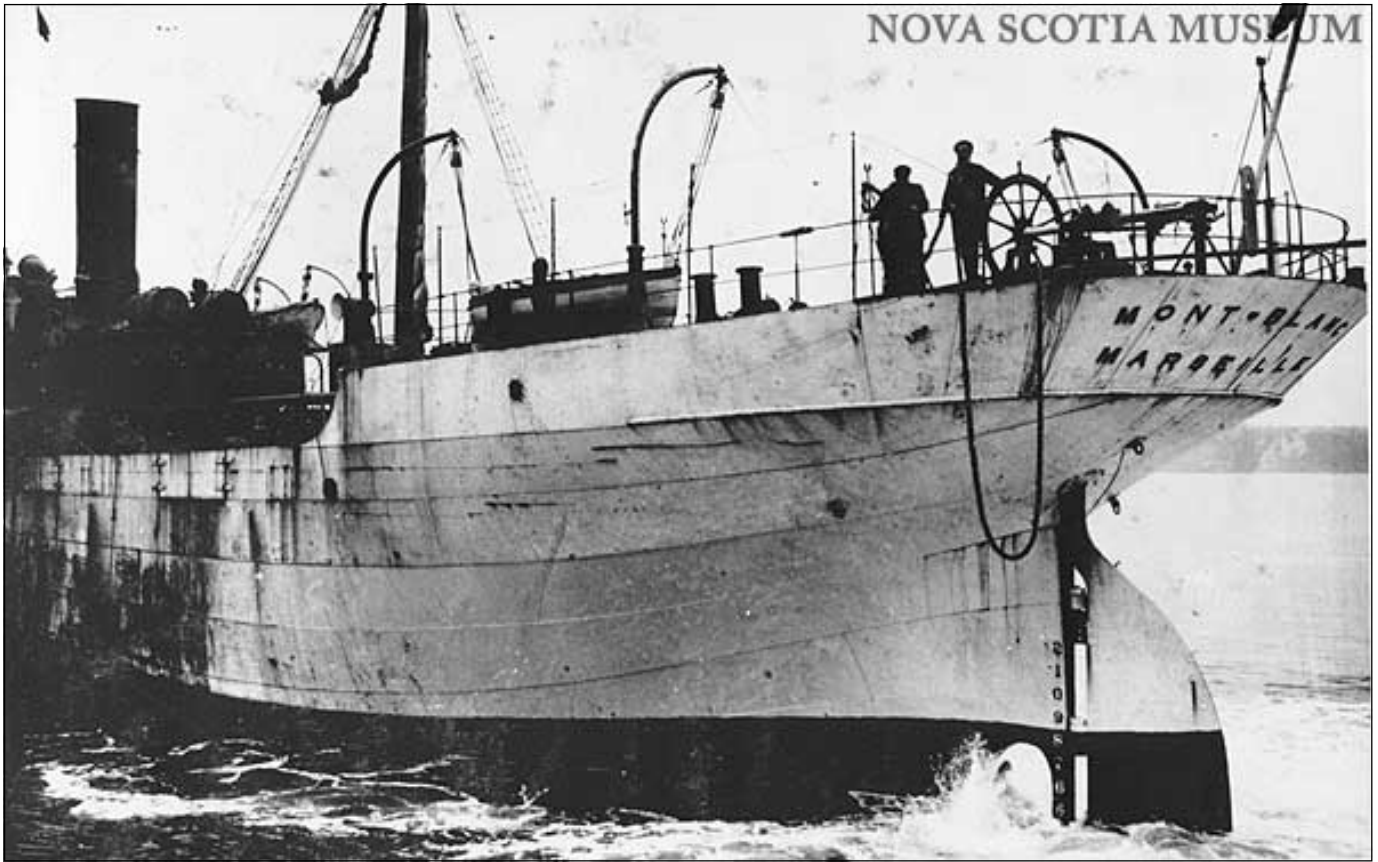


## THE "S.S. MONT BLANC"

*You may recall that in past newsletters John & I did a series on ships that had exploded with disastrous effect in various ports around the world during WW2.*

*This story that I recently came across is from WW1 and according to what I have read about it, it was the worlds biggest manmade explosion until the Atom bomb went off. Ed.*



*(From Wikipedia)*

The SS Mont-Blanc was a French freighter which exploded while carrying ammunition in Halifax Harbour on December 6, 1917 causing the Halifax Explosion which killed 2000 people.

The explosion was caused by a collision with the Norwegian ship SS Imo. Mont-Blanc was built in Middlesbrough, England in 1899, ordered from an English shipyard by French shipping investors.

A classic three-island style, general cargo steamship, Mont-Blanc was a tramp steamer, carrying diverse types of cargos around the world. The ship changed owners several times and was registered at first in Rouen, then Marseille and finally Saint-Nazaire, France. In World War One, Mont-Blanc was purchased by the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (The French Line), the French state owned corporation put in charge of much of France's wartime shipping. She was chartered to carry a complete cargo of miscellaneous types of military explosives from New York to France in November 1917.

### **SS Mont-Blanc**

Namesake: Mont-Blanc, famous French mountain

Owner: Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (French Line)

Port of registry: Saint-Nazaire, France

Builder: Sir Raylton Dixon & Co., Middlesbrough, Great Britain

Launched: 1899

Type: General Cargo

Tonnage: 3121 gross tons

Length: 320 ft (98 m)

Beam: 44.8 ft (13.7 m)

Depth: 15.3 ft (4.7 m)

Installed power: Steam, coal fired

Propulsion: Triple Expansion Steam Engine, single screw 247 ihp (184 kW)

Armament: Two defensive cannons

## MONT BLANC 2

She left New York December 1 to join a convoy in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Entering Halifax Harbour on the morning of December 6, she struck the outbound SS Imo in the Halifax Narrows.

A fire caused by the collision detonated her cargo twenty minutes later.

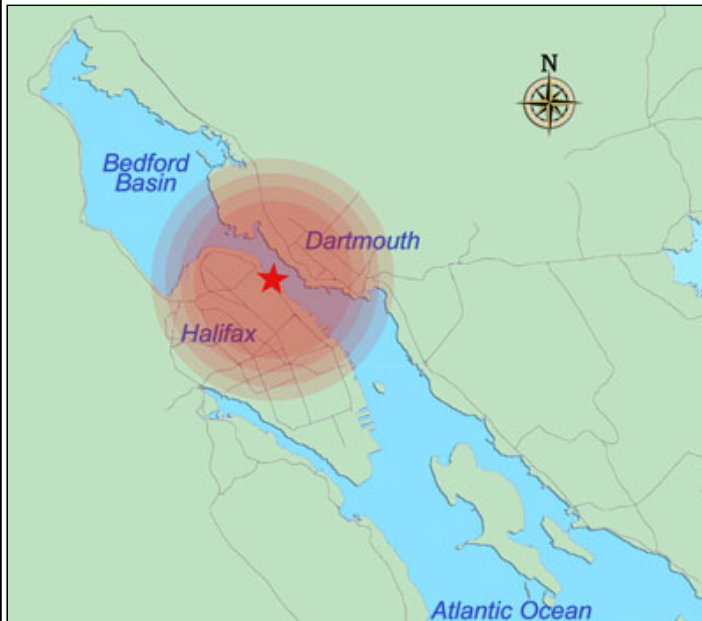
Mont-Blanc's crew abandoned ship before the explosion and all survived, except for one man killed by falling debris. Mont-Blanc's captain, Aime Le Medec, and pilot, Francis Mackey, were blamed for the explosion by a Judicial Inquiry and charged with manslaughter but acquitted at trial. A subsequent appeal determined that Mont-Blanc and Imo were both equally to blame for errors that led to the collision.

**Thursday, December 6, 1917, dawned bright and clear in Halifax.** World War I raged in Europe, and the port city was busy with the movement of war ships carrying troops, relief supplies and munitions.

Around eight that morning, the Norwegian ship carrying relief supplies to Belgium, SS Imo left its mooring in Bedford Basin and headed for open sea. At about the same time, the French ship SS Mont-Blanc was heading up the harbour to moor, awaiting a convoy to accompany her across the Atlantic.

A convoy was essential; this small, barely seaworthy vessel was carrying a full cargo of explosives. Stored in the holds, or simply stacked on deck, were 35 tons of benzol, 3000 rounds of ammunition, 10 tons of gun cotton, 2,300 tons of picric acid (used in explosives), and 400,000 pounds of TNT.

SS Imo, a much larger and faster ship than SS Mont-Blanc, passed into the Narrows. She was travelling fast, and too close to Dartmouth when SS Mont-Blanc first spotted her. SS Mont-Blanc, not flying the regulation red flag to indicate she was carrying explosives, signalled that she was in her correct channel; SS Imo, however, signalled that she was intending to bear even further to port, closer to Dartmouth and further into SS Mont-Blanc's channel. SS Mont-Blanc signalled again that she was still intending to pass to starboard; she was by this time very close to the Dartmouth shore and travelling "dead slow."



A WW2 photo

Bedford Basin Convoy

SS Imo, however, did not swing towards Halifax, as SS Mont-Blanc expected; she signalled instead that she was maintaining her course. SS Mont-Blanc, perhaps wrongly, saw only one course open -- to swing to port, towards Halifax, across the bows of SS Imo, and thus pass starboard to starboard.

Perhaps the ships might have passed without incident, but SS Imo signalled "full speed astern."

So did SS Mont-Blanc, but it was too late.

Reversing her engines caused SS Imo's bow to swing right, and it struck SS Mont-Blanc -- missing the TNT, but striking the picric acid stored directly beneath the drums of benzol on deck.

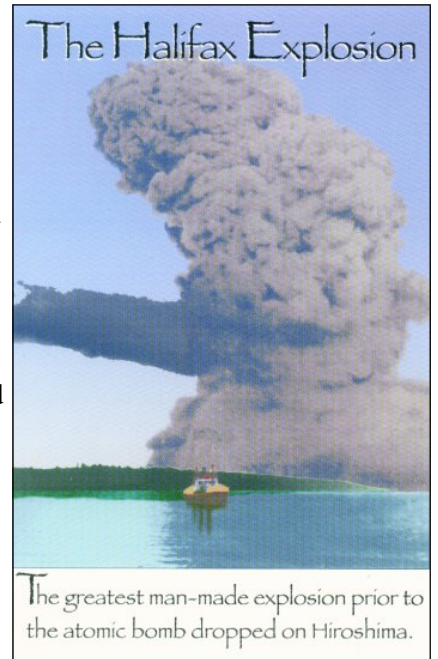
The impact cut a wedge in SS Mont-Blanc's side, and struck deadly sparks.

### MONT BLANC 3



The crew of SS Mont-Blanc, aware of their cargo, immediately took to the lifeboats, screaming warnings that no one heeded. They rowed for Dartmouth, leaving the now furiously burning ship to drift towards Halifax, propelled in that direction by SS Imo's impact. SS Mont-Blanc drifted by a Halifax pier, brushing it and setting it ablaze. Members of the Halifax Fire Department responded quickly, and were positioning their engine up to the nearest hydrant when SS Mont-Blanc disintegrated in a blinding white flash, creating the biggest man-made explosion before the nuclear age.

It was 9:05am.



Over 1,900 people were killed immediately; within a year the figure had climbed well over 2,000. Around 9,000 more were injured, many permanently; 325 acres, almost all of north-end Halifax, were destroyed.

Much of what was not immediately leveled burned to the ground, aided by winter stockpiles of coal in cellars. As for SS Mont-Blanc, all 3,000 tons of her were shattered into little pieces that were blasted far and wide. The barrel of one of her cannons landed three and a half miles away; part of her anchor shank, weighing over half a ton, flew two miles in the opposite direction.

Windows shattered 50 miles away, and the shock wave was even felt in Sydney, Cape Breton, 270 miles to the north-east.

There were about 20 minutes between the collision and the explosion at 9:05. It was enough time for spectators, including many children, to run to the waterfront to watch the ship burning, thus coming into close range. It was enough time for others to gather at windows, and thus an exceptionally large number of people were injured by flying glass -- 1,000 unfortunate survivors sustained eye damage.

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 a blizzard the worst ever known that struck the city the following day, dumping 16 inches of snow over the ruins and their sooty, oily covering.



## MONT BLANC 4

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 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.

To this day, Halifax sends an annual Christmas tree to the city of Boston in gratitude.

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The 'Mont-Blanc' was completely destroyed and scattered by the explosion. Steel fragments of her hull and fittings landed all over Halifax and Dartmouth, some traveling over four kilometres.

A black rain of unconsumed carbon from the Mont-Blanc fell over the city for about 10 minutes after the blast, coating survivors and structural debris with soot. Water around the ship vaporized, a huge wave flooded the streets of Halifax and Dartmouth and swept many people back into the harbour where they drowned.

The next day, one of the worst blizzards ever recorded in Halifax began, and lasted for six days.

Today several large fragments, such as one of Mont-Blanc's cannons and her anchor shank, are mounted where they landed as monuments to the explosion.

Others are on display at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax which has a large collection of Mont-Blanc fragments, many recovered from the homes of survivors.

Gradually, Halifax was put back together, though nothing could compensate for lost lives. Within two months over 1,500 victims had been buried, some unidentified; the remaining victims were discovered only in the spring as excavation was made easier. A relief committee was set up to provide clothing, money and furniture, and

this committee existed for almost 59 years. There are still a few survivors of the blast receiving pensions from the Relief Committee's fund.

Three thousand houses were repaired in the first seven weeks; in January, temporary apartments were being constructed at the rate of one every hour. Rebuilding continued apace, and a few months later, construction started on 328 houses in the area bordered by Young, Agricola, Duffus and Gottingen Streets. The houses were built from cement blocks known as hydrostones, and (with a design unusually forward-thinking for the time) had gardens with trees in front, and modern plumbing and electricity. This area, still known as the Hydrostone, is considered one of the more attractive and desirable parts of Halifax in which to live.

On Dec. 6, 1992, the Halifax Fire Department erected a monument in front of Station 6 (corner of Lady Hammond Road and Robie Street), in honour of the nine members who died attempting to fight the fire on SS Mont-Blanc.

Over eighty years later, there are few survivors left to tell their stories. But Halifax has not forgotten, and every Dec. 6 at 9am there is a service by the Memorial Bells at Fort Needham, close to where SS Mont-Blanc exploded.

\*\*\*\*\*



The 'Imo' was hurled against the Dartmouth shore.

The Mont-Blanc exploded before the Imo could make headway to open water. The shockwave swept over the deck tearing away the smoke stack and the super-structure. Shrapnel perforated the ship's hull. Captain Haakon From was killed, as were five of the crew of the Imo.

The body of Pilot William Hayes was found crouched under a boat on the bridge. The tsunami lifted the Imo and threw it against the Dartmouth shore. Helmsman John Johansen was knocked unconscious and awoke to find himself neck deep in water, moments later he found himself back on board the Imo, the wave having receded. Others who survived the blast, but who feared being washed overboard

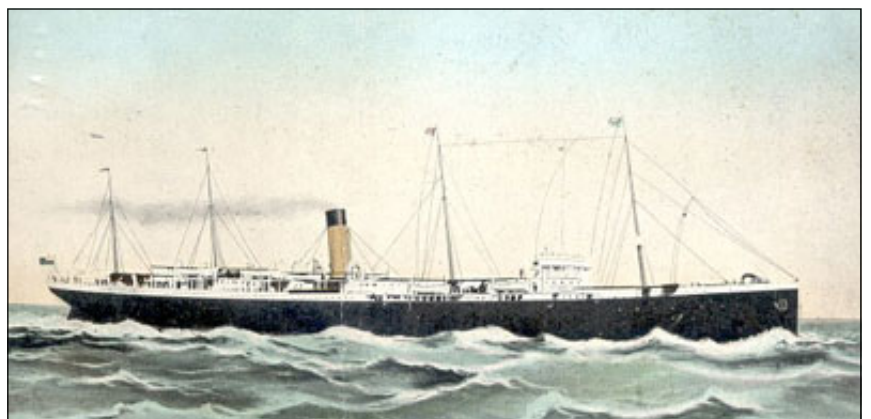
made for the shore. A boat from the HMS High Flyer came and rescued the remaining crew.

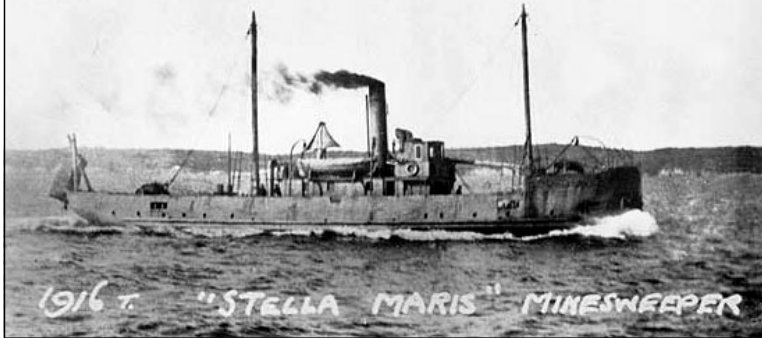
**Right-** The Imo was originally the 'RUNIC'

A White Star Line livestock carrier.

She was fitted with a 20ft. Diameter propeller That caused her to swing to port going ahead and to 'cut' to starboard going astern, making her a difficult ship to manoeuvre.

The white patch on the Imo's sides are the words BELGIAN RELIEF to hopefully protect her from German submarines.





## MONT BLANC 5

*Many vessels of all sizes were destroyed or damaged by the explosion; below are the worst effected.*

The "Stella Maris" which was nearby at the time of the collision headed for the Mont-Blanc, to attempt to attach a line to tow it away from Pier 6. When the Mont-Blanc exploded the Stella Maris was swamped and thrown up onto the shore. Capt. Brannen and nineteen of the crew were killed, by some miracle William Nickerson, the second mate, and four of the crew survived. The Stella Maris was salvaged, and put back into service.

At Pier 8, to the north of Pier 6, stood the British steamer Curaca, Tonnage: 6386 Gross, Built: Sunderland, Builder: J.L. Thompson & Sons Ltd. Year: Owners: N.Y. & Pacific Steam Ship Co. Ltd. ("The Grace Line")

Crew: Captain E. Peck, 55 crew+ 12 horsemen, she had been loading mules. The blast blew her across the harbour to the center of Tuft's Cove, at Dartmouth, her bow protruding from the water. Her

stern was smashed in, her masts and smokestack blown away. At the time of the explosion between 7 or 8 crew were ashore and survived. Of the 46 other crew members who were aboard, only one survived.

The vessel was later raised and put back into service under the same name.

Due to the efforts of a grandson of one of the victims and a local historian, the names of the victims were added to the ship's monument located at Halifax's Fairview Cemetery in 2001.

The RN cruiser HMS Highflyer was the flagship for the Royal Navy in North America and the West Indies. She was anchored by the Halifax Dockyard, awaiting the return of the whaler crew who went to assist the burning Mont Blanc. The explosion killed the crew of the whaler and three crew onboard the Highflyer, 50 others were injured. Although built for battle, the ship sustained significant damage. While the Highflyer underwent repairs, the crew provided rescue and relief assistance on shore.

On December 11, the Highflyer escorted the first convoy to leave Halifax following the explosion. The Highflyer built in 1898 was the last serving cruiser from the Victorian navy. She saw extensive action in World War I including the sinking of the German Armed Merchant Cruiser Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse in 1915. After the war she was made Flagship of the East Indies Squadron and was retired and sold for scrap in Bombay in 1921.

**Photo below** The HMS Highflyer is the 3 funneled job anchored in the river.

The Hovland was in the Dry Dock when the Explosion occurred. She suffered serious damage to her upperworks and five of her crew were killed. However, her hull was not damaged and she was soon repaired and returned to service.

She was also loaded with ammunition, so when the burning Mont Blanc drifted close the wharfies and the crew quickly battened down the hatches and so kept the cargo safe from the blast.



The photo taken after the blast shows her minus her funnel and a few other bits.

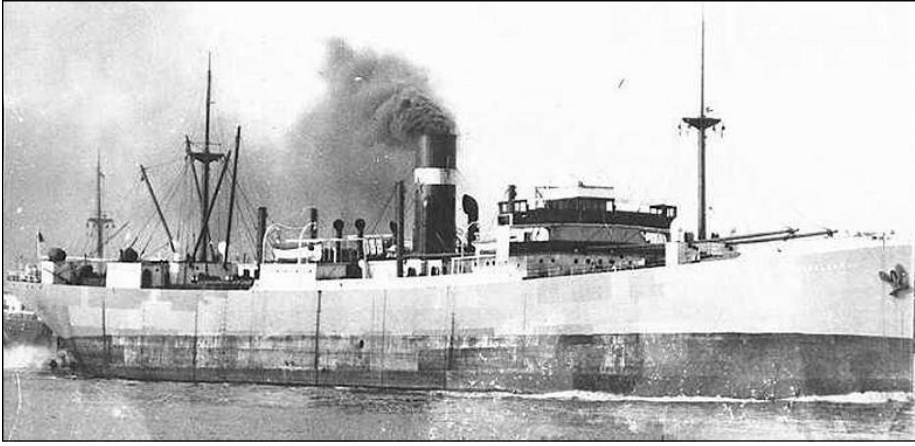
The ship billowing coal smoke is the Candian navy cruiser HMS Naiomi, she to was damaged in the blast and several of here crew were killed in the blast. Her crew were engaged in rescue work for weeks afterwards.

She was given to Canada by the Brits, but proved to be a white elephant, the Canadian navy couldn't afford her and after a year at sea she spent all her time alongside were she is in this photo.

British cargo ship 'Curaca'



## MONT BLANC EXPLOSION 6



*Picture shows the “Anglo Australian” I’m not sure if it is the same ship, she looks a mite modern for an 1899 build, a sister ship of this “Anglo Saxon” gained fame in WW2 by being the only MN ship to sink an enemy sub by gunfire.*

The British cargo ship Calonne, formerly SS Anglo-Australian was also badly damaged and many of the crew perished  
Tonnage: 4019 Built: London, Great Britain  
Builder: Short Brothers Year: 1899  
Registered Port: London, Great Britain  
Owners: Equinox Steam Ship Co., London  
Crew: Captain John Henry Telfer—  
During the Explosion, Colonne was berthed at Pier 9 taking on horses for soldiers at the front. The wreck was hove over by the blast but remained at the wharf. She was later repaired and put back into service.

### The Inquiry • Who was to blame?

Almost immediately after the Explosion, citizens and officials demanded answers. While Haligonians knew that there were two ships involved, the Imo and the Mont-Blanc, they were unsure who was to blame. Was the fault in the hands of Captain From of the Imo, exiting the basin through the narrows, in haste to make up lost time? Or did the fault lie with Captain LeMedec, pushing the unflagged Mont-Blanc with its large cargo of explosives into the narrows, that caused the disaster?

On December 12th, 1917, just 6 days after the fatal explosion, in the courthouse on Spring Garden Road, Mr Justice Arthur Drysdale; a native Haligonian would attempt to answer these questions. The Halifax Explosion Inquiry opened with examination of the series of events which unfolded on the morning of December 6th. Testimony from both sides, the Imo, and the Mont-Blanc were heard.

Captain Le Medec was the first to take the stand. He reported that the Mont Blanc was entering the main harbour after having spent the previous evening outside of the anti-sub nets, which were lowered every night, making entrance into the harbour impossible for the Mont Blanc. Le Medec claimed that visibility was clear that morning. As he approached the narrows, the Imo, in an attempt to pass a tug boat pulling barges that was slowing the Imo's exit, was on a course that would cut across the bow of the Mont-Blanc . At this point, the Mont Blanc gave off one signal, “indicating that it would veer slightly more starboard, or to the right” moving towards the Dartmouth side of the harbour.

The Imo, replied with two blasts indicating that it too would move towards the Dartmouth side; and the Mont Blanc then responded with two more blasts and continued toward the Dartmouth side. When the boats seemed that they would crash, Le Medec recalled, he ordered the engines stopped and “bear hard to the left” which put them on the Halifax side of the harbour. This would be an important piece of information in the later Appeals which would take place after the initial inquiry. Just when Le Medec thought danger had been averted, the Imo let out three blasts, which signaled that the Imo would proceed “full speed astern!”

At that point, Le Medec knew a collision was unavoidable. Fire broke out, Medec knowing the dangerous cargo which the Mont-Blanc carried, ordered the lifeboats to be lowered, and the crew jumped ship rowing to Turtle Grove, leaving the Imo and everyone on shore virtually blind of the danger. Exploding drums drew thousands to the water’s edge to watch.

Unfortunately, most of the crew of the Imo died, leaving very few witness to vouch for the Imo. They did have a witness from the deck who survived the explosion. However like the other witnesses from the Imo, they provided very little extra information as many were disoriented because of the explosion, or were in a position on the Imo which was not conducive to seeing the events of that morning.

Pilot Mackey, who was onboard the Mont-Blanc that morning, was also questioned by Mr.Burchell. The Councilor called into question his competency as well as his sobriety that morning. Burchell sited negligence by Mackey as one of the reasons the Mont-Blanc should be held accountable. He also claimed that the absence of warning flags was also to blame.

After less than two months, Judge Drysdale concluded that the Explosion had occurred because of “violations of the rules of navigation”, gross negligence on the part of Pilot Mackey, and that “the pilot and master of the steamship Mont-Blanc were wholly responsible for violating the rules of the road” . He also condemned the behavior of Halifax Pilots and Harbour Authority and their negligence and their lack of rule enforcement in the harbour.

## Mont Blanc explosion 7

Haligonians, for the most part, agreed with Drysdale's conclusions, taking sympathy for the Imo because of the loss of crew members. Inquiry would not end with Drysdale's conclusions however, and the question of who was to blame would be appealed, not once but twice by the owners of the Mont-Blanc, first to the Supreme Court of Canada, then to Britain to appeal once again.

Drysdale's conclusions did not satisfy the owners of the Mont Blanc, in January of 1918, they sued the owners of the Imo for two million dollars. The owners of the Imo responded quickly with a counter-suit for the same amount. Judge Drysdale, also presiding in the suit, concluded that the Mont Blanc was to blame.

Almost immediately the owners of the Mont-Blanc "appealed against the said judgment to the Supreme Court of Canada" and on May 19th, 1919, the trial began. The evidence presented in the appeal was much the same as the initial inquiry, with one new piece of evidence which proved that the Mont-Blanc was on the Halifax side of the harbor when it exploded. After hearing all the evidence, five judges concluded as follows: Two Judges (Davids and Idigton J.) found the Mont-Blanc "wholly to blame", two Judges (Brodeur and Mignault J.J) found the Imo "wholly to blame" and one Judge (Anglin J.) found both ships to be at fault.

These findings were not satisfactory for the owners of either the Imo or the Mont-Blanc and were again appealed to a higher form of justice in the Privy Council in London England, where it was concluded that both the Imo and the Mont-Blanc were at fault, therefore share the responsibility and the blame for the fatal explosion on December 6th, 1917.

*Further reading on this shows that total confusion reigned, the harbour was governed by several authorities who apparently never contacted each other as to who did what. They were; the Royal Navy (because Canada then was a bit like Australia prior to federation.) The Royal Canadian navy, The Harbour Master, the state Govt. The Halifax City Council. Plus various other state and national bodies had a say in it.*

*So far I have concentrated on the ships and their crews, but the killing was done mainly amongst the residents of the city, to finish this story some photos from the city.*



**Left** the stock of one of Mont Blanc's anchors



**Right** one of her guns  
Now mounted in parks  
were they landed in 1917  
more than 2 miles from  
the scene of the  
explosion.



Left the brewery before

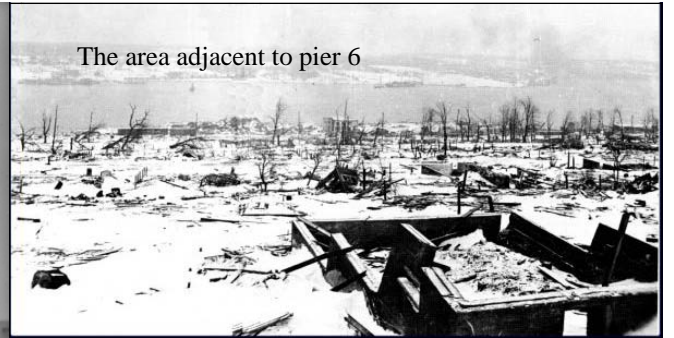


Right the brewery after the explosion must have been a traumatic time for the drinkers in the town,  
I wonder if they got counseling.

## MONT BLANC EXPLOSION 8



Town hall



The area adjacent to pier 6



Ruins of the sugar refinery-SS IMO in the background

NOVA SCOTIA MUSEUM

Terrible Halifax Disaster. Wreckage Sugar Refinery. "S.S. Imo" in Distance



S. SNOW-COVERED DEVASTATED RESIDENTIAL SECTION OF HALIFAX, AFTER TERRIBLE EXPLOSION. Copyright Underwood & Underwood,



NOVA SCOTIA MUSEUM

Nowhere in the Halifax websites that I have read is there any criticism of the captain and crew of the Mont Blanc, which I find both surprising and a credit to the websites as I cannot think other than that the Captain and crew should have tried to sail the ship out of the narrows knowing what they had on board and that they didn't know how long before or even if she would explode. Also nowhere in the websites does it say if her engines were still working, the collision was into one of her holds so it is most probable they were still turning over. Ed.