

The Vessel *Mont Blanc*

The Explosion That Destroyed a Town

by Hank Foglino

On Wednesday the 5th of December, 1917, the French ship *Mont Blanc* approached Halifax Harbor in Nova Scotia. The *Mont Blanc* was an old, abused vessel. She had been launched in 1899 and her owners, reaping the riches of the early transportation booms of the early 1900s, worked her hard and consented only to major repairs. In 1915 the vessel was purchased by the reputable Compagnie General Transatlantique as a last resort to replace any of the many ships sunk by German U-boats. Guns were mounted fore and aft and the *Mont Blanc* went to war; her cargoes were determined by Navy orders. She made many uneventful Atlantic crossings carrying general cargo to North America and vital war materials back to France.

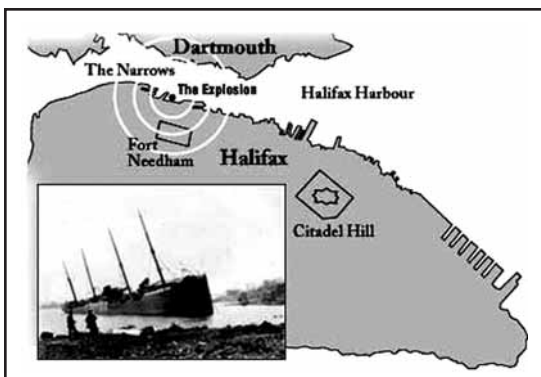
On the 25th of November, 1917, she pulled into Gravesend Bay, NY with a new captain, Aime Le Medec, to pick up cargo for France. His first clue that this was to be special cargo came when a gang of shipwrights came aboard and began constructing wooden linings for all four cargo holds and erecting partitions in each between-deck section, all this done using copper nails. When they were finished, there wasn't a steel plate or stanchion visible. Even the hold covers were sheathed in wood. When Le Medoc met with the officials, his suspicions were confirmed: the cargo was explosives.

He was told that normally his type of ship would not be used for the large load he would be carrying, but the shortage of ships left no choice. Her cargo consisted of 200 tons of TNT, 10 tons of gun cotton and 2,300 tons of wet and dry picric acid (the deadly and sensitive lyddite, chief explosive agent of WWI). Last minute instructions from France arrived to ship additional cargo that was urgently required. This consisted of 35 tons of benzole, a new super gasoline, contained in metal drums. They were stacked three to four high on the fore and after decks, held in place by retaining boards and lashed with ropes. A further surprise for Le Medoc was that the convoy that he was supposed to join up with would not accept his vessel. The minimum convoy speed was designated at 13 knots. It was doubtful that the *Mont Blanc* with her current load would be able to maintain 7 knots for any period of time, making her easy prey. The orders, therefore, were to proceed to Halifax, where a convoy sailing with more escorts was forming which might possibly accept her. If not, Le Medoc would receive special orders for an independent Atlantic crossing.

It was already dusk on the 5th of December, 1917 when the *Mont Blanc* picked up Francis Mackey, a pilot with 24 years of experience taking boats in and out of Halifax Harbor without being involved in an accident of any kind. McKay spoke no French and Le Medoc was not proficient in English, but they seemed to be able to communicate with each other. Shortly thereafter, a signal from the guarding gunboat confirmed that the boom defense closing the harbor was in place and there would be no traffic between dusk and dawn. The pilot was invited to spend the night on board and he graciously accepted the offer.

Some six miles away in Bedford Basin, a Norwegian vessel, the *Imo*, lay at anchor. Her captain, Haakon From, was cursing his ship's agents. They knew he wanted to be underway that day and were told he was

short of fuel to reach New York to pick up cargo of urgently needed relief supplies for war-torn Belgium. They had promised that the coal tender would be there at 3 p.m. However, it did not arrive until 5:30 p.m., and by the time it had loaded 50 tons of coal, the harbor boom was closed. If his coal delivery had been made on time, he could have been underway. Protected from U-boat attack by the words "Belgium Relief" painted in huge red letters on a white background on each side of his hull, he could have been well on his way to New York. His only consolation was that his pilot was already on board, ready to sail first thing in the morn-



ing.

The next day, December 6, 1917 at a little after 7:30 a.m., Captain Le Medoc and Pilot Mackey joined the third officer, Joseph Leveque, on the bridge and shortly thereafter the signal came from the gunboat to hoist the identification flags and get underway. After hoisting the identification flags, Leveque asked Le Medoc if he should also raise the red flag for explosives. He was told it would not be necessary. As Mackey guided, the *Mont Blanc* passed the now open harbor boom. He was well aware that Article 25 of the *Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea* said that, "In narrow channels every steam vessel shall, when it is safe and practical, keep to that side of the freeway or mid-channel which lies on the starboard side of the vessel". In compliance, he took the *Mont Blanc* well over to the Dartmouth shore, passing the HMS *Highflyer* anchored in mid-channel. A minute or so later Mackey first spied the *Imo*, which was headed out to sea, at the bend where the Narrows met Bedford Basin, sailing on a course that would intercept the *Mont Blanc*. Captain Le Medoc gave the ship's whistle one short blast, claiming the channel on his starboard side and as an added precaution brought his ship to within 300 feet of the Dartmouth shore and came to "dead slow". He could not believe what he heard when the *Imo* relied with two short blasts meaning, "I am altering my course to port," which would put her further into the *Mont Blanc*'s channel and on a collision course.

"What the hell?" cried Mackey and ordered, "Hard aport. Stop engines". (It should be noted that in those days "hard aport" meant turning the wheel to starboard as one would use a tiller on a sailboat.)

By now the *Imo* was getting dangerously close, and Mackey realized the only chance he had for avoiding a collision was to go to port and allow the *Imo* to pass starboard to starboard. He blew two short blasts on the whistle and turned the wheel to port. The *Mont Blanc* moved sluggishly into a turn to port. But as the *Mont Blanc* turned, the *Imo* blew three short blasts, indicating that she was putting her engines full speed astern. This began swinging the *Imo*'s bow to starboard, and with her forward motion not yet checked by her

reversed propeller, a collision was inevitable. Seconds later the bow of the *Imo* struck the *Mont Blanc* and ripped through the plating of her number one hold. From the bridge Le Medoc and Mackey watched in horror as the bow of the *Imo* cut through the starboard side. Many of the metal drums containing benzole burst, spewing their contents all over the deck and down through the newly formed gash onto the lyddite.

Minutes after the collision, the reverse thrust of the *Imo*'s propeller took hold and the ship began backing away, tearing its bow out of the *Mont Blanc*'s starboard side and spewing a rain of sparks which immediately ignited the benzole. By the time the *Imo* freed herself from the *Mont Blanc* and drifted away, floating helplessly with stopped engines and no steering capabilities, the *Mont Blanc*'s forward deck was a blazing inferno and the ship was drifting towards land. It was impossible to reach the anchors to stop the drift or get to the only pressure hose connections, which were on the forward deck, to put out the fire. The metal containers containing the benzole began to explode, increasing the intensity of the blaze, and leaving no alternative for Le Medoc than to order "abandon ship". The *Mont Blanc* carried two lifeboats which were quickly filled. Just before the boats left the ship, someone noted that the Chief Engineer, Antoine Legat, was not seen on deck and was probably still in the engine room. Le Medoc climbed back aboard and went below. He reached the engine room, empty and silent with the exception of a soft hiss of escaping steam, and was overwhelmed with the situation. He sat on a wooden crate and put his face in his hands. Suddenly someone was at his side; it was First Officer Jean Glotin, a veteran of convoy service who was no stranger to fire at sea.

"Captain, we must go," he declared. "Legat had remained to lift the safety valves on the boilers but is accounted for now."

Le Medoc replied, "You go my friend. I am responsible and I must stay with the ship. It is correct; isn't it?"

"No, we must both go. Come I don't think there is much time."

The first officer took the captain by the arm and gently pulled him to his feet. He tried to protest but realized it was useless and they both left to join the others in the lifeboats. As they rowed away from the ship, it continued to drift west towards pier 6 and Richmond. Mackey led the lifeboats to the Richmond shore screaming to everyone who passed to get away from an explosion was imminent. Not too many people heard. Upon reaching shore, they ran with all the strength they could muster towards a stand of trees away from the shoreline.

The ocean going tug *Stella Maris* was towing two heavy unwieldy scows when it saw the burning *Mont Blanc*. Anchoring the barges, she raced towards the collision site. At the same time, the Captain of H.M.S. *Highflyer* was notified of the fire and sent one of his whaleboats to see what could be done to help. During this time townspeople were lining the shores to watch the spectacle. Before either the *Stella Maris* or the whaleboat arrived, the *Mont Blanc* drifted into pier 6. The captains agreed that the best thing that could be done was to put a line on the burning vessel and try to tow her back to mid-stream. No one had any idea of the deadly cargo aboard the *Mont Blanc*.

At 9:06 a.m. the *Mont Blanc* blew up. In the

continued on page 8

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continued from page 5

blink of an eye, the French ship disappeared in a ball of flame. The sea parted and the scorching shock wave traveled across Halifax and Dartmouth, obliterating everything its path. Docks and piers erupted, small vessels just disappeared and the larger ones had their superstructures leveled. Heavy cranes, buildings and all structures along the shore were demolished and their remains tossed skyward to come down to earth as flaming missiles of destruction. A railroad bridge was swept away, its rails twisted into spirals and flung in every direction. On the near shore everything was leveled; houses, telephone lines, trees all disappeared and finally the flames took over. *Mont Blanc's* half-ton anchor shank fell to earth over two miles away.

After the attack of the shock wave, the sea's turn came. The displaced water came rushing back creating a thirteen-foot high bore that was reflected outwards, tearing ships from their moorings, carrying them to shore and smashing them down on land when the water receded. On shore, whatever was left was washed away. As quickly as it surged outward, it retreated, passing down the channel and washing over McNab's Island and into the Atlantic. Hours later a merchant ship at sea was lifted violently with such force that the captain thought they had hit a mine. Mother Nature then took a hand, sending the worst blizzard to hit Halifax in years, bringing gale winds to fan the fires, heavy snow storms and freezing temperatures.

Within thirty minutes of the explosion, organized search and rescue parties began work. Nationwide, offers of money and relief goods came pouring in. Response from all countries was generous, but it was from the United States of America that the first and most valuable assistance came. Survival and medical equipment, material for a five-hundred bed hospital, and medical personnel all came by land and sea. From Boston came two ships with supplies and ten motor trucks accompanied by ten drums of gasoline, which were presented as an absolute gift to the city of Halifax. The trucks were accompanied by chauffeurs who would stay with them until local inhabitants could be trained in their use. To this day, the city of Halifax donates a Christmas tree every year to the city of Boston for its help in the hour of need.

After several postponements, the investigation of the disaster began on December 13, 1917. Other than some highlights the writer will not attempt to completely describe the trial. The details may be found in the referenced literature. The counsel for the Norwegian Shipping Company was at a disadvantage not being able to call the captain or the pilot of the *Imo*, both of whom had been killed. In fact, only one other officer was available to testify, which left the counsel with the only strategy available, which was to discredit the testimony from the *Mont Blanc's* crew. They had reached shore and taken haven in a patch of woods, and except for one person's hand that had been impaled by a shard of metal, none had been injured and all had survived. This survival rate raised some suspicion as to whether they had acted as duty warranted or

had panicked, leaving the ship without having done anything to avert the disaster. Another disadvantage was that the *Mont Blanc* was flying the tri-colors of France, and in the opinion of many Nova Scotians, the French were capable of almost anything. The majority of Canadians supported Britain in its war against Germany. However, the majority of the French-speaking Canadians of Quebec were dead set against their country's getting involved in the war. The words French Canadian became almost synonymous with traitor.

Finally, the question was asked why the red flag noting the presence of munitions was not flown. If flown, it would have alerted anyone who saw it that an explosion was imminent and given them the chance to distance themselves from the burning vessel. Le

Medoc answered that according to International Regulations, the red flag is flown when explosives are being handled aboard ship, i.e. when loading or discharging ammunition. Nowhere does it say it should be flown when the ship is underway. He noted that, considering the threat of espionage, in his opinion it

was better if no one was aware of his cargo. After days of conflicting testimony, the pilot and the master of the *Mont Blanc* were found to be guilty of violating the Rules of the Road. Commander Frederick Wyatt, the Chief Examining Officer, was found guilty of not taking proper steps to ensure that the regulations were carried out and, especially, in not keeping himself fully acquainted with the movements and intended movements of vessels in the harbor. The cases against Mackey and Le Medoc were later dropped on habeas corpus proceedings, leaving only the charge against Commander Wyatt. On March 21, 1918 the charges against him were dropped. Markey was reinstated as a pilot and completely vindicated. No action whatsoever was taken by the French Government against Le Medoc and he went on to serve the Compagnie Generale Transatlantique until 1922. In January, 1931 he was promoted la Legion d'Honneur. Although cleared of wrong doing, Commander Wyatt was transferred away from the port.

Over 1.5 square miles of Halifax was leveled and windows were shattered as far as Turo, Nova Scotia, 62 miles away. There were approximately 2,000 deaths (half occurring instantly), and 9,000 injuries. The death toll could have been worse if not for the heroism of railroad dispatcher Vince Coleman. Learning of the impending explosion, he stayed at his post warning two incoming trains of the danger. Coleman was killed in the explosion, but the trains stopped a safe distance from the blast and relayed his message, alerting officials of the upcoming disaster and enabling them to respond immediately.

It should be noted that Halifax, in turn, rendered much needed assistance during our 9/11 crisis when all aircraft were detoured away from New York. They took American passengers forced to land in Halifax into their homes giving them lodging, food and companionship during the crisis.

Reference: Bird, Michael J. 1967 *The Town That Died*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Toronto



The devastation left behind after the explosion

