9 days work.

11206748156\_f550260f73



Halifax, N.S.: Apartment Houses. (Military Type) These buildings are 96 feet long, 46 feet wide and 2 stories high. They contain 16 Apartments each. View from Bell Road.

11206735344\_b2dd82d8bf



Halifax, N.S.: Temporary housing for workmen of contractor, clearing up devastated area.

11206745196\_8621f7d38b



Halifax, N.S.: Military Apartment Houses at foot of the Citadel.

11206723165\_c3f904490b

**Piers' notes:** No. 283. Ives Point Battery: Interior, showing emplacements for 5 R.M.L. Guns on west front, with intervening expense stores, and piled shells; flagstaff on rampart, and telegraphic line. Artillery Store for Small Stores in foreground; and in right distance, old entrance from wharf below (this at present leads down to new Q.F. Battery). The main entrance is some way to right, out of the picture. Taken in 1880 or 1881 (after telegraphic communication was established in 1879-80). Looking Northwest towards George's Island, from top of Barrack Casemates. Compare with No. 234, which is similar, but not the same.

SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers no. 6913 (Piers no. 283) N-7370 / (Below) no. 6933 (Piers no. 229) N-1493



**Piers' notes:** No. 229. Ogilvie, Fort: Gate and Caponier (loopholed Barracks for twelve men and one N.C.O., and Guard Room) with piece of loopholed Wall at left; Artillery Store at extreme right; from inside the Fort; 1879(?). Looking North, from Southwest end of the fort. Prints of photographs of Fort Ogilvie are attached to Record Plan dated 1879.





**Piers' notes:** No. 255. York Redoubt: General View of South Gun Position (Battery of 9" R.M.L. Guns) from near West Gate and Artillery Store to South Caponier; showing numbers 1 to 6 of the eight 9" R.M.L. Guns on traversing platforms, with intervening Expense Cartridge Stores and Expense Shell Stores. To right are West Wall and Gate (closing gorge of work) and inner part of South Caponier and South Gate in distance. Within wall, left to right, are (a) Artillery Store and Latrine in front, (b) Ash-pit, (c) Brick building containing Meat Store, Wash House, Coals, Store for Field Forge, etc. In distance to left is Sleepy Cove with Sandwich Point beyond and granite hill above, and Road to Herring Cove. On hill three inches from right of view, was later built Sandwich Battery. Position Hill is out of view to right. About 1880. Looking South-southeast, from top parapet of Duke of York's Tower.

SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers no. 6995 (Piers no. 255)

(Below) Connaught Battery in 1944, built in 1916 SOURCE: Sarty & Ellis (2009), p. 5





**Piers' notes:** No. 259. Point Pleasant Battery: Interior of Northeastern part, with five Smooth-bore Guns on traversing platforms, en barbette, and racers for two similar guns on flank to left; York Redoubt in distance; about 1879-80. Looking South-southeast towards York Redoubt, from Northeast flank of the Battery.

SOURCE: NSA Royal Engineers Collection no. 6949 (Piers no. 259) / (Below) no. 6950 (Piers no. 260) N-1479





**Piers' notes:** No. 260. Point Pleasant Battery: Exterior of the gorge, showing Palisades and Gate at the gorge, with Guard Room and other wooden buildings, and bit of parapet of left flank to left; about 1879-80. Looking South-southwest from the road which passes the Battery.



**Private Fred Felepchuk, RCR, C.E.F.**

Age – 23

Address – Glace Bay, NS

Occupation – Royal Canadian Regiment

Buried – Fort Massey Cemetery, Halifax

Family – Wife Ellen, 4 child, father Steve

Felepchuk, Podolsk, Russia

Court of Inquiry stated Felepchuk killed by Explosion duty pier.

Snow's Funeral Home 479037

SOURCE: <http://regimentalrogue.tripod.com>



**Sapper Claudin Gaudet, RCE**

Age – 19

Address – Memramcook West, NB

Occupation – Sapper, Royal Canadian Engineers, Ives Point battery

Buried – St. Joseph, NB

Family – brother

Personal artifacts held by Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

(Photo by Jay White)

## APPENDIX B: MY EXPERIENCE IN THE HALIFAX DISASTER

Library and Archives Canada reference: R5570-0-3-E Vol. 1 (Online MIKAN No. 102440)

Original document: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/sos/002028-4301-e.html>

DESCRIPTION from LAC website: *The anonymous author, an Irish-American, volunteered for service with the Irish Guards in November 1917. He left Philadelphia for Halifax, N.S. and arrived shortly before the explosion. Although wounded himself, he assisted in rescue work and burials following the disaster.*

### “My Experience in the Halifax Disaster”

In consequence of the military missions of the British and Canadian governments set up in all the principal cities throughout the country soon after the United States declared war on Germany, I volunteered, in the city of Philadelphia about the middle of November, 1917, for service in the Irish guards of the British Army, and, was sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, to await transportation overseas.

We arrived in Halifax about 12 o'clock (midnight) and, through the kindness of a Canadian soldier, whom we met on the train from Boston to Halifax, took us to the barracks where he was stationed we were taken care of temporary at least for the night. There was one fellow with me from Boston, and our training was a way behind schedule, otherwise we would have been met at Halifax station and taken to the huts assigned to and of the British expeditionary force, which was some three-quarters of a mile distant.

The following morning we were directed to the armory assigned to the British, and, on our way there we crossed the hill known as the Citadel; a considerable fortress which completely dominates the entrance to the harbor and affords a splendid view of the surrounding country.

On arrival at our destination a record of us was soon made on our army papers and we commenced to drill — left right, left right! — for the first time. The drill sergeants and “gym” instructors were considerate, so we soon commenced to “get acquainted” with our new surroundings.

There was in the neighborhood of about two hundred and fifty men in [illeg.] At the time of my arrival there — all of whom were from the United States, with new arrivals almost daily.

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Wednesday evening, December 5, I put on the uniform for the first time and jokingly bidding farewell to my “city” close of the new town near that farewell came to be my last to anything earthly.



The terrible disaster! The worst of its kind in the world's history!

Thursday, December 6, 1917, that never-to-be-forgotten day, broke bright and clear and calm — that calmness which usually forebodes a storm of some kind. It was an unusual day for this time of year and for this climate. We were on parade in the Armory, each squad going through its drill according to its experience; while two, or possibly three, of the more advanced squads were marched out of the Armory on a “hike” immediately after parade started. Lucky they were or there would have been more casualties. At five minutes past nine o'clock to be exact, there was a tremor! And the sergeant who was drilling us — a real live wire — a little Canadian “gym” instructor who had served two years in France, was nearly the first one to notice it in fact all of us noticed it. He “halted” us and asked us if we noticed it. We replied we did; but nobody seemed to know anything more about it, so we proceeded with our drill. We had been marching in two ranks from the east to the west side of the Armory, on which a number of very large windows were, and were as close to the wall as was possible to go when the order “about turn” was given. A very lucky order indeed, for us! We had proceeded about three or four yards away from the windows when that terrible crash — that dull, reverberating war — fell upon our ears! It is entirely beyond my humble abilities to even attempt to describe it. It's beyond the power of anybody, no matter what their abilities are. On recovering my senses and hearing, for I was as deaf for several minutes — exactly how long I don't know — as any person ever was, all was silence, all was darkness. A chocking [sic]

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blinding, impenetrable cloud of dust filled the Armory, turning day into night. After a while. Through a hole in the roof, a little light could be seen directly over where I was. I saw the form of my little Canadian friend (the “gym” instructor) go by at a great pace, whereto I did not know; but I afterwards learned he had made for the cellar as he knew the Armory and I did not, being only there a week then. He was “wise” to making for the dug-outs in France during a heavy bombardment. Next I noticed a little light like the flicker of a candle at what was once the door of the Armory, and I made for it at top speed, without my greatcoat, tunic, or cap. We all had discarded these during the physical exercises.

I could feel the blood running off my face and could see it dripping from my left hand but I did not know then if it was serious or not. On my way out I met our Major and the blood was streaming from a wound on his face. Reaching the sidewalk I heard an agonizing moan behind me. It was one of our poor fellows who had reached the street and collapsed, fatally injured. With the assistance of a couple more fellows we carried him to the medical hut for treatment. I learned afterwards that the poor fellow died the same day.

Outside our fellows were around; most all of them cut and bleeding. Three or four of us ventured back into the Armory for our uniforms and it was then I realized what an escape I had. Right close to the windows were three poor fellows lying dead; just about three yards from the place where we got the order to “about turn”; and another fellow had three of his ribs broken.

The windows were blown in upon them, killing them instantly. There were several holes in the slated roof. The iron girders supporting the roof and the iron frame-work connecting it were twisted as if they were thin strands of wire but they did not give way; if they did, there would not be one of us left to tell the tale. Debris was piled high all around. When I reached the outside I had my wounds dressed up a little. Streams of wounded people were coming from all directions toward the medical hut for treatment. There was hardly anything left at the hut that was not blown to pieces; but they

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soon procured supplies from the Halifax hospital. This hospital being some distance away from the scene of the explosion was not much damaged.

Now to the rescue! I wish it to be understood that although we were soldiers, there was no command given to go to the rescue. This was absolutely and entirely outside our line of duty as soldiers. Outside of strictly military operations there is no person or persons having the power to order another person to risk their life. And this was certainly by no means a military operation. It was entirely civilian. Not one of that gallant little band needed a command (even if commands could be given) to go to the rescue of their fellow human beings in that hour of dire disaster, and nobody with a heart could do otherwise.

We proceeded toward the scene of the disaster; some fellows without their greatcoats, some without their caps, but nearly all wearing bandages of some sort or another. As we neared the scene of the explosion it began to unfold itself in a most terrible manner. Wires were strewn across the streets in all directions. "Live" ones as well as "dead" ones; we could not tell which was a "live" wire or which one was not charged. Houses shattered to pieces as though they were mere match wood. We ventured into several of them on our way to search for wounded people but did not find any. We had not far to go from there till we found more than we hoped to find. Halifax railroad station! Now we are at the very scene of that terrible catastrophe. What was once a fine railroad station — the very station I got off at at midnight only a week before — was one hugh [sic] pile of twisted steel and debris. My first job, in company with several others, was to assist several sailors who were removing small cases of ammunition stored in huts to a safer place right on the waterfront. Fires were raging in all directions; "live wires" were strewn all over the place. It was a "ticklish job" but thanks to the goodness of God nothing happened.

The next scene was a heart-rending one. There was a trainload of Canadian veterans who had just returned from France, all of whom were wounded, and there could be seen many

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an armless sleeve and many a legless trousers in that pile of human debris. This train was on a siding awaiting orders to proceed with its load of crippled heroes to take them to their homes and loved ones, whom they had not seen for over two years when the explosion occurred. I don't believe ten out of the whole lot of them escaped. Having at least escaped death in

France, they had to return to the door-way of their own country to be killed. They were so badly mutilated that in some cases the only means of identifying them was by the shoulder plates on their tunics with the word "Canada" on it.

It was one terrible scene of death, destruction, and desolation. There were several merchant-ships in [the] anchorage in the harbor, and from their appearance it would be hard to tell if they really were ships or not. There was nothing left of the ammunition ship except huge [sic] chunks of her plates which could be found laying around every place. Her gun which weighed several tons was found three miles from the scene of the explosion. The "Imo" was beached on the Dartmouth shore. There were two British cruisers lying at the dock but their stout construction and low build saved them from serious damage. Their magazines were loaded with ammunition as were the magazines of the merchant-ships, but the sailors aboard immediately flooded them preventing any chance of an explosion on board those ships.

About half of our fellows were sent over to Dartmouth across the harbor from Halifax, which was very hard hit, too. The job before us was a very unpleasant and very dangerous one. Everywhere around lay piles of dead and wounded in the most indescribable condition. The condition in which we found those unfortunate people could not for decency's sake be described here, and the agonizing and heartrending screams of the wounded and dying was enough to make the stoutest heart quail and one's blood run cold.

By this time the naval men had lowered all their boats while any thing that could float on water was pressed into service to take the wounded to places where succor could be given.

About fifty of us, sailors and soldiers, worked frantically

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for half an hour on a building for a child we were told was in it. We had no tools but our hands to work with. We succeeded in tearing a hole in the kitchen floor large enough for a man to squeeze through. A sailor went down and handed up a little girl about eight years old with the only damage done to her was a slight wound on the back of her head. Now to get the sailor out of the whole was a much harder job than it was to get the little girl out. The floor of the house sagged down and we had some time to get out that sailor. We had no means of getting the wounded to the boats except to carry them or make improvised stretchers from lengths of debris we would pick up. It was quite a distance in some cases to where we had to carry them. The ground was in such a condition from the force of the explosion and the tidal wave that went up from the harbor made it most difficult to do anything; while trying to be as gentle and tender as possible with those poor creatures added to our difficulties.

On one of my trips to the boats I saw in the distance to black-clothed men hurrying to the scene of the disaster. As they approached I soon recognized them as two Roman Catholic priests and on every trip I made afterward I could see them hurrying to and fro amongst the wounded as we placed them near the water edge to await the arrival of the next boat. They (the priests)



were out in the ruins, taking their lives in their hands at different times as any one of those buildings were liable to collapse on them at any instant. They did not stop to realize the danger; their only thoughts were to administer the last rights [sic] of the Roman Catholic Church to the wounded and dying of their faith. It filled me with courage and hope to see those holy men — God's own anointed — administer to those unfortunate people in what a great many cases was their last moments on this earth. See back of sheet

**[written on back of p. 6]**

I afterward learned that these priests were from St. Patrick's Church on Great Brunswick Street, Halifax.

This may be Great Barrington St. Please look up [in] Catholic Directory, as I do not clearly recollect this incident, but am certain the parish priest's name was Father Murphy

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we continued at this work for at least three or four hours till I was nearly exhausted and the wound on my left hand caused it to swell so much that the glove I wore on it had to be afterward split to get it off. I well remember seeing one of our fellows climb a telegraph pole that had iron spikes drove in it for foot-holds at about a foot apart. He climbed up ten or twelve of those spikes to remove the body of a little girl who was impaled [sic] thereon. Of course the child was dead. The dead we disregarded for the time and our one object was to remove the wounded. This we did as we went along. On entering one house a very pathetic scene confronted us. The house was a complete wreck; and lying almost side by side were the bodies of two females. They looked very much like mother and daughter. They were dead; but between them lay a fox terrier dog, apparently uninjured, and try as we may we could not induce that dog to surrender his faithful watch. He was a true friend! Another incident was a house in which the whole family [sic] of six or seven were lying dead and the only signs of life was [sic] a young chicken.

Fires were raging on all sides; freight trains, houses and any thing that would burn was on fire. In the middle of the devastated area stood a horse as though he was petrified, and nothing could move him.

I could go on almost indefinitely recounting experiences of this sort and the heroism displayed at every moment by the soldiers and sailors in their utter disregard for their own safety.

By this time we had worked our way up to the last house in Richmond which was at the western [should be northern?] end of the city. I well remember seeing lying around in one small space eight different pieces of what I am almost positive was one man. It was an isolated place, and we looked around but could find no other bodies whatever near this place.

During this period of time I must have assisted in the rescue of

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from twelve to sixteen people as we worked in parties of two's and three's; sometimes individually; and when we found a person badly wounded we would assist each other. We had been cautioned to do this owing to the danger of entering a building by one's self. Should that building collapse, that man might be fatally injured and would not be missed till it would be too late.

I am not positive of the exact number of rescues I took part in, and anyone can readily understand we were not keeping count in a case like this; our one object was to get those unfortunate people out of that terrible place. To the best of my belief that would be about the right number.

Seeing our captain, who was badly cut about the head and face, a short distance away, I went to him and told him of the condition of my hand and arm. (By this time the swelling had reached my shoulder). He immediately sent me back to barracks where I had the wound dressed properly and my arm put in a sling. It was then near three o'clock in the afternoon. Most of the men had returned by this time, so we had for "chow" a half bowl of soup and two slices of dry bread. They were already conserving what food was left for the poor children, women, homeless and destitute. After our "meal" all of us turned out, wounded and all, to erect tents for the homeless. We put up some five hundred of those army tents on a plane [sic] known as the "Commons" — a place used as a drill-grounds. The only assistance I could render at this job was to carry a few tent pegs in my right hand, but it helped some as every man was needed; even then, it was well after dark before we had them all erected. Our sergeant-major was "kidding" us all about our appearance, saying we looked as though we had just come out of the front line trenches, but the following day he had to go to the hospital and there discovered that one of his ribs was broken. Imagine him working all day with a broken rib and did not know it! He complained about his side hurting

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him but he would not give in. He was six weeks in hospital.

Sometime Thursday night, or early Friday morning a terrible blizzard commenced to rage. It lasted all day Friday and far into that night. We were all "confined to barracks" or "EZ'd" as it is better know [sic] in the Army. A United States destroyer was dispatched from Boston to Halifax, and a number of marines were landed to do patrol duty and prevent looting of any kind in the devastated area. Martial law being proclaimed and the storm raging so bad on Friday night, our major considered it entirely unsafe for us to venture out. It would be taking too much risk because it would be impossible for those marines doing their duty to distinguish between friend or foe on account of the weather even if we were in uniform. As there were no Canadian soldiers available at the time of this kind of work, by kind permission of the United States government those marines were ordered there for patrol duty.

By this time one of our huts was taken over as a temporary hospital. Our beds were of the "upper and lower" kind accommodating two on top and two below, so that when this hut was

taken over we had to make room for the men of that hut. This was done by putting three men in where there were just enough room for two! Those huts were in very bad shape after the explosion. The roofs and windows in some cases were very badly shattered; so on Friday morning when “revellé” [sic] sounded we had, in most cases, a nice blanket of snow covering us.

We were very much handicapped on Saturday on account of the snow. It was impossible to navigate much less recover any dead bodies from the ruins, so we had to give it up for that day. It was a terrible blizzard but I believe it did some good inasmuch as it prevented any possible chance of plague arising from the awful number of dead bodies that lay around.

Sunday morning about twenty-five or thirty of us were sent to the Wellington barracks to clean up there. The barracks were near where the explosion occurred, so they were in awful shape. Those barracks are built so as to form an

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absolute square so the space in the center can be used as a parade grounds. There were quite a large number of Canadian “rookies” — eight or nine hundred I believe — stationed here, but luckily for themselves, they were all on parade at the time the explosion occurred. I understood there were only six or seven killed of the men who were in barracks. There are always a certain number of men left in charge of these rooms. We proceeded to clean up a section and started on a hall-way on the first floor of this section. Having cleaned up this hall-way we proceeded to the second floor for the same purpose. Just as the last man had ascended the stairs which was at the end of the hall-way, the whole ceiling collapsed. Thank God there was nobody underneath it.

On the second floor, in one of the rooms, was a small stove which was about the only thing that was not smashed to pieces. We made a fire in it of pieces of broken furniture and other wood that lay around. We were very wet and cold after walking from our huts to this place as it started raining on Sunday morning, turning the snow into a vast sea of slush. Some of the fellows had taken off their military boots (not rubber) to try and dry their feet at that dim little stove-fire. The roofs were of slate, and the building two stories high. I was sitting at one side of the stove while the other fellows were sitting at different places near the stove or around the room. The roof was in bad condition and the wind was, by this time, blowing a strong gale. Someone remarked that it was not a very safe place to be; we all agreed that it was not, and were about to move when a shower of slates fell on top of us. A slate dropped on my right shoulder, another knocked a fellow’s cap off, and there were several narrow escapes. It took far less time than it takes to tell it for us fellows to move away from that stove!

We continued on until about three-thirty when we returned to our huts. Our mess hall was in the Armory, but there was so little of it left after the explosion it would be hard to find any resemblance of a dining room about it. What was left of the tables was covered with snow, so



we had to form in "single file" pass [sic] the kitchen staff, while one "dished" us out a small portion of stew, another one ounce of cheese, another two slices of bread, while the last one

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presented us with a half mug of black tea. By this time it was customary for the "Officer of the Day" or as he is better known in the army as "Mess Officer", whose duty it is to enter the mess room at meal times to ask if there are "any complaints," about the food, to ask for volunteers to divide their scanty rations with the needy, suffering victims of the disaster. There was not a man there at any meal did not give some part of his allowance to those unfortunate people.

In passing, I may say, that when the "Officer of the Day" enters the mess hall it's for the purpose of hearing, and acting upon, any just complaints about the food. It's every soldier's privilege; but one must have a reasonable complaint to make or else you are liable to make a lot of trouble for yourself.

Monday was spent at the board. A gruesome, nasuating [sic] job; trying to identify those poor victims by arranging any little scrap of evidence that could be found on them, so as the relatives and friends who continually filled the morgue would have a chance to recognize their belongings. In a great many cases it was utterly impossible to identify any of them from the condition they were in. The heart rending scenes witnessed there will live in my memory as long as I live. It certainly can better be imagined than described. To witness these relatives and friends as they walked past the long lines of victims stretched out in rows, and eagerly awaiting those that were being constantly brought in was a sad sight. There would be a scream here, a moan or a sob there; then someone would have to be carried away from that terrible scene. The only stimulant we got was a half a table-spoonful of brandy at the end of the day. There were times when we felt pretty "blue," but we kept on at our unpleasant task trying to arrange the poor creatures in such a way that they could be placed in wooden boxes to await burial later. Of course any of the identified bodies were buried by relatives or friends. This kept on for several days till all the dead who could be found were either identified, or mark unidentified. The weather was very bad; rain, snow, sleet and strong winds all of the time; with intense cold.

We dug long lines of trenches in this inclement weather, to

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bury the dead in, and when we returned to our huts at night we would have to hang our wet clothes around two old stoves in the hut to try and dry them out, if only a little, so we could wear them the next day.

On Christmas Eve night I had the unusual experience of going to confession in Murphy's theater! "The Casino" was the name of it, and people of this name, although strange to say were not Catholics kindly put the use of the theater till 11 o'clock each Sunday at the disposal of father Murphy in whose parish the theater was situated. The reason the theater was used was because the Catholic Church in that parish was entirely unsafe for any number of people to

enter it. Other denominations used the theater on Sunday evenings for their services as their churches, in a great many cases, were either completely wrecked, or unsafe to enter.

I well remember an incident that took place after I had come home from confession. I was standing in the vestibule of the theater and got in communication with a strapping, fine Irish fellow who was a sailor in the British navy. We talked about the disaster that had occurred, and he told me it had been two years previous since he was to confession. What he had witnessed there brought him to a realization of his indifference to his Creator, and the mercy of that Creator in giving him another chance by not taking away his life as happend [sic] [to] those fourteen hundred people who lost their lives in the explosion. The cruiser in which this sailor was assigned lay at anchor two miles away from shore, and one of his comrades, although not of his faith, rowed him to shore in the dark and awaited his return to row him back to his ship. This same comrade did the very same thing the next (Xmas) morning so the poor fellow could go to Holy Communion.

While that sailor and me were talking in the theater vestibule, along came one of our fellows, another Irish. He knew me, so all three of us got in conversation. It did not take long to find out what his business was. He asked me if I knew where there was a Catholic Church where he could go to confession. He had told the sailor any [sic] myself that it was a long time since he had been to the Sacraments. We told him at once he was in the right place to become reconciled with God, but he seemed to hesitate and was about to leave. Sensing his temerity, we insisted on him remaining

[p. 13 is MISSING. It appears that the writer was subsequently sent to Windsor where the BEF had a camp.]

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Through some mix-up in my papers caused by the explosion I could not be sent over. The other four fellows were still in Hospital.

I don't believe I ever felt worse in my life as the few of us who remained lined up to get a last farewell — and in a great many cases it was a last farewell — to that brave, gallant, heroic, kindhearted lot of men as their train steamed past the barracks we occupied.

The evening before their departure, our major lined them up on the parade ground. He was a man with forty-two years experience as a soldier, and knew the United States pretty well. It was a farewell address; but he did not get very far when his emotions overcame him, so it was with great difficulty he could proceed with the remarks he wished to make to these fine fellows. He stated that in his forty-two years of service it was never his privilege to command men of such calibre. Although all of them "green" men they were tried and tested in the worst disaster of its kind in the world's history and were not found wanting. To prove his regard for them he allowed every one of us out till midnight on the eve of their departure without a pass! And every man of them proved his worth by answering roll-call at the "revellé" [sic] the following

morning. I may say there was but little sleep for any one that night! The following day he went to Halifax with them to bid them good-bye, when they sailed from that port.

I did not get away from Windsor till Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1918. We sailed from Halifax the following day, and I had the good fortune on arriving at my destination other side of the six, or eight of my old "pals" who were with me during our trials and hardships, and after a hard day's drill we would go over some of the experiences we had while in Canada. However, none of us wished to dwell very much what we had seen and gone through at the time of the disaster. We tried to forget; if forget we could what we had seen and gone through there. The End.

From that day to the present one, not as much as "thank you boys" has ever come from any direction for the services rendered humanity there on that terrible occasion.

TRANSCRIPTION by Dr. James White, 10-11 Feb 2014; with corrections 3-4 April 2014.