

ON THE BOOKSHELF

“The Great Halifax Explosion: A World War I Story of Treachery, Tragedy, and Extraordinary Heroism”

By John Bacon (Wm Morrow Books)

It was the most destructive man-made explosion ever on the American hemisphere, destroying most of the Nova Scotia, Canadian port city of Halifax in a 15th of a second. The sonic wave shattered every window pane for up to 5 miles, caused a 35-foot tsunami that swamped ships and tossed them around like toys, and the fireball that accompanied it set the demolished buildings ablaze. 25,000 were made homeless in a less than an instant, as 325 acres were obliterated. Railroad tracks were turned into twisted junk.

Approximately 3000 people were killed instantly or soon after the hideous wounds caused by flying glass shards or falling debris. The bodies of living and dead were coated with a slick black oil-like substance which defied soap and water (when they were even available, which was limited.) It tore apart the communication and transportation resources of the busiest port in the North American continent.

The Halifax Explosion occurred after a sequence of seemingly-minor mishaps. The *Mont-Blanc* had 6 million pounds of high explosives (TNT and picric acid) *plus* 246 tons of benzol, a highly-combustible accelerant, which was the latest “super gasoline”, in 494 barrels.” The crew had unwittingly constructed the perfect bomb.” It would be barely nudged by a much bigger merchant ship, the *Imo*, because its captain refused to grant right-of-way to the *Mont-Blanc*, which was not flying a red flag to indicate its dangerous cargo. They were afraid the U-boats would see the flag and target the freighter for destruction. The scene was blanketed by 16 inches of snow and 45 MPH winds from a blizzard the next night, further hampering rescue efforts and causing more deaths due to exposure.

Journalists from Boston dispatched accurate reports which stirred Americans instantly into action. Two days after the explosion, a ship left Boston with \$200,000 in medical personnel and supplies, engineers, glaziers, and glass. The next day another ship headed northward with more medical and reconstruction professionals plus \$100,000 worth of supplies and \$25,000 worth of trucks, plus the gas and drivers needed to operate them. Massachusetts’ contributions totaled more than \$15 million in modern currency. Maine and Rhode Island followed suit, as did the rest of the Canadian territories, and many over municipalities and states.

From our War for Independence, War of 1812 and into the early 20th century, we had tried to add Canada to our territory. Such talk ended with Halifax, never to reappear. A bond was forged by the compassion of America toward the victims of the Halifax Explosion that will never be broken. Nova Scotia still send a prize tree escorted by Royal Canadian Mounter Police to serve as Boston’s Christmas Tree every December. They haven’t forgotten.

We talk to the author on The Morning Show on Dec. 6, the centennial of the event. The interview will also be archived on www.onthebookshelf.biz.