

WHO WAS TO BLAME: THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION INQUIRY

An historical docu-comic

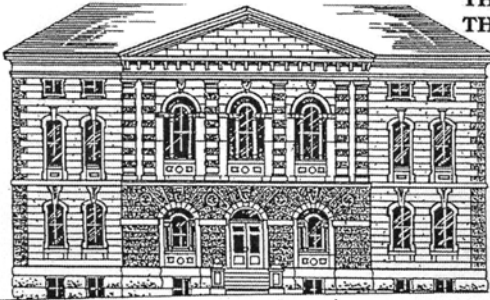
Just days after the December 6th. collision of the IMO and the Mont Blanc, in 1917, in the Narrows of Halifax Harbour, revenge came to the fore in the minds of Haligonians. They were still entangled in an uneasy merge of nightmare and reality... the sights and sounds of death and destruction indelibly etched in their psyches. They

wanted...demanded...answers--soon. Since many thought Kaiser Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany, was solely responsible for starting World War I, he should be their prime target. They would quickly come to realize, however, the improbability...if not impossibility...of bringing him to trial. Who then? The IMO? The Mont

Blanc? The Navy? Saboteurs? An investigation, before the WRECK COMMISSIONERS, opened on the afternoon of Wednesday, December 12, 1917; the first witness being called the next day.

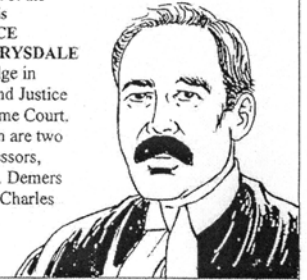
Written and illustrated
by
OWEN McLEARRON

THE DATE: DECEMBER 13, 1917 THE PLACE: The (OLD) HALIFAX COURT HOUSE



Located on Spring Garden Road, it was designed, in 1858, by the Toronto architectural firm of William Thomas & Sons. Completed in 1863, it housed both county and provincial courts with many notable decisions being reached, in these hallowed halls, over the years. This would be a judicial inquiry whose sole purpose was to sort out the facts and assess blame; those found to be responsible would be bound over for trial. The court house, like most other structures in Halifax, had been a victim of the Halifax Explosion (about \$19,000 damage) with broken windows which were hastily boarded up, cracked walls and chunks of plaster hanging from the grimy ceilings. Regardless of the unsightly surroundings, the inquiry would proceed, without delay, sitting daily from 10:00 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The Chairman of the Commission is
MR. JUSTICE ARTHUR DRYSDALE
the local Judge in Admiralty and Justice of the Supreme Court. To assist him are two nautical assessors, Captain L.A. Demers and Captain Charles Hose.



In the Supreme Court Room, the inquiry is about to get underway; the first witness has been called to the stand and is sworn in. Since the witness will be replying in French, he will answer through his interpreter, Louis D'Ormano, who is also sworn in. He will be questioned by W.A. Henry, K.C., appearing on behalf of the Government of Canada.

PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME.



MON NOM EST... MY NAME IS
A IMÉ LE MEDEC.



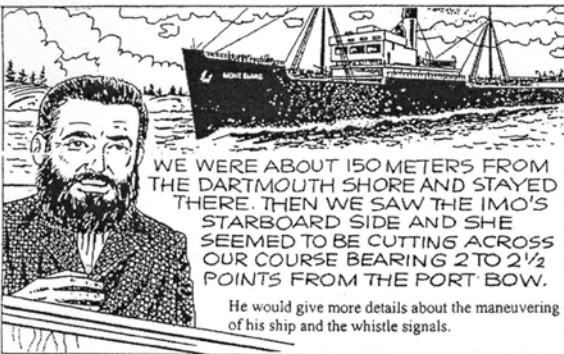
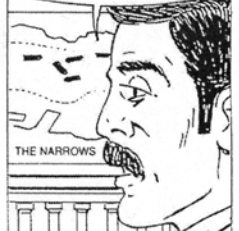
Le Medec's testimony continues:

I HAD MANY YEARS TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE BEFORE BECOMING CAPTAIN OF THE MONT BLANC. MY SHIP WAS LOADED WITH 2,600 TONS OF MUNITIONS AT GRAVESEND BAY IN NEW YORK. WE SET SAIL FOR HALIFAX TO JOIN UP WITH A CONVOY AND THEN CONTINUE ON TO FRANCE TO UNLOAD OUR CARGO.



Le Medec would also tell of the instructions he received from the Examining Officer at the mouth of Halifax Harbour when he arrived.

AFTER YOU SAILED INTO THE NARROWS ON THE MORNING OF DECEMBER 6th., TELL US WHAT TOOK PLACE.

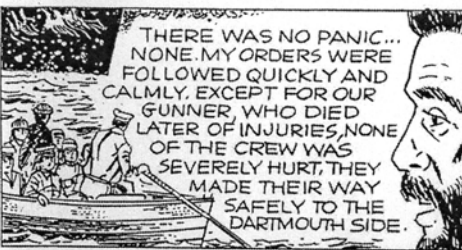


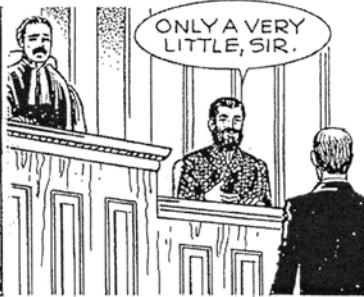
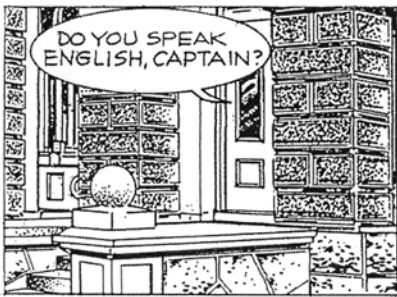
It was time for Le Medec to be cross-examined by Charles J. Burchell, representing the IMO, who is as tough as he is talented. He is well known for launching unrelenting attacks against witnesses. This would be an uphill battle since the Captain and the pilot of the IMO had both perished but Burchell would be more than ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

There was an early bias in favor of the IMO. In the eyes of many Nova Scotians, Frenchmen, like Le Medec, were not to be trusted. The Mont Blanc had been pre-judged, because she flew the tri-color of France, and found guilty.



Le Medec, sitting eye-to-eye with his questioner, explains that the red flag, according to international regulations, indicates that explosives are being handled aboard ship that is in the process of loading or discharging munitions. Nowhere do regulations say it must be flown when a ship is underway and, at that time, it was preferable that everyone should be in ignorance of his cargo.





Burchell would level question after question against the witness. Le Medec would also be questioned by F.H. Bell, representing the City of Halifax.

Later, in the inquiry, upon recall, Le Medec would add some credence to the mistrust of the French. He surprised everyone when he answered in English. He would admit that he spoke English reasonably well since it was required to get his Master's Certificate. He didn't like to speak it because, at times, people could not understand him.

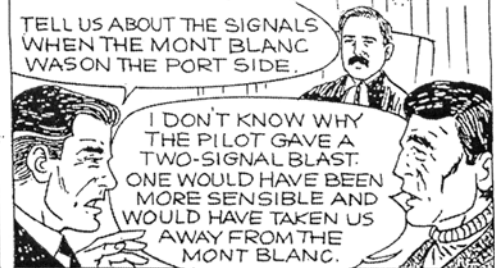
Peter B'Jonas is the first witness from the IMO and is questioned by W.A. Henry: he answers through an interpreter.



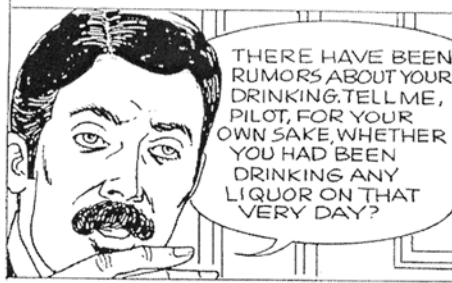
Almost all of the questions are answered by:



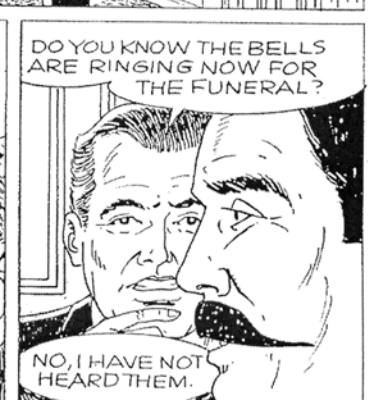
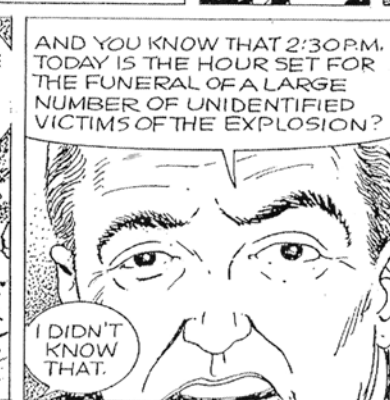
Captain Demers takes over the questioning:



Pilot Francis Mackey is called to testify and would confirm Le Medec's testimony. W.A. Henry would continue his questioning:



Mackey would face a scathing cross-examination by Burchell who felt, at the outset, that one or both pilots were responsible for the accident and Mackey was the surviving pilot.



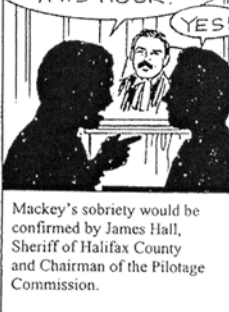
Burchell continued to hammer away at Mackey's alleged drinking habits. Later:



YOU SAY EVERYTHING YOU TOLD US IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE?



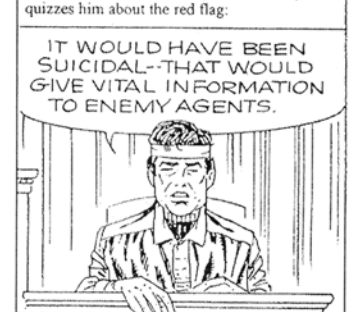
Burchell asks once... then again: YOU SAY THAT AT THIS HOUR?



After hearing 22 witnesses, the inquiry would adjourn, for the holidays, on December 21, 1917.

So much of the testimony was about signals... how many... when... by whom... where the ships were positioned plus an over-abundance of nautical jargon. There was so much disagreement on both sides and with each other and, in time, their accumulative testimonies became totally exhausting. It seemed to go on forever. You could cut the monotony with a knife. The inquiry would reconvene on Monday January 21, 1918

After questioning other IMO crew members, Captain Frederick Pasco of the Dockyard is called to testify. W.A. Henry quizzes him about the red flag:



F.H. Bell steps up to question Pasco:

WHO COULD HAVE STOPPED THE IMO FROM LEAVING ANCHORAGE IN BEDFORD BASIN?



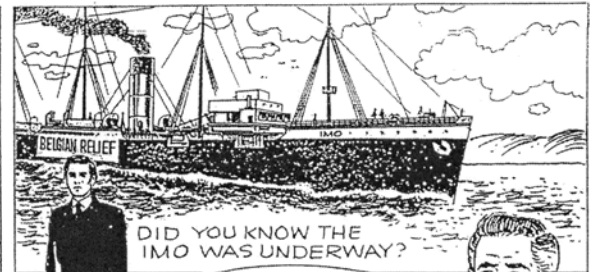
BEDFORD BASIN

Pasco, whose head is still partially bandaged from wounds he received, explains that only the Chief Examining Officer has such authority. Pilots have orders that they are not to lift anchor unless they have permission from Commander Wyatt. Pasco was unaware that any such permission had been given to the IMO that morning.

Concluding his testimony, Pasco offered that he was surprised the crew of the Mont Blanc did not protest carrying such a cargo of explosives and leave the ship in New York.

Bell begins questioning Commander Frederick Wyatt, asking him to explain his functions as Chief Examining Officer:

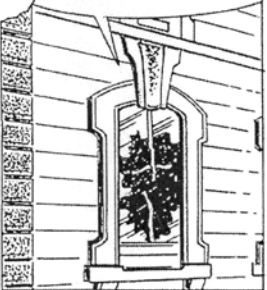
I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR SAYING WHERE MERCHANT SHIPS SHOULD BERTH AND WHEN THEY SHOULD ENTER AND LEAVE PORT.



DID YOU KNOW THE IMO WAS UNDERWAY?

I HAD NO IDEA SHE WAS READY FOR SEA THAT MORNING, BUT THAT WAS NOT UNUSUAL...IT WAS OFTEN DONE.

WAS IT NOT THE DUTY OF THE GUARD SHIP TO INTERCEPT THE IMO?



NO, SIR, IT IS THEIR DUTY TO EXAMINE AND GUARD SUSPECT NEUTRAL SHIPS USING THE HARBOUR.



AS FAR AS YOU KNEW, THERE WAS NO RISK OF A COLLISION THAT MORNING?



NONE WHAT-SO-EVER!

BECAUSE YOU BELIEVED THERE WAS NO SHIP GOING OUT?



Several more questions were asked about pilots not following instructions for which there was no punishment.

Burchell on cross-examination:

COULDN'T YOU HAVE DONE MORE TO ENSURE THE CO-OPERATION OF THE PILOTS INSTEAD OF TRYING TO SHIFT RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN LAXITY?



M'LORD, I OBJECT TO COUNSEL'S REMARKS.

Grudgingly, Justice Drysdale agrees and mildly admonishes Burchell. The attack against Wyatt turned vicious at times. During the course of the evidence, Wyatt was asked if two ships passing alongside in the Narrows posed any danger...he replied negatively. Other much larger ships had done it without incident, citing The Olympia, sister ship to the Titanic and the Mauretania and there were no ships bigger than these.

On January 28, 1918, the hearing ended...all the more than fifty witnesses had been examined. Drysdale's report would cause somewhat of a sensation in Halifax and a subject of grave discussions in merchant shipping circles.

On February 4th., after reading his fifteen-minute-long decision:

IT IS MY FINDING THAT THE MONT BLANC IS COMPLETELY AT FAULT FOR THE EXPLOSION ON DECEMBER 6, 1917.



Just after leaving the courthouse, Le Medec, Mackey and Wyatt were placed under arrest; the charge: MANSLAUGHTER.



William Hayes, pilot of the IMO, was named as a specific victim. The three, now in custody, would later be released on bail, \$6,000 each for Mackey and Wyatt and \$10,000 for Le Medec. They would be committed to stand trial before the Supreme Court.

Later, the cases against Le Medec and Mackey were disposed of on habeus corpus proceedings, leaving only the case against Wyatt; that would be dropped on March 21, 1918, because it fell short of the requirements for an indictment of manslaughter.

Le Medec returned to France, serving the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique until 1922. He would be promoted Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1931. Wyatt would be transferred away from the port, Mackey went back to piloting.

Both ships were found equally to blame; no one party was responsible for the loss of so many lives..

MANY THANKS! Firstly to my cat, Thomas, for allowing me the use of my drawing board on which he has a scicata in the afternoon sun; to my son, Stephen for his help and the typesetting; The Halifax Regional Library; the Nova Scotia Archives, Fred Honsberger, Allan North and the many people whose ears I bent in my quest for visual data.

For more detailed information about the Halifax Explosion and the eventual legal proceedings, check out your local library or bookstore.

This docu-comic appeared in the Cronical Herald december 6th, 2003 courtesy of Owen McCarron

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