EYEWITNESS

The Halifax Explosion, December 6, 1917

Janet Kitz

Editor's Note: *What follows are excerpts of interviews from the survivors of humankind's largest explosion before the Atomic Bomb. Janet Kitz, researcher and historian, has been collecting materials for over a decade. Her oral history tapes will be deposited in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia when her research is completed. If you have oral eyewitness accounts of Canadian events you would care to submit in this format please send them to the Journal.*

Context

The explosion took place just before five minutes after nine on the morning of December 6, 1917. It was the result of a collision in Halifax harbour between two ships. One, a Norwegian freighter, the *Imo*, the words BELGIAN RELIEF clearly visible on the side, was heading from Bedford Basin to New York to collect relief supplies, and the other, a French munition ship, the *Mont Blanc*, was arriving from New York to join a convoy gathering in the Basin. Its cargo of high explosives, topped off by barrels of inflammable benzol loaded on the decks, would have been unimaginable in normal times. By the end of 1917, however, the war in Europe had been extremely costly in men and materials, and the French government was in dire straits. The *Mont Blanc* caught fire and burned for twenty minutes, giving its crew time to leave the ship and take refuge on the Dartmouth shore. The explosion and fires that followed it devastated Richmond, the most northerly part of the city, and caused considerable damage to the rest of Halifax, and to Dartmouth, across the harbour. The death toll was never accurately tallied, but approached 2000.

Barbara Orr

The Orr family lived in Richmond on the slope above the northern end of the harbour, just south of the Narrows that lead to Bedford Basin. There were six children in the family, Barbara being the oldest. All were at home at a quarter to nine that morning, but not busy preparing for school, as one of them had whooping cough and so all were in quarantine. Barbara had just seen her father off to the Richmond Printing Works, the family firm, where he was a partner.

"I was in the dining room, that had a big bay window that overlooked the water. I was standing at the window watching these two ships. My brother liked to watch the ships going to and from the Basin, so I called for him. I said, "Ian, come and see what is going on."

So he came into the dining room where I was and we looked out the window. Then my mother came and we watched these two boats. They looked like they were deliberately trying to run into each other. They had room to get by. There was no need of a collision.

We stood there and watched them collide. We saw the boats come together and saw the smoke come out of the bit of a hole. And Ian said, "That's an ammunition boat."

I said, "What do you mean, an ammunition boat?"

He said, "That's the kind of boat that carries gunpowder and bullets and supplies for the war."

I said, "Will it explode?"

And my mother said, "Oh, I don't think so."

I had a friend who lived down in the direction of the ship, so I thought I'd run down and see if she was home, and then we'd go and see the fire."

Barbara and her brother and sister left the house, their mother seeing that none of the workers down by the docks and on the nearby ships seemed at all anxious. She warned them not to go too close, but was worried about their safety. Barbara left the other two to find her friend.

"I was running down the hill. And the screaming from the men. . . I could hear them screaming. They could have warned people. I saw them in their little boats. I watched the other boat, the Belgian Relief boat, heading towards the Dartmouth shore. The munition boat came right in to the shore on our side, and there was no alarm given. People could have got away."

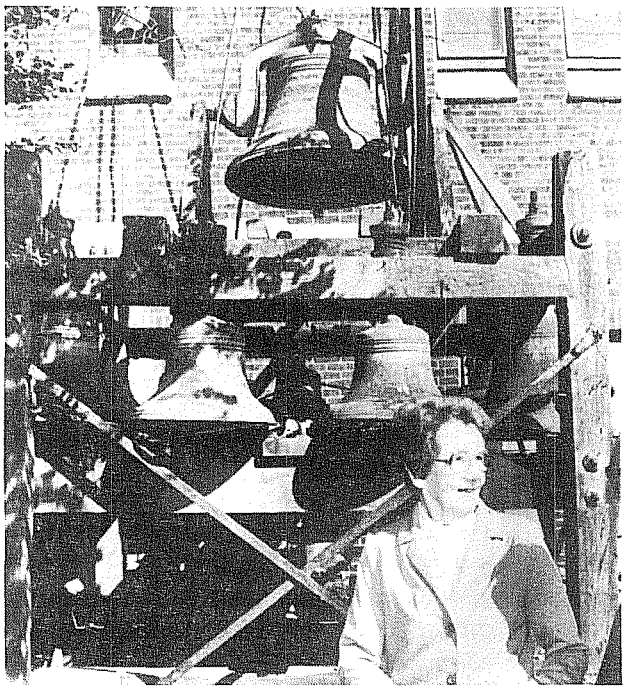
The Mont Blanc, now burning fiercely, drifted to Pier 6, just below where Barbara was.

"It was so still, so calm, and this terrible, awful column of smoke went up and then balls of fire would roll up through it. They burst . . . but there was no

sound. It was the strangest thing. I stood spellbound in the middle of this field. And then I thought, "Oh, something awful is going to happen."

Well, I didn't have to think it any longer. It happened. I had a boot on, and the boot was taken off my foot, and my foot wasn't taken off. We used to wear boots tight laced. I couldn't walk for months and months. I was conscious after it went off, but I had the sensation that I was going down into deep holes and up all the time. Then I was lying near the top of Fort Needham. People were crying all around, "The Germans are here! The Germans are here!" And I said that it wasn't the Germans, a boat exploded. But nobody listened."

Barbara crawled towards her home, but the houses were all on fire. Eventually she reached her aunt's home, further away from the harbour.



Barbara (Orr) Thompson, 1983, standing in front of the carillon of bells donated by her to the United Memorial Church in memory of her family.

Frank Burford

Frank Burford, aged fifteen, had just started work at Hillis & Sons' Foundry in Richmond, close to the harbour.

"Somebody came in, "There's a ship on fire."

Eventually the men were crowded at the windows, watching the drama in front of them.

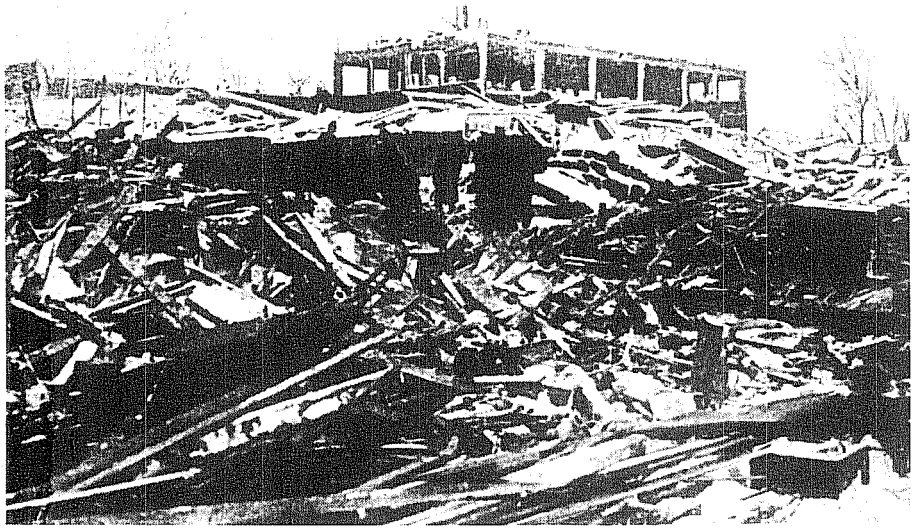
"You could read BELGIAN RELIEF on one. This other one had a deck load of barrels. I saw the fire on the barrels eventually. The flames were licking all up the barrels aboard that boat. We all piled up, watching. You had to reserve standing room only.

She was drifting in towards Richmond Station. Richmond Station was just between our house and the water. All of a sudden the phone rang. My boss answered. He said, "No. Frank's not going out. He's not here to go on messages."

There was a bit of talk, and then he called Frank over.

"Frank, go down to the office and get a parcel. They want it delivered to the Dry Dock." Dry Dock was down five or six blocks away. "And when you come back," he said, "we'll find your place."

Frank Burford in 1984. The photograph, courtesy of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, was one of a number of portraits of survivors by Ron Merrick.



The remains of Hillis & Sons Foundry. Frank Burford was one of the few who escaped death there. His father was killed in the foundry, his brother and sister at home.

I went to put on my new overcoat. He said, "You won't need your coat, Frank. It's warm and you'll be able to move faster. You hurry now." He was a nice man.

Frank ran.

". . . All of a sudden there was a big bang and I turned and I thought the sidewalk came up and hit me.

. . . When I woke up I looked around. I was boxed in, lumbered in from head to foot. A timber lay across my legs. Big one, son of a gun. There was plaster. There was everything.

. . . I had to draw myself out from under. I was scared that everything could move . . . I pulled myself and heaved myself between timbers . . . I got my head out and then out I came. I was on a big heap of stuff and the fires were all around me.

. . . I realized that I had seen a fire. I saw the men leaving the ship's side. I saw them clambering over the sides and they went over to Dartmouth to hide in the bushes. I saw the flames licking up the sides of the ship and her deck load.

. . . Next thing I saw two men come up. They said, "Could you tell us where our boat is?" . . . They must have been sailors off a boat and they got blown off. They knew nothing. I just shook my head."

Winnie Crouse

Winnie Crouse was seventeen. She lived outside Halifax, near Hubbards, but had come into town to do some shopping, and was staying with her husband's sister near North Street, further away from where the explosion happened, where houses were badly damaged, but did not catch fire.

"Mrs. MacReady (*her sister-in-law*) was in the passage ordering coal over the phone. She screamed, "Oh, my God!" I was just about to get up. I had put one foot out of bed. I was in my nightie. I had put on one boot, those old fashioned buttoned boots. I opened my bedroom door and that is all I knew. I came to somewhere in the hall. Mrs. MacReady was there. She had four children, having their breakfast at the kitchen table. She said, "Oh my God, Winnie. My children."

We couldn't see anything for lime dust. I don't think there was a piece of lime anywhere on the wall and the windows were all in. The doors were all down. We managed to get to the kitchen at the end of the hall. The baby, he wasn't quite eleven months old, was in his carriage, and the door to the back garden had fallen on top of him, but the hood of the carriage had kept it from falling on his head. Everything was full of lime and glass."

Nearby was the main military barracks with a magazine filled with explosive material. It was feared that another explosion might occur and people were warned to leave their homes, and go to high ground.

"A policeman came. He didn't have to open a door because all the doors were blown off. The MacReadys lived in a nice apartment on the second floor. He said, "I'm ordering everyone out. Get to the Commons. There could be a second explosion." That's all he said.

I ran to the bedroom, and I couldn't see much for dust. I grabbed my coat, gave it a couple of shakes and put it on. I just had it over my nightie, and it was long, and I was scared I'd trip."

The whole family, including the husband, who had been in bed, set off up the street.

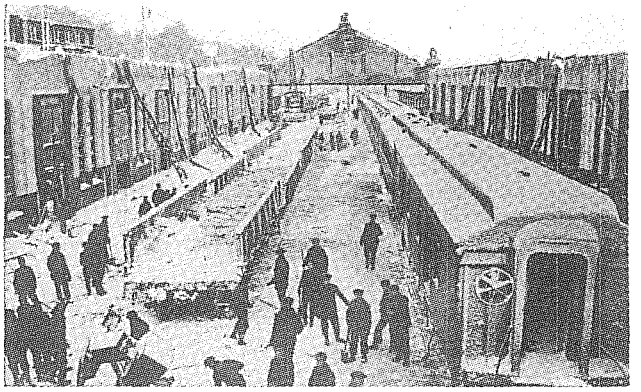
"I said, "Bessie, I'll take the baby." I don't know how she felt, but I was walking as if on air, not feeling

much, just acting automatically. I picked the baby up and shook the lime and glass off him. He never cried or anything. I put more clothes on him and off we set. I only weighed about a hundred pounds myself in those days.

We walked up Uniacke Street and crossed Gottingen, and, as far as you could see, nothing but people. Everybody was quiet. Shocked. Stunned. Nobody knew what had happened."

They reached the Commons.

"There we stood. And there we stood. Then a policeman on horseback came among the people. He said, "Those that have a home, they can go to it."



Halifax Railroad Station, in which 60 persons were killed by falling roof.

Percy McGrath

Dr. Percy McGrath was a young army doctor stationed in a nearby town. He arrived in the first relief train.

"We only knew that a dreadful explosion had destroyed the city of Halifax. My wife and I gathered up what bandages and supplies we had and the train left about eleven o'clock. . . . They had notified places along the line, and we picked up doctors, supplies and relatives of people that were in the city.

. . . It ordinarily took about three hours for a train to go from here to Halifax with all the stops, but we did it in an hour and a half.

We arrived in Rockingham about 12:30. We couldn't get any further because there was debris all over the place. The track was blown up. . . . We had to make our way in through the debris till we came to where the army had taken over. They had cleared a bit of a roadway as far as they could. We were climbing over all sorts of things. . . . They had piled the bodies on each side, piled them up like cord wood. Three feet high."

Eventually they reached Camp Hill Military Hospital

"They *(the injured)* were in the corridors, on the floor, between the beds. The windows were all blown out. They had blankets up and it was dark.

. . . The people . . . if they were bleeding you tried to stop it. Lots of them who had wounds, we had to be very careful for inside those wounds was glass and plaster and bits of wood, and if you sewed them up you were sewing them in. Then, of course, there were an awful lot of eye injuries. . . . People all went to their windows to watch. We worked there for three days non–stop."

Camp Hill Hospital, Halifax 1917

Leighton Dillman

The North End of Dartmouth was also badly affected. Leighton Dillman worked at Consumers' Cordage, near the harbour. He thought that the plant boiler had burst. His brother, working near him, was cut badly.

". . . This heavy black rain came. I hear it was powder. We were right in it. It covered our skin. See this tiny little spot? *(pointing to a scar on his arm)* That's it. Of course my brother with his open cuts got a lot of it."

Most survivors who were near the explosion site have scars that are tinged with dark blue from the fallout.

". . . Then we got home to our mother. She was badly hurt. We put her on a chair and carried her back into the woods quite a distance. She was in the kitchen, getting breakfast for the little guys. The roof came in, and the roof beam came in right along side of her and hit the stove.

. . . The lady next door to the one I was telling you about, she was killed. That house burnt down. Our house wasn't on fire. On the left hand side was my aunt's square house, and one side of it was taken down. You couldn't have done it any better . . . the nails pulled straight out, and landed in a field. Just picked the side up off the two storey house. To look at it you could put it back again, pound nails in and put it back."

Leighton Dillman's great enthusiasm was gardening. A park in Dartmouth, created on land that he gave to the city, bears his name.

Reflections

When Winnie Crouse returned home, she learned what effect the explosion had on her parents.

"When the Explosion happened, Mother was out hanging clothes on the line, and she said she felt the earth trembling under her feet, and she looked across St. Margaret's Bay and she could see the black smoke whirling round and round. My father was down on the wharf, pulling up some rope to put away for the winter. He was a fisherman. Mother said he came up from the wharf and he said, "Jane, Halifax is blown up. Do you see all that black smoke over there?" And she said to me, "Winnie, I couldn't hang the rest of my clothes up,thinking you was in there," and there was quite a few people from my home. My husband had two sisters married and living in Halifax, and there were a couple other people from home. One sister had one child and they all ended in different hospitals. Her husband lost an arm. The daughter, she was three years old, she had a cut across her chin, and she has the scar yet, and the mother lost an eye. She didn't lose her arm, but it was all cut up. They were in the hospital all winter, those three.

I can see my mother and father just as if it was this morning, when I walked in that door, with my husband behind me, and my father was sitting in his rocking chair, and he never spoke, and I couldn't speak, so, after, I sat down, and I said, "Mother, what have you got to eat?"

She said, "Winnie, I have some good barley soup." Then she said, "Winnie, you sit right there." That is the way Mother was. I was the only girl in the family, and so she brought me a plate of soup and some tea, and then I went into the bedroom and lay down, and closed my eyes, and I tried to get everything off my mind, but. . . .

Now, dear, that happened in 1917, and I'm 82 today, and all that stands out so vivid in my memory. Sometimes I don't know what I did with something that I saw two days ago, but I can still picture those happenings as if they were yesterday."

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