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R.C.N. MAGAZINES, BEDFORD BASIN, N.S.
QUARTERLY REPORT ON EXPLOSION TO
OCTOBER, 1945.

PART I - GENERAL

During the period several months prior to the cessation of hostilities in Europe and for the time subsequent to that date up until July 18, the number of ships requiring to de-ammunition both outright and on deposit was greater than could be dealt with under the existing schedule of work and the available facilities. Consequently large amounts of ammunition were spread out on both North and South jetties at practically all times and the personnel concerned with checking receipts were unable to cope with the large quantities of ammunition returned, more so on the South jetty than on the North due to the fact that North jetty was maintained for ammunition returned outright and thus a much larger staff was utilized than on the South jetty which was to contain deposit stores only.

A great deal of ammunition arrived without its proper packages, and in the case of gun ammunition no packages were used in the majority of returns. Thus each jetty usually contained some hundreds of tons of mixed ammunition, a great deal of it unpackaged, and this was the situation existing prior to the initial explosion with the exception that the North jetty was temporarily clear of 90 per cent of its usual load of returned ammunition.

In the Magazine area itself large piles of both repairable and serviceable ammunition were stowed in whatever outside space was available. A clear picture of this can be obtained from the accompanying print of the Magazine Area Enclosure "A" showing disposition of all outside storage dumps and what they contained. These storage dumps were covered usually by tarpaulins but in numerous instances no covering at all was used. As will be seen from the accompanying print the stacks of outside ammunition were placed in between, in front of, and behind many regular magazine buildings thus completely nullifying safety distances and the protection afforded by traverses.

Outline of Events

As far as can be ascertained the fire started at approximately 1840 hours on 18 July, 1945, at the extreme north west corner of the South jetty. As can be seen from the accompanying print, this area, of the jetty contained loose cartridges Q.F. 4.7" piled approximately 9 to 12 deep, a large quantity of shells B.L. or Q.F. 4.7" and several stacks of depth charges along with numerous other explosives and pyrotechnic stores. Smoke and sparks were seen to be rising from this extreme corner of the jetty followed almost immediately by an explosion. Fragments and burning explosives were thrown over an area of approximately 400 yards by the initial blast, spreading fires through the under brush and piles of boxes along the shore adjacent to the jetty. A series of minor explosions followed which was attributed to small quantities of ammunition around buildings near the jetty. It was noted following the first blast which was extremely heavy that in every instance the roofs of the old type magazine buildings, (i.e. most magazines in Old Area shown on Enclosure "A") had collapsed with only the roof trusses remaining.

The Patrolman on duty at the South Jetty was killed apparently in the first blast while a member of the Veteran's Guard received shrapnel wounds but managed to make his way out to the South Gate where he was sent for treatment.

No action could be taken to cope with the spreading fires in the South Area by way of the South Gate so all fire fighting forces were utilized from the North Gate down through the upper area.

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Men were despatched to erect road blocks about 500 yards from each of the two entrance gates while a party of men were rushed to the Siding to lay out hose lines and stand by in the eventuality of any fires starting in or around the loading platform which was loaded with ammunition. The maintenance engineer stood by all night at the pumping station to ensure water was available at all times. Fire boats were requested from the Dockyard but they proved of little use due to the heavy blasts and debris flying through the air which were much heavier and more concentrated for some time on the water side of the Area due to the nature of the slopes. As all communications had been completely disintegrated an R/T set was installed in the North Gate Guard house which became the temporary headquarters.

The contour of the land between the older Area and the new section undoubtedly prevented to a great extent complete devastation of the whole Magazine. (See Contour Map Enclosure "B"). This was evidenced by a pile of approximately 800 Mk. 7 Depth Charges lying just over the brow of the hill being disturbed by the blast, but otherwise no detonation took place.

Fairly heavy explosions occurred regularly until almost midnight when a very heavy detonation occurred. Extremely heavy detonations occurred at 0100, 0200 and 0400 hours while cartridges, the majority being 4 inch, continued exploding intermittently well into the next day. The heavier detonations were apparently caused by a concentration of Mk X Depth Charges and 250 lb. Bombs, Mk. XI Aerial Depth Charges, and stacks of Squid respectively. Captain O.C.S. Robertso R.C.N. (R) personally directed all stages of the firefighting utilizing the services of the Magazine, Armament Depot and Dockyard Fire Services. The whole area along the Dartmouth-Bedford Highway was ordered to be cleared about 2100 hours and in this both the Army and the Air Force rendered valuable assistance. The North end of both Halifax and Dartmouth was evacuated as well as a great deal of Bedford because of the heavy detonations but by Thursday it was possible to continue firefighting as the explosions had diminished in volume and strength and it appeared feasible to suppose the major explosion risk was over and that the remainder of the Magazine Area could be saved. By continuing constant fire fighting the fires inside the Area were brought under control Friday and Saturday and by maintaining a routine fire patrol during the following week it was presumed any danger was past. During the early part of the week following the explosion, an extremely hot period of weather was encountered and it was interesting to note that in the evening about 1900 hours as the air began to cool the occasional cooked off and this was observed on three consecutive nights. SHEIL

On Thursday night, July 19, fires were noticed in the densely wooded area east of the Railway Siding and trucks were used to clear the loading platforms of exposed ammunition, this being hauled behind the garage area at the North Gate. One car at #1 Siding had suffered fire and explosion damage but 4 cars at #2 Siding were intact and were removed to the Armament Depot. Portable pumpers were brought into use along with back packs and with the aid of nearly 200 ratings from the Dockyard the fires were brought under control by the end of the following week. Fire Patrols were continued both at the railway siding and inside the area until the end of the month at which time any danger of fire recurring was considered remote but due to the nature of the country a sharp vigil had to be maintained.

Assessment of Damages.

The south jetty where the fire originated had disappeared with the exception of approximately 30 feet of the shore end and the few old pilings remaining in position. The road way marked in red was apparently intact but covered with every size of projectile from 20 mm to 8" as well as Shark and Hedgehogs. These appeared to be in very possible condition and a great many on cursory examination