

The Biggest Blast Before the A-Bomb

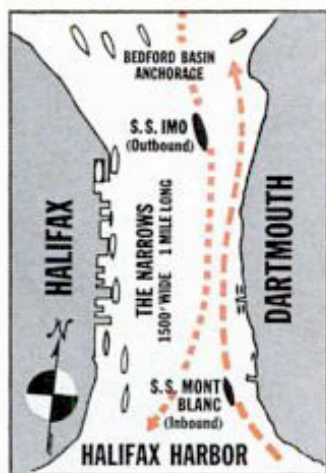
It was just 50 years ago this month. A city was blown off the map because two ships disputed the right-of-way

Based on *The Town That Died* by Michael J. Bird. Used by permission of G. P. Putnam's Sons. © by Michael J. Bird.

CAPT. AIME LE MEDEC was worried. With 2500 tons of explosives aboard, his ship was floating bomb

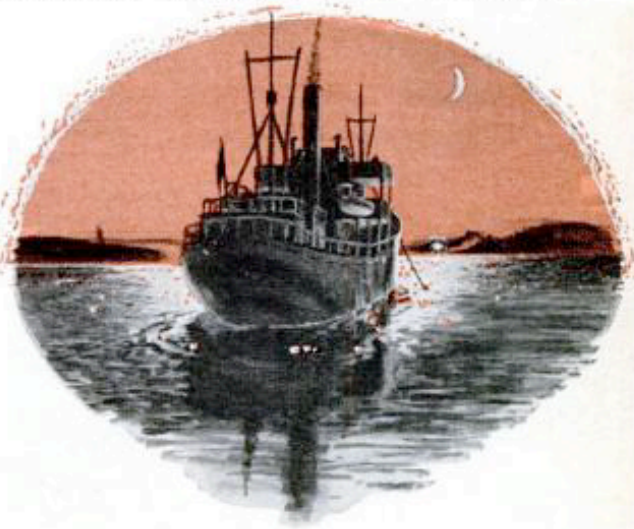
OLD-TIMERS still speak of it in clichés—"Go to Halifax" or "I'll blow you to Halifax"—and for youngsters it's a legend. For either, the reference is to the biggest man-made explosion in the history of the human race until the development of the atomic bomb. One grim morning in December, 1917, two ships, one loaded with more than 2500 tons of explosives bound for the war in Europe, collided in Halifax Harbor.

The resulting explosion killed nearly 2000 persons, injured 9000 and blinded 200. This is the story of that tragic, and easily avoidable, collision, and why it happened.



HALIFAX HARBOR, on fateful morning, was peaceful. It could have remained so if *Mont Blanc*, inbound to anchorage, had been allowed to follow normal right-hand traffic, and *Imo*, outbound to Atlantic, had done the same. Instead, stubborn insistence on right-of-way put both ships on a collision course near Dartmouth shore and set scene for the terrific explosion

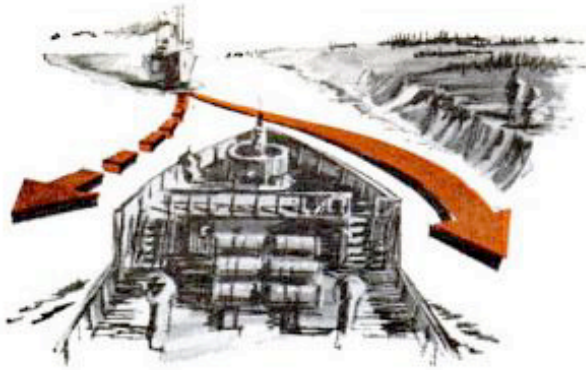
SS MONT BLANC (right) arrived at dusk the night before from New York with perilous cargo, anchoring for night in Halifax Harbor, south of Narrows. In morning she would move into Halifax to pick up coal



SS IMO (left), Norwegian liner, also docked in Halifax to pick up coal, was en route to New York to collect relief supplies for war-stricken Belgium. Her captain was angry because ship had been forced to spend night in Bedford Basin when coal loading was delayed. So, early next morning, when she finally started south into the Narrows, she accelerated until she was doing a brisk seven knots. Meanwhile, the *Mont Blanc* had also started up, proceeding northward cautiously because of deadly cargo, hugging the right shore. Tragedy was minutes away



Illustrations by Jack Mitchell



8:35 A. M.: On northbound explosives ship, men on bridge were appalled to see southbound *Imo* fail to take normal course (dotted line) out to sea. "That fool is aiming to come down in our water," the harbor pilot said to Captain Le Medec. "Better give him a whistle." One signal was blown, which demanded same reply—acknowledging port-to-port passing—but to disbelief of men on *Mont Blanc*, *Imo* gave two blasts, indicating starboard passing

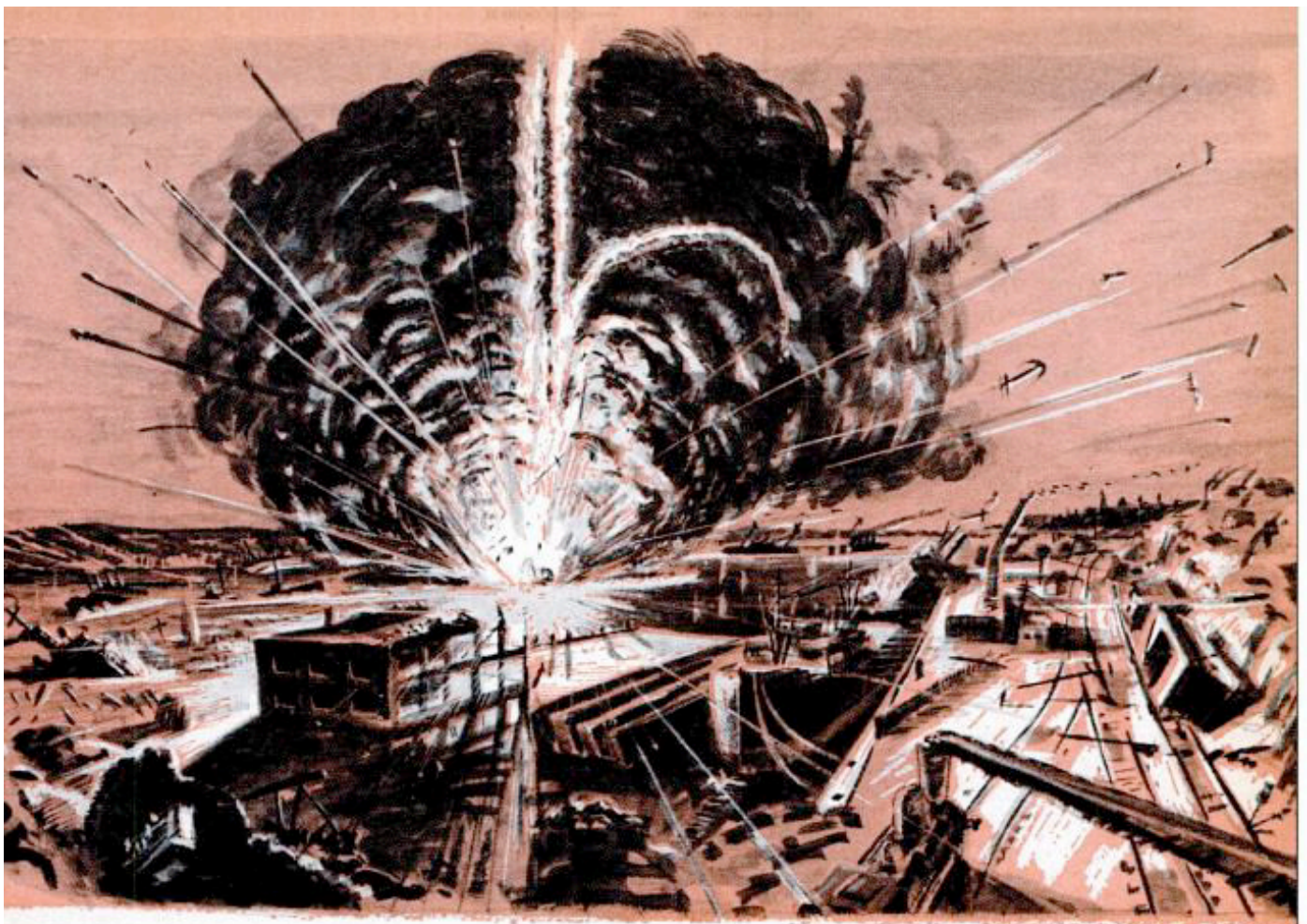
8:42 A. M.: When *Mont Blanc* pilot realized *Imo* was going to try to squeeze between them and Dartmouth shore, he shouted, "Stop our engines!" Then, in desperate maneuver, he had *Mont Blanc* swing hard left. Too late! *Imo*, instead of continuing on course, blew three blasts which meant, "I have reversed my engines." But reversed engines now threw her own bow to her right. She continued drifting close and collision now seemed sure. Through all of this, *Mont Blanc* was not flying red "explosives" flag. Such flag was only required when loading



8:45 A. M.: Bow of *Imo* sliced 10 feet into bow of *Mont Blanc*. Barrels of gasoline smashed open and flooded deck. Some fell overboard. Then *Imo*, with engines still in reverse, backed away and sparks from rent metal ignited the spilled flammable fuel. *Mont Blanc*, now on fire, continued drifting to port and came to rest near downtown Halifax docks



8:55 A. M.: As thousands lined shore to watch, unaware of impending catastrophe, cowards and martyrs played out grisly scene. Crew of *Mont Blanc*, who knew of ship's deadly cargo, fled in lifeboats to Dartmouth shore, hiding in nearby woods. Meanwhile, tugboat crews and others from nearby vessels, who only saw ship in distress, tried valiantly to tow it away from docks and prevent further spread of flames. Some intrepid seamen even climbed aboard stricken *Mont Blanc* to help quench fire. Most inevitably perished in disaster, because drifting ship was now greatest time bomb mankind had ever assembled. Worse, factory windows filled with spectators. Tram cars slowed down so passengers could get better look



9:06 A. M. Twenty-one minutes after collision, *Mont Blanc* blew up, devastating Halifax, its citizenry and surrounding territory. Explosion blew bottom right out of harbor, huge rocks landing on shore. Part of *Mont Blanc's* heavy iron anchor, weighing half a ton, came down two miles away. Officer on one nearby ship, was blown from deck and landed on Fort Needham Hill, a half mile away, bruised and naked. Water blown out of harbor hit a ship at sea so hard her crew thought she had been struck by a mine. Whole blocks of Halifax and Dartmouth were knocked flat. Much of what was left was on fire. Many not dead were dying. And it was still not over. The explosion, which happened almost in the middle of Narrows, blew so much water out of slim channel that, when it went out to sea and started in again, it came back in waves 30 feet high, rushing up on the shores two block deep into both towns

9:30 A. M.: When survivors dared lift their heads, Halifax was a shambles, a horrible sight to behold. City had been laid waste. Thousands of homes, factories and office buildings were utterly destroyed without trace. Trains had been blown off their tracks. Fires were everywhere. A few ships, including *Imo*, were badly damaged but still floated, their crews dead or dazed. Both *Imo's* captain and harbor pilot aboard were killed instantly. Later, charges were brought against Captain Le Medec and his pilot but, after lengthy legal maneuvering, charges were dropped. So, to this day, blame for tragedy has never been placed

