THE MILITARY IN DISASTER RELIEF AFTER THE EXPLOSION IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, DECEMBER 1917

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On December 6, 1917, the munitions ship *Mont Blanc* blew up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The blast had one-sixth the power of the first atomic bomb and killed or wounded 20 percent of the Halifax population. The enormous ensuing relief effort was a success. Relief workers limited further loss of life, maintained order, and restored Halifax's wartime role as a critical port. Halifax was a military town, and forces from Canada, Great Britain, and the United States played a significant role in the relief effort. This study proposes that military contributions were critical to this successful humanitarian assistance operation. First, it provides a background of Halifax, the explosion, and a brief description of the military units involved. Next, it examines the three most critical military contributions to the relief effort: enough trained men and equipment to provide an immediate emergency response for medical care; authority to enforce security in the ruined town, enabling streamlined relief; and vital leadership to organize a systematic relief effort. Without these contributions, the relief effort would not have proceeded as quickly or successfully. The study concludes with implications for today's humanitarian assistance missions, for which military forces are well suited, and the argument that the capability is a critical part of national strategy.

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ABSTRACT

THE MILITARY IN DISASTER RELIEF AFTER THE EXPLOSION IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, DECEMBER 1917, by LT Charles E. Matykiewicz, 126 pages.

On December 6, 1917, the munitions ship *Mont Blanc* blew up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The blast had one-sixth the power of the first atomic bomb and killed or wounded 20 percent of the Halifax population. The enormous ensuing relief effort was a success. Relief workers limited further loss of life, maintained order, and restored Halifax's wartime role as a critical port. Halifax was a military town, and forces from Canada, Great Britain, and the United States played a significant role in the relief effort. This study proposes that military contributions were critical to this successful humanitarian assistance operation. First, it provides a background of Halifax, the explosion, and a brief description of the military units involved. Next, it examines the three most critical military contributions to the relief effort: enough trained men and equipment to provide an immediate emergency response for medical care; authority to enforce security in the ruined town, enabling streamlined relief; and vital leadership to organize a systematic relief effort. Without these contributions, the relief effort would not have proceeded as quickly or successfully. The study concludes with implications for today's humanitarian assistance missions for which military forces are well suited, and the argument that the capability is a critical part of national strategy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During World War One, an accidental explosion in the town of Halifax, Nova Scotia killed just under two thousand people. Following the blast, a large relief effort ensued. The military provided a critical part of the relief effort. Military leaders should reexamine the services' roles in this particular relief effort. The actions of soldiers and sailors following the events of December 6, 1917 were essential to effective disaster relief. Military units made excellent first responders, worked together to maintain security, and formed the bedrock of leadership and organization. The lessons of Halifax are applicable today in planning for future disasters.

Because of World War One, many military units were stationed in Halifax. Canadian Army units guarded the town and cared for convalescing soldiers returning from the front. Royal Canadian Navy sailors patrolled the seas in search of U-boats. The British Expeditionary Force trained recruits in Halifax, and the British admiralty ran convoy operations. American Navy ships refueled and refit in Halifax facilities. Three countries and their various military services worked in relative harmony for their small part in the Great War. Halifax would need their talents after the explosion. This first chapter will introduce the reader to Halifax and the units involved, and outline the events of the explosion and ensuing relief.

In addition to the immediate death toll, the blast left many injured. A Canadian officer told eye specialist Frederick Tooke that "the war has nothing on this, and I have

seen the worst of it."[1] Unlike in the trenches, the dead and wounded were not soldiers. Casualties far exceeded the city's medical care capabilities. Soldiers and sailors provided medical care that the city could not support. They also provided the critical infrastructure necessary for the entire relief effort to locate, transport, and triage emergency patients. Chapter 2 will cover the military's role in medical care.

Soldiers are trained to stay calm and maintain cohesion in the face of death, but civilians are not, and they often did not in Halifax. The disaster left many citizens confused and shell-shocked. Others acted in anger and terror. Some tried to exploit the situation for personal gain. With normal civil security functions overwhelmed, the military stepped in to enforce security. The disaster relief operation could not function without order. Chapter 3 will examine the military's role in security enforcement after the disaster.

The military was a necessary part of the relief, but it was not sufficient. Civilians organized relief coincident with the military, and there were many shared and overlapping duties. The cooperation between military and civilian relief efforts allowed for the smooth transfer of control to civilians when they were ready. Even when civilians fully controlled the operation, military leadership gave critical support. Chapter 4 will cover the coincident emergence of military and civilian leadership and leadership's role in the relief effort.

The approach to studying the Halifax disaster relief effort is twofold. First, relief operations, including Halifax, are often unique occurrences and thus making comparisons

[1] Frederick T. Tooke, "An Experience through the Halifax Disaster," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 8, no. 4 (1918): 308.

is difficult. World War One had hundreds of battles, giving planners and historians many examples by which to tease out truths. There was only one Halifax explosion. In recent times, American forces went to Liberia for Ebola in 2014, the Philippines after a typhoon in 2013, Japan after the 2011 tsunami, and Haiti after an earthquake in 2010. Each was a singular event, as different from each other as they are from Halifax. Therefore, this thesis does not attempt to use Halifax to derive a doctrinal approach to relief operations. Instead, it seeks to give a sense of how the relief operation unfolded. However, this does not mean the story of the disaster should be relegated to mere anecdote. By understanding the influences on the soldiers, sailors, and leaders in Halifax, the reader can understand how the situation influenced their decisions, and better anticipate necessities of future disaster relief operations. Second, it is difficult to judge whether to consider a relief operation successful. This is true of Halifax. Soldiers, sailors, and civilians made many difficult choices. Some turned out for the better, and some did not. Civilian and military leadership also faced difficult choices. While hindsight shows how some of these choices caused harm, most aided the success of the relief effort. Few leaders in Halifax had experience in disaster relief, and the military was not trained for it.[2] Nevertheless, the military organized quickly to provide a vast amount of medical care that saved as many lives as possible. Soldiers and sailors maintained order and security throughout the relief effort. Halifax stayed an essential port of call for North Atlantic convoys, in no way a certainty after the blast. Historians generally have a positive assessment of the relief

[2] The notable exception is the visiting Massachusetts State Guard unit, who had significant experience in disaster relief. As they did not arrive for two days, the reader should not consider this statement contradicted by later chapters.

operation. This thesis agrees with that assessment but also tries to understand mistakes that military units made.

Sociologist Samuel Prince set forward three phases in his principles of disaster relief, based on his study of Halifax. These are the emergency, transition, and rehabilitation period.[3] This is a useful construct to categorize the response. Prince does not delineate exactly where he thinks Halifax relief efforts fit in these categories, but this thesis will adapt Prince's phases as a framework for the relief effort. The emergency phase began with the disorder immediately following the explosion, and ended with the security established by the military at the end of the first day. The military took charge in this period because Halifax did not have civilian organizations that could respond to a disaster of this magnitude.[4] The transition period began when the military achieved security. Increasing centralization of the relief effort marked this phase, and it ended when workers completely cleared the devastated area of dead and injured. Medical care shifted from triage to long-term care in the transition period. The rehabilitation period began as the military turned over critical functions of running the city to full civilian control. The full rehabilitation of Halifax took many years, and because the military took a much smaller role, it is outside the scope of this paper.

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[3] Samuel Henry Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change, Based upon a Sociological Study of the Halifax Disaster* (New York: Columbia University, 1920), 85.

[4] Donna E. Smyth, "A Semiotic Blast," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 104.

The military played a large part in the relief operation because Halifax was a military town. The brutal economics of World War One were in full swing, and Halifax was a key logistics node. Food, munitions, and lumber passed through by the ton. In addition, Halifax quartered and transported soldiers going from the Americas to Europe. Halifax grew about 10 percent during the war, and by 1917, approximately 54,000 people swelled the city.[5]

Halifax wartime business benefited from relative proximity to Europe. Allied ships in 1917 had to contend with German submarines plying the Atlantic. They could steam along the east coast of the Americas in relative safety, but to cross the North Atlantic to Europe, they needed the protection of a convoy. Halifax's natural harbor and large anchorage made it an ideal place to await the next convoy.[6] Halifax was also ice free year-round. Quebec, another important Canadian port, gave way to Halifax around December when the St. Lawrence River froze.[7]

As an important military port, Halifax had a multitude of military organizations. Some were very new: The Royal Canadian Navy was seven years old.[8] Still in its

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[5] Massachusetts-Halifax Health Commission, *Report of the Massachusetts-Halifax Health Commission* (Halifax, NS: The Commission, 1932), 52.

[6] Janet Kitz, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing, 1989), 7.

[7] John Griffith Armstrong, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy: Inquiry and Intrigue* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 17.

[8] Ibid., 9. The Royal Canadian Navy began in 1910. Most vessels were foreign hand-me-downs and of dubious capability.

infancy, its primary mission was to protect the coast from the German submarine threat. Most of the Royal Canadian Navy was stationed in Halifax.

Halifax had army protection as well. The Canadian Militia protected Halifax, which was their mission since the days of British rule. During the war, the Canadian Army reinforced the Canadian Militia in defense of Halifax. The Canadian Army brought modern technology that the Canadian Militia lacked.[9] Most of the 3,300 soldiers serving in the Canadian Militia in Halifax were ineligible for overseas duty. Age, family status, or minor disability restricted them to serving in their home country.[10] The Canadian and British Expeditionary Forces also had recruits in Halifax, preparing to head to the fronts of Europe. There were also convalescing soldiers in military hospitals scattered around town.[11] All told, there were approximately 5,000 soldiers and sailors stationed in Halifax in December of 1917.[12]

The British Navy handled arranging protection for convoys leaving for Europe. A British commander on a capable ship would arrive in Halifax to await the next convoy. When enough transport ships were ready to depart, the fleet of merchants and a few protective warships would begin their journey across the Atlantic. On December 6, 1917, Admiral Evelyn R. Le Marchant was preparing to lead the next convoy on the HMS

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[9] Armstrong, 11.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Archibald MacMechan, "The Halifax Disaster," in *The Halifax Explosion December 6, 1917*, ed. Graham Metson (Toronto, Ontario: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978), 66.

[12] Joyce Glasner, *The Halifax Explosion: Heroes and Survivors* (Toronto, Ontario: James Lorimer and Company, 2011), 57.

Highflyer.[13] Organizing the convoys fell to the Port Convoy Officer, Admiral Bertram M. Chambers. Admiral Chambers had been the port convoy officer responsible for Canada for several months. However, due to the recent freezing of the St. Lawrence, he had only moved his headquarters to Halifax in November, about two weeks prior to the explosion.[14]

Halifax is built around a well-protected natural harbor. Entering from the southeast, a ship proceeds northwest between peninsulas. A narrowing channel reveals the city of Halifax to port (left), and the smaller town of Dartmouth to starboard (right). As the ship reaches the busiest part of Halifax, the channel is less than two thousand feet wide and aptly called the Narrows. After passing the city, the sea widens into Bedford Basin, where many ships have room to anchor and await their next duty.

On December 1, the small, slow, and old *Mont Blanc* left New York harbor.[15] After a few days in Halifax, she was to await the next convoy and continue to Bordeaux, France.[16] The *Imo* was a large and fast passenger liner repurposed as a cargo ship. After stopping in Halifax for coal, she waited in Bedford Basin for morning daylight. Early on

[13] Bertram M. Chambers, "Halifax Explosion," *The Naval Review* 8, no. 3 (1920): 447.

[14] Chambers, 445.

[15] Glasner, 14.

[16] Donald A. Kerr, "Another Calamity: The Litigation." In *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 366.

December 6, she weighed anchor for New York, where she would load her cargo of relief supplies for Belgium.[17]

At about 8:30 a.m., *Imo* was outbound to sea, and *Mont Blanc* was inbound. Both ships had their harbor pilots aboard.[18] *Imo,* avoiding some small traffic in the harbor, kept to the east side of the Narrows. East was the left side of the channel from her perspective. Typically ships keep to the right side of channels to allow for a port-to-port passage with other ships. However, on a busy morning in crowded wartime Halifax this was not an unusual move for the less maneuverable *Imo*.[19] *Mont Blanc* also kept to the east side of the channel, on her right, the normal side.

When the two ships were in sight of each other, they blew their whistles to indicate the direction of passage, as was customary. *Mont Blanc* blew first, a single blast. The single blast stated her intention to maneuver to starboard and her desire to pass the *Imo* port-to-port.[20] The less maneuverable *Imo* in response blew two blasts. Two blasts indicated that she would alter course to port, and desired to pass starboard-to-starboard. The *Mont Blanc* blew a single blast again and maneuvered to starboard as best she could. The *Imo* again blew two, and maneuvered to port. Both ships crowded the eastern shore of the Narrows in their confusion.[21]

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[17] Kitz, 6.

[18] Kerr, 366-367.

[19] Kerr, 367.

[20] Ibid., 365.

[21] Ibid., 366.

With collision imminent, both ships executed extremis maneuvers. *Mont Blanc* turned hard to port. Moments later, the *Imo* engaged full reverse, which turned her bow quickly to starboard.[22] The *Mont Blanc* seemed ready to pass just in front of the *Imo* when the *Imo* pivoted back onto a collision course. The *Imo* cut into the *Mont Blanc* on her starboard bow and both ships drifted apart without power (see figure 1).

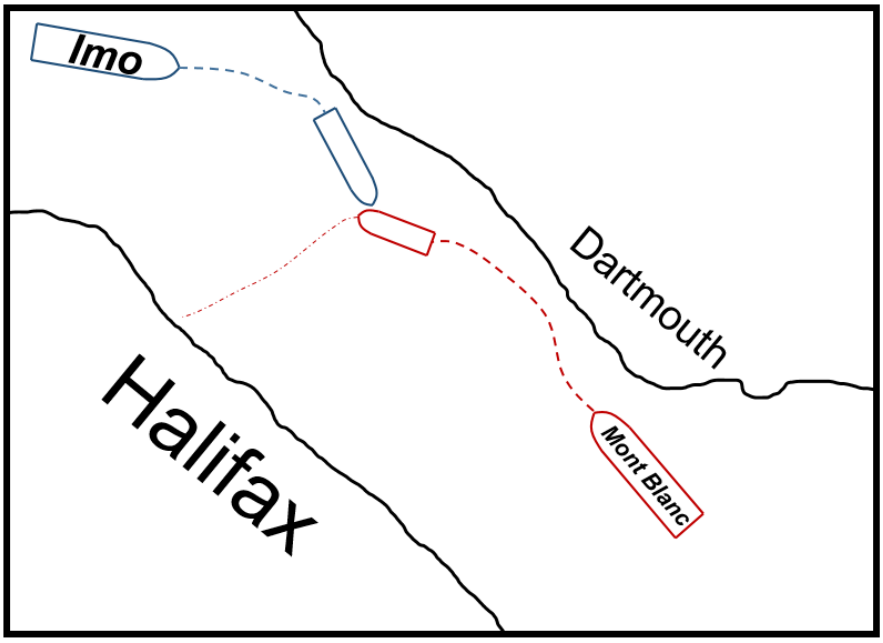

Figure 1. Path of the *Imo* and *Mont Blanc*

Source: Created by author.

[22] Armstrong, 35. When a ship moving forward engages reverse, the direction of propeller rotation causes dissimilar pressures along the back of the ship's keel and rudder. The result is a rapid pivot of the ship about her keel. The counter-clockwise (in reverse) direction of rotation of the *Imo*'s single screw rapidly pivoted the ship to starboard. Good seamanship or not, the last-ditch effort by the *Imo* came too late.

The collision between the *Mont Blanc* and the *Imo* happened in the narrowest part of the channel. The *Mont Blanc's* momentum carried her west, where she grounded lightly against the shore in the northeastern corner of Halifax (see figure 2). This was in a populous area known as Richmond. Richmond grew from the busy docks and main railroad along the shoreline. Initially an industrial area, dockworkers made their homes near the wharves and turned it into a mixed-use community. By December 1917, military members, dockworkers, and their families occupied most dwellings. Most houses were multi-family, and grew crowded as the wartime economy boomed.[23]

[23] Kitz, 11.

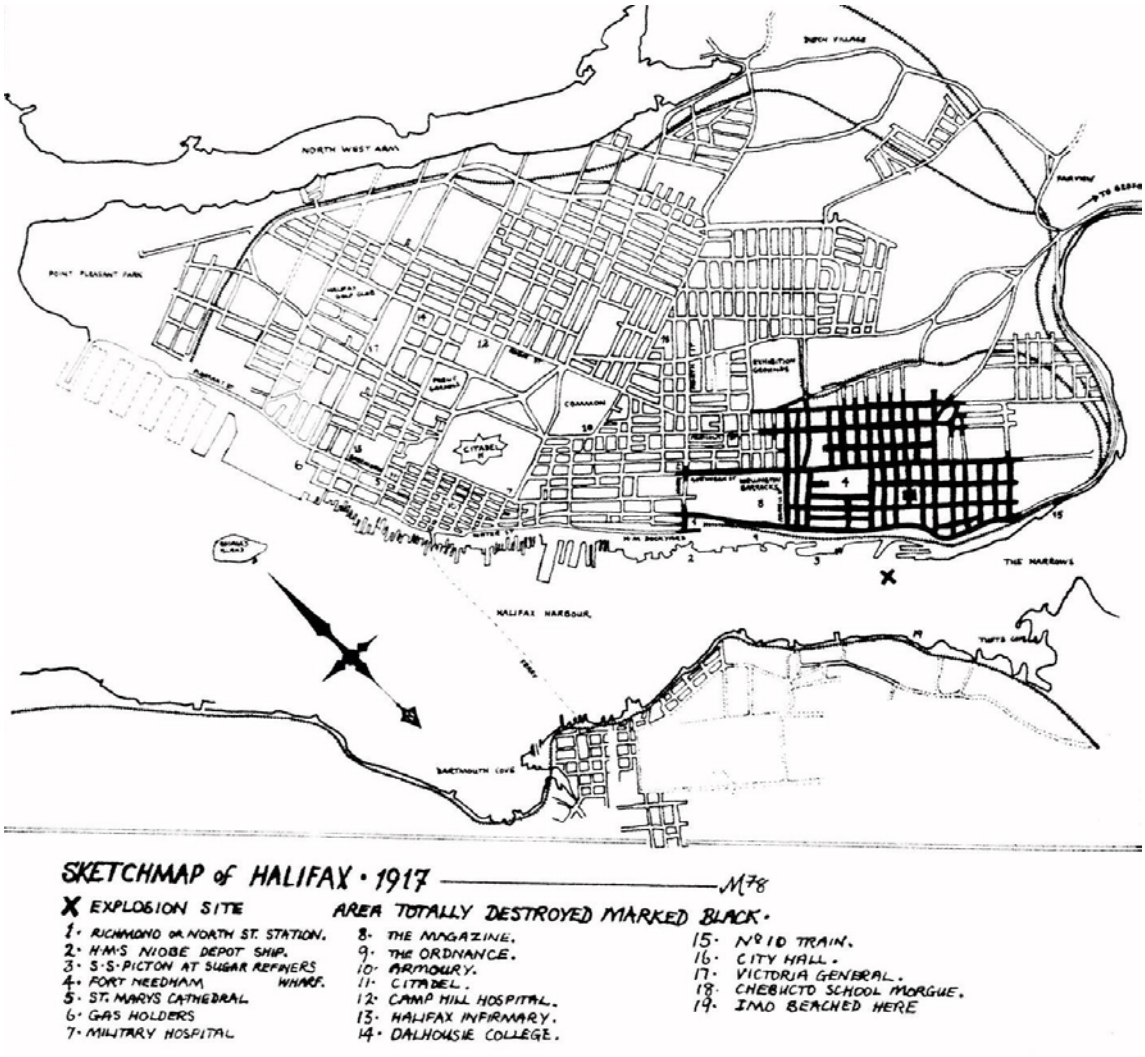

Figure 2. Sketch Map of Halifax and Darmouth, 1917

Source: Archibald MacMechan, "The Halifax Disaster," in *The Halifax Explosion December 6, 1917*, ed. Graham Metson (Toronto, Ontario: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1978), 10.

The *Mont Blanc* was carrying explosives. A total of about 2,600 tons of various types caused one of the largest ever non-nuclear explosions.[24] As the two ships separated,

[24] David Simpson and Alan Ruffman, "Explosions, Bombs, and Bumps: Scientific Aspects of the Explosion," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus

barrels of benzol, strapped to *Mont Blanc's* deck, tumbled into the hold and burst. Sparks flew as metal scraped metal, igniting the highly flammable liquid. Fire broke out on *Mont Blanc's* bow, and quickly overwhelmed the ship's pumping mechanisms preventing her crew from fighting the fire.[25]

The crew of the *Mont Blanc* knew her cargo, but the rest of the harbor did not. *Mont Blanc*'s captain, aware that there was no way to prevent disaster, ordered the engines stopped and the boats lowered. The crew disembarked and made for the eastern shore of Dartmouth. They shouted at passing vessels, but their warnings in French were not heard or understood, and not heeded.[26]

A ship, on fire, drifting towards the busy docks, encouraged heroism from local tugboat crews. Ships known to carry explosives, such as the nearby *Picton*, were at risk from the burning ship. Captain Horatio Brannen of the tug *Stella Maris* was first to the scene. By the time he arrived the *Mont Blanc* had already grounded.[27] Smoke and fire billowed from the ship as the *Stella Maris* tried to unground her. Men in the dockyards continued about their business or turned to watch the efforts.[28] Black smoke probably indicated burning oil, and few thought they were in grave danger. Fires continued to burn

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Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 293. The original declaration stated the *Mont Blanc* carried 2,300 tons of picric acid, 225 tons of TNT, and 61 tons of guncotton. The total is 2,586 short tons. In addition, lashed to the deck were an unknown number of barrels of benzol.

[25] Armstrong, 36.

[26] Kitz, 19.

[27] Armstrong, 36.

[28] Armstrong, 39.

as Navy and civilian personnel tried to fight them.[29] Larger scale firefighting efforts began to get underway.[30] They did not arrive in time to help.

The explosion was equivalent to 2.9 kilotons of TNT.[31] The *Mont Blanc* was obliterated. Bits of steel rained on Halifax and Dartmouth across the harbor.[32] The explosion also caused a local tsunami.[33] The resulting wave damaged or destroyed almost all of the forty-five ships in the channel and swept many to their deaths.[34] The *Imo,* drifting directly across the channel from the *Mont Blanc,* was thrown upon the shore in Dartmouth. The blast killed many of her crew and demolished her superstructure.

Halifax homes, mostly wooden structures, could not stand up to the force of the explosion. Even sturdy brick buildings such as the Acadia Sugar Refinery, 300 yards away, were reduced to rubble.[35] In Richmond, the part of Halifax nearest to the explosion, the blast flattened almost every building, and within a mile most buildings were so damaged as to be unusable.[36] In the remainder of Halifax, practically every

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[29] Ibid., 37.

[30] Ibid., 40.

[31] Simpson and Ruffman, 276. It was approximately one-sixth of the power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

[32] MacMechan, 14.

[33] Kitz, 26.

[34] MacMechan, 15. MacMechan details the wave. For a brief discussion of the casualties, see Glasner, 36.

[35] Armstrong, 42.

[36] Armstrong, 42.

window facing the harbor shattered. In moments, 20 percent of the Halifax population was dead or injured.[37]

The morning of December 6 was cold and clear, rising from a low of 17 degrees Fahrenheit.[38] Homes, businesses, and ammunition magazines lit furnaces to keep warm. As structures collapsed on wood-burning stoves, stocked with fuel for the winter, fires broke out across town.[39]

A burning ship in the harbor elicited much curiosity. At 0845 on a Thursday morning, Haligonians were starting their day. Many took a few minutes to stand at their windows and gaze at the crippled *Mont Blanc*. This diversion turned out to be a crucial mistake. The shock wave shattered glass and threw shards into the faces of curious onlookers.[40] The broken glass made injuries to the eyes and face common, but they were by no means the only injuries Haligonians sustained. Burns from the explosion and subsequent fires, cuts and wounds from flying debris, broken limbs, and nerve injuries were common.[41] In the early aftermath of the explosion, mortality rates were high.

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[37] Glasner, 36. In a city of 54,000 people, approximately 1,900 died and 9,000 were injured.

[38] MacMechan, 92.

[39] Chambers, 449.

[40] Abraham C. Ratshesky, *Report of the Halifax Relief Expedition December 6 to 15, 1917* (Boston: Wright and Peter Printing Company, State Printers, 1918), 20. A number of people were blinded because of this phenomenon.

[41] Thomas. J. Murray, "Medical Aspects of the Disaster: The Missing Report of Dr. David Fraser Harris," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour,* ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 242.

The general destruction of the city worsened the situation. Unable to move a block to find shelter or aid, severely injured people died quickly from exposure and loss of blood.[42] It was impossible to move about the city, much less decide where to go. Without clear indications of where to find help, or even awareness that help existed, many people took shelter in what remained of their homes and did not seek assistance.[43] Cold weather exacerbated the already deadly situation.[44]

Many first thoughts after the explosion resembled those of Admiral Chambers: "Those d---- Germans must have blown up the Citadel."[45] Early inclinations to blame Germany resulted in incidents against citizens of Halifax with German heritage or German sounding names.[46] A German attack, unlike an accidental explosion, meant further explosions must be imminent. Suspicion that war had arrived on the shores of Halifax led many to try to evacuate the city. Spurious reports that a second explosion was coming led to further panic and attempts to flee.[47]

Fleeing the city was impossible as debris made roads impassable by car and the main railroad station was destroyed.[48] Although the initial terror subsided, worsening

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[42] Tooke, 312.

[43] Ratshesky, 15.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Chambers, 446.

[46] Smyth, 103.

[47] Tooke, 311.

[48] Marilyn Whiteley, "Through the Eyes of Annie Leake Tuttle: The Old Ladies' Home and the 1917 Explosion," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus

weather the next day made movement even more difficult and delayed relief efforts. A blizzard developed early on December 7 and reached maximum strength that evening.[49]

The relief effort began within the hour, and the first priority was medical relief. Thousands of injured and displaced persons needed immediate triage and care. Military units sent men into the most devastated areas with stretchers. In small teams, these working parties brought wounded to areas where medical professionals could care for them. Hospitals in Halifax, already crowded with injured soldiers from the war, did not have enough space.[50] All of the hospitals ended up holding many more people than they were designed to hold. Military units also created new spaces to house the injured. Ships like the USS *Old Colony* were quickly repurposed as floating hospitals, and Canadian Army units erected hospital tents in open spaces.

No city could anticipate a disaster of this magnitude, but Halifax was perhaps less prepared than some. A public safety committee, common in other cities of the era, did not exist in Halifax.[51] In addition, wartime expansion meant the police force was overworked before the explosion. Military units established order and security, which enabled further relief efforts by civilian and other military teams. By the afternoon, the military controlled access to the most devastated areas around Richmond and the dockyard. The

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Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 94.

[49] Chambers, 453.

[50] MacMechan, 62.

[51] Kitz, 58.

following week, only official relief workers, with passes from the Halifax Relief Committee, could enter the devastated area.

Initial coordination began shortly after the explosion. Two days later, a special train arrived from Boston with members of the Massachusetts State Guard and Red Cross. The arrival of more medical workers and a large amount of supplies accented the need for greater coordination of the large relief effort. The Halifax Relief Committee, officially formed several days after the explosion, included military and civilian members in its leadership. This head organization split duties into smaller committees with designated tasks. Lieutenant Colonel McKelvie Bell, the senior Canadian Army medical officer, led the medical relief effort and had wide latitude to organize systematic relief.[52]

The three main parts of the military operation—medical care, security, and coordination of relief—were key to the successful relief effort. Many injured lived to tell their story, terror was largely minimized, and Halifax kept its role, with only a short interruption, as a critical port on the supply route to Europe. The involvement of the military was key to these aspects of success. The military had the necessary supplies, plenty of manpower, and the organizational ability to achieve effective relief after the Halifax disaster.

[52] Ratshesky, 11.

CHAPTER 2

MEDICAL RELIEF

> The work was of a very severe nature owing to the falling timbers, heat and smoke and the choked up nature of all the ground, but all my officers and men worked like Trojans until we had cleared the hillside of all with life in them who could be got at, many of these died in transit and many more lived.
>
> — LCDR Francis Drake-Clark, quoted in Michael Bird, *The Town That Died: The True Story of the Greatest Man-made Explosion before Hiroshima*

When it came to medical care, relief parties had to make difficult tradeoffs. They could not save everyone. The number of injured and dead was an order of magnitude greater than what normal Halifax facilities could handle. First responders had no plan, little training, and few means of communication for employing medical relief. Without perfect information, first responders made sacrifices with their limited resources. Because of this, Halifax medical relief was not seamless. Yet, by the afternoon of the first day, a comprehensive system existed to find, recover, triage, and care for the injured. The medical response to the disaster earns the positive reviews it garners. While hindsight offers considerations for improvement, judging success of the medical efforts must consider the scale of destruction: 20 percent of the population was dead or injured.[53]

Halifax was lucky to have a large local military presence. Military units were the unequivocal first responders in the disaster. They had men, organization, motivation, and the capability to provide a strong response. Soldiers and sailors were trained in basic medical care and were equipped with medical supplies. These were units prepared for the

[53] Armstrong, 11. A common figure is 1,900 dead and 9,000 injured, and Halifax had just over 50,000 people in 1917.

mass casualties of World War One, but they were not in a war zone. Their preparations for war were immediately available to the citizens of Halifax, and they served them well.[54] However, soldiers and sailors did not universally respond immediately. Family ties, unit size and type, and wartime mission affected how quickly various units responded.

This chapter focuses on military contributions to medical relief, but this does not indicate the military constituted the entire relief effort. Local practitioners gave care in their own homes.[55] Within a few hours of the explosion, civilian doctors from the surrounding regions began traveling to Halifax.[56] The official record less widely echoes their selfless service than that of military responders. Some of the most heroic military contributions, justifiably lauded, were smaller in scale than the accomplishments of civilian teams of doctors.

However, the military provided the medical framework in which all rescuers operated. Soldiers and sailors responded first because they had better protection from the blast and could form cohesive groups quickly. They were prepared to give first aid in battle, so they had facilities and supplies for significant medical care. They were the quickest to grasp the large scale of the medical response and to consider the bigger picture. In the first emergency phase of the disaster, the military created the order necessary to work collectively to save the most lives. The order and organization they

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[54] Prince, 60.

[55] Janet F. Kitz and Joan M. Payzant, *December 1917: Re-visiting the Halifax Explosion* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing, 2006), 108.

[56] Tooke, 312.

brought to medical relief helped in the transition period of relief, when the effort became coordinated and centralized.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, soldiers and sailors experienced as much confusion as any other citizen of Halifax. Many were injured themselves, and some had local homes and families. Few understood why the *Mont Blanc* exploded, so rumors spread of possible further explosions and attacks. Instinctual self-preservation reigned, and it took time for military leadership to enforce discipline and begin providing medical care.

On board a Canadian reserve vessel, a sailor shouted, "to hell with you and the *Birkenhead* we got wives and kids ashore!"[57] Most of the Canadian soldiers and sailors defending Halifax were not eligible for service overseas, due to age or minor disability.[58] Many of the personnel were older, which often meant they had families. Sailors on the Canadian cruiser *Niobe*, badly damaged by the blast, left their ship and went into the city to find out what happened to their homes.[59] Reactions such as this were common among locally-based units. Their chief concern was their own families and homes, but they increased the confusion in the rush to aid their own. Foreign units such as the British Expeditionary Force, which was executing drills at the Halifax Armoury, reacted differently. The explosion destroyed the Halifax Armoury, killed two British

[57] Armstrong, 53.

[58] Ibid., 11.

[59] Ibid., 53.

Expeditionary Force members and injured many more (including their captain), but they were among the first units to render aid.[60]

Admiral Bertram Chambers' first words after the explosion, addressed to his wife, "Those d--- Germans must have blown up the Citadel," expressed a widely shared sentiment.[61] While Admiral Chambers thought there would be no further danger, many others expected a second, larger explosion.[62] The fear of further attack or disaster is clear in the first orders given. British officers ordered their vessels to raise steam and land medical relief parties.[63] These orders were vaguely contradictory. Bringing up full steam pressure was the first step in preparing to get underway, and required the efforts of men that might otherwise be available for relief efforts. Before orders from Admiral Chambers arrived, the *Changuinola* had already raised steam and deployed one relief party.[64] Admiral Chambers sent out additional relief parties, but his and other officers' concerns delayed the search and rescue efforts. Admiral Chambers' next duty was the condition of convoy vessels that originally scheduled to leave the next day. A tug took him to Bedford

[60] Armstrong, 55. Many members of the British Expeditionary Force training in Halifax were American recruits.

[61] Chambers, 446.

[62] Tooke, 311.

[63] Chambers, 447. Chambers' orders were "to be ready to leave wharves or get under way if necessity arose."

[64] Kitz and Payzant, 21.

Basin where the ships had anchored. Only once he ascertained that the blast did little damage did Admiral Chambers state that he "returned to the focus of the explosion."[65]

The reaction of the British Navy was common across other military units. The world was at war, and the priority of the military in Halifax was to adhere to their responsibilities in the prosecution of that war. They were soldiers and sailors, not rescue workers. Units tended to their own well-being, and to the success of their military mission. Only when they settled these factors, did the military as an organization bring its full capabilities to bear on the medical disaster unfolding in Halifax.[66]

Foreign militaries—British and U.S. forces—tended to be the first to mount an effective response. Their admirably quick response did not come from greater innate ability or heroism. Three main factors explain why. First, the simple fact that the *Mont Blanc* exploded from the water gave the disaster a nautical aspect. The Royal Canadian Navy had a strong presence in Halifax, but maritime forces composed much of the foreign military in town.[67] It was difficult for naval relief parties to move injured people from the shore down to the vessels pier side, but Admiral Chambers stated, "the route shoreward was even more impassable."[68] Naval units could mount a response more quickly since they had more manageable water access. Shore-based units struggled to get

[65] Chambers, 447.

[66] Armstrong, 54-55.

[67] The British Expeditionary Force was the only exception to the maritime nature of foreign forces.

[68] Chambers, 448.

to the disaster area. Debris meant cars and carts could not access the most devastated areas, so stretcher parties had to carry out injured by hand.[69]

Second, the composition of the Canadian defense forces affected their eagerness to respond. Men stationed in Halifax mostly had homes and families in town. Like the sailor on the *Birkenhead*, they had an understandable response to find their families even if it meant abandoning their post. This sapped the ability of some Canadian forces to respond collectively in the first moments of the crisis. Later that morning, Canadian acting senior naval officer Captain Walter Hose ordered the captain of the *Niobe* to recover the naval personnel who had left the dockyard.[70] Many Canadian personnel did selflessly stay and assist, but there are no reports of foreign sailors needing to be rounded up to return to their ships. They simply did not have filial attachments to the ruined town.

Third, smaller and older ships made up the Canadian Navy at the time. Their missions were mostly patrols for German U-boats in the nearby North Atlantic. Because they were not designed for larger wartime battles, they could not take as much explosive punishment as a modern vessel. American and British ships had better armor and thus survived the blast with less damage. In addition, luck of position typically had Canadian ships, especially the large *Niobe*, closer to the explosion. The American *Old Colony*, a major contributor to relief, was across the harbor in Richmond. Because they experienced less damage, British and American ships could more quickly transition to sending aid to

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[69] MacMechan, 60.

[70] Armstrong, 54. The Canadian senior naval officer was Captain Pasco, but he was largely incapacitated by the explosion. He did help with some prioritization and organizational decisions, but his second in command, Captain Walter Hose, took the lead for the Canadians.

the town. In addition, most American and British ships were large in comparison to their Canadian counterparts. Because of their large size, they warranted embarked medical support teams and at least one ship's doctor.[71] Larger units, such as the British Expeditionary Force, also had enough people without serious injuries to contribute quickly and significantly to the rescue efforts.

Gradually, the chaos faded, and soldiers and sailors began to help. British Expeditionary Force recruit Carl Moulton describes:

> We were marched down to the water as soon as we could get the men together. Fires were raging all about, buildings all flat, glass all about and the people—the least said the better. We worked among the ruins for hours, had to improvise stretchers and take the injured to tugs and other boats to be carried to the hospital ships . . . There was little confusion for the military took hold of the situation.[72]

As leaders began to establish order and cohesion, soldiers and sailors first began to care for their comrades. Many units had their hands full with this task. Cadets at the Royal Naval College of Canada, only a few hundred yards from the explosion, struggled to administer first aid to their colleagues and evacuate them from the damaged building.[73] British Expeditionary Force recruits tended to their own injuries before a group marched

[71] Armstrong, 55.

[72] Ibid., 56. Mr. Moulton wrote this letter to a love interest, so there may be some embellishment.

[73] MacMechan, 25.

to the dockyard.[74] On the *Niobe*, sailors worked to properly reattach their ship to the pier, as the blast had loosened one its lines.[75]

It took time for military units to transition from helping each other to executing rescue efforts for injured civilians. How seriously the blast affected the unit correlates to the time of this transition. Sailors from the *Old Colony* were among the first to arrive and begin search parties; their ship was unaffected by the explosion.[76] Without serious injuries among their own personnel, they turned more quickly to the aid of others. The British Expeditionary Force recruits had many injuries, but were a large enough unit to muster a quick response. Some stayed behind to care for comrades, but 150 men, some with minor injuries themselves, went to the dockyard to help.[77] In comparison, the Naval College cadets, just as heroic and ready to help, could not muster aid beyond what they needed to care for their own.[78]

Many injured Haligonians were near death. The explosion flattened their homes and there was little shelter in near-freezing temperatures. In shock, the walking wounded wandered about in confusion. Furthermore, rumors circled of an imminent second

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[74] Armstrong, 55.

[75] Ibid., 56. One of *Niobe's* anchors, bedded on the pier, had dragged.

[76] MacMechan, 26.

[77] Armstrong, 55.

[78] Blair Beed, *1917 Halifax Explosion and American Response* (Halifax, NS: Dtours Visitors and Convention Service, 1998), 118. The average age of Naval College cadets was fifteen, younger than the typical British Expeditionary Force recruit. However, the actions of the two groups were so similar at first, the author has concluded that the size difference of the two units was a greater contributor to their capacity to help than their relative age.

explosion, and further contributed to injured people trying to leave the devastated area.[79] Exposure, exhaustion, and loss of blood, exacerbated by the lack of shelter, meant that initial mortality was extremely high.[80]

First responders needed to bring the wounded to locations where trained medical personnel could properly attend to them. British officers on *Highflyer* and *Changuinola* sent out stretcher parties to find the injured and bring them on board these ships.[81] The British Expeditionary Force arrived at the waterfront and received tasking from Captain Hose.[82] They formed small search parties which first searched the ruins around the dockyard and then expanded searching north toward the explosion's center.[83]

Shortly after the blast, sailors from the *Old Colony* rowed across the channel from Dartmouth and landed at the Halifax dock. Groups of sailors formed their own search parties and created jury-rigged stretchers for transporting the injured.[84] Canadian soldiers pitched in as well. General Thomas Benson, the ranking Canadian officer in Halifax, ensured that every available man worked.[85] Colonel W. E. Thompson, Benson's assistant adjutant-general, began to bring soldiers in from shore batteries in outer Halifax.[86] All

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[79] Murray, 233.

[80] Tooke, 312.

[81] Chambers, 449.

[82] Ibid., 450.

[83] Armstrong, 55.

[84] Murray, 234.

[85] Armstrong, 57.

[86] MacMechan, 32-33.

groups formed small search parties and combed the wreckage. They recovered many, but carried out early searches haphazardly, and often searched the same building multiple times.[87]

Relief parties soon ran out of places to bring the injured. The explosion destroyed most of the Halifax dockyard hospital, but naval personnel brought wounded to it anyway. Captain Harold Hines of the *Old Colony* decided to have his ship brought over from the Dartmouth to the Halifax side of the Narrows.[88] His sailors moored her just astern of the *Niobe.* By about 1:00 p.m., she began taking on patients from the broken dockyard hospital, as well as new arrivals.[89]

Within a few hours of the explosion, teams of soldiers, sailors, and civilians were hard at work bringing the injured to safe locations and beginning to care for them. However, they performed their searches randomly. Initially, the teams searching the wreckage did not coordinate, except among members of their own ship or army unit.[90] The captain of the *Niobe* described his sailors as able to respond to the immediate crisis, but their search efforts were not terribly systematic or comprehensive.[91] Given the scale of the disaster, senior leaders recognized the need for a more organized medical response.

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[87] Prince, 61.

[88] Home of Heroes, "Full Text Citations for Award of the Navy Cross," accessed March 1, 2017, http://www.homeofheroes.com/members/02_NX/citations/01_wwi-nc/nc_02_WW1_Navy-ADM.html.

[89] Murray, 234.

[90] Prince, 60.

[91] Armstrong, 71.

Halifax needed further organization and thus centralization of the response effort. It was not until the afternoon that military leaders organized a systematic method of search.[92] This organization stemmed from an early afternoon meeting between civilian relief leaders and General Benson.[93]

Teams of soldiers and sailors brought injured Haligonians to hospitals faster than the hospitals could accommodate them. Recently built Camp Hill was an instructive example of a Halifax hospital. West of the harbor, the blast had little effect on it. It was not empty on the morning of December 6. Convalescing soldiers occupied the approximately 260 beds, but these men were in better condition than the incoming patients.[94] They turned themselves out happily, and some aided by acting as nurses.[95] By the end of the day, Camp Hill held as many as 1,630 patients.[96] A single hospital bed might hold three people.[97] Many injured Haligonians did not even have beds, and were left outside, or arranged in hallways and storage rooms, while rescuers went back for more victims.[98]

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[92] Prince, 61.

[93] Chambers, 451.

[94] Murray, 239.

[95] MacMechan, 67.

[96] Tooke, 311; MacMechan, 65. Tooke says it held 280, MacMechan says 240.

[97] Tooke, 312.

[98] MacMechan, 63.

Various military units created and staffed temporary emergency hospitals. The previously mentioned *Old Colony* was one of the first examples. She reached full capacity after a few hours, with some help from the USCG *Morrill*.[99] The arrival of the American cruisers *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* meant additional staff and supplies. By the evening, *Old Colony* functioned as a 150-bed hospital with facilities cobbled from various units around the dockyard.[100] She mostly served injured dockyard hands based on her location, but took on any the search parties brought to her.

Another solution to the lack of facilities was to send injured Haligonians to nearby Nova Scotia towns. One of the first trains out of Halifax transported injured people to Truro, about fifty miles north.[101] However, due to a general shortage of transportation, this was not a common option. It was simply easier to find care in Halifax than to try and leave.[102] When transportation networks resumed regular operation, the most seriously injured had already found hospital space in Halifax. Neighboring towns provided better aid by sheltering many of the thousands left homeless by the explosion.[103]

Hospital space was at a premium, so large buildings were coopted into service as care facilities. This took time, and the lack of ability for caregivers to communicate

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[99] Logbook of the USCG *Morrill,* April 1917-December 1918, Logs of Revenue Cutters and Coast Guard Vessels, 1819-1941, Entry NC-31 159A Box 1646, Record Group 26, National Archives Building, Washington, DC, December 6 entry.

[100] Armstrong, 68.

[101] Prince, 62.

[102] Whiteley, 94.

[103] Prince, 66.

caused confusion among rescuers. The blast severely damaged Rockhead Hospital in north Halifax, but with few other options at the time, rescuers put the building into service nonetheless. Doctors and nurses operated in barely habitable conditions, but had no way of informing rescue workers to bring wounded elsewhere.[104] The inability to communicate with rescue parties also contributed to crowding at places like Camp Hill. Emergency hospitals sprang up at the YMCA and St. Mary's College but it took time to inform relief workers to bring wounded there instead. One rudimentary shelter went completely unused. The Canadian Army put up 400 tents in the Halifax Common, a large field near the central barracks.[105] Military and civilian relief efforts were either unaware or unwilling to use these heated and well equipped tents.[106] The lack of ability for rescuers to coordinate among themselves meant they overtaxed some facilities and underused others.

The quality of care provided by overworked doctors suffered as well. Many worked nonstop for twenty-four hours, only sleeping when they were physically unable to continue operating.[107] In the first days, sanitation and infectious disease received only the slightest consideration. Canadian Army eye specialist Frederick Tooke said, "any attempt at bacteriology would have been a burlesque."[108] There were no reports of

[104] Glasner, 114.

[105] MacMechan, 36.

[106] Kitz, 69.

[107] Tooke, 312.

[108] Ibid., 317.

contagious disease outbreaks. It is probable that luck and cold December temperatures were the main factors in this. Later relief efforts suspected the presence of disease and accounted for it.[109] However, by the time they took these considerations into account, the first responder doctors had already performed all major operations for the most severely injured Haligonians. Without the resources to sort and separate possibly contagious cases, doctors and nurses willingly and knowingly took on this risk while doing the best they could.

It was not only doctors who provided medical care. Soldiers, sailors, and civilians trained in first aid put their skills to use. On an inbound train, nearly pushed off its tracks by the explosion, soldiers and sailors came upon the scene and aided the train crew in caring for the injured.[110] These men were nursing injuries themselves. In fact, doctors at Rockhead Hospital had recently discharged these men to clear the beds.[111] Early rescue efforts did not always feature trained first aid. One soldier tried to remove a shard of glass from a woman's head. This well-meaning gesture would have worsened her condition due to blood loss.[112]

As the relief efforts became more locally organized, first aid became more regimented. Search parties at Wellington Barracks began to bring injured to their two unit corpsmen before sending them to hospitals. These corpsmen, close to where their unit

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[109] Ratshesky, 15. Responders were concerned about diptheria and waste-borne diseases.

[110] MacMechan, 42.

[111] Ibid., 43.

[112] Kitz, 48.

was searching, could more quickly provide care. They bandaged wounds and performed initial triage before the injured reached hospitals. Before patients left, they gave them blankets for the rest of the journey to the hospital.[113] British naval forces, with more medical personnel attached, sent out a surgeon with each stretcher party.[114] Either method accentuates the need for early care. Only the luckiest patients could get to a hospital within minutes. Military forces could offer basic first aid, which ensured that serious wounds received some prompt care. In addition, there was a significant risk of exposure on the cold December day. Nearby, first aid workers decreased the risk of complications due to exposure to cold temperatures, as long as they had the necessary supplies.

Unfortunately, by afternoon on the first day, many working parties found themselves running out of essential supplies. Sailors searching the ruins ran out of stretchers, and had to create their own out of pieces of scrap metal.[115] The rudimentary first aid station set up by the two Wellington Barracks corpsmen ceased giving care when they ran out of first aid supplies.[116] Some of the search parties dug in the wreckage with no tools at all.[117] Leaders were aware of this problem. On the first day, Colonel Thompson acted to find and bring essential supplies downtown, and stated his priorities

[113] MacMechan, 32.

[114] Chambers, 447.

[115] Kitz, 60.

[116] MacMechan, 32.

[117] Glasner, 63.

were “boots, blankets, picks, and shovels.”[118] The first request of the USCG *Morrill* was for “any linen that could be spared for use as bandages on shore.”[119] Lieutenant Colonel McKelvey Bell, the senior Canadian medical officer in Halifax, was also beginning to tackle the distribution problem. He ensured that his men distributed military medical supplies to care facilities and established local first aid stations in locations around the city.[120] Nonetheless, basic supplies for both initial rescuers and hospital workers were scarce for the first days.

The scattershot stretcher parties, overworked doctors, and dwindling supplies were apparent to military leaders the first afternoon. The hospitals were overcrowded, the police overworked, and there was no public safety committee to take charge.[121] Seeing the need for more cohesion, Halifax civilian and military leaders began to form committees to help organize a better response. Organization was an essential aspect of the transition from triage mode to ordered relief. More centralized leadership allowed the medical relief effort to become systematic and efficient.

There was no clear chain of command at first. Colonel Paul Weatherbe of the Royal Canadian Engineers formed the first committee to organize medical relief.[122] The first task they handled was the organization of doctors and nurses that were available to

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[118] MacMechan, 33.

[119] Logbook of the USCG *Morrill,* December 6 entry.

[120] Armstrong, 58.

[121] Kitz, 58.

[122] Murray, 234.

help. Hospitals, both those already existing and those that sprang up throughout the day, were desperately short of staff. Hours after the explosion, trains arrived from the countryside with medical aid. These trains brought numbers of doctors and nurses, all who needed to know where to go in the city.[123] They needed places to sleep when not rendering aid.[124] Supplies also needed to be distributed to first responders. Colonel Weatherbe organized dispensaries for first aid supplies "as close as possible to the devastated district."[125]

There was a near simultaneous effort by Lieutenant Colonel McKelvey Bell. His first efforts also focused on distribution of doctors, creation of hospitals, and allocation of supplies.[126] His work in Halifax is better known. This was largely because on December 8, he took on a much greater role. The continued arrival of help from the countryside, capped by the arrival of the Massachusetts State Guard on the morning of December 8, prompted the change.[127] Relief leaders needed to further increase the scale, organization, and centralization of the relief effort. Hospitals that sprang up in the first two days were disorganized. Doctors might normally separate patients by age, sex, and nature of injury,

[123] Ratshesky, 12.

[124] Murray, 234.

[125] Murray, 234.

[126] Armstrong, 57. Weatherbe's committee is not mentioned in much of the literature, but has emerged upon further study. Bell was certainly a much better historian as he appointed someone to keep records.

[127] Murray, 235.

but this was not the case.[128] Lieutenant Colonel Bell, with direction from more senior military and civilian leaders, created a strategy of centralized medical relief and focused on bringing order to the increasing chaos.

Bell's committee took over all medical relief duties. Bell and his immediate assistants took charge of the creation and inspection of the various hospitals and coordinated their response with Dartmouth medical relief.[129] Various relief organizations and units all reported to the medical relief committee, led by Lieutenant Colonel Bell.[130] Lieutenant Colonel Bell himself spent most of his time inspecting hospitals, with assistance from the recently arrived Red Cross.[131] His staff also took the lead in communicating with outside agencies to match incoming medical supplies with the needs of the Halifax medical relief effort.[132] As Bell organized his committee, massive amounts of aid arrived in all forms. The committees and volunteers had become overwhelmed, and piles of unnecessary supplies would not improve the situation. By taking charge of this function at the highest level, Bell determined what supplies rescuers needed, and ensured that arriving aid approximated those needs.

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[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Charles C. Carstens, "From the Ashes of Halifax: The Relief Work for the Blinded, the Maimed, and the Orphans," *The Survey for December 29, 1917* (1917): 360, accessed August 25, 2016, http://archive.org/details/fromashesofhalif0000ccca.

[131] Ratshesky, 16.

[132] Murray, 235.

Bell had a penchant for organization. In charge of the entire city's medical relief efforts, he helped create and appoint members to a multitude of subcommittees. The full list included committees concerned with transportation, supplies, finance, construction, housing, relief, medical, and warehousing.[133] Bell also appointed an official historian and created a subcommittee to keep track of statistics.[134] Chapter 4 covers the genesis of these committees, and the leadership contributions of Lieutenant Colonel Bell.

By December 8, two days after the explosion, relief workers were coming to the city in large numbers. Trains arrived full of donated food, clothing, and other medical supplies.[135] Fortunately for Halifax, the railroad had recently installed a secondary rail line into the city. The blast of the *Mont Blanc* destroyed much of the former main rail line. However, the new rail line did not reach into the city, and relief efforts had few options for local transportation. Soldiers needed vehicles to bring arriving doctors and nurses to hospitals, so they commandeered cars from civilians.[136] As hospitals grew in patients, staffing, and specialty, patients also needed transfer between hospitals for optimum care.[137] Ambulances were a rare asset, and mostly consisted of soldiers driving

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[133] Ratshesky, 12.

[134] Murray, 229, 235.

[135] Ratshesky, 12.

[136] Judith Dudar, "The Halifax Harbour Explosion: Fact, Fiction, and Focal Point," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 114.

[137] Lucy Wright, "Halifax Experiences, December 21, 1917-January 2, 1918," *Simmons Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1918): 4.

civilian vehicles.[138] The transportation committee assisted medical relief with all of these critical needs.[139]

The committee on supplies fulfilled two needs. First, it determined the efficient distribution of the incoming supplies with the help of the transportation committee. Second, it determined additional needed supplies, and transmitted those needs to the city, state, and federal governments of the United States and Canada, as well as civilian relief organizations.[140] This committee worked with the warehouse committee, which managed the storage of incoming supplies. In addition, the Red Cross worked with the committee on supplies to distribute basics to homeless Halifax families.[141]

Two groups needed assistance from the housing committee. Arriving relief workers needed a place to sleep. Despite "sending the members of our unit to different quarters of the city," Abraham C. Ratshesky, leader of the Massachusetts State Guard relief party, insisted that his people reconvene at night.[142] Arriving doctors and nurses were typically kept in private homes, and three American nurses stayed in the private residence of the governor of Nova Scotia.[143] Displaced citizens of Halifax also needed a place to stay. Many tried to leave the city, but found it impossible as none of the

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[138] Murray, 236.

[139] Wright, 6.

[140] Ratshesky, 16.

[141] Ratshesky, 12.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid., 13.

transportation networks were functioning normally.[144] Often these people, with nowhere else to go, showed up at the hospitals. It became the duty of the attending doctors and nurses to find a place for them until the housing committee could secure accommodations.[145]

The medical department was the primary focus of Lieutenant Colonel Bell's efforts as the head of Halifax medical relief. This was because Halifax did not have the capacity in hospital beds or medical staff to meet the scale of the disaster. In a city of fifty thousand people, nine thousand wounded needed care. Halifax was also where most Canadian soldiers injured in Europe spent their time convalescing. Before the explosion, Halifax hospitals already overflowed with patients due to the demands of war.[146] Medical staff organization was another difficult problem to solve. In some cases, such as the *Old Colony*, doctors stayed with the units with which they were familiar. In others, such as the Massachusetts State Guard, doctors and nurses split up on arrival. For the Massachusetts State Guard, when their own hospital was ready, they regrouped and staffed it themselves. Keeping medical workers on teams with whom they had experience increased efficiency. On the other hand, the first doctors to arrive on the scene were exhausted. Some performed surgeries for over twenty-four hours, and needed immediate relief.[147] Within the hospital environment, the medical relief committee needed to strike a

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[144] Whiteley, 94.

[145] Ratshesky, 21.

[146] MacMechan, 62.

[147] Tooke, 312.

balance between relieving overworked doctors and keeping medical teams together. This was most important early on, because by December 8, enough doctors and nurses had arrived to fully staff all hospitals.[148]

The creation of the American Bellevue Hospital, as it became known, earned special mention. On the morning of December 8, when the Massachusetts State Guard arrived, the Bellevue building was an officer's mess.[149] Deciding that the American arrivals should have their own dedicated hospital, Lieutenant Colonel Bell dispatched a team who worked with sailors from the *Old Colony* to convert the damaged Bellevue building. In what the Canadian premier called "a triumph of organizing ability," the American Bellevue Hospital took on sixty patients by the evening of December 8.[150] By the following midday, they had one hundred.

Haligonians and historians widely admired the example set by the Massachusetts State Guard and Red Cross. They were not a large group, and one hundred patients at the American Bellevue Hospital was a comparatively small effort. Canadian civilians and local military groups contributed more simply due to size. However, the impact of the Massachusetts State Guard was so widely and generously noted because of the quick nature of their response, the disaster management expertise they brought, and their assistance with future relief supplies. They set the example for well executed foreign humanitarian assistance.

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[148] Ibid., 319.

[149] Prince, 78.

[150] Ratshesky, 14.

Messages about a major disaster in Halifax raced around the northeastern United States and Canada, but with telegraph lines down, there were no details or further communications. In the fog of uncertainty, some organizations did not respond.[151] This was not the case for Massachusetts. Without further clarification of the disaster, the state organized a small contingent of guard doctors, nurses, and Red Cross officials.[152] They set off by train that evening and received only rumors from Halifax over the thirty-hour trip. The original thirty-three made space for other doctors and nurses who joined along the way.[153]

While the Massachusetts State Guard train only brought a few doctors, it brought outsize expertise on disaster management.[154] According to Abraham Ratshesky, the first thing their group did on arrival was meet with the leaders of the response—Lieutenant Governor McCallum Grant, General Benson, Admiral Chambers, and Lieutenant Colonel Bell.[155] In the next few days, there was a flurry of organization and the centralized

[151] William Buxton, "Private Wealth and Public Health: Rockefeller Philanthrophy and the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee/Health Commission," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 185. The Rockefeller Foundation received the same telegram but waited for clarification. Their desire for more information was a major reason their contribution was small.

[152] Ratshesky, 5.

[153] Ratshesky, 6.

[154] Carstens, 361.

[155] Ratshesky, 11.

coordination of relief fully began.[156] Chapter 4 covers the concept of organization, but it is no coincidence that the emergence of an efficient, thoughtful, centralized medical relief system correlated with the arrival of the Massachusetts State Guard.

The Massachusetts group also provided a crucial link for coordination of relief supplies from the United States. Before Halifax reestablished a regular telegraph link to the outside world, the guard heard rumors of a shortage of building materials.[157] Still on their special train towards Halifax, Ratshesky sent back word to send these supplies on following trains. Massachusetts also sent two ships, the *Northland* and the *Calvin Austin*, full of supplies to Halifax.[158] Local knowledge of exactly what Halifax needed helped ensure American aid efforts stocked these ships with the supplies most needed.

According to Ralph Bell, the Halifax Relief Commission secretary, the "Great commonwealth of Massachusetts deserves particular mention."[159] They were the first outside relief unit to arrive. As noted by the governor of Massachusetts, they received maximum support from the state, and added a significant amount of organizational expertise in addition to the small relief hospital they personally staffed.[160]

Early hospitals had every class of patient, but as the response moved away from triage in favor of longer-term medical care, varied patient statuses created inefficiencies.

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[156] Prince, 82-83.

[157] Ratshesky, 9.

[158] Ibid., 24-25.

[159] MacMechan, 104.

[160] Ratshesky, 27.

Bell and his staff instituted specialized hospitals to streamline care. They also increased safety with a contagious hospital, set up on December 10.[161] Later they established a women's hospital and a children's hospital. Once patients had more life-threatening injuries taken care of, organizing them allowed experts to work more efficiently. For instance, eye injuries were uniquely common in the Halifax.[162] Tooke was the first outside eye specialist to arrive, and recorded forty-eight major eye surgeries in the time he was at Camp Hill.[163] While there was not a special hospital for eye injuries, those that needed specialist care were saved for Tooke and similarly trained surgeons.[164] This helped streamline care for these types of injuries.

As specialized hospitals arose, and conditions improved throughout the city, patient numbers began to drop. Camp Hill hospital held five times its capacity at maximum.[165] By Tooke's departure ten days after the blast, it held only one hundred patients, which allowed it to re-admit convalescing soldiers.[166] The transportation committee brought patients who no longer needed full-time care to local homes. Nearby Nova Scotian towns also continued to absorb a significant share of injured Haligonians.

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[161] Ibid. 15.

[162] Tooke, 312. Many were standing in front of their windows watching the *Mont Blanc* burn when it exploded. Carstens, 360; he wrote that there were 400-500 people that totally lost their sight due to the explosion.

[163] Tooke, 313-316.

[164] Ibid., 319.

[165] MacMechan, 65.

[166] Tooke, 317.

A late and unenviable task taken on by the military was to provide for the dead. After the initial push for survivors, soldiers and sailors combed the wreckage for the deceased.[167] By the evening of December 7, soldiers established a morgue.[168] This mortuary became a central location for citizens to identify their family members.[169] Temporary morgues had sprung up quickly in the aftermath, but the military organization decided a single large morgue was a better option. Soldiers and volunteers labeled where they found the bodies and would not release them for burial without certain identification.[170] Military precision and organization was critical to properly care for the dead in such a large disaster. Civilian facilities played a part, but did not have the scale required to handle the large number of bodies.

At the morgue, and in all the military medical response, the key benefit was the scale of capabilities. Whether in recovery, hospital creation, transportation, or medical supplies, civilian organizations simply did not have the resources to cope. The scale of the medical problem was simply too big. Only military organizations could offer the resources to match the needs of Halifax. Scale also mattered within military organizations. Larger, more modern units had more embedded medical assets and generally provided a better emergency response. The military was uniquely suited to give medical care in the emergency period of relief, and was an essential contributor to

[167] MacMechan, 39.

[168] Prince, 78.

[169] Glasner, 118.

[170] Kitz, 105,107.

medical organization during the transition period. All disasters are local, and Halifax civilians were fortunate that so many soldiers and sailors were local.

CHAPTER 3

SECURITY ASSISTANCE

> This follows not only because of the imperturbability and the promptitude of reaction, of an army in crisis, but also because of the rapidity with which it can be mobilized, its value in preserving law and order, its authoritative control and power to punish, and because of the attending psychological effects of orderly bearing and coolness in a time of general chaos, bespeaking a care that is at once paternal and sympathetic.
>
> — Samuel Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change, Based upon a Sociological Study of the Halifax Disaster*

No relief effort, medical or otherwise, could have occurred without some sense of security in Halifax. There was none after the *Mont Blanc* exploded. Hallucinations, shock, fear, and confusion—citizens barely understood what happened, much less how to respond. At first, the military was susceptible to the same disorder. It was not clear to soldiers and sailors what the threat was, or what they should do in this situation for which they had not trained. Eventually, military leaders regained control of their troops, and shortly thereafter, effective control of Halifax. The military control provided security, which enabled the remainder of the relief effort to proceed smoothly.

Before relief workers completely established security, soldiers and sailors performed many acts of heroism in the face of the unknown. The explosion of the *Mont Blanc* created many fires. Homes and buildings were mostly wood, and when they collapsed onto their furnaces, they went up in flames. The Halifax fire department bore the brunt of fighting these small fires. However, because the fire on the *Mont Blanc* before the explosion set the first alarm, the first responders were pier side when the ship

exploded. The blast killed the chief of the fire department and destroyed the most modern firefighting equipment, which slowed the department's ability to respond.[171]

Firefighters simply contained many fires and allowed them to burn. Flammable houses in the dry weather were impossible to save, so this action ensured flames would not spread.[172] However, Halifax firefighters could not allow all fires to simply run their course. The *Mont Blanc* did not contain the only explosives in Halifax: several ammunition magazines were ensconced within the city. The explosion damaged one of these facilities, the Canadian Militia garrison magazine. Fires threatened the outskirts of the building. According to a Canadian soldier, "All the buildings in the vicinity were burning and, as the wreckage lying around the magazine would catch fire very easily, I decided to clear it away."[173]

That soldier was Lieutenant Charles A. McLennan, the hero of Wellington Barracks that day.[174] He gathered a small team of Canadian Army soldiers capable of assistance, only about fifteen of the one hundred who were in the square.[175] They first put out fires around the magazine, and then turned to the magazine itself. By this time a group of British sailors from the *Changuinola* arrived and began to help. The adjoining heater house, a small wooden structure that kept ammunition dry, had fires raging

[171] MacMechan, 39.

[172] Ibid., 40.

[173] Armstrong, 58.

[174] MacMechan, 29.

[175] Ibid.

inside.[176] McLennan turned a chemical extinguisher on the blaze, which eliminated it in a massive cloud of steam.[177]

The magazine fire attracted onlookers. Another Canadian soldier described a large crowd gathered around Wellington Barracks.[178] It was shortly after 10:00 a.m., about an hour after the *Mont Blanc* exploded, and relief efforts were getting underway. Rumors flew about further explosions as citizens speculated about the root cause of the blast. The whole city was on edge, and the real threat from the Wellington magazine stoked further fear.[179] The cloud of steam from the extinguished fire was too much for the panicked crowd outside the magazine. A Naval College cadet noted, "from the roof I could see the crowd, that had been on the street, running in every direction."[180]

Soldiers and sailors were not immune to the feeling of panic. McLennan and a few of his nearby assistants were the only ones to notice the serious fire inside the small heater house. The rest of the men under his control were busily clearing up burning debris around the outer area of the magazine.[181] They did not realize McLennan had just

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[176] Armstrong, 58. The purpose of the heater house is to keep moisture away from ammunition. It is basically a large furnace, and is situated adjacent to the actual ammunition storage for safety. Hot, dry air is pumped from the heater house to the ammunition storage area.

[177] MacMechan, 30.

[178] Armstrong, 59.

[179] Prince, 48.

[180] Armstrong, 59.

[181] Glasner, 67.

extinguished the blaze, and with the belief that the magazine had just caught fire, they too ran for their lives.

Nobody condemned the men who ran. Even McLennan acknowledged that their response was natural and expressed no blame.[182] Many ended up returning to the magazine to resume help. However, some contributed to further panic. Some men who fled Wellington magazine ran to the dockyard, where their exclamations caused naval work parties to scatter, or even jump in the water to protect themselves.[183] Injured Haligonians faced groups of soldiers running about and ordering everyone to depart the area.[184] Improperly clothed, injured citizens joined a disorderly exodus from the city.[185] Panic spread by military men heightened the hysteria and absorbed much of Halifax during the first morning.

The fire at the magazine was a real threat, and warranted some preparations in case it did explode.[186] At the dockyard, Captain Frederick Pasco and Captain Hose struggled to take these precautions while maintaining order after the reports of an

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[182] Armstrong, 60.

[183] Michael J. Bird, *The Town That Died: The True Story of the Greatest Man-made Explosion before Hiroshima* (Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1967), 103. Armstrong, 60 also discusses how panic spread to the dockyard.

[184] Glasner, 82-83.

[185] Ibid., 84.

[186] The experience of Halifax in 1917 contributed materially to safety procedures in munitions transport. Further explosives facilities would be located well away from any populated areas.

impending explosion.[187] Canadian doctor Frederick Tooke described "terror and panic on the part of the mob," which delayed the relief and probably resulted in more deaths.[188] Even after the initial panic wore down, for hours uniformed men went door to door to tell people to leave for open ground.[189] They even turned back volunteers arriving in the city to help.[190] There were no orders demanding this, and it seems men largely acted on hearsay and their own impressions.

The city government of Halifax lacked the manpower to maintain order.[191] The police department was understaffed, and the citizens of Halifax looked upon men in uniform as a source of authority. However, the military had no direct control over Halifax civilians. Military leaders did not declare martial law throughout the relief effort.[192] People naturally assumed that soldiers and sailors were in charge and were enhancing order. Some were, but many others were not. Reports of impending doom from scared military members exacerbated the general disorder. It was not until about 12:00 p.m., three hours after the explosion, that military leaders restored progress of relief from the threat of panic.

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[187] Armstrong, 60.

[188] Tooke, 311.

[189] Kitz, 54.

[190] MacMechan, 41.

[191] Glasner, 57.

[192] Kitz, 62-63. The military had some emergency powers by that afternoon but left civilians in overall control.

Rushed, panicked decision making was not confined to the Wellington Barracks magazine. In the dockyard, the blast badly damaged the *Calonne*. Rocks from the harbor bottom littered the deck and phosphorous fires constantly broke out.[193] The *Calonne* was carrying ammunition, but the type carried little risk of a large explosion as that of the *Mont Blanc*. Not knowing the low risk, the crowd at the docks cried to have her sunk. Admiral Chambers stated he "had indeed some trouble in preventing this absurd waste of a fine ship" and had her towed a few miles away from town and anchored.[194] On the north end of the dockyard was another magazine. Soldiers and sailors received an order to clear the explosives. They carried ammunition boxes to the shore, which was necessary; then dumped them into the water, which was not. Naval authorities later stopped this wasteful practice, instead having the boxes stacked on shore away from the fires.[195]

The *Picton* was moored at the wharves closest to the *Mont Blanc* at the time of the explosion. She also carried ammunition. Workers throughout the dockyard knew of her cargo, and when the burning *Mont Blanc* first drifted nearby, they quickly secured ports and hatches to prevent any fire from reaching the *Picton*.[196] Thanks to their heroism, the *Picton*, although heavily damaged, was not in danger of exploding herself. Naval parties

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[193] Chambers, 450. Ships used phosphorous charges to produce a smoke screen, a rudimentary defense for convoys. Broken out of its encasements, the type of phosphorous used on the *Calonne* burned on contact with air.

[194] Ibid.

[195] MacMechan, 41.

[196] Ibid., 26. Of the eighty men who secured the *Picton*, only ten survived.

who boarded her to gather the wounded after the explosion saw a safely secured cargo, and judged there to be little risk.[197] That afternoon, *Picton*'s agent coordinated several tugs to anchor her in the stream away from the fires on shore.[198]

Neither the *Picton* or the *Calonne* posed a risk of exploding like the *Mont Blanc*. However, the response to the perceived threat of each ship was very different. The *Picton* was first attended to by naval personnel who knew her cargo and understood that she posed no threat. At the dockyard just further south, cool heads did not always prevail, and the perceived danger almost overwhelmed authorities.[199] Loss of the inherent authority of incapacitated Captain Pasco probably contributed to the disorder.[200] Men unnecessarily dumping ammunition into the water meant fewer men available to fight fires or join search parties. Fear of further explosions, unchecked by authority, hampered the ability of soldiers and sailors to reasonably evaluate risk and perform more critical relief work. At Wellington Barracks and in the case of the *Calonne,* there was little evidence of command and control, except for McLennan's small group. With their chain of command unclear, soldiers and sailors responded to threats instinctively. Instinctive responses were often incorrect, but to Halifax civilians, the inherent authority of a man in uniform backed them up. The lack of calm heads and a firm chain of command resulted in increased terror among Haligonians and a slowdown of the relief effort.

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[197] MacMechan, 26.

[198] Bird, 97.

[199] Armstrong, 61.

[200] Captain Pasco was wounded in several places, but kept control of the dockyard for about two hours before turning over to his executive officer, Captain Hose.

Early in the day, the military contributed to disorder at the same time soldiers and sailors began to render aid. However, by midday, military authorities began to achieve a measure of control. Order returned. The confusion and panic that followed the explosion delayed the relief effort in the emergency period, and if it continued, it would have worsened the situation. By imposing order and ensuring physical security, soldiers and sailors helped the rest of the relief effort transition to a smoother operation.

General Benson, the senior Canadian Army officer in charge of Halifax, made his way into the devastated area about two hours after the explosion.[201] He had spent the morning directing the gathering of troops from surrounding areas.[202] Entering the most damaged areas, he witnessed McLennan's work at the magazine and the progress of the search parties. He recognized the need for security. In Halifax, only the military could provide the men needed to maintain order.

The explosion shattered glass, which meant stores and homes not destroyed outright were wide open. Benson had his men patrol critical areas such as the business district early in the day.[203] They acted as guards in sensitive devastated areas and patrolled the streets, some on horseback.[204] British Marines from the *Highflyer* landed to

[201] MacMechan, 31.

[202] Armstrong, 57.

[203] Ibid., 70.

[204] MacMechan, 34; Beed, 101. Beed wrote the only history that mentions the use of horses.

assist.[205] They carried blankets to give to those in need, and carried shovels to help dig in wreckage, but their primary duty was security. They needed to allay fears and ensure calm after the panic from earlier in the day.[206]

Authorities worried about looting because of the open and abandoned homes and stores. There were few reported cases despite the opportunities. The amount of military personnel in the disaster area probably discouraged potential looters, or, leadership's fear of criminality may have simply eclipsed the actuality of it. However, rumors flew. Journals, letters, and eyewitness accounts describe various levels of criminal behavior following the explosion.[207] A British sailor claimed to see the body of a looter hung as a warning.[208] Soldiers on patrol in the area were under orders to shoot criminals caught in the act, but there is no official record showing this ever happened.[209] While record keeping was not strict the first two days, a lack of permanent records indicates that looting was not significant after the explosion.

The belief that the explosion was a German attack, and the continued fear of further attack, had a more pernicious effect than the rumors of looting. There are eyewitness accounts of people with German sounding names "stoned in the streets or

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[205] Bird, 99. One of the Marines' other tasks was to round up sailors who had abandoned their posts after the blast.

[206] MacMechan, 33.

[207] Smyth, 102.

[208] Ibid., 103.

[209] Bird, 131.

chased by angry crowds."[210] Like looting reports, some embellishment may exist in these accounts. However, the negative reaction towards Germans was longer-lasting than accounts about confusion and disorder. A slogan of "Place the Blame" started by the *Halifax Herald* morphed into the "Hate the Hometown Hun" campaign.[211] Historians should not accept this as antiquated attitudes towards the aggressors of a years-long war. The fearmongering encouraged by local newspapers lasted from the day after the explosion through the later legal trials. Benson and many other officials reviled this sensationalism throughout the entire process of relief.[212]

In Camp Hill Hospital, an incident on the morning of December 12 further strengthened rumors of German involvement. A sailor from the *Imo* came to the hospital with non-life threatening injuries. Hospital workers were to monitor him for twenty-four hours, but he attempted to sneak out of the hospital later that day. The police stopped and searched him, and found letters written in what they believed was German.[213] It was all miscommunication. The sailor, and the language of his letter, was Norwegian.[214] He was an unfortunate victim of anti-German sentiment.

The measured response by military leaders toward theoretical German involvement probably helped prevent real problems for Haligonians of German descent.

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[210] Smyth, 103.

[211] Smyth, 103.

[212] Armstrong, 124.

[213] Ratshesky, 17.

[214] MacMechan, 143.

A strong military presence throughout the city discouraged mob justice. The few citizens reportedly smashing windows of German homes and shops were not brazen enough for more than these minor acts of vandalism. Military leaders were more circumspect than most in placing blame. When the police arrested sixteen German citizens on December 9 for no reason other than being German, the military ensured the release of all within a few days.[215]

Keeping all but rescue workers away from the most devastated area also helped keep German shops and homes safe. The military began to cordon off the area on the first afternoon, and kept the area completely closed off for weeks. Only those participating in the relief effort could enter. The highest levels of the relief committee chose to vet all would-be rescuers, and those rescuers needed to show passes to enter the area.[216] Even Admiral Chambers, visiting to inspect the ruined area six days after the explosion, needed permission.[217] The uniform of an admiral was not enough to secure his entrance, and his pass from General Benson received extreme scrutiny from the Canadian Army guards.[218]

In his report, Chambers is droll in his remarks about the guards' efficiency, probably because one of the early tasks was the organization of just such a force around the dockyard.[219] Like General Benson's troops patrolling the business district,

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[215] Kitz, 79.

[216] Wright, 7.

[217] Chambers, 454.

[218] Ibid., 455.

[219] Ibid., 450.

establishing some basic order and security helped aid the work of the local rescue effort. As the medical relief organized comprehensive searches of the wreckage, somebody needed to keep away distractions. For instance, the blast left many people shell-shocked, and they wandered about and occasionally caused disturbances.[220]

Even those with all their facilities were distracted from an organized rescue effort. At Camp Hill Hospital, citizens searched among the injured for lost family members.[221] This slowed medical workers. Search parties could not handle such a distraction. A soldier kept one man out of the devastated area, saying, "if we let in everyone who had family in the area it would impede the search and rescue effort."[222] This interaction occurred the afternoon after the explosion. Buildings were still on fire, and those that were not might collapse at any time. There was no more threat of a second explosion, nor were there rumors anymore, but the devastated area was no place for unprepared volunteers.

There is a point at which more help is simply more burdensome than beneficial. In the case of searching the devastated area for injured, the soldiers and sailors executing this operation reached this peak on the first day. Nonetheless, additional search teams probably would have sped up the search. After all, it was several days before the military finished the search for survivors and two days before they began to remove the dead. The problem was the inability to provide safety, security, and resources to additional workers.

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[220] Ratshesky, 20.

[221] Glasner, 103.

[222] Ibid., 97.

A new volunteer body meant another shovel to supply, another mouth to feed, and another bed occupied. Halifax was running short of them all. While additional volunteers might work the wreckage faster, the rest of the rescue infrastructure would not support this. Additional volunteers might be untrained or lack the teamwork abilities of the soldiers and sailors. If the military was too cautious by not allowing more volunteer workers, opinions of those present do not reflect that. Sociologist Samuel Prince points to Halifax as the reason disaster relief should rely on professionals instead of volunteers.[223]

Keeping out excess volunteers was not just a local problem for the cordoned-off area. Relief parties started pouring in from the countryside right away, and from outside the country on December 8. There was more to do when they arrived, but there was such a shortage of accommodation that relief commission authorities requested that volunteer workers cease traveling to Halifax.[224] Unskilled volunteers would consume more resources than they could contribute. Professional relief operations such as the Massachusetts State Guard acknowledge this reality. Abraham Ratshesky reported that as their train wound its way towards Halifax, many people asked to come on board to assist. The only ones allowed onboard were doctors and nurses.[225] With the same mentality, Canadian military authorities in Ottawa held off immediately sending additional

[223] Prince, 80.

[224] MacMechan, 35.

[225] Ratshesky, 6-7.

personnel. Later, with more information from Benson, they sent doctors, nurses, and personnel trained in construction.[226]

Obviously, the leadership was struggling to maintain order with the resources Halifax already had. An ordered relief effort was more important than a larger one. Part of securing order was keeping people out of the devastated area so the teams already at work could do their job unimpeded. Another part was establishing a chain of command and structure of organization. Chapter 4 covers the details, but the first meeting between Halifax leaders gave General Benson greater control over the relief operation, which allowed him greater leverage to ensure order and security throughout the city.[227]

The afternoon meeting confirmed the primacy of the military as the lead organizer of relief. The military patrols established order and security before the meeting took place. The outsize influence of soldiers and sailors made both crowds and politicians feel safe.[228] This effectively permitted the military to continue controlling access to the devastated area, commandeering cars, and otherwise running the relief effort. Colonel Thompson told soldiers, "whenever you want a car or team, stop and take it," before the transportation committee adopted that as official policy.[229]

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[226] Armstrong, 87.

[227] MacMechan, 50.

[228] Prince, 42.

[229] Beed, 89.

Firm control by the military enhanced the relief effort, but not always without cost. Some citizens protested the loss of their vehicles, and were simply overpowered.[230] However, most willingly gave up their cars, and some commandeered cars were actually driven by their owners.[231] They simply went where the military ordered them to, usually to and from hospitals. Traffic packed the whole city, and in the devastated area, debris often completely blocked the roads.[232] Military control of vehicle traffic helped keep essential travel lanes clear. Taking vehicles off the road to act in service of the military aided the medical relief effort by providing ambulances, and also kept the curious and the uninvolved from creating further traffic jams.

Canadian, British, and American soldiers and sailors were hard at work by the afternoon. Besides providing medical care, security, transportation, and organization to the relief effort, some still manned their normal posts.[233] This was all done with fewer men, because many soldiers and sailors were injured or dead from the blast. War took a backseat for the moment as the authorities put everything on the table to maintain order. Every available man and woman capable of contributing to the relief effort was doing so. The disaster was not over by the first afternoon, but the men were running out of steam and General Benson was running out of men.

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[230] Dudar, 114. One unfortunate delivery vehicle driver was knocked cold by a soldier's fist for refusing to give up his delivery carriage.

[231] MacMechan, 61.

[232] Chambers, 451.

[233] MacMechan, 34.

The afternoon arrival of the *Tacoma* and the *Von Steuben* was a great relief for General Benson and Admiral Chambers. Between them they brought over 1,200 desperately needed men.[234] It was lucky they were close enough to see and hear the blast. Lookouts on both ships reported feeling the explosive pressure from fifty-two miles out to sea, and saw smoke rising from the direction of Halifax.[235] With *Tacoma* in the lead, the two American cruisers steamed towards the black cloud.

Captain Powers Symington was the senior captain on the smaller but more modern *Tacoma*. When the two ships arrived at about 2:00 p.m., he and Commander Stanford Moses of the *Von Steuben* immediately entered town in order to render assistance.[236] One of the first things they saw was the work carried out on the *Old Colony*, so Captain Symington sent his ship's doctor to help stand up their hospital.[237] After that, it took him more than an hour before he managed to find General Benson to determine how he could help.[238]

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[234] Armstrong, 66-67. The *Tacoma* held 309 and the *Von Steuben* held 975.

[235] Logbook of the USS *Tacoma*, January 1, 1917-December 31,1917, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Entry 118-G-V Box 1, Record Group 24, National Archives Building, Washington, DC, December 6 entry.

[236] Logbook of the USS *Tacoma*, December 6 entry; Logbook of the USS *Von Steuben*, June 9, 1917-December 31,1917, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Entry 118-G-V Box 1, Record Group 24, National Archives Building, Washington, DC, December 6 entry.

[237] Joseph Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance: The Maritime Aspects of the 1917 Halifax Explosion," *The Northern Mariner* 10, no. 4 (October 2000): 44.

[238] Armstrong, 70. Symington had found Pasco in the dockyard, but received no clear direction from the incapacitated Canadian captain. Not until after the 3:00 p.m. meeting at city hall did he find Chambers, who brought him to Benson.

General Benson's troops were exhausted. By the afternoon, he and adjutant Colonel Thompson were struggling to find men to act as guards through the night.[239] He seized the opportunity provided by Captain Symington and asked him to provide men to patrol the business district at night.[240] Every evening from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m., men from the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* guarded the streets of the devastated area.[241] Canadian forces could get much needed rest.

In addition to sailors, there were roughly five thousand soldiers in Halifax on December 6.[242] Loss of life and the myriad tasks of the day meant that General Benson still did not have enough. His men would have muddled through the next few nights without the additional American sailors. General Benson and other leaders were in a difficult situation. They could not anticipate, in the hectic morning hours after the blast, that the military would need to furnish hundreds of men for citywide patrols. Neither could they pull men away from critical relief work to rest. Halifax forces were unprepared for twenty-four hour relief operations, and the arrival of American sailors was a lucky break.

The sailors on the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* were also lucky to arrive at a time when Halifax relief leadership was becoming organized. They were a most welcome addition because they arrived with their own accommodations and they would not rely on

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[239] MacMechan, 34.

[240] Ibid.

[241] Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 45.

[242] Armstrong, 11.

the relief commission for food and supplies. They arrived at an opportune time to offer help without adding to the demands of the relief effort. Because of this, they garnered an overwhelmingly positive reception without having to get involved in the harsh details of managing a disaster. During their stay, they mostly kept to nighttime patrols. In addition, medical personnel helped on the *Old Colony*, and they provided some help with construction. Some sailors from the *Tacoma* spent the first two days boarding up broken windows, and some from the *Von Steuben* built barracks.[243]

It was good they, and many other soldiers and sailors, spent the time and effort to seal up drafty, windowless buildings. Halifax lacked shelter and accommodation, and sealing windows was a simple fix. Clear, cold weather on December 6 gave way to a blizzard on December 7 that brought sixteen inches of snow.[244] Blinding snow and enormous snowdrifts made rescue work that much more difficult, but troops carried on throughout the day.[245]

The blizzard accentuated the need to restore services to the streets of Halifax. Without gas, electricity, telephone, and other basic utilities, Halifax could easily slip back into disorder. Except for the instances of fixing buildings for shelter, the military did not take a direct role in early reconstruction or restoration of services. However, telegraph lines and streetlights worked by the end of December 6, telephone lines by December 7,

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[243] Logbook of the USS *Von Steuben*, December 8 entry; Whiteley, 95. The Whiteley article discusses the positive perceptions Haligonians had of the American construction assistance.

[244] Prince, 65. Light snow began around 9:00 a.m. and most snow fell in the afternoon and early evening, with flurries until the next morning.

[245] Chambers, 453.

and gas service by December 9.[246] The respective utility companies, not the military, restored these services. This is not to say the military was not important. The security framework the military provided allowed businesses and civilians to fulfill the roles in which they had expertise.[247]

The military security framework also gave smaller businesses the chance to contribute to the relief effort. A local tarpaper manufacturer approached Colonel Thompson. He proposed that the military commandeer his supply in order to distribute it equitably among any Haligonians who needed it.[248] Colonel Thompson ecstatically agreed. Profiteering was their concern: the manufacturer worried that an unscrupulous buyer would purchase his entire supply, and resell it for a significant markup. Not all tradesmen and business owners were as generous as this manufacturer. Profiteering is common following major emergencies, and reportedly budded in Halifax. However, military pressure cut short any exorbitant price gouging.[249]

Allowing business to focus on reconstruction, and the military to focus on security and medical relief, allowed military leaders' thoughts to return to the ongoing war effort. This was mostly a naval concern. Halifax's primary importance to World War One was as a staging base for convoys. Admiral Chambers' actions on December 6 show this concern: inspect the convoy ships, cable the British admiralty, and request of Captain

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[246] Armstrong, 71; Prince, 72.

[247] Prince, 69-70.

[248] MacMechan, 33. Tar paper, a roofing material, is a useful waterproof insulator, and is easily installed over empty window frames.

[249] Prince, 51.

Hose that he have the narrows sounded.[250] After this, Admiral Chambers spent the next several days concerned entirely with the relief effort. On December 8, contingent with the centralized organization of relief, he found the time to inspect some areas of the dockyard.[251] Finding many essential facilities intact, and the harbor clear, he began to aid convoy preparations. The convoy of thirty-four ships originally scheduled for December 7 departed on December 12, and Halifax slowly resumed its role as a critical convoy way station.[252]

Canadian military forces, Army and Navy, largely operated as a garrison for the town. Their mission was to protect it and the soldiers coming to and from Europe. The relief effort fit their mission of protecting the town. The threat they faced was disorder and death within Halifax. They did not have the same external war concerns that the British and American ships had. Authorities only diverted one returning ship of injured Canadian soldiers, due a few days after the explosion. By that time the Canadian military in Ottawa arranged for staff to meet it in New York and bring these soldiers home.[253] Canadian soldiers and sailors concentrated solely on rescue efforts for their city.

Foreign forces stationed in Halifax removed themselves from the relief effort when conditions allowed. They were stationed in Canada because of the war, and being away from home meant the status of the conflict was foremost on their minds. It would

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[250] Chambers, 447-448, 450. Chambers' first cable stated that Halifax would be "out of action for some time."

[251] Ibid., 454.

[252] Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 46.

[253] Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 46.

be untrue to say that they had less of a desire to help. They simply and smartly allowed the units who called Canada home to take the primary relief role.[254] Once they were no longer needed, they concentrated on the larger mission of winning World War One.

As conditions improved, civilians began to take a greater role in maintaining order. On December 11, the Halifax Relief Committee split the guard duties of Halifax into north and south, and appointed the police department to the southern half.[255] After the military provided all the security for five days, they had the situation under control and could begin to hand over duties to civilian agencies. The civilian police department could not establish order as quickly or as completely as soldiers and sailors did, but they could maintain it when the military left

The *Mont Blanc* did not just demolish Halifax lives and buildings; it damaged the Halifax government and regulatory systems. Citizens were in shock. Normal activities stopped functioning.[256] The explosion caused the loss of many lives and homes, but disorder and confusion did not consume Halifax. It did not happen because the military established, and kept, order and security for the citizens of Halifax until normal government services resumed.

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[254] Ratshesky, 17. The Massachusetts State Guard is an excellent example of this mentality. Ratshesky describes the arrival of capable, civilian, professional help and is eager to turn over the relief effort. This occurred on December 12, when his unit had only been in Halifax for four days.

[255] Halifax Archives, "Summary of Halifax City Council discussions related to the Halifax Explosion," Halifax Regional Municipality, accessed February 9, 2017, http://halifax.ca/Archives/explosioninformation.php#SummaryofCityCountildiscussions.

[256] Prince, 31.

It is important and difficult to discuss how the military contributed to disorder and confusion in the first few hours. Historian Archibald MacMechan, who was present at the explosion, wrote, "the 'second alarm,' as it has been called, must be regarded as a second disaster."[257] Even as some soldiers and sailors heroically fought fires, others spread unsubstantiated rumors that caused further loss of life. As it happens, military personnel are people, and thus susceptible to the same inclinations to panic. However, the military could recover quickly. Once the initial shock wore off, cool heads and professional leadership brought cohesion to the military response. Once the military engaged in a cohesive, organized response, the citizens of Halifax lost their fear and turned to the task of rebuilding their ruined town.

[257] MacMechan, 42.

CHAPTER 4

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

> Gradually order and regulation began to appear, immediate wants having been cared for. The personnel of the committees having been selected with great care, with the assistance of your representatives work proceed until such time as we felt that the citizens of Halifax were able to carry on the work. The American Hospital was turned over to another unit and we gradually withdrew from the committee, leaving the citizens in charge.
>
> — Abraham C. Ratshesky, *Report of the Halifax Relief Expedition December 6 to 15, 1917*

When Captain Powers Symington of the USS *Tacoma* arrived in Halifax, he immediately set out to find work for his men. He first sought the advice of Halifax military leaders. He visited the HMS *Highflyer* in search of the senior naval officer afloat.[258] The British told him that the Royal Canadian Navy was in charge, and directed him to the dockyard. He found injured Captain Pasco, who had already given up command to Captain Hose.[259] After sending medical officers to help on the *Old Colony*, he resumed his search for guidance, now looking for the U.S. consul general.[260] An hour after he first landed, he found Admiral Chambers, who explained that as he oversaw Halifax convoy operations, he did not feel authorized to give orders to the American Navy. Admiral Chambers did rescue the confused captain by bringing him to General Benson, who finally gave needed direction.[261]

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[258] Armstrong, 67.

[259] Ibid., 68. It does not seem that Captain Symington met Captain Hose.

[260] Ibid., 70.

[261] Chambers, 452.

A study of the Halifax relief effort gives the researcher the same initial frustration that Captain Symington probably experienced in his search for who was in charge. Halifax lacked a disaster plan, so local leadership acted without clear guidance.[262] Relief did not start out well organized. There was duplication of effort in military and civilian leadership roles. Foreign organizations, from locally based military units to foreign military and civilian groups, contributed their own personnel. Sometimes these outside groups used different methods of relief and chains of command. They were only reluctantly subservient to Halifax relief leadership. It was not even clear whether the military or civilians ran the relief.[263] It took time for Halifax leaders to clean up these inconsistencies.

Military leadership contributed immensely to the organizational efforts, especially at first. Slowly but surely, Halifax civilian leaders gained more control of the operation within their city. Those with prior experience in disaster relief helped set policies and standards. Eventually, the Halifax Relief Committee ran a centralized, efficient operation that restored Halifax to a fully functioning wartime port. The military continued to assist, and service members staffed the relief organization at many levels.

Organization during the emergency period of relief was at the small unit level. McLennan organized the firefight at the Wellington Barracks. Captain Hines of the *Old Colony* placed his ship into service.[264] Various units organized search parties and began

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[262] Kitz, 58.

[263] Prince, 101-102.

[264] Chambers, 452.

medical relief. This showed initiative, but was not systematic. It was not organized or efficient at scale. Search parties covered the same area twice or more. Rescuers brought injured to defunct hospitals such as Rockhead, or overburdened hospitals such as Camp Hill. Supplies dwindled, causing some first responders to cease their work.[265] Without centralized control of the relief operation, smaller units found themselves increasingly incapable of rendering aid.

The spirit of centralized control arose at Halifax City Hall. The mayor of Halifax was out of the city; his deputy Henry Colewell filled the role.[266] Colewell, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia McCallum Grant, and ex-mayor of Halifax Robert MacIlreith, met with as many local leaders as they could gather and began to formulate a plan. Their efforts were delayed. Shortly after Colewell arrived at city hall, a soldier warned the occupants about an imminent second explosion.[267] They cleared the building, but only went a few blocks before they decided to take their chances and return. Their first meeting, at about 11:30 a.m., decided upon a central executive committee with five subcommittees.[268]

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[265] Bird, 107.

[266] MacMechan, 50.

[267] Ibid., 51.

[268] Russel Dynes and Enrico L. Quarantelli, "The Place of the Explosion in the History of Disaster Research: The Work of Samuel H. Prince," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 60.

The purpose of this first meeting was to identify the necessary subcommittees, not to fully staff them. Those five subcommittees were transportation, food distribution, shelter, mortuary, and financial affairs. At the suggestion of the executives, Colonel Weatherbe formed a medical relief committee.[269] Lieutenant Governor Grant led the central executive committee. He called for a later meeting at 3:00 p.m. that would involve military leaders General Benson and Admiral Chambers.

The civilian system established centralized relief as a concept, which mirrored the military relief organization. There was parallel action and decision-making. For instance, through Lieutenant Governor Grant, the transportation committee authorized Halifax police to commandeer automobiles.[270] The military was already doing this. Colonel Weatherbe's medical relief committee, under the civilian leaders, organized doctor registration and distribution of medical supplies; the military organized their own medical services and logistics via Lieutenant Colonel McKelvey Bell.[271] Colonel Weatherbe and Lieutenant Colonel Bell accomplished many of the same tasks independently of each other. It is difficult to determine how much the duplication of effort impacted efficiency. Most historians only note that Lieutenant Colonel Bell's committee eventually subsumed Colonel Weatherbe's, putting medical relief under complete military control.[272]

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[269] Murray, 234.

[270] MacMechan, 54.

[271] Armstrong, 58, 69.

[272] MacMechan, 54; Murray, 234. Colonel Weatherbe was a member of the Royal Canadian Engineers and volunteered his services to leaders at city hall, while Lieutenant Colonel Bell worked for General Benson. MacMechan and Murray are the only historians

The 3:00 p.m. executive committee meeting established the military as the primary organization to render aid. Canadian forces had already assumed de facto emergency powers in the city. Historian Janet Kitz describes them "acting as police, rescue workers, guards, and transport controllers."[273] The civilian relief committees continued planning, but the largest contributing organization was under the control of General Benson. Soldiers and sailors led most of medical relief and controlled access to devastated areas. While purportedly under civilian control of the executive relief committee, the military was largely left to its own devices.

There is dispute about how much civilian efforts contributed to the organization of the Halifax military response. For instance, General Benson stated, "the citizens did not organize for systematic relief till Sunday the 9th."[274] Admiral Chambers wrote of the 3:00 p.m. meeting that, "I left the building with the impression that order was already beginning to arise out of the chaos, and what could be done would be done."[275] The two military leaders had a distinctly different view of progress made at the same afternoon meeting. General Benson may have felt that his forces were bearing the brunt of the relief effort, which they were, and that early civilian actions were unimportant to his troops. However, the initial organization from city hall would become increasingly important when relief transitioned to civilian control.

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who devote significant discussion to Colonel Weatherbe. His committee earns little to no mention elsewhere.

[273] Kitz, 62.

[274] Armstrong, 69.

[275] Chambers, 451.

Civilian leaders were organizing as best they could, but the military had a natural head start. Soldiers and sailors had an established chain of command.[276] A British naval officer co-opted a leaderless group of soldiers who happened by his team of sailors.[277] The nature of military authority made this type of command and control easy. The military did not have to create committees or assign roles for their leaders. There was no deliberation on who would lead a military relief committee because General Benson was the ranking Canadian officer. This allowed for rapidity of organization that civilian leaders could not match. The early civilian blessing of military actions also gave military leaders carte blanche to continue controlling relief via their own chains of command.

In addition to rapid organization, the military gets high praise for its contributions to medical care. The military's outsize role in controlling devastated areas and emergency hospitals probably gave historians an outsize perception of the total military contribution. Soldiers and sailors did perform heroic acts, coordinate medical care, and establish systems of medical relief.[278] However, about half of the physicians involved were civilian, and they performed heroic feats of stamina when they cared for the injured.[279] Despite similar numbers, the military role is better known. Many local doctors operated

[276] Armstrong, 69.

[277] Bird, 101.

[278] Armstrong, 97-98.

[279] Murray, 231. The chart of doctors was first compiled December 18.

out of their own homes, in the background of the relief effort.[280] Out of the spotlight, they are sometimes not given the same credit for their work.

The military also receives high praise for bringing organization to the relief effort. Like medical care, civilian organization efforts appear eclipsed by military efforts, especially early in the relief effort. The military kept better records during the explosion and service members wrote widely about their experiences. Soldiers and sailors immediately took charge of medical care, transportation, distribution of food, and allocation of supplies because they were the only organization that could at the time.[281] However, the military objective was not to control city operations in Halifax for any length of time. Foreign leaders wanted to return to the war, and Canadian units could not fulfill all their wartime duties when occupied with relief.[282] Despite this, military leaders would only hand over control when civilian leaders were capable of assuming it. Civilian groups simply needed a little extra time to organize.

The workings of early committee members were critical to later civilian relief efforts. At some point, the transportation committee would not rely on the military to commandeer cars and transport patients. The infrastructure they developed was in place when the military gave up that task. Finance, a minor concern for a military operation, was necessary for civilian organizations to fund a relief effort. The finance committee established a credit line the first day, and later controlled management of the many

[280] Beed, 44.

[281] Prince, 60.

[282] Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 45-46.

donations.[283] A legal basis for commandeering equipment and a ready supply of money were not critical for the military response. They were critical for the civilian response. This shows how the military can be a critical asset in an emergency situation that requires a quick organized response. Second, it shows how a modicum of early civilian organizational effort enables later assumption of control. Without a system of centralized control, and without committees ready to assume their duties, civilian leaders could not properly take over the military operation. By staying abreast of military developments and making their own significant contributions to relief organization, civilians leaders were ready to take the baton.

The early chain of command between military and civilian organizations may have been confusing, but it was not conflicted. There were no fights about jurisdiction. There was so much to do, and so much shared danger, that leadership worked towards the same goals.[284] There are no apparent disputes over control between military and civilian organizations.

This was also true within the military chain of command, which as Captain Symington saw, was just as muddled. The sharing of duties between Admiral Chambers and Captain Hose, the Canadian second-in-command, is typical of how various military organizations interacted. Admiral Chambers, the highest-ranking British Naval officer permanently stationed in Halifax, was in charge of arranging convoys and escorts.[285]

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[283] MacMechan, 51.

[284] Prince, 64.

[285] Armstrong, 63. Admiral Le Marchant was the senior admiral, but he was scheduled to depart with the next convoy. Admiral Chambers was the local expert, although he had only been in Halifax a few weeks, so Admiral Le Marchant took a

Captain Hose was acting as the superintendent of the dockyard and the head of Halifax Royal Canadian Naval forces.[286] Upon meeting, the two men determined that Admiral Chambers would "deal generally with the situation from a naval point of view," which meant organizing naval search parties and security patrols.[287] Thus, Admiral Chambers represented both the British and Canadian navies when he met with General Benson. Admiral Chambers asked Captain Hose to sound the narrows, critical knowledge for an upcoming convoy.[288] They combined and reallocated their duties between themselves.

These two men graciously helped each other with no thought of whether they were intruding on each other's authority. For all organizations occupied with relief; this manner of mutual assistance was the feeling of the day.[289] They were also deferential to each other's source of authority, and to the military chain of command. For instance, Captain Hose asked Admiral Chambers to take the lead for the port reconstruction committee, giving the Admiral decision-making authority for Canadian territory. Before agreeing to take the role, Admiral Chambers consulted both Lieutenant Governor Grant and General Benson.[290]

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backseat to any control of Halifax relief operations. Admiral Chambers did consult with Le Marchant on many decisions.

[286] Bird, 94.

[287] Chambers, 450-451.

[288] Armstrong, 66.

[289] Prince, 67-68.

[290] Chambers, 453.

General Benson was in charge of the overall military operation. As the highest ranking Canadian officer in Halifax, duties of organizing the military relief fell solely on him. General Benson had many resources and a ready organization, but the undertaking was enormous. He needed a cohesive team of subordinates that he could trust to take their own initiative. The actions of Admiral Chambers and Captain Hose in determining their own roles epitomized what General Benson needed for effective relief and reconstruction. These two were by no means the only military officers or civilian leaders who took such effective individual initiative towards organizing relief. Adjutant Colonel Thompson dispatched men before he consulted with General Benson.[291] U.S. Navy liaison officer Captain Hines, on his own initiative, used the *Old Colony*'s sailors and supplies to augment nearby emergency hospitals.[292] Military initiative towards organizing relief was in good supply, and General Benson trusted his subordinates to carry it out.

General Benson received the same trust from higher military headquarters. The head of all Canadian forces in Ottawa did not micro-manage and allowed General Benson full control of the situation.[293] Canadian military authorities requested updates and asked if they could assist, but sent no orders or troops until requested. General Benson was not a disaster management expert, but he had local expertise and a handle on the situation. Detailed directions from far-away headquarters would not help him.

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[291] MacMechan, 50.

[292] Chambers, 452.

[293] Armstrong, 87.

Other military units involved also deferred to General Benson as the military leader of relief. When Admiral Chambers met Captain Symington of the *Tacoma,* he brought him to General Benson.[294] Admiral Chambers might have simply asked the American captain to help overwhelmed British and Canadian Naval forces. The admiral had just come from the afternoon meeting, and was certainly aware of the huge task facing General Benson as head of military relief.[295] He decided that a higher level of command should determine the best use of the American personnel.

Captain Symington also did an admirable job walking the fine line between taking initiative and consulting with higher authority. Before he could find any local leaders, he sent his ship's medical officer to assist the *Old Colony*. Yet, he sought further guidance from the commanders in charge before landing any other American sailors.[296] Like many of his military peers, he balanced initiative with respect for the chain of command. He took the initiative by sending his medical officer to a clearly understaffed facility. By seeking direction before landing a large party of sailors, he ensured that the efforts of his men would go to where they would be most useful.

This deference was particularly important for foreign units that took part in the relief effort. Admiral Chambers acknowledged that he was in an awkward position by taking charge of Canadian naval relief efforts. By right, Captain Hose would lead this.[297]

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[294] Chambers, 452.

[295] MacMechan, 34.

[296] Armstrong, 68.

[297] Chambers, 450.

Admiral Chambers said he "was careful, both at the time and later, to state that he was acting 'at the request of the Captain Superintendent'."[298] It was easier for Captain Symington because he was never in charge of foreign troops. He provided manpower for General Benson, and organized his men as requested, but did not take on any further coordination duties.[299]

Every foreign commander acknowledged the delicacy of providing forces responsible for controlling a town in which they were guests. The need for delicacy was clear. An uninvolved civilian who had their car commandeered by a uniformed fellow citizen might be unhappy, but would be apoplectic if that uniform was foreign. A Canadian soldier who shot a looter, as orders dictated, might engender a different response than a foreign sailor who took the same action.[300] A foreign officer may have faced backlash from Haligonians in ordering a civilian business to donate their stock to the relief effort, but Canadian officers had little difficulty.[301]

One conclusion is that foreign forces are well suited to providing medical aid and reconstruction manpower, and less suited to local leadership and law enforcement. The sailors from the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* happened to adhere to this. In addition to their nighttime security patrols, they gave medical aid and put up shelters.[302] From a security

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[298] Armstrong, 91.

[299] Ibid., 93.

[300] Smyth, 102.

[301] MacMechan, 33.

[302] Armstrong, 93.

standpoint, Halifax was quiet the first evening when they took to the streets. There is no indication they were involved in commandeering anything. Had there been serious enforcement action by the Americans, they might not have garnered such overwhelmingly positive reviews of their role in the Halifax relief effort.

Haligonians describe American units as a godsend, valuable, essential.[303] Partly this was because the roles they took in the disaster were the most positive aspects of the relief effort. Commandeering a car is a negative action while offering medical care is positive. In the case of the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben*, they took no jobs that might have gained suspicion. Also, they were subservient to Halifax military leadership, which left a good impression on both military commanders and citizens of Halifax. Bureaucratic tangles or rough treatment of survivors were not characteristics of the relief effort, but if they were, the American units were not involved. They were only involved in the aspects of relief that made improvements in the lives of Haligonians, and earned good press because of it. Citizens would judge any inefficiencies of the relief effort against its leaders, and not the American units that came only to provide help.

The arrival of the Massachusetts State Guard was well received, especially by Halifax newspapers.[304] The civilian leaders of relief committees also lauded the arrival of this foreign aid. Ralph Bell, the secretary of the later Relief Commission, wrote, "they had landed in Halifax a special train bringing nurses, doctors, and hospital equipment

[303] Armstrong, 92; MacMechan, 34.

[304] Armstrong, 96.

galore."[305] The warm reception of the Americans resulted in some grumbling from Lieutenant Colonel Bell. He took care to point out, accurately, that the Massachusetts State Guard did not bring enough people or medical equipment to staff an entire hospital by themselves.[306] He resented the positive press toward the American unit because Canadian forces were contributing the clear majority of the relief personnel. Local doctors noted this as well. In a later letter to the *Halifax Herald* a group of Halifax doctors wrote: "It is therefore clear that the Halifax doctors, instead of helping materially with the wounded, virtually performed all the vast work there was to be done, with the help of their brethren from outside [nearby towns], before the American surgeons had time to arrive on scene."[307] Both the Halifax medical community and Lieutenant Colonel Bell gave credit to the Massachusetts forces for their generous efforts, but exhibited some resentment at their heroes' welcome.

The resentment partly sprang from a misconception of what the arriving American unit contributed to the relief effort. Lauded for their efforts to provide medical relief and their quick response, they arrived too late to make a significant impact on emergency medical care.[308] While the unit did bring medical assistance and supplies, the greatest asset of the Massachusetts State Guard was disaster expertise. Abraham Ratshesky brought knowledgeable leaders who led prior relief efforts after fires in

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[305] MacMechan, 104. Note that the Halifax Relief Commission, which came later, is not the same as the Halifax Relief Committee. The commission formed much later.

[306] Armstrong, 97.

[307] Murray, 238.

[308] Tooke, 319.

Chelsea and Salem in Massachusetts. However, Ratshesky also knew that applying their knowledge to the management of the relief effort would need a careful hand. The relief committee was already managing the response. Although stressed, its leaders would not kindly take instruction from a foreign unit that just arrived. Ratshesky said that his team must not "appear as intruders" and should delicately approach any advisory role.[309]

Ratshesky was careful to state in his report that any advice was given as a suggestion.[310] However, the unit still met difficulties. One of the suggestions was to send medical staff house-to-house to find injured people who sheltered in place rather than seek help, either due to lack of proper clothing or unawareness about the availability of care.[311] It was an astute suggestion, but American medical staff conducted the search. Unfortunately, this operation led to some resentment against the strangers.[312] Why were these foreign officials forcing them out of their shelter? Despite their best intentions, it was hard to avoid citizens' natural suspicion of foreign militaries operating on their own soil, even with such a friendly alliance between the United States and Canada.

Deferential as they were, the Massachusetts State Guard catalyzed a major change in the organization of Halifax relief. Their arrival coincided with a significant move

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[309] Ratshesky, 11.

[310] Ibid., 13.

[311] Ibid., 15.

[312] Joseph Scanlon and Gillian Osborne, "More Source than Influence: Johnstone's Contribution to Prince's Dissertation," in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University, 1994), 78.

towards centralization. Current relief leaders were no longer dealing with an emergency, but had not yet moved toward rehabilitation. There was a parallel command structure between civilian and military, and duties of many committees overlapped. Ratshesky observed overwhelming turmoil upon arrival and "decided that organization was our first duty."[313]

The military and the five original relief committees, plus Colonel Weatherbe's medical relief subcommittee, were hard at work.[314] They had, by this time, decided upon the location for a mortuary, set up first aid stations around the city, and staffed regular and emergency hospitals. Yet on the way to city hall, Ratshesky saw "chaos apparent; no order existed."[315] The original relief committee members might disagree with this observation. To say that there was no order unfairly impugns the progress made over the first two days. However, the relief organization spent those first two days in triage mode, and there was still much to do.

When the Massachusetts State Guard arrived, their doctors and nurses first scattered to various hospitals. Ratshesky went to present himself to the mayor as the head of the Massachusetts unit. Acting Mayor Colewell was out, but Ratshesky met with Lieutenant Governor Grant, General Benson, Admiral Chambers, and Lieutenant Colonel

[313] Ratshesky, 11.

[314] The five original committees were transportation, food distribution, shelter, mortuary, and financial affairs.

[315] Ratshesky, 10.

Bell.[316] Carefully broaching the subject, he first suggested that they move the relief headquarters away from city hall. Canadian leaders accepted this proposal.[317]

The organizations that first sprang up were ready to transition to more ordered, cohesive, central management. According to Charles C. Carstens, head of a Massachusetts children's charity, "In less than twelve hours from the time the American unit from Boston had arrived, the necessary features of a good working plan were accepted by the local Relief Committee."[318] Moving away from city hall was the first step. It allowed the relief leadership to separate from normal civil government functions. This was a small step towards a greater goal: complete centralization of administration and authority in one relief organization.[319] This would also allow civilians to take the lead in relief by removing the parallel military command, which was the de facto arrangement for the first three days (see figure 2).

[316] Ratshesky, 11.

[317] Prince, 82.

[318] Carstens, 360. Carstens was one of the Massachusetts State Guard team, so his statement may be slightly biased.

[319] Prince, 83.

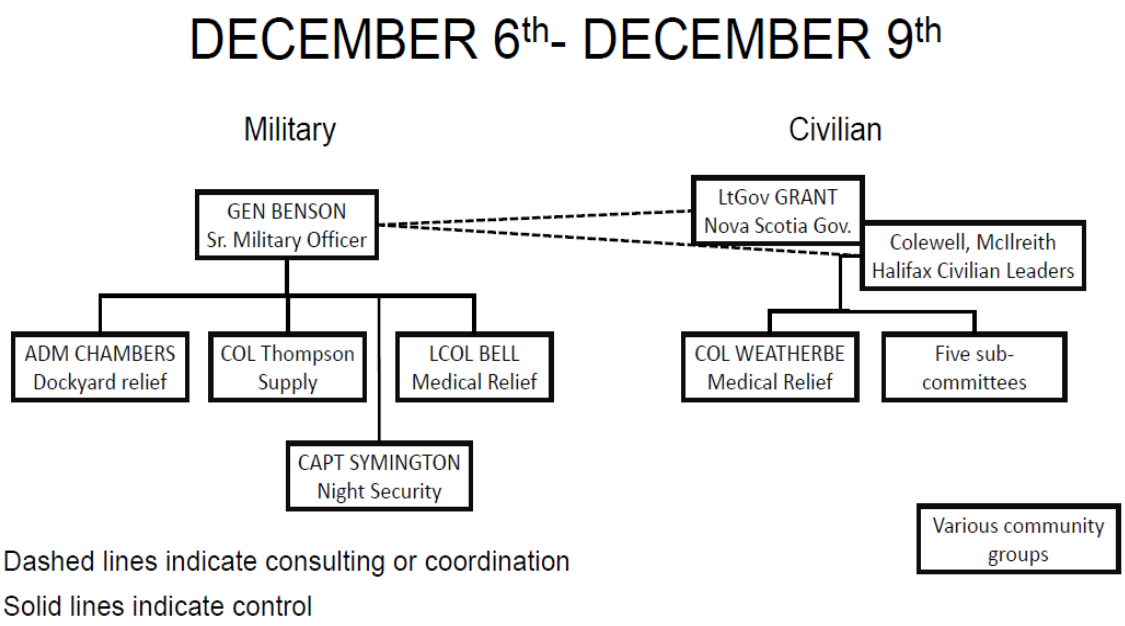

Figure 3. Structure of Authority for Halifax Relief prior to the Establishment of the Halifax Relief Committee

Source: Created by author.

Centralized authority was still critical. Ratshesky's unit was one of many organizations that operated in Halifax on December 8. The Canadian Red Cross, the Salvation Army, local Roman Catholic Clergy, and the Halifax School Board Association are some examples of the various community groups that organized to help. These units were not under control of, or even cooperating with, any relief committee.[320] They stepped on each other's toes, and more units were on their way. The day after the Massachusetts State Guard arrived; the Boston chapter of the American Red Cross

[320] Prince, 83. The Salvation Army did not place its members under control of the central Halifax relief committees until January 1.

arrived. Units from Rhode Island and Maine quickly followed.[321] This was the chaos that Ratshesky and the Massachusetts State Guard met. It was not chaos of death and destruction, but chaos of a disorganized relief effort.

The management of this chaos meant the creation of several new subcommittees, but first, there needed to be a better way to manage those committees. The former executive committee split in two: the executive committee and the management committee. The executive committee created policy, while the management committee ensured various other subcommittees carried it out properly.[322] This served to insulate the top leaders of Halifax relief from day-to-day demands.

The vast number of new committees matched increased needs of coordinating the relief effort. Ratshesky saw a need for committees in transportation, supply, and finance, which already existed in some form.[323] He saw need for committees on relief, housing, construction, warehousing, and medical.[324] Later a rehabilitation, fuel, clothing, registration, information, animals, and children's committee were added.[325]

It is curious that Ratshesky states in his official report that, "The immediate need was a transportation committee, on account of the large number of people coming to the

[321] Murray, 242.

[322] Carstens, 360.

[323] Ratshesky, 11-12.

[324] Ibid., 12.

[325] Kitz and Payzant, 76.

city."[326] He made similar comments on supply and finance, although the very men he met on his arrival had already organized these committees.[327] What happened was that the tasks handled by the original committees had, as described by historian Archibald MacMechan, "branched out in all directions and extended far beyond any possibilities considered on December 6th."[328] Ratshesky was not attempting to overstate his own contributions. If that were the case, there would be fewer glowing reports from local leaders of the organization he brought to the relief effort. The leadership and expertise brought by the Massachusetts State Guard provoked the relief effort to move towards rehabilitation, marked by full civilian control and a gradual return to normalcy.[329] On December 8, Canadian civilian leaders were unable, unwilling, or unprepared to establish authority over the various organizations within the city. Ratshesky and his team gave them the tools to do so.

The various committees were either led by experts in the field of disaster relief or committee members consulted closely with them. This was true even from the first committees. Robert MacIlreith, the ex-mayor of Halifax, led the mortuary committee that arose on December 6. He was the mayor when the *Titanic* sank in 1912, during which rescuers brought several hundred bodies to Halifax. His experience gave him the expertise to quickly find an appropriate location for a morgue and to emphasize proper

[326] Ratshesky, 11-12.

[327] MacMechan, 51.

[328] Ibid., 52.

[329] Prince, 85.

identification procedures.[330] When MacIlreith took over the executive committee, another official with experience from the *Titanic* disaster, Arthur Barnstead, took over the mortuary committee.[331]

Few other local leaders had experience in disaster relief. The Massachusetts State Guard brought a lot of experience. Ratshesky took part in rebuilding the towns of Chelsea and Salem after major fires.[332] His team included Christopher Lanz, who led the rehabilitation work for Salem, and Katherine McMahon, the head of social service for the Boston Dispensary.[333] According to sociologist Samuel Prince, Canadian leaders of the relief found that, "it was soon clear that the new-comers had had unusual experience in dealing with other disasters."[334] Happy to have outside expertise, they accepted plans presented by the Massachusetts State Guard to institute systematic relief.[335]

Ever careful to allow Canadian leaders to keep their roles as head of relief, these experts began to filter among various committees. Lanz was appointed as the executive

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[330] Glasner, 92.

[331] Kitz and Payzant, 69.

[332] Murray, 236. The fires destroyed most of both towns, Chelsea in 1908 and Salem in 1914.

[333] Prince, 81. The author had to look up the more archaic usage of the word dispensary, which is a public facility where all forms of medical or dental care is provided free of charge. Ms. McMahon's expertise went much further than distribution of prescription medicine.

[334] Ibid., 82.

[335] Carstens, 360.

secretary for the rehabilitation committee.[336] However, most of the Massachusetts personnel acted in a purely advisory role. This was especially true for the medical relief committee, which grew out of the combination of Colonel Weatherbe's and Lieutenant Colonel Bell's committee, and was eventually headed by Lieutenant Colonel Bell.

The medical relief mission had the largest scope. It is important to unravel the parallel duties of Lieutenant Colonel Bell's and Colonel Weatherbe's operations prior to December 8. Colonel Weatherbe set up first aid stations, organized doctors, and distributed supplies.[337] Lieutenant Colonel Bell organized doctors, distributed supplies, and controlled all military and emergency hospitals.[338] This implies he was not in charge of Victoria General, the large civilian hospital. In any case, civilian and military teams organized some but not all the medical activities in parallel. Lieutenant Colonel Bell "pointed out to the general relief committee that chaos would reign if there wasn't some organization to look after the various medical activities."[339] Ratshesky made a similar observation. The day after the arrival of the Massachusetts State Guard, Halifax leaders appointed a medical relief committee headed by Lieutenant Colonel Bell.[340]

Lieutenant Colonel Bell's new role was different. It was a much larger team. He appointed statisticians and an official historian, and then could delegate many of his

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[336] Carstens, 361. Carstens does not specify the chairperson of the rehabilitation committee.

[337] MacMechan, 54.

[338] Armstrong, 97.

[339] Murray, 235.

[340] Ratshesky, 14.

management and communication tasks.[341] He accepted suggestions made by Massachusetts doctors, such as organizing the city into districts and making considerations for contagious diseases.[342] Lieutenant Colonel Bell spent most of his time inspecting the medical relief effort. As medical teams wound down emergency hospitals, he implemented his vision for patient management by attempting some segregation of patients by nature of injury in the remaining hospitals.[343] He excelled in his duties, and earned praise for his thoroughness, vision, and organizational abilities.[344]

Lieutenant Colonel Bell remarked that the recognition of the military's primacy in medical relief, through him, was simply a formality.[345] He was discussing the importance of the military role, but the formal recognition of control by civil authorities gave him organizational powers over civilian relief as well. The lack of cooperation between relief agencies was a real problem. Lieutenant Colonel Bell could not use military orders to enforce cooperation, and needed the formal recognition to ensure his authority over civilian groups.[346]

One of the most difficult determinations each committee had to make was how generous to be with aid. Too stingy, and those in need go without. Too generous, and

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[341] Murray, 235.

[342] Ratshesky, 14-15.

[343] Murray, 235.

[344] Tooke, 311.

[345] Armstrong, 98.

[346] Prince, 83.

rescuers might misallocate supplies before the neediest cases received them. This debate played out in the United States as well. The Massachusetts Red Cross sent aid at once, while the Rockefeller Foundation inquired for more information before providing any relief.[347] Like the Massachusetts units, early relief efforts tried to err on the side of generosity. The clothing committee reported, "We had applications for clothing from those who were not entitled to it, but rather than hold up the work of relieving the sufferers we felt it better to clothe everyone by accident than to allow one of the sufferers to go without."[348] Colonel Thompson and the tarpaper manufacturer were equally eager to equitably distribute necessary supplies to needy Haligonians.[349] Railway officials in the United States and Canada did their part by expediting the train carrying the Massachusetts State Guard.[350] The Citadel, normally off-limits to civilians, broke its rules to admit injured people.[351] In the emergency phase of relief, generosity was key, but as the relief effort transitioned, generosity gave way to efficiency.

The executive relief committee, through central organization, brought efficiency to the relief effort. It was necessary, but it also meant added red tape for Haligonians whose lives had been shattered.[352] They had to wait in lines for food and submit to

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[347] Buxton, 184.

[348] Kitz, 92.

[349] MacMechan, 33. This is discussed in more detail in the previous chapter.

[350] Ratshesky, 27.

[351] MacMechan, 37.

[352] Prince, 92-93.

interviews before receiving clothing or money. This led to disgruntled commentary, but ultimately ensured the continued success of the relief effort. It discouraged greed and profiteering, and ensured that physicians who helped received pay for their time.[353]

On December 9, the same day the Lieutenant Colonel Bell officially became head of the medical relief committee, Halifax leaders distilled the official Halifax Relief Committee from the original committee. Gone were the Halifax and Nova Scotia politicians. When the relief headquarters separated from city hall, current political leaders could fulfill their normal duties. Ex-mayor MacIlreith, no longer an active politician, led the Halifax Relief Committee.[354]

With the designation of the Halifax Relief Committee, the relief effort entered the rehabilitation phase.[355] It cemented the centralized principles of relief organization espoused by the Massachusetts experts. It also cemented a civilian as the head of relief. General Benson never declared martial law, but he controlled so much of the early relief forces he had similarly outsize influence. Previous relief committees simply rubber-stamped many military decisions. Now, the chain of command was clear, and had a civilian atop it (see figure 4).

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[353] Joseph Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 15, no. 1 (March 1997): 157.

[354] Armstrong, 104.

[355] Prince, 85.

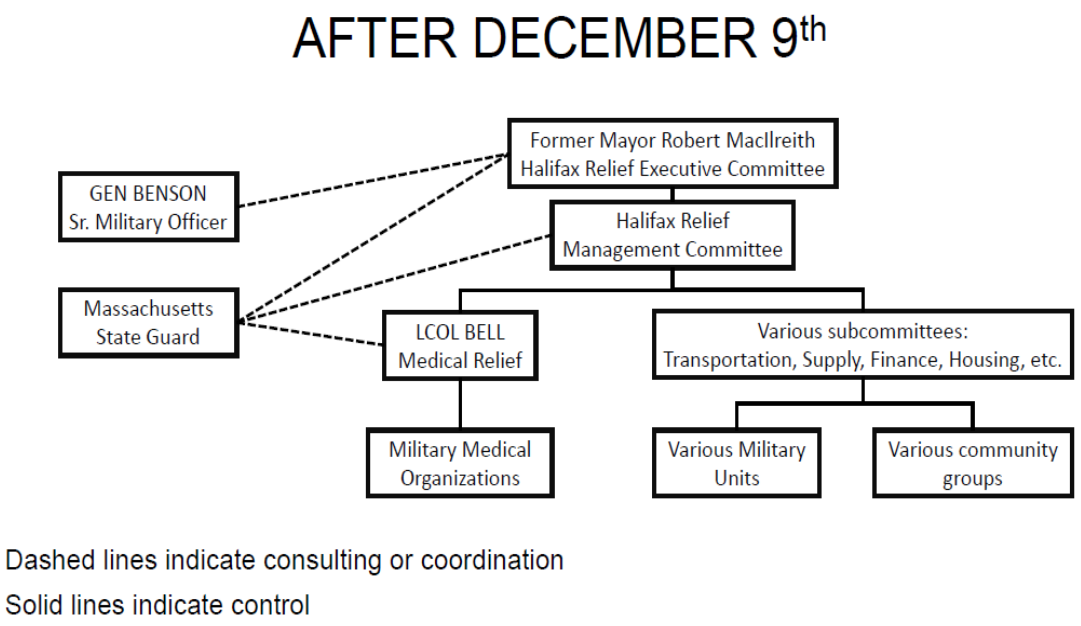

Figure 4. Structure of Authority for Halifax Relief after the Establishment of the Halifax Relief Committee

Source: Created by author.

The relief effort still heavily involved the military. Soldiers and sailors made up the majority of relief forces, and Lieutenant Colonel Bell controlled all medical relief for Halifax. General Benson closely consulted with MacIlreith, and they stocked the various committees with military representatives.[356] Their military expertise was still critical. Control of relief remained, according to sociologist Samuel Prince, "not wholly municipal or wholly martial, but rather an admixture of authorities."[357]

[356] Armstrong, 104.

[357] Prince, 101-102.

For foreign units, the systematic organization of relief and the continued arrival of volunteers allowed them to plan their departure. Noting the Red Cross units from Rhode Island and Maine, Ratshesky and his unit decided to withdraw. Ever considerate of his unit's subordination to the greater relief effort, he requested permission from Lieutenant Colonel Bell.[358] The date was December 12. The Massachusetts State Guard had only been in Halifax for four days when Ratshesky requested to leave.[359] The *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* were already gone. Captain Symington determined that General Benson no longer needed his men, and the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* departed on December 9 and 10 respectively.[360]

Canadian units held on for longer. Eventually, they either completed their tasks or handed them over to civilian relief organizations. One of the longest tasks was removal of bodies, which troops carried out for more than a month.[361] Lieutenant Colonel Bell was one of the last military men to leave the relief effort on January 23.[362] As the needs of injured Haligonians transitioned from medical care to rehabilitation, the medical relief committee shrank and the rehabilitation committee grew. Even the Halifax Relief

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[358] Ratshesky, 18.

[359] Their train departed on December 14.

[360] Logbook of the USS *Tacoma*, December 9 entry; Logbook of the USS *Von Steuben*, December 10 entry. The *Von Steuben* was in Halifax an extra day to take on more coal.

[361] Kitz, 107; Beed, 16. The last person killed by the blast was not found for almost a year, but troops were no longer searching.

[362] Kitz, 127.

Committee, created for disaster management, gave way to the federally organized Halifax Relief Commission by the end of December.[363]

Strong leadership and central organization are key characteristics of the response to the explosion of the *Mont Blanc*. The military played a role in both, but was most important early in the disaster. With normal sources of civilian authority demolished, military leadership filled the void. There were many aspects of disaster leadership that the military fulfilled. They provided immediate, quick thinking authority to gain and maintain control of the disaster at Halifax. This included fighting fires, setting up search parties, and setting up emergency hospitals wherever possible. They also provided organizational leadership. Lieutenant Colonel Bell exemplified foresight and resourcefulness as he established medical care facilities to hold many times more people than Halifax was designed to accommodate. Without the leadership and centralized organization provided by the military and its leaders, Halifax relief efforts might have floundered for days before becoming effective.

Generosity of time and money by military and civilian, Canadian and foreign, was hugely important for Halifax relief. Just as important was generosity of spirit by the relief effort's leaders. Military commanders did not micromanage or fight each other for primacy. There was no competition for command or credit. Similarly, close cooperation between military and civilian units was evident. Military units had control first, but smoothly enabled the transition to civilian control. In Halifax, early joint efforts aided this smooth transition. Finally, disaster relief expertise was an important characteristic of

[363] Armstrong, 129. The Halifax Relief Commission formed primarily to rebuild Halifax.

Halifax relief leadership. Those who had seen similar situations brought lessons from experience. They watched earlier relief efforts progress through emergency, transition, and rehabilitation periods, and their knowledge helped Halifax relief efforts make the same progression.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

> While the point is hardly profound, neither is it necessarily obvious: soldiers train for war; war is a disaster. The Halifax explosion, too, was a disaster, and in the short term the militia organizational structure provided a template for effective reaction to the crisis.
>
> — John Armstrong, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy: Inquiry and Intrigue*

The explosion of the *Mont Blanc* devastated Halifax. What happened next, a relief effort with a large military component, rescued the city from peril. The successes of this relief effort outweighed any failures. The entirety of the relief operation after the blast saved as many lives as possible, kept a sense of order and security throughout the effort, and ensured Halifax continued to play a critical role as a World War One port. This chapter begins with these factors that made Halifax relief a success, which help to understand how the military in Halifax played a significant role. The military units in Halifax were trained and supplied to be first responders, showed calmness and cohesiveness, and proved their ability to lead and organize. Their achievements can help current military leaders frame their planning for future disasters. Finally, Halifax showed that military disaster relief capability is an important tool for application of American national power today.

Relief workers rapidly established a system of medical care. Search parties examined wreckage, provided first aid, and brought people to where they could receive advanced care. While it was not flawless, it was a system. It did not ignore any devastated areas or ignore injured people. Eye doctor Frederick Tooke opined, “from my knowledge of the men entrusted with the work is that it was conservatively and

conscientiously undertaken and carried out."[364] Through search, triage, and emergency care, every injury was treated to the maximum extent possible, and doctors turned none away.[365]

Relief workers arrived on the scene quickly. They set up temporary hospitals by the first afternoon.[366] Before dark, some sort of emergency shelter covered almost every displaced person, and emergency hospitals added at least a thousand beds.[367] Doctors performed surgeries almost continuously, and completed most major surgeries within forty-eight hours.[368] By quickly treating the injured, doctors prevented major injuries from becoming worse due to delayed treatment. The speed of the response was also critical to the low prevalence of infectious disease.[369]

The explosion did not just wreck the bodies of those unlucky enough to be near. Normal services provided by the city of Halifax, such as trams, telephones, gas, electricity, and water, ceased to operate.[370] Yet, the city did not experience an every-man-for-himself exodus. Despite early disorder from reports of an imminent second explosion, the people of Halifax worked together to restore their city. Officials limited profiteering

[364] Tooke, 318.

[365] MacMechan, 62.

[366] Glasner, 114.

[367] Kitz, 69, 88.

[368] Tooke, 313.

[369] Ibid., 318.

[370] MacMechan, 22.

and greed. Utilities restored essential services quickly. Despite the amount of destruction, Halifax recovered.

The rapid restoration of city services ensured that Halifax would still help the prosecution of World War One. After inspecting the ships in Bedford Basin, Admiral Chambers cabled to the British admiralty, "please notify all centres Halifax out of action for some time."[371] Thousands of casualties and wrecked facilities meant Halifax might not recover in the foreseeable future, but this was not the case. Within ten days, medical workers cleared Camp Hill Hospital of civilian patients from the blast, allowing it to resume taking in convalescing soldiers.[372] On December 12, the HMS *Highflyer* led a convoy of thirty-four ships out of the harbor, four days after its scheduled departure and five days after the explosion.[373] Halifax wartime operations did not succumb to the destruction.

Neither did Halifax leaders succumb to infighting and conflict between organizations. The normal local government system had disintegrated, and had difficulty regaining control of the city.[374] Organizations that stepped in respected the rule of law. The military did not declare martial law, and there was little extrajudicial punishment.[375]

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[371] Chambers, 449.

[372] Tooke, 317.

[373] Joseph Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 46.

[374] Prince, 31.

[375] Bird, 131.

Control of the relief effort eventually became centralized under a civilian organization, but there was no guarantee that the path to this centralization would be so conflict-free.

Ralph Bell, the secretary of the later Halifax Relief Commission, said it best:

> In spite of the almost insurmountable difficulties communication was kept up, however, and within the first twenty-four hours food depots established all over the city; clothing depots opened, emergency shelters were provided where thousands of destitute were housed. Hospitals with a normal capacity of hundreds were forced to extend their capacity to provide for thousands. At the end of the week a tremendous organization of voluntary workers, running with the smoothness of a well-oiled machine, were taking care of the various requirements of the situation as efficiently as if it had been in operation for years.[376]

None of these well-oiled machinations of the relief effort were guaranteed. Many potential scenarios could have made the Halifax relief effort much worse. If it had taken longer to find, triage, and transport the injured, the blizzard of December 7 would have caught many people exposed. If profiteering and personal gain had overcome the feeling of mutual assistance, the normal functions of the city would have taken longer to restore, causing further harm to newly homeless residents. If internecine conflict had plagued relief operations, Halifax leaders might not have turned their focus back to restoring the city's function as a wartime port.

The overall relief effort was a success, and the military role was critical to this success. The military had necessary capabilities that civilian organizations did not. According to sociologist Samuel Prince, "the army has the intensive concentration, the discipline, the organization and often the resource of supplies instantly available."[377] By

[376] MacMechan, 104.

[377] Prince, 60.

providing medical relief, security for the devastated city, and organizational structure, the military proved its inherent capability for disaster relief in Halifax.[378]

Military units made outstanding first responders. Trained for the battlefields of Europe or the seas between, they knew how to deal with crisis. Soldiers and sailors, most trained only in basic medical care if trained at all, provided the majority of first aid.[379] They also helped in hospitals. Injured soldiers acted as nurses or orderlies after giving up their beds to more severely injured patients. Besides performing medical work, the military brought needed medical supplies. Civilian hospitals ran out of anesthetic and suturing material quickly, but infirmaries on ships had stockpiles of these essentials that replaced dwindling onshore materials.[380] Land-based military units contributed all they had. While their supplies often did not last through the first day, they lessened the pressure on civilian medical supplies.

Most savable lives in Halifax were lost due to insufficient doctors, nurses, or medical supplies. Civilian and military doctors deserve equal recognition, but military units had advantages over their civilian counterparts.[381] Attached to units in Halifax, they had an immediate source of supplies and assistants. Civilian doctors did not always have these assets. Local doctors often operated alone out of their homes. Doctors from

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[378] Bird, 120.

[379] MacMechan, 32.

[380] Kitz and Payzant, 75.

[381] Murray, 231.

surrounding towns had to quickly gather the only supplies on hand.[382] Later military arrivals, such as those from the Massachusetts State Guard, called on their state's resources for additional relief supplies. The military could employ medical relief on a scale that civilian organizations could not match.

The military organization was also ideal for achieving order. When the government of Halifax was unable to provide security, the military stepped in. Soldiers acted as police officers, commandeered vehicles, controlled transportation networks, and ensured that the rule of law endured.[383] Haligonians saw soldiers and sailors as trustworthy authority figures. Despite the devastation, routine returned to Halifax quickly, which allowed technicians to restore utilities and the local government to regain control.[384] The fact that military officers ran many city functions at first helped achieve a quick return to normalcy. Military control of the devastated area also reduced confusion among the various relief organizations.

The contributions to disorder, in the form of spurious reports of an imminent second explosion, was the darkest chapter of Halifax relief for military organizations. Emotions run high in wartime, and ran higher after the blast. Fear of further explosions, fear of foreign attack, and fear for one's own life encouraged a terrorized mob mentality. Soldiers and sailors were as susceptible to this mentality as any other person. Fortunately

[382] Kitz and Payzant, 73.

[383] Kitz, 62.

[384] Dudar, 114.

for Halifax, military men could quickly overcome physical terror to accomplish tasks.[385] Their experience as service members helped inure them to the violence and devastation they observed. While some members of the military abetted panic initially, it was the military organization that eventually reestablished order. By tight control of the devastated area and critical functions of Halifax, the military ensured the city was secure for organized relief.[386]

Historian Archibald MacMechan, who was in Halifax during the explosion, wrote, "it is only just to say that wherever there were soldiers there was organization."[387] During the emergency period of relief, soldiers and sailors had ready-made teams. Because of group heroism, unit cohesion, and established chains of command, soldiers and sailors quickly provided organized, systematic relief.[388] Halifax had no public relief organization capable of such a gigantic task. The nature of military command filtered into the relief organization as well. Military units had centralized command of the relief mission, but decentralized control of the operation. The later relief committee adopted this mindset.

For the civilian relief committee, military organizations served as leaders and key advisors. Expertise in the form of disaster management professionals was hard to come by in Halifax, but a train full of it arrived from Massachusetts. Other military

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[385] Prince, 42.

[386] Prince, 51.

[387] MacMechan, 59.

[388] Prince, 56.

professionals filled key leadership roles with aplomb. The senior Canadian medical officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bell, initially organized comprehensive medical relief and later headed the medical relief committee for more than a month.

The experience of the Halifax disaster and ensuing relief effort would have turned out differently if five thousand soldiers and sailors were not part of the response. Searches for injured would have taken longer, medical facilities would have been established less quickly, and essential supplies would have run out sooner. Mob terror and panic might have lasted for longer than it did, and done more damage. All the while, civilian leaders struggling to organize would not have had military leadership to lean on. This does not mean the military was the harbinger of successful relief. Civilian contributions to medicine, order, and organization were also critical. Still, the military took on such an enormous role that for Halifax, it was the linchpin of a successful relief effort.

Determining that the military was critical to successful Halifax relief, and thus could be critical to future disaster relief operations, is an important but insufficient lesson. There are other key takeaways for future disaster relief, but it sometimes seems that the Halifax explosion and ensuing relief has been forgotten. Partly responsible is that two thousand dead barely registered in a war that killed millions. After the Halifax explosion, World War One continued for another year. Citizens of the world wanted to forget about the war, and that included forgetting about the Halifax disaster.[389] The 1918 influenza epidemic also began as the war wound down. It hit Halifax hard, and ended

[389] Beed, 132.

final attempts to figure the exact number of deaths from the explosion.[390] The Great Depression, which began ten years later, also contributed to the forgetting of Halifax.[391] The dark events of the following years made the Halifax disaster seem comparatively insignificant.

Civilian organizations learned from Halifax. When firefighters from neighboring towns showed up to help fight fires, their hoses would not fit because they had different styles of attachment. After Halifax, cities adopted the practice of standardized fire hose fittings.[392] Cities also adopted the practice of locating ammunition handling areas far from population centers. New explosive substances developed for an industrialized World War One were more potent than ever, and city planners did not widely recognize the danger of storing them in town until the Halifax explosion.

Military organizations should also study Halifax for general lessons about disaster relief. The relief effort was not just a success because the military responded. It was a success because the military responded well. Army and Navy leaders captured the strengths of the military organization when they led their soldiers and sailors.

A quick response was critical to the success of the relief effort. The military units who responded quickly contributed more. The *Old Colony* was the first American unit and one of the first military units to organize a response.[393] There was some luck

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[390] Massachusetts-Halifax Health Commission, 54-55.

[391] Beed, 132.

[392] Kitz, 70.

[393] Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 44.

involved in this. The ship was far from the explosion, and the sailors did not have families ashore like their Canadian counterparts. Therefore, they took less time than most units to organize. The *Old Colony* became one of the first emergency hospitals, and a critical site for treatment of the most severe injuries, because sailors wasted no time in getting organized.[394] The Massachusetts State Guard was also an excellent example of the importance of showing up quickly. Coming from afar, they did not contribute to the initial emergency relief. However, they were the first unit with disaster management expertise to arrive. They were not the only unit with disaster management professionals to arrive in the coming days, but because they were the first, they contributed more to the further system of relief.[395] Civilian agencies could not match the military's ability to deploy significant amounts of organized relief quickly, and the military units who responded quickly helped the most.[396] If military units are to provide disaster relief, rapidly commencing operations is an important consideration.

A quick response also merited an excess of positive press. It pays to be first. The secretary of the Halifax Relief Commission, Ralph Bell, says, "The Great Commonwealth of Massachusetts is deserving of particular mention in this regard" precisely because they were the first foreign unit to arrive from out of town with

[394] Chambers, 454.

[395] Kitz, 84.

[396] Armstrong, 69.

significant supplies.[397] Halifax newspapers wrote many glowing reviews of the American relief effort. In Halifax, locally based foreign units were often the first to respond. This is a significant contributor to the positive press foreign relief earned. Positive press for foreign units reflected well upon them back home, and helped to deepen ties between the countries involved (see figure 5).[398]

[397] MacMechan, 104. Bell continues to commend them for their later contributions in supplies, as Massachusetts continued to send aid, but he starts his commendation with appreciation of their early arrival.

[398] Beed, 17.

Figure 5. Editorial Cartoon in *The Evening Mail* of Halifax

Source: Blair Beed, *1917 Halifax Explosion and American Response* (Halifax, NS: Dtours Visitors and Convention Service, 1998), 73.

Selfless generosity ensured a positive review of the foreign relief effort for years to come. One Haligonian remembers how "Mother always spoke with reverence of the U.S.A. people because they sent Stucco Homes and furniture all free."[399] Instructions like

[399] Beed, 29.

Massachusetts Governor Samuel McCall gave Abraham Ratshesky of "go the limit" were the best approach to the initial relief operation.[400] In the early stages of relief, the lack of bureaucracy was a form of generosity and critical to good press. Later, citizens of Halifax met what Prince calls "cold professionalism" with disapproval.[401] Even though increasing bureaucracy was necessary as relief became more organized, the perception that workers lacked generosity hurt the image of the relief effort.[402] Responders can manage negative perception in later stages of relief, but early stages must minimize bureaucracy and red tape.

Military leaders must generously care for victims of relief, but should also be aware of effects on service members. Halifax showed that soldiers are not immune to panic caused by devastation and loss of control. Enough has been said on this point. However, soldiers and sailors were subject to other emotions besides temporary flight. Exhausted soldiers experiencing the horrors of the explosion's aftermath often left with what military professionals would recognize today as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.[403] Lieutenant Colonel Bell, who spent six weeks in charge of medical relief, afterwards took months away from the military for his own mental recovery.[404] Soldiers

[400] Ratshesky, 27.

[401] Prince, 92.

[402] Dynes and Quarantelli, 61.

[403] Prince, 46.

[404] Kitz and Payzant, 77.

and sailors can take control of their minds in the terror of the moment, but are still susceptible to long-term effects from dealing with death and destruction.

In addition to limitations of individual responders, Halifax relief showed the influx of volunteers can tax relief infrastructure. To house and transport relief workers and relief supplies was a thankless but necessary task.[405] Those who had arrived first actually stopped those who tried to come later simply because there was no space for them.[406] This shows another advantage of military relief: soldiers and sailors arrive with their own housing and supplies, especially in the case of naval relief. Relief from the sea was always welcome because ships not only provided housing facilities for relief workers, they were also stocked with an excess of needed supplies. Like any military operation, logistics of relief is just as important as tactics.

Military leaders in the relief effort received wide latitude from their superiors. Canadian military authorities from Ottawa did not micromanage General Benson.[407] The Secretary of the Navy gave the captains of the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* the authority to decide how much to help and when to return to the war.[408] Lieutenant Colonel Bell did not micromanage medical relief, applying a broader method of organization instead.[409] As in all military operations, trust between superiors and subordinates was critical to

[405] Wright, 6.

[406] MacMechan, 35.

[407] Armstrong, 87.

[408] Scanlon, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance," 45.

[409] Murray, 234.

decentralized control. Trust between leaders was also important. Military and civilian leaders needed to overlook their differences to work towards common ends.[410] Admiral Chambers and Captain Hose needed to trust that each was acting in the other's best interest when they split up the duties of the dockyard relief effort. Admiral Chambers, who had only been in Halifax for a few weeks, also had to trust local advisors when he took over the role of port reconstruction.[411]

Trust between military and civilian organizations was critical to smooth turnover to civilian control. Even though the military largely controlled relief for the first few days, on paper, civilian organizations remained in charge of the city, and organized their own efforts in parallel. Local doctors and relief organizations were also essential contributors.[412] Managing these civilian organizations in lockstep with military relief helped all groups work in the same general direction. As emergency medical needs gave way to continuing care, civilians established the Halifax Relief Committee, and the effort was firmly in civilian hands.[413] Thus the structure of relief leadership transitioned from parallel efforts between military and civilian, to a purely civilian-led effort. The changing structure of relief allowed military units to return to their war missions.[414]

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[410] Prince, 64.

[411] Chambers, 453.

[412] Wright, 5.

[413] Armstrong, 104.

[414] Ratshesky, 25.

Halifax showed that military capabilities closely match the requirements for a successful disaster relief operation. The primary mission of any military is not disaster relief, but disaster relief is an important ancillary mission for American armed forces. In Halifax, disaster relief ensured the city continued to fulfill its wartime role, critical to World War One logistics. In addition, it cemented an already strong relationship with a key ally for both America and Great Britain.

In Halifax, continued disorder would have affected U.S. and British strategic interests. This is an important reason the U.S. military should be ready to provide disaster relief with its own forces. America owns and operates many bases abroad, some in areas prone to natural disasters. Natural disasters and manmade disasters like Halifax, can strike without warning. Even if a disaster does not directly affect an American base, surrounding areas support the base infrastructure. If military forces are unprepared to respond, a humanitarian disaster could impede the operation of those bases in peace or war. In addition, the presence of American bases on foreign land relies on the support of the surrounding population. This is true even in areas where U.S. personnel are not necessarily welcome. If American forces do not respond, or respond poorly, to a local humanitarian crisis, denizens may withdraw tacit approval of their presence.

From a geopolitical standpoint, humanitarian relief operations are critical to keeping U.S. strategic alliances. After the Halifax disaster, Nova Scotia Lieutenant Governor Grant remarked that the disaster "had undoubtedly furthered the cordial relations between Canada and the United States."[415] Even today, almost one hundred

[415] Ratshesky, 22.

years later, Halifax maintains a strong connection to Boston as a legacy of the response.[416] While America and Canada did not have a shaky alliance, a public relations win can still be significant. In 2016, the United States faced heated rhetoric from the leader of the Philippines, who maligned the validity of the long-standing alliance. However, 92 percent of Filipinos have a positive view of the United States.[417] In 2013, America sent a significant relief effort, Operation Damayan, after powerful Typhoon Haiyan.[418] It is no guarantee that Filipino public opinion is sufficient for maintaining the alliance, or that public support is correlated with that particular relief effort. However, disaster relief can be an important way to show commitment, establish security, and enforce peace.[419] It is in the interest of the United States to be able to accomplish this mission worldwide. The military should not shy away from playing an important role in statecraft by proper execution of humanitarian disaster relief.

Halifax showed that the military is a critical organization for effective humanitarian relief. There are excellent reasons for the military to maintain the capability to execute this mission. Ensuring local support of foreign bases and furthering

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[416] Beed, 17.

[417] Ishaan Tharoor, "Forget Duterte. The Philippines Loves the United States," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2016, accessed March 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/22/forget-duterte-the-philippines-loves-the-u-s/?utm_term=.b42b381a14c1.

[418] Or Super Typhoon Yolanda, as it is known in the Philippines.

[419] Chris Dolan and Alynna Lyon, "Calculation of Goodwill: Humanitarianism, Strategic Interests, and the U.S. Response to Typhoon Yolanda," *Global Security and Intelligence Studies* 2, no. 1, article 5 (2016): 43. Chris Dolan and Alynna Lyon "Operation Damayan: A Critical Examination of the U.S. Humanitarian Response to Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in the Philippines" is also a good read on this subject.

geopolitical ties are important. The author would add a final note that the justification need not be so cold-blooded. The U.S. military is an extraordinarily powerful and capable organization. It can respond to a disaster at a far greater scale than any civilian organization. Halifax showed that it is well suited to save lives and do good, and no commander should avoid this opportunity. The value of human life is reason enough for the military to employ its awesome capability for effective disaster relief.

APPENDIX A

UNITS INVOLVED

The following is intended to provide a reference of the major units discussed in this thesis and is not a comprehensive list. The information was obtained from multiple sources. Joseph Scanlon's, "Source of Threat and Source of Assistance: The Maritime Aspects of the 1917 Halifax Explosion," is an excellent primer on US Navy ships that helped in Halifax. The first chapter of John Armstrong's, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy*, describes the various Canadian military organizations, and his later chapters give more information on the ships of the Royal Canadian Navy. Finally, the website of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic offers a comprehensive list of every ship involved at: https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/research/ships-halifax-explosion.

SHIPS

Imo. A modern Norwegian steamship chartered to bring relief supplies to Belgium. She was empty when she left Halifax and planned to pick up her cargo in New York. She collided with the *Mont Blanc*.

Mont Blanc. A French cargo ship full of high explosives. She entered Halifax Harbor from New York. She collided with the *Imo* and burned for fifteen minutes before exploding along the Halifax shore.

HMCS *Niobe.* One of the Royal Canadian Navy's first ships, *Niobe* was an 1897-built British cruiser that was no longer operational. She was permanently moored to the pier in the naval dockyard. There she served as a floating barracks and training center for transiting sailors.

HMS *Knight Templar*. A former cargo ship converted to an escort cruiser. She aided the relief effort and left with the first post-explosion convoy.

HMS *Changuinola.* A former merchant ship converted to a lightly armed escort cruiser. She was lightly damaged in the explosion and provided search parties around the dockyard.

HMS *Highflyer*. A protected cruiser; she was damaged in the blast and one of her tenders was destroyed (the tender was trying to aid the burning *Mont Blanc*). She provided aid and left with the first post-explosion convoy.

Calonne. A British cargo ship carrying ammunition, loading at the time of the explosion. She was partially damaged by the blast, and phosphorous charges that caught fire on her decks prompted calls to have her sunk.

Picton. A British cargo ship carrying ammunition. She was very close to the blast and was badly damaged. However, astute dockworkers secured her hatches when the burning *Mont Blanc* approached. She posed little threat of explosion.

USS *Old Colony.* A former passenger liner, the *Old Colony* was destined for Europe to be converted into a hospital ship. At the time of the explosion, she was across the harbor in Richmond. In the early afternoon, tugboats towed her to the Halifax side to become a hospital ship earlier than planned.

USS *Tacoma*. An American protected cruiser that was patrolling approximately fifty miles from Halifax. When lookouts saw the explosion, she steamed for Halifax and provided medical, security, and construction assistance for several days.

USS *Von Steuben.* Originally the SS *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, a German passenger liner-turned warship, the United States impounded her at the outbreak of World War One. When the United States entered the war, she was rechristened the *Von Steuben.* Like the *Tacoma*, she provided medical, security, and construction assistance for several days.

LAND BASED UNITS

Canadian Expeditionary Force. An overseas combat force that began in World War One. Most of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in Halifax were involved in logistics (coordinating supplies for forces in Europe) or were recruits waiting to be shipped to the front.

Canadian Militia. The Canadian Militia was traditionally responsible for defending Halifax and had been there for many years. Of the soldiers in Halifax, the approximately 3,300 militia made up the majority. They tended to be older than the average soldier and did not have modern equipment. They provided a significant amount of manpower for the relief effort.

Canadian Army. At the outbreak of World War One, the Canadian Army reinforced the Canadian Militia in Halifax. Halifax was such an important port facility that it needed more men and better equipment to ensure protection from German attack. Canadian Army units provided significant manpower for the relief effort.

British Expeditionary Force. British Expeditionary Force recruits in Halifax were mostly young Americans who signed up to fight the war for the British before America entered. After their training in Halifax, they would ship out to Europe. Of 323 personnel, approximately 150 were able to assist in the rescue operation.

Massachusetts State Guard. A small group composed mostly of military doctors, nurses, and Red Cross officials. They departed Boston the evening of the explosion and arrived two days later. They provided some medical care and a lot of disaster relief expertise.

APPENDIX B

TIMELINE, DECEMBER 6-10, 1917

Most of the following timeline is excerpts from the chronology in Archibald MacMechan's history of the explosion compiled by Graham Metson. Some of the times, such as when the *Old Colony* became a hospital or when the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* departed, are not the same across all sources. In cases of disagreement the author has used the sources closest to the actual event.

December 6th	
8:45 a.m.	Collision between the *Mont Blanc* and the *Imo*
9:06 a.m.	The *Mont Blanc* exploded
10:00 a.m.	Fire at the Wellington Barracks magazine
1000-1130 a.m.	Panic in the city at reports of a second explosion
11:00 a.m.	Word of massive explosion in Halifax reached Boston and elsewhere
11:30 a.m.	First meeting of Halifax civilian leaders
1:00 p.m.	*Old Colony* began taking patients
2:00 p.m.	USS *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* arrived
3:00 p.m.	Meeting of Halifax civilian and military leaders; relief committee established
3:45 p.m.	Relief began to arrive from neighboring Nova Scotia towns
6:00 p.m.	Morgue and shelters open
8:00 p.m.	Sailors from the *Tacoma* and *Von Steuben* assume security duty
10:00 p.m.	Massachusetts State Guard and Red Cross depart Boston
December 7th	
morning	Blizzard begins, max strength reached by afternoon
11:00 a.m.	Second meeting at city hall
night	Life-threatening surgeries completed
December 8th	
7:00 a.m.	Massachusetts State Guard and Red Cross train reaches Halifax
3:00 p.m.	Relief committee meets with Massachusetts State Guard members
9:00 p.m.	American Bellevue Hospital receives first sixty patients
December 9th	
	Other American relief begins to arrive
2:00 p.m.	*Tacoma* departed
	German citizens arrested; "Place the Blame" campaign began
December 10th	
	More relief parties arrive; relief leaders request they cease due to lack of facilities
10:30 a.m.	*Von Steuben* departed
	Halifax Relief Committee established

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