

War Memories across Canada Conversation Kit:

The Explosion December 6, 1917 Halifax, Nova Scotia



General view of Halifax N. S. after explosion Dec. 6th 1917 from water front.

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On December 6, 1917, two ships collided in Halifax harbour—the SS Mont Blanc (a French ship) carrying explosive materials and the SS Imo (a Norwegian cargo ship). The SS Mont Blanc caught fire and, 20 minutes later, exploded in what was then the largest man-made explosion in history.

Nearby ships, buildings and piers were flattened. The blast killed approximately 2,000 people and injured 9,000 more. The explosion devastated the city, leaving about 25,000 people homeless.

Discussion Questions:

The Halifax Explosion is commemorated in many ways in the city of Halifax, including monuments, museum exhibitions, art projects and music. What is the role of art, literature and music in commemorating past events, disasters or wartime experiences? What is the role of the artist or musician in commemoration?

Is there an event in your community's history that you can commemorate? Would you do this through art, music or another means?

A disaster is a tragic moment in a community's history. How does a disaster change people? How does it contribute to creating a sense of community? What is the best way to commemorate a disaster?

Why does the Halifax Explosion matter today? What are some of the lessons learned from this event that can be applied today?

Activities:

Travel to Halifax and visit the site of the explosion, the [Maritime Museum of the Atlantic](#) and the [Halifax Citadel](#). If you're not able to visit in person, research the Halifax Explosion and draw a map showing the commemorative sites. Take an imaginary walking tour of the sites on your map.

Create an art project to commemorate an event in your community's history. You can also write a song, story or poem.

Disasters happen regularly around the world. Research a recent event. Even if it did not happen in your community, find a way to help through volunteering, fundraising, or education.

Resources:

Websites

The Halifax Explosion

<http://www.halifaxexplosion.org/>

A detailed account of the Halifax Explosion and its aftermath, including historical photos, maps and and personal accounts.



Soldiers engaged in rescue work after the Halifax Explosion.
Bibliothèque et Archives Canada – Library and Archives
Canada/PA-022744

The Halifax Explosion – CBC Digital Archives
<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/topic/the-halifax-explosion>

This site includes links to archival film, audio and news stories related to the explosion.

Maritime Museum of the Atlantic
<https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/what-see-do/halifax-explosion>

The museum's website includes a Halifax Explosion online exhibit.

Videos

Hope and Survival: Halifax Explosion Memorial Project, by Teresa MacInnes and Kent Nason. Sea to Sea Productions, 2014
<https://vimeo.com/113332686>

Just One Big Mess: The Halifax Explosion 1917. (1991)
An 18-minute NFB documentary that offers first-person accounts of the explosion and its impact.
<http://www3.nfb.ca/objectifdocumentaire/index.php?mode=view&language=english&filmId=30>

Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion (2003).
A television miniseries by Bruce Pittman and Keith Ross Leckie. View a six-minute clip here:
<https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Halifax-Explosion-A-Devastated-City>

Books

Aftershock: The Halifax Explosion and the persecution of pilot Francis Mackey, by Janet Maybee. Nimbus, 2015.

Barometer rising, by Hugh MacLennan. McClelland & Stewart, 1989 (fiction, originally published in 1941).

Scapegoat: the extraordinary legal proceedings following the 1917 Halifax Explosion, by Joel Zemel. New World Publishing, 2012.
The aftermath of the explosion, from legal and political perspectives.

Shattered city: The Halifax Explosion and the road to recovery, by Janet Kitz. Nimbus, 1989.

Survivors: children of the Halifax Explosion, by Janet Kitz. Nimbus, 1992.

Halifax Public Libraries has a [complete list](#) of books about the Halifax Explosion.

Canada

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