

JULY 19 - 21 - 1945

# 17,000 Evacuated From Their Homes During Night Blasts

**Magazine Area  
Still Dangerous  
Says Jones—  
Casualties May  
Exceed 21**

HALIFAX, July 19.—(BUP)—Halifax today was believed to have escaped a paralyzing explosion of the main ammunition magazine at the Royal Canadian Naval arsenal after a nightmarish night and morning of major and minor blasts that drove 17,000 people from their homes and set off more than a dozen munition dumps.

A naval officer returned from the vicinity of the blazing naval armament depot near Burnside told the British United Press that the main magazine containing some 50,000 depth charges and TNT has not exploded and will likely escape.

Explosions rocked Halifax and Dartmouth all night long and continued far into this morning. But after noon the drumfire of exploding ammunition had gradually died down until only occasional shell bursts were heard against the sharper obligato of smaller ammunition.

Had the main magazine gone up, the official stated, it would have eclipsed any of the four major blasts that shook the area during the night and morning. He said the magazine contains 6,000 tons of ammunition, hundreds of thousands of tons of depth charges and a large quantity of TNT (trinitrotoluol). But the TNT is at the bottom and is separated from the rest of the dump by a thick concrete flooring, he added.

Hundreds of panes of plate glass windows were smashed in downtown Halifax, and broken glass represented most of the damage in Halifax itself. The known casualty list was set at 15—with one missing and 14 injured—but a naval officer said he believed that no one who was in the immediate area of the first blast would be likely to survive.

It is not yet known how many were actually working in the immediate area when the first blast shook the town at 6.35 yesterday evening. It is believed no trace of these will ever be found. But one naval officer estimated the number at not more than six. This, added to the other known casualties, would place the list at 21. But this figure may be exceeded when the full facts are brought to light in the series of investigations likely to follow.

The injured included 12 members of the Veterans' Guard on duty at the arsenal, a Royal Canadian Navy seaman, and an unidentified woman cut by flying glass in Halifax. None of their injuries was believed serious.

Civil defence and service officials acted quickly to evacuate the north ends of both Halifax and Dartmouth along plans which had been drawn up and rehearsed during the war.

**Still Dangerous Says Jones.**

(CP)—Fires died down today after a night of flame and explosion in the ammunition depot of the Royal Canadian Navy five miles from here on Bedford Basin, but Vice-Admiral George C. Jones, Commander-in-Chief, Canadian Northwest Atlantic, said the magazine area was still dangerous and should be avoided by those who did not have official business.

After a personal inspection on foot of the magazine area which was the scene of four big explosions and a number of small ones during the night, Admiral Jones said a "rough examination" of the area had been made and that fire and patrol parties "are controlling the area". He added that rail and bus traffic on the Halifax side of Bedford Basin—suspended throughout the night—had been resumed.

Thousands of residents of the north end of Halifax and of Dartmouth, across the harbor from Halifax and closer to the explosion site, remained evacuated pending word from officials that it was safe for them to return to their homes. They were evacuated to less dangerous open areas in the vicinity.

The leaping flames started to die down in mid-morning, while Halifax waited tensely for what might have been the fifth and greatest of the main explosions. For a time it was feared the fire would reach the main ammunition dump.

From across Bedford Basin a short time later, however, only one fire could be seen still burning in the depot and the blaze appeared to be dying out.

Civil Defence Control Headquarters announced in the morning that it was expected to be known by noon whether precautions in effect since last night could be lifted, but noon passed without any further announcement and there still were occasional explosions to be heard in the direction of the ammunition

depot.

The main magazine toward the north end of the depot looked as it was well separated from the flames in the extreme south end.

Numerous dull thuds broke the comparative morning silence today until approximately 9 o'clock A.D.T. (8 a.m., E.D.T.) when they ceased. However, an hour later they were heard intermittently again.

All ships which had been in Halifax harbor were moved out last night and this morning in fear of the explosions. The ships, at present, are berthed all along the Atlantic coast.

(The British United Press said ships in the basin fled through the harbor gates, their screaming whistles adding to the confusion. But the hospital ship, Letitia, remained gallantly at its pier, ready to provide beds for wounded if the casualties increased.)

The whole civilian population of the town of Dartmouth, which has approximately 17,000 people, was evacuated on official orders when fires swept toward the main magazine.

In Halifax, too, the north end was evacuated.

Thousands of people who had to move spent the night sleeping in the Halifax Armories, where they were supplied with army blankets. The floor of the armories was a mass of people sprawling everywhere.

There were hundreds of others who spent the night sleeping in vacant lots, public parks and any available outdoor space. Each time a new explosion went off people hugged the ground.

In many places, including the Dalhousie University campus, there were whole families stretched out on the ground sleeping under army blankets, or those brought from home.

About 2,000 residents of North Dartmouth were moved to the Army's artillery training centre at Eastern Passage on the east shore of Halifax harbor south of Dartmouth. They were billeted in Army huts, and Brig. D. A. White, D.S.O., Officer Commanding Military District No. 6, ordered food to be sent in so that the evacuees could have breakfast this morning.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 people were moved to the Cole Harbor district, and police said they would remain there in open fields until it was safe to return home.

In the Preston road district, also in the south end of Dartmouth, almost 4,000 more Dartmouth people were staying in the open.

From the St. Margaret's Bay road it was reported late last night that automobiles crawling along the road bumper-to-bumper extended a distance of 10 miles, when people tried to get as far away from the explosion area as possible.

Soon after the initial blast last night military police, A.R.P. Wardens, R.C.M.P., and civilian police rushed to the vicinity of the blasts and co-operated in blocking off all roads into the area.

Fire boats, which were rushed to the scene to fight the blaze, were withdrawn at the height of the fires when it was found that the flames were uncontrollable.

There was no official indication as to the cause of the blast, which is said to have consumed hundreds of tons of explosives. One unconfirmed report was that it started when a barge loading at the naval magazine caught fire and the flames spread to the sheds.

Every available transport vehicle, both service and civilian, was pressed into service to move the thousands of people.

Incoming and outgoing trains were tied up here and farther west last night. Among trains which were stopped was the Ocean Limited which was due to arrive in Halifax at 10.30 last night.

**Four Major Blasts.**

Store owners in Halifax arrived at their stores early this morning and started the job of cleaning up the sidewalks littered with glass from the hundreds of windows smashed by four major explosions last night and this morning which rocked the foundations of every building for miles around.

The first of the main thunderous detonations occurred at 6.35 p.m., A.D.T. (5.25 p.m., E.D.T.) last night and destroyed all buildings inside the magazine. It also smashed window panes, and hurled picture frames and mirrors from the walls of many homes.

Blasts continued to rock the area, with another detonation at 12.20 a.m. which was even louder than the first one. It was thought that this was the main explosive storage going off but naval officers said it wasn't.

Throughout the night from a distance about two miles from the depot small explosions could be heard sounding with the rapidity of machine-gun fire.

In clear view on the Bedford side of the Basin the flames, stretching for hundreds of yards, could be seen reaching 150 feet into the air. Periodically, pillars of flame shot skyward when new explosions were set off by the rapidly spreading fire.

The third detonation, and by far the loudest of all, rocked the area at 3.55 a.m. and put all electrical power in Dartmouth and Halifax out of operation for at least 15 minutes.

After a flash of fire which lit the whole sky as bright as day, another roar split the air seven minutes later at 4.02 a.m.

In North Dartmouth two Army officers worked tirelessly to help residents leave the area. Major B. Snow, an R.C.O.C. officer from Toronto, and Capt. L. M. Schram, of the R.C.E.M.E. from Ponoka, Alta., warned hundreds of people to move and helped get them loaded into Army and Red Cross trucks which took them from the danger area.

Near one house a couple of miles from the magazine Major Snow said he found 18 people hiding in a gravel pit. They were soon evacuated.

Sixty patients in the Rockhead military hospital were moved to safety at the Camp Hill military hospital in the south end of town.

The Merchant Seaman's Club was thrown open to evacuees.