

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

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Gary Hanna

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The 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbor

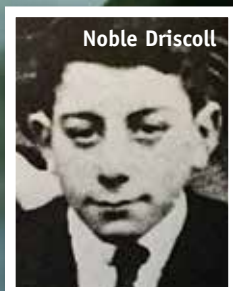
By Kristin Lewis

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

Thirteen-year-old Noble Driscoll lay in a pile of rubble near what used to be his school. He did not know what had happened, but his mind was filled with scary images of smoke and fire.

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

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



December 6, 1917, had dawned cold and clear in Halifax and Dartmouth. These two seaside towns in Nova Scotia, Canada, were separated by a narrow harbor.

By 8 a.m., the two towns were busy. Mothers served up steaming bowls of porridge. Children gathered their schoolbooks. Fathers headed off to work. In the northern Halifax neighborhood of Richmond, where Noble lived, horse-drawn wagons clattered down the streets. Factories made flour, beer, metalworks, and other goods. A tram rumbled along the waterfront, where men carried cargo onto ships docked in the harbor.



From his backyard, Noble had a great view of the Narrows, the **aptly** named narrowest section of Halifax Harbor. Noble, a curious kid with dark hair and a wide smile, was fascinated by

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

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

Gruesome battles were happening in Europe, but this violence was thousands of miles from Halifax and Dartmouth. Noble must have felt safe in his neighborhood.

But in a few minutes, this would change.

A terrible accident was about to happen. Two ships—the *Mont-Blanc* and the *Imo*—would soon





AFTER



Along the Waterfront

Left: Halifax before the explosion. Many houses were made of wood, which caught fire after the explosion toppled kitchen stoves.

Below: A view after the explosion.

collide. Noble's neighborhood would be destroyed, and thousands of people would be dead.

Bad News

Though Noble was far from the fighting, World War I had cast a shadow over Dartmouth and Halifax. Newspapers brought more and more bad news from the front lines. Noble often saw soldiers in uniform around town. Some had come back from the war badly injured. Others were preparing to go overseas to fight. At Richmond School, where Noble was in seventh grade, the war was a frequent topic of conversation.

During the war, Halifax became an important hub in the transportation of supplies and troops. Halifax was the closest major North American **port** to Europe, and the shape of the harbor made it easy to protect it from outside attacks. This was important because German

submarines called U-boats prowled beneath the waves of the Atlantic Ocean outside the harbor. By 1917, these U-boats had sunk some 3,000 vessels.

Many ships were passing through the harbor each day. Traffic had increased eightfold since the war started. The harbor had become as busy as a major highway at rush hour.

Floating Bomb

On December 6, the *Mont-Blanc* was due to join a convoy of ships headed to Europe. Few people beyond the crew knew that the *Mont-Blanc* was packed with dangerous **munitions**. Powerful explosives—the most powerful that existed at the time—were packed into the cargo holds below deck. Above deck were barrels filled with benzol, a flammable liquid similar to gasoline. In total, the ship carried nearly 3,000 tons of explosive materials. The *Mont-Blanc* was a floating bomb.

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

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

A catastrophe was taking shape

WHOOSH!

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

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

But it was too late.

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

Water gushed through a 20-foot gash in the



Mont-Blanc's hull. The barrels of benzol toppled and splashed open.

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

Sparks flew.

And then . . .

WHOOSH!

The benzol caught fire.

Flames raced across the deck of the *Mont-Blanc*. Black smoke rose into the sky. Water poured into the ship, hissing as it turned to steam. Mackey and the *Mont-Blanc* crew knew there was nothing they could do. It was only a matter of time before the explosives below deck blew up. The choice was **stark**: Stay on the boat and die, or abandon ship.

They piled into lifeboats and rowed toward Dartmouth. Mackey waved and shouted, trying to alert the other ships in the harbor to the danger. But no one seemed to notice.

Flicking Skyward

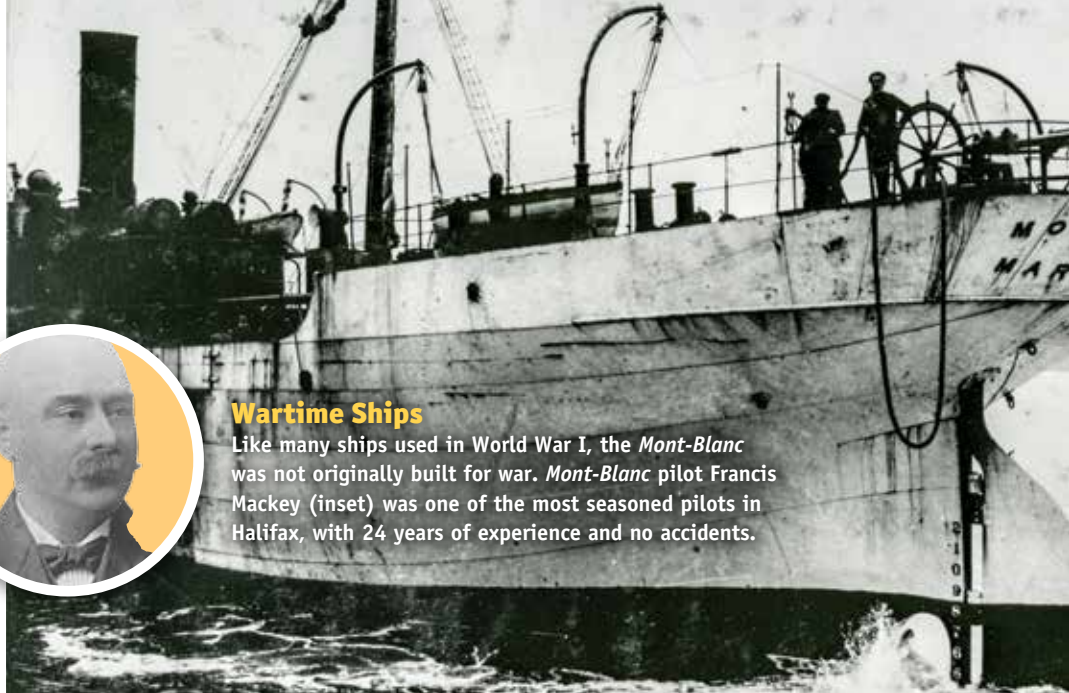
Back in Richmond, Noble saw the orange and blue flames flicking skyward from the *Mont-Blanc*. He left his house and walked toward the harbor for a better view.

Like Noble, many in Dartmouth and Halifax rushed outside to see the burning



Wartime Ships

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



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

The *Mont-Blanc* had been knocked off course during the collision. Now it was floating toward Noble's Richmond neighborhood.

Around 9 a.m., the ship drifted into Pier 6 on the Richmond waterfront. And then, the *Mont-Blanc* exploded.

Shock Wave

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

In seconds, this shock wave



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



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

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

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

When Noble came to, he saw

that most of the buildings were gone. Fires burned everywhere. Noble's jacket had been blown off. Shards of glass stuck in his hair. His skin was blackened by the rain.

Yet there was more horror to come.

The explosion triggered a huge wave that surged out of the harbor and crashed through Dartmouth and Halifax. This tsunami toppled more buildings and swept people away. It pushed the *Imo* aground in Dartmouth. In the end, seven people on board the *Imo* were killed.

Luckily for Noble, the wave did not reach him. In a daze, he wandered through the ruined streets toward his house.

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

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

Powerful Explosion

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

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

Communities across Nova Scotia mobilized. By the afternoon, trains loaded with nurses, doctors, firefighters, and supplies were streaming into Halifax. Another train carried away survivors, including Noble and his family. Doctors went from passenger to passenger, treating injuries.



Relief Efforts

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

Unfortunately, a blizzard hit the next day, **hampering** relief efforts. But in the following days and weeks, aid poured in from across Canada and the United States. Thousands of people had lost homes, possessions, and jobs. Many had permanent injuries. More than 2,000 people had died.

People were angry. They wanted answers. Some blamed Germany. Others blamed the government. Some blamed Mackey and the *Mont-Blanc* captain. The two men were **vilified** in the newspapers, put on trial, and briefly sent to jail.

They were later released and charges were dropped. It seemed they had been **scapegoated**.

Mackey eventually returned to the sea, but his name was **tarnished**. (Recently, writer and retired teacher Janet Maybee worked to clear Mackey's name and interviewed many of his surviving relatives. You can read the story in her book *Aftershock*.)

100 Years Later

Today—100 years later—Halifax is thriving. Walk through the streets along the harbor, and you'll enjoy the smell of seafood wafting from waterfront

Behind the Scenes

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

Kitz has dedicated her life to preserving the stories of survivors of the explosion. Noble Driscoll's story comes from interviews she conducted and donated

to the Nova Scotia Archives. Kitz has also written several books about the explosion. Watch our video at Scope Online for a more in-depth look behind the scenes of this article.



restaurants. You'll hear the horns of ferries. You'll see trains bringing cargo to the ships docked in the harbor.

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

As for Noble? Tragically, his brother Gordon was never found. The Driscolls went on as best they could. They lived for a while in the nearby city of Truro, and they welcomed a new baby in 1919. That same year they returned to Halifax. By then, World War I had ended. The

Driscolls, like people all around the world, were ready to rebuild their lives.

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

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

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

Writing Contest

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

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