

## Introduction: Through Sailors' Eyes

We must remember not to judge any public servant by any one act, and especially should we beware of attacking the men who are merely the occasions and not the causes of disaster.

*Theodore Roosevelt*

*10 April 1899*

The Halifax explosion of 6 December 1917 razed much of the city of Halifax, vilified the Canadian navy, polarized elements within the media and government, and became a definitive event in Canada's national consciousness.<sup>1</sup> On that day, the collision of the ships *Mont Blanc* and *Imo* in Halifax Harbour triggered an eruption of almost 3,000 tons of picric acid, TNT, and gun cotton. The largest man-made explosion in the world to that time, it killed over 1,600 people and wounded some 9,000 others.

Yet despite the magnitude of the explosion and the tragedy and controversy in its wake, the event is curiously underrepresented in the country's political and military histories. Some national histories make no mention of the disaster, and even the definitive biography of the prime minister of the time remarks on it only in passing.<sup>2</sup> The response of the military history community has been similarly underwhelming. The vast majority of First World War studies have concentrated almost entirely on events overseas and on the politics and policies that directed them. Indeed, from the standpoint of Canadian soldiery, only Sir Andrew MacPhail's official army medical history of the Great War (1925) comments on the explosion and its aftermath. His observations, while brief, emphasize that the disaster was the "supreme test" of the army medical service in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Desmond Morton's widely used survey text on Canadian military history recognizes the threat that the disaster posed to the critical role played by the port of Halifax – and the nascent naval force it sheltered – in the war effort.<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Tucker's official history of the naval service provides a brief sketch of the local naval dimensions of the disaster but does not go much beyond generalities.<sup>5</sup> Much more recently, in their landmark study of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) during the First World War, Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty recognize the Halifax explosion as a "new datum in Canada's consciousness," but suggest that, owing to good fortune, it only briefly disrupted the operations of the navy and the port. Although coverage of the explosion is merely a digression in their study, they are the first historians to make the important point that the explosion turned public opinion against the navy.<sup>6</sup> Yet if this argument is accurate, it is puzzling that the most recent general history of the RCN makes no mention of the catastrophe.<sup>7</sup>

Although all but ignored by military and political historians, the Halifax explosion represents a significant benchmark in the field of disaster research. Indeed, the 1920 work of Samuel Henry Prince on forms of social change experienced during this catastrophe is still admired as a pioneering work in the genre.<sup>8</sup> More recently, analysts of disaster such as Russell R. Dynes, E.L. Quarantelli, and T. Joseph Scanlon have made additional contributions to a respectable body of scientific literature on the subject.<sup>9</sup>

These studies notwithstanding, most of what has been written about events in Halifax on and after 6 December 1917 is popular history and literature focusing on the local dimension. Many of these works convey a rich sense of the immensity of the tragedy, the sufferings of the population, and

the endurance of the human spirit. Classic books such as Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) and Michael J. Bird's *The Town That Died* (1962) have particularly sharpened our appreciation of the event. For succeeding generations, books by Janet Kitz (1989) and by Robert MacNeil (1992) have continued the tradition.<sup>10</sup> These and other works, while all local in their viewpoint, range widely in style (from literary expressions to historical and scientific examinations) and subject (from relief and medical responses to legal issues and reconstruction). Most are worthy (and often very moving), but few are without errors. They suffer from lack of access to all the available sources. Some of the popular histories, perhaps inspired by MacLennan or MacNeil, cross into the novelist's realm of invented dialogue, which blurs their usefulness as credible history. Most seriously, the *national* perspective on the disaster is lacking because research has been confined largely to local sources.

If one examines all the political, military, disaster-analysis, and local accounts of the explosion, the common thread is that national context is ignored. Neither the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Militia, nor any other government agency figures prominently in accounts of the disaster, despite their direct and immediate involvement. This is a striking omission for an event long regarded as one of our national touchstones. As part of the national war effort, the port of Halifax had been brought under federal control: Halifax, more than any other Canadian city, had become a garrison town. The French ship *Mont Blanc* was in the harbour solely because of Halifax's important role in the war effort. The administration that controlled the movements of *Mont Blanc* and other ships in the harbour was federal. Moreover, after the explosion, federal agencies were responsible for getting the port back into operation, for calling a public inquiry into the event, and for determining what lessons should be drawn from the disaster. Everyone in Halifax – from outraged municipal politicians to the citizens themselves – fully understood the federal context, and all looked to Ottawa when laying the blame or looking for relief.

Beyond these considerations, the national context is crucial in revealing the role and experience of Canadian sailors and soldiers in the disaster. No published study suggests that these men were other than bit players in the tragedy, but such a suggestion is misleading. Halifax was the principal base of Canada's tiny navy. With unforeseen events in the war at sea threatening the east coast of North America, the size of the naval force in the harbour

quickly multiplied. At the same time, the city housed the most important army garrison in the country. Both soldiers and sailors were particularly well placed to witness and understand the events that unfolded in Halifax Harbour. Thus, like federal agencies, these military and naval men are an important part of the wider context of this study. Yet because it was ultimately the naval service that was responsible for the port of Halifax, it is the eyes of the “sailors” that provide the central focus.

This book is not a history of the Halifax explosion per se. It does not detail the civilian loss of life or damage to the city at large, nor does it review citizens’ efforts at relief and reconstruction. It concentrates on local events only to the extent that they affected or were affected by the navy. Thus, the chapters that follow recount events from the point of view of individual officers, enlisted personnel, civilian employees, and officials of the navy, whether afloat or ashore, and whether in Halifax, Ottawa, or elsewhere. They include, as well, the perspectives of personnel in the allied Royal Navy and United States Navy. Such accounts provide the bases on which to revisit and revise the known sequence of events.

Such revision is made possible by the wealth of detailed information in the records of the armed services in Ottawa, which reflects the centrality of the armed forces to the life and economy of wartime Halifax as well as the forces’ responsibility for the federal government’s response to the disaster. The records of other federal departments and agencies that had a presence in Halifax are also rich sources: the political leadership and senior officials in Ottawa needed, demanded, and received a constant flow of information. Together, these sources not only clear up myths and misconceptions in earlier accounts but also bring new dimensions to the story. One of the notable new dimensions is the perspective of leaders in Ottawa – the people who, within a few days of the explosion, made most of the key decisions that affected subsequent events. Because they were in a position to make a somewhat detached assessment of local events and personalities, their perspectives frequently differ markedly from those of people closer to the disaster. Related to this consideration, federal personnel and institutional records are also invaluable for analyzing people and institutions under stress, one of the fascinating aspects of any disaster, and one of the most profitable areas of study.

Equally importantly, federal sources explain why the regional perspective has so completely dominated the record from 1917 to the present day. In the face of understandable outrage in Halifax about the apparent failure of

federal officials and national institutions, the response of authorities in Ottawa – surprisingly well documented in the National Archives – was political damage control from which a more balanced assessment has never emerged.

Once the operation of the port had been restored, the Canadian Army publicly received some belated credit for its role in the wake of the disaster, although this acknowledgment greatly understated its crucially important, efficient, and effective part in all phases of the recovery. The navy's reputation, by contrast, had no chance.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, Haligonians searched for answers. Why had this awful thing happened? Who was responsible? A public inquiry established to address those questions rapidly became controversial: given the emotionally charged atmosphere in the city, it was rather too much to expect otherwise. A growing sense of public outrage accompanied the proceedings. The movements of ships and the orders given by masters and the pilots charged to bring the ships safely into port were scrutinized. The navy (and by implication the government of Canada) was responsible for traffic control in Halifax Harbour. Had it failed in its duty? That possibility became the subject of much debate, and a swelling wave of public vilification was directed towards the RCN. The navy was caught in what became a nasty search for people to punish. As the process played out, it was accompanied by what some would today call a media feeding-frenzy. Meanwhile, lawyers argued and postured, and politicians and officials struggled with appearances, issues, and outcomes while practising damage control. Despite an apparent array of circumstantial evidence against the navy, the Crown counsel to the inquiry, who had become convinced that the naval service was blameless in the matter, courageously tried to argue against the weight of intense public opinion. He failed. In a symbolic censure of the entire navy, Frederick E. Wyatt, the middle-ranking officer in charge of naval examination of shipping at the port, joined an equally unfortunate ship's captain and a pilot accused of manslaughter. Ultimately, the focus on Wyatt served as a useful foil to prevent other information from becoming public and to help the government weather the crisis. It is one of the goals of this book to redress this injustice.

The first chapters of this book offer an examination of the navy's physical presence in the port of Halifax and a reconstruction, from a naval point of view, of the sequence of events leading up to the disaster. Similarly, the explosion and its immediate aftermath will be addressed in terms of ships,

facilities, and personnel. The focus then shifts outward in time and space through the day of the explosion as sailors and soldiers from three nations struggled to deal with the disaster. The account continues with an assessment of reaction and recovery efforts in still wider terms, including an Ottawa perspective, and the complex interactions by which damage was assessed and repaired and by which the port was brought back into operation as a vital cog in the ongoing war effort. Two chapters explore the difficult visible and behind-the-scenes processes that sought to determine blame, absorb lessons, and affect public policy. In concluding, some additional evidence will be considered to expand our understanding of how the affair played out and how it affected the Royal Canadian Navy.

Finally, it should be noted that Canadian military historians have long studied the difficulties between senior military officers and politicians. Such issues are not the focus of this work. Rather, this is a tale of an institution in crisis. It was composed of a “family” of politicians, civil servants, and uniformed personnel who shared certain values and objectives, interacted with and affected each other, and generally understood their place in the system. Despite the changed times, they were not unlike such institutions that exist today. Herein lie the modest lessons to be learned.