

Piecing together unwritten tale of Halifax Explosion journalists

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Soldiers patrol a devastated neighbourhood in the aftermath of the Halifax Explosion in 1917. (THE CHRONICLE HERALD / File)

It may be surprising to learn that journalists were among the first responders to the Dec. 6, 1917, Explosion in Halifax Harbour. Yet their part in serving the community during the aftermath remains largely untold and unrecognized.

For over a year, I have investigated the reporters, editors and correspondents who, in unimaginably difficult circumstances, demonstrated skills of the highest order to provide news coverage of the disaster.

They include: in Halifax, Morning Chronicle publisher G. Fred Pearson; Daily Echo editor Harvey Jones; Herald editor Peter Lawson; Herald reporter Harold B.

Jefferson; Canadian Press (CP) superintendent James Hickey; CP telegraph operator Maxwell Backer and CP messenger boy Leo Hinch.

In Dartmouth: Chronicle columnist Mary “May” O’Regan; Herald correspondent Arthur Pettipas and Dartmouth Patriot editor Joseph Sheldon; and in Truro, Daily News publisher Alfred R. Coffin.

Now I need their descendants’ help to find out more about their experiences completing such a heart-rending assignment.

A handful of the journalists’ family members have already come forward. After they learn the intent of the research is to write a book acknowledging the hard work and achievements of their forebears, descendants have responded generously. Some have provided obituaries and anecdotes; others photographs and news clippings. I hope more will follow.

One descendant has supplied passages from his grandfather’s Explosion memoirs. The veteran reporter writes that staff of a waterfront hotel had to “remove a dead body” before he could use a room and confesses to “borrowing” a typewriter from an unlocked store to compose his first dispatch. He also admits that covering the Explosion story was “my toughest assignment.”

One of the unique challenges of the research is to discover where each journalist was when the Explosion occurred. One unsolved case involves Chronicle reporter May O’Regan who lived on Ochterloney Street in Dartmouth. She may have been on the 9 a.m. ferry crossing to Halifax when the blast happened at 9:05, 35 seconds. There is evidence that her sister Theresa was on the ferry, but was May?

Another journalist with unknown whereabouts on Dec. 6 is Halifax Herald correspondent Arthur Pettipas, a future mayor of Dartmouth. Mrs. Pettipas miraculously survived the blast in their Windmill Road and Dawson Street residence, but Arthur wasn’t home at the time. Where was he?

There are further mysteries that could be solved by descendants. Halifax CP bureau telegraph operator Maxwell Backer was working his key in the Acadian Recorder building on Granville Street when the blast occurred. He survived the concussion and flying glass, but there is no record of what happened to him after he raced home to find his Edward Street house damaged and his wife seriously injured.

After receiving an urgent message from publisher Senator William Dennis to “get on the story,” Herald editor Peter Lawson left his Buckingham Street boarding house, walked through the ruins of the north end past Africville and arrived at the Rockingham train station. There, he wired a bulletin to Truro with news of the

Explosion. Yet soon after the disaster, Lawson departed Halifax for the United States. When and why he left is still unknown.

Likewise, what eventually happened to Daily Echo editor Harvey Jones who on the day of the blast not only accompanied Mont Blanc Captain Le Medec to the French consulate but also later boarded Imo and found Pilot William Hayes' body?

Finally, there is 16-year-old Canadian Press messenger boy Leo Hinch. Following the blast, he rushed from the Chronicle building to his Richmond Street home only to discover that his mother, two brothers and three sisters had perished. What happened to Leo after this day is still a mystery.

Five days after the catastrophe, the Halifax Herald announced in a front-page editorial: "The complete story of the disaster will never — can never — be told. There will be a chapter here and there lacking continuity but each with a theme filled with vital interest."

With the help of descendants, hopefully the "chapter" on journalists who covered the Explosion in Halifax Harbour can finally be written.

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