

Historical Distortions and Errors in the Film *Shattered City*

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Shattered City is a fictional drama but it is based on a real historical event involving real people and it takes extreme license with historical fact. The film does convey with some visual power the effect of the blast and the destruction and suffering of the people of Halifax. The production values are quite high in terms of historically appropriate costumes and settings. However the film is full of falsehoods, distortions and errors from start to finish. While the drama has unquestionably raised awareness, one must question its validity and not rely on it as an educational resource. It is unfortunate that CBC Television has in this case shown such low standards when it comes to depicting a real historical event in dramatic series. It is also unfortunate that the title of this film will cause confusion for years to come as the this terrible fictional film shares the same name of a fine and very reliable non-fiction book about the Halifax Explosion *Shattered City* by Janet Kitz.

Four Major Examples:

1. *German spies*

There is no evidence of Germans spies or saboteurs in Halifax in World War One during or before the explosion. Military records from both Allied and German records show no spy network operated in Halifax. German intelligence officials complained it was "almost impossible" to send intelligence agents to North America in the face of the superior English intelligence network. The limited intelligence gathering from the German embassy in Washington became "quite impossible" after the US entry into the war in 1917. This led to almost "complete abandonment" of any attempt to keep up a secret service, let alone carry out organized acts of sabotage. There were lots of public rumours about German spies in World War One and later in World War Two but these were based on wartime paranoia and ethnic stereotypes. Many Canadian immigrants from Europe, innocent seafarers with German sounding names and Nova Scotians with centuries old German roots became innocent victims of arrests and internment thanks based on the sort of paranoia which the film *Shattered City* promotes by making German spies and saboteurs a major plot line. A large Canadian audience who know nothing about the Halifax Explosion will now think spies were part of it.

Sources:

John G. Armstrong, "Canadian Home Defence, 1914-1917 and the Role of Major-General Willoughby Gwatkin," unpublished master's, Royal Military College of Canada, 1982 thesis.

Tin Pots and Pirate Ships Canadian Naval Forces and German sea raiders 1880-1918 by Michael L. Hadley & Roger Sarty (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

2. Trial and "cover-up"

Shattered City depicts a conspiracy that frees the captain of *Mont Blanc* and the naval commander Wyatt leaving *Mont Blanc's* pilot, Mackey as the fall guy for the explosion. There was no conspiracy or intervention by higher powers. In fact, the man who the film depicts as the victim of conspiracy, the pilot Mackey was the first to be let go even before the trial, by the judge who felt there was not enough evidence to involve him, followed by the release of *Mont Blanc's* captain for the same reason. It was Wyatt, depicted in the film a scheming villain, who became the scapegoat and was the only person sent to trial for the explosion. He was acquitted not, not as the film depicts by "intervention of powers outside this courtroom" but by a jury of Halifax citizens. The film's overall depiction of the trial is a clumsy and false compression of an Inquiry which started in December, a Criminal manslaughter trial which started in February and a civil court case which dragged on into the 1920s. There are fragments of real issues, such as the issue of blaming the dead captain of *Imo* and Wyatt's claim that he had been warning of an impending accident, however these issues are freely mixed with contrived facts, pure inventions and complete reversals of what really happened.

Sources:

Janet Kitz, *Shattered City*, Nimbus 1989. The chapter "Fixing Responsibility" is a good summary.

"Another Calamity: The Litigation" chapter in *Ground Zero: A reassessment of the 1917 explosion in Halifax Harbour*, edited by Alan Ruffman and Colin Howell, (Nimbus, 1994). This article gives a more detailed look at the legal aspects.

If you want to see what people actually said, word for word, during the trials, this document at the Halifax Regional Library reference department has it all: *In the Privy Council On Appeal from the Supreme Court of Canada Between the Ship Imo and La Compagnie General Transatlantic Record of Proceedings, 1919.*

3. Vilification of Commander Wyatt and Captain Le Médec

Facts are made up to blame a British-born Royal Canadian Naval Officer, Acting Commander Wyatt (RNR, ret.), for the explosion and depict him as an arrogant coward. There is a relentlessly anti-British theme to the film. He is depicted as cowardly refusing to venture near the burning *Mont Blanc* but ordering others to do so. (In fact, Wyatt was trying to get to his harbour tug to direct fire fighting when the explosion occurred.) Using a 1990s term, Wyatt is depicted as "deregulating" harbour traffic including raising the speed limits and relaxing rules on the movement of ammunition when in fact Wyatt was calling for more regulation of the harbour pilots as were other officials but were hampered by political patronage interests at the pilotage commission. The captain of the *Mont Blanc* is depicted as a panicky coward and shown to be one of the first to abandon his ship (when in fact he was the last to leave, insisting on remaining behind.)

Le Médec's behaviour is contrasted with heroic action by Mackey which are complete inventions of the film-makers. In final absurd invention, the *Mont Blanc's* crew is shown fleeing on foot though New Brunswick to be captured by Mounties when they never left the city.

Sources:

John Armstrong, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy*. A chapter looks at the trial in some detail with quotes from critical testimony by Wyatt and Le Médec.

4. *Medical Aftermath of the explosion*

The film tells us there were no surgeons and only two makeshift hospitals until the Americans arrive on trains. There were actually a half dozen hospitals operating the day of the explosion were also military medical facilities at five other locations who provided critical personnel and supplies. American relief trains did not arrive for two days. Five Canadian relief trains did arrive the day of the explosion from towns in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick bringing many surgeons, nurses and supplies. They were summoned by heroic railway employees and provided vital medical staff, supplies and fire equipment when it was needed most. American help was greatly appreciated and vital for long-term treatment but it was not part of the initial emergency response. It is unfortunate that the film *Shattered City* turned this important Canadian story into an American one.

Sources:

Joseph Scanlon, "The Magnificent Railways Rail Response to the 1917 Halifax Explosion" *Canadian Rail* No.461 (November- December 1997), 143-153.

Detailed military reports on the medical aftermath: Department of Militia and Defence Canada, *Extracts from an Intermediate Medical Report Re the Halifax Disaster, December 6th, 1917* by Assistant Director Medical Services, Military District No. 6, Halifax, Feb 26th, 1918), 22-1-245, No. 2 MD, NAC, RG 24, vol. 4273.

ADMS MD No 6 to DGMS, circa 8 March 1918, HQ 71-26-99-3, vol. 1, NAC, RG 24, Vol 6359.

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