December 1917: RI Medical Teams Rush to Halifax Disaster

Described as the most devastating pre-atomic blast ever recorded

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During his long life, December 6, 1917 was a day Halifax native and Rhode Island physician DR. EDWIN G. THOMPSON (1863–1949) would never forget. The dentist and physician, a graduate of Philadelphia Dental’s College and Medico-Chirurgical College, was perhaps making his rounds at the Roger Williams Hospital when the tragic events began to unfold in his hometown’s harbor, a WWI hub of Canadian Navy activity.

At about 8:45 a.m., the Imo, a steamship carrying supplies for the Belgian Relief Commission, headed south through the Narrows, passing to the port side of incoming ships, rather than on the traditional starboard side.

The French steamship Mont Blanc, a WWI munitions transport, was entering the harbor to rendezvous with a military convoy that would escort it across the Atlantic. The ship was packed with 2,300 tons of picric acid, 200 tons of TNT, 35 tons of high-octane gasoline, and 10 tons of gun cotton.

Warning signals and evasion maneuvers proved futile and the ships collided. At 9:05 a.m., the ablaze Mont Blanc rammed Pier 6 and exploded, creating a 60-foot tsunami that swept over the harbor. Horrified onlookers were swept out to sea and drowned.

Explosion caused what has been described as a “mushroom-like” cloud.

Main building of the Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition, Halifax, Canada, damaged in the explosion.
Warehouse windows propelled glass missiles everywhere; 200 lost their eyes and sight. The event has been described as the most devastating pre-atomic blast ever recorded. It killed 2,000; leveled thousands of buildings, and injured tens of thousands.

**Rhode Island relief**

On the following day, December 7, 1914, at noon, a train chartered by the local chapter of the American Red Cross left Providence bound for Halifax, with a rescue team of 60 doctors and 60 nurses led by Dr. Thompson. A blizzard blanketed the tracks as the train forged northward.

According to the *New York Times* of December 8, 1917, a second provisional unit was sent from Providence on December 8 with 69 physicians and surgeons, 50 nurses, 6 secretaries, and social workers under the charge of ophthalmologist **DR. N. DARRELL HARVEY** of Providence, who also worked at Newport Hospital.

The train carried a complete sterilizing plant, a large quantity of ether, alcohol, compresses and surgical equipment. On the scene, the Red Cross set up 57 makeshift hospitals. The Rhode Island contingent worked in the Ladies College Hospital, the Halifax Infirmary and Bellevue. Many remained for several months.

Upon his return, Dr. Harvey gave an accounting of the Rhode Island Red Cross Relief Unit at the Halifax disaster to the Rhode Island Medical Society on March 30, 1918 and outlined relief plans should such a disaster hit Providence. ☞