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Incident on Lucknow Street

Defenders and the Defended in Halifax, 1915

Roger Sarty

According to Murphy's law, if something can go wrong it will go wrong. This is especially true of military operations, which involve complicated equipment, large numbers of people, and rapidly changing situations. As Halifax has been a fortress town for two and a half centuries it is almost inevitable that at some time or another the garrison would damage the city through well-intentioned efforts to protect the place. In light of the fact that coastal defence guns operated within a couple of thousands yards of the city until 1960, it is perhaps surprising that there were so few accidents. The most serious mishap occurred during the First World War.



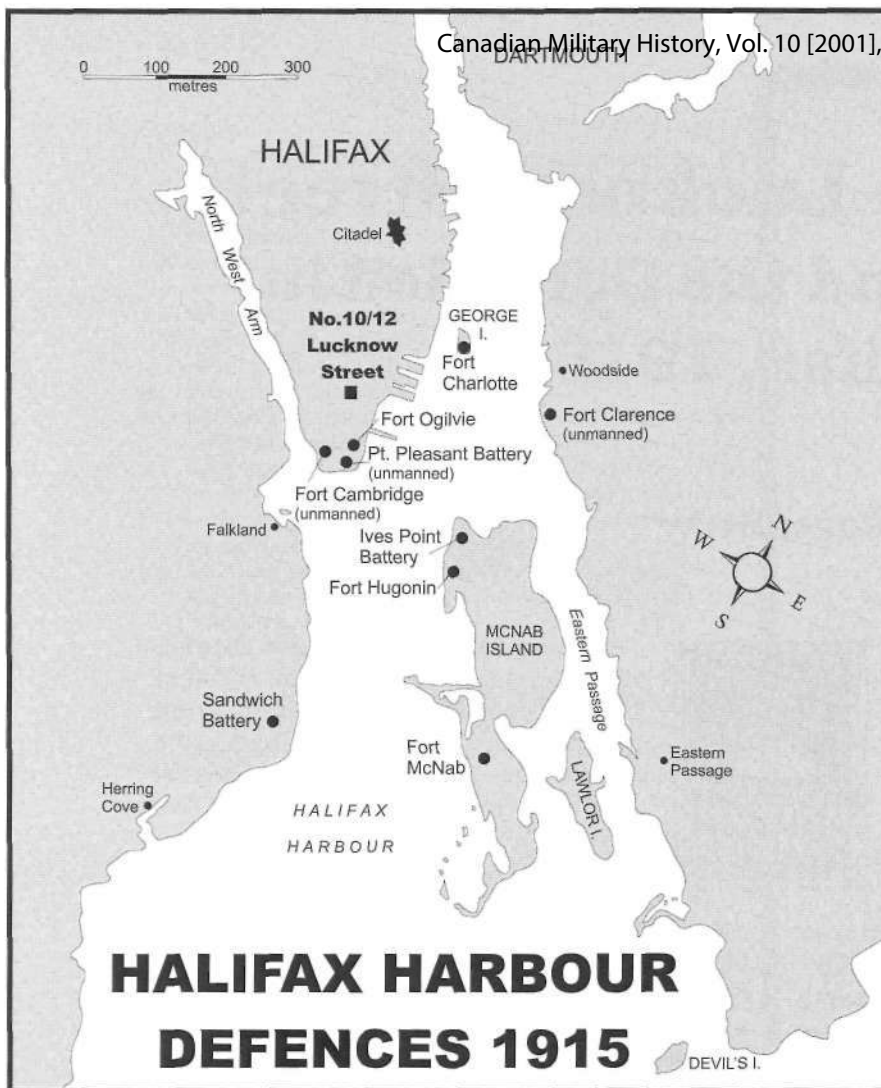
There was a real possibility, British naval leaders believed, that the fast German cruisers might attempt a raid on the port.² The garrison had to be alert, but on 1 March 1915 an excess of zeal nearly brought tragedy to two Halifax families.

At mid-morning on that day, Miss Alice O'Brien, 25, left her father's house on Lucknow Street in the city's fashionable south end for a ride on her horse, which was at a stable a few blocks away. The O'Briens lived in one half, No. 10, of a double house which had been built around 1890. The wooden building was typically late Victorian, with two narrow, high-ceilinged stories whose front wall was almost flush with the sidewalk. Alice's father, the federal government's inspector of weights and measures, was at his downtown office when she left for her ride. Mrs. O'Brien had also gone downtown, to shop, and only the maid remained at home. Number 12 Lucknow, separated from number 10 by a partition wall, belonged to L. Clyde Davidson, a publisher and stationer. In the Davidson house as well, the maid alone was present.³

At the end of July and the beginning of August 1914 the Halifax defences mobilized according to well-laid plans. The garrison included about 3,000 troops, of whom a third were professional soldiers of the permanent force, and the rest militiamen from around the Maritimes. They built trenches at positions on the outer harbour where German saboteurs or raiding parties might land, and manned six modern coast artillery forts that the British army had built before turning the fortress over to the Canadian government in 1905-6.¹

Halifax was of great strategic importance. The British war effort depended upon the supply of raw materials and equipment from North America across the Atlantic, and this vital seaborne trade was a logical target for Germany's powerful navy. Halifax served as a secure haven for merchant ships and also as a protected base from which the Royal Navy's warships could track down German commerce raiding cruisers.

Shortly after Alice began her ride, a little steamer, the federal Department of Marine and Fisheries vessel *Brant*, chugged out from the inner harbour. It stopped off the central part of McNab's Island to place a marker buoy over a shoal.⁴ *Brant* was still inside the "examination line" where every ship wishing to enter harbour had to identify itself to the navy's "examination vessel." Supporting the examination vessel were the powerful guns of Fort McNab, atop a 100-foot hill at the southern end of McNab's Island.



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold © 2001

Brant, on its return trip, had passed Ives Point Battery, which, from its position on the north-western tip of McNab's Island, stood guard over the entrance to the inner harbour. The officer in charge was under instructions to let no ship pass the fort into the port unless it had been cleared by the examination service. *Brant* had not been cleared and ignored signals from the fort, so the gunners did what they had trained to do. One of the fort's 12-pounder guns placed a shell behind the steamer. There was no reaction. A second shot kicked up the water scarcely 25 feet ahead of the bow when, as we have seen, *Brant* stopped.⁶

By this time, shortly after noon, Alice O'Brien had finished riding and started home. A block or so from Lucknow Street she met a friend who blurted out that something dreadful had happened. Hurrying on, Alice was horrified to see a crowd around her house: many of the upper storey windows were shattered, and bits of plaster and splintered wood were scattered about.

If a ship violated the regulations, a six-inch gun, designated the "examination gun," would fire a round across the offender's bow. In the event a few "bring-to" rounds failed to inspire cooperation, the garrison had instructions to fire for effect and destroy the vessel. The examination system thus worked as a trip-wire to bring the defences down on a disguised enemy raider before it could slip into the port to drop mines and shoot up moored vessels and the dockyard.⁵

At 1145 hours *Brant* turned around and headed back towards the inner harbour. In the words of the steamer's master:

.. left for Indian Point buoy, running slow speed; dinner bell rung and I left pilot house for dinner. As I was taking my dinner I heard what I thought was the 12 o'clock gun; took no notice. As I was returning to pilot house I heard a second shot. I stopped ship, as we were at Indian Point buoy, and to give men time to get their dinner. As we were engaged in lifting buoy, officer came alongside and informed me to proceed to Patrol Ship [the examination vessel], which I did. The Officer came aboard and saw the work we were engaged in.

Just before Alice's return, people in the area had heard a whistling sound, and then an explosion on the roof of the O'Brien house. Images of a German cruiser or of a Zeppelin pouring high explosives into the city flashed through the minds of some witnesses. With less fertile imaginations, the O'Brien and Davidson maids, who, fortunately, had been hanging laundry in the backyard, assumed something had gone wrong with the heating system.⁷

The furnace had not exploded and the Germans had not arrived. On the staircase inside the O'Brien house, beneath holes in the roof, lay a lump of steel engraved with damning evidence: a broad arrow and the digits 11-97 showed it to be part of an artillery shell manufactured for the British government in November 1897. One of the shells from Ives Point Battery had apparently bounced off the water and whizzed over the south end of the city to hit the centre of the roof of numbers 10-12 Lucknow Street, some 3,700 yards from the fort. On

striking the building a contact fuze detonated the charge in the shell.

Designed to tear open the hulls of torpedo boats and destroyers, the exploding round blew a hole two feet by four feet in the roof over the O'Brien's staircase and spread fragments which ripped a half-dozen holes, one 18 inches in diameter, in the roof of the Davidson house. Other steel splinters blasted through the partition, flew across the adjacent stairwell in the Davidson house, penetrated a second wall and entered one of the bedrooms, smashing some of the furniture. One fragment was found buried six inches in the far exterior wall of the Davidson house.⁸

Good luck alone had prevented deaths or severe injuries. The coast gunners knew that shells could ricochet like this, and yet had run the risk to stop, of all things, a government steamer. What had gone awry?

Militia and navy headquarters in Ottawa concluded that the accident was the result of a failure of inter-service co-operation. The navy regarded the examination service line under Fort McNab as the official entrance to the port. The militia, however, treated the Ives Point-Point Pleasant line, some two miles further inside the

harbour, as the boundary. Consequently, the navy had informed the master of *Brant* that he need not report to the examination vessel unless he passed outside the vessel, while the militia officer commanding at Ives Point Battery was under instructions to challenge any vessel attempting to enter past his fort without clearance.⁹

The militia adopted the navy's boundary, as it should have already done. The navy had precedence in all matters concerning the regulation of ship movements. There had been a second lapse in the defence arrangements, however. The best way to let the crusty captains of local craft go about their business without locking antlers with the battery commanders was to have the harbour craft fly special recognition signals. The *Halifax Defence Scheme*, the lengthy secret document on the basis of which the fortress had mobilized for war, had provided for precisely this, but in the confusion of August 1914 it had not been done.

There was no difficulty in ensuring that the two services applied the same regulations in the same way, but nevertheless the accident was a chilling reminder that every warning shot fired by the fortress guns might endanger the lives and property of the population around the

The house at No. 10/12 Lucknow Street that was hit by an errant "bring-to" shot fired from a 12-pounder gun at the the Ives Point Battery on McNab Island.



Photo by author

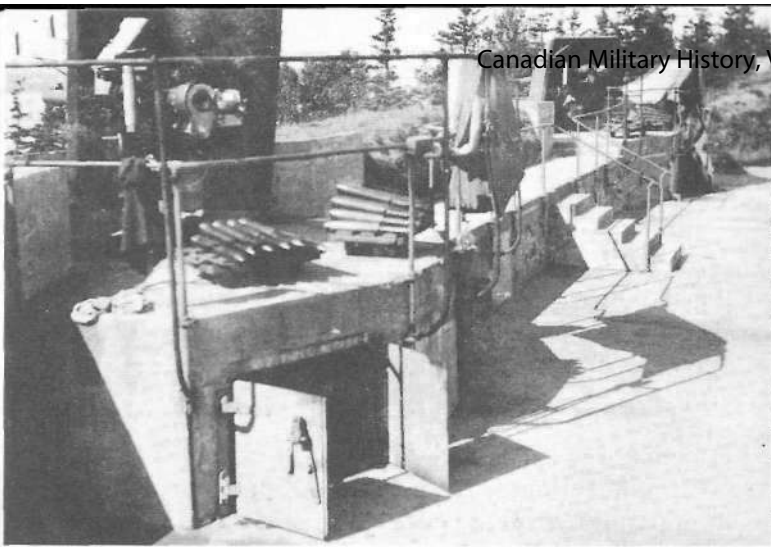


Photo by J.R. Curry. NAC PA 112428

The 12-pounder Q.F. [Quick Fire] gun position, Hugonins Battery, McNab Island, Halifax, NS, September 1914.

examination service at Halifax even in the spring of 1916 when the low level of the German threat allowed some reduction in the readiness of the city's defences.¹⁴

Happily for the townspeople, the militia did not forget civilian safety. Realizing that the six-inch gun was far too powerful for the examination role, the militia mounted a small six-pounder gun at Fort McNab expressly to fire warning rounds. The light six-pound projectile was sufficient to throw up a menacing geyser of water, but did not have the mass and power to ricochet anything like hundred-pound or even twelve-pound shells, and would do correspondingly less damage in the event of a mishap.¹⁵

These decisions set a precedent for procedures at all of Canada's defended harbours in both world wars. At each port the lightest gun available was assigned to the examination service, and fired warning rounds without restriction when ships violated port-entry procedures. In these ways the Lucknow Street accident directly influenced Canadian coastal defence policy.¹⁶

In Halifax, the *Liberal Morning Chronicle* ominously noted that this was not the first time shells had bounced from the harbour, but the *Conservative Herald* assured its readers "that a similar mishap will never occur again."¹⁷ City Council did not discuss the accident. The only mention of the military in the council minutes for the spring of 1915 is a motion to urge the federal government to despatch more troops for overseas service through Halifax.¹⁸ The increased shipping traffic resulting from the war, after all, meant prosperity for the city.

The Department of Militia and Defence arranged for repairs to the Davidson and O'Brien houses. It was not, however, easy to cover the building's wounds. In 1976 Miss O'Brien showed the author cracks ten feet long in the plaster above the staircase at number 10 Lucknow. But the O'Briens at least enjoyed the element of the ridiculous in the incident. A relative in England wrote to them about the bombing raids on British cities by German Zeppelins, and the O'Briens replied that "we are being shelled too, but by our own people!"

harbour. This was a dilemma. Pending a judgement from higher authorities the coastal gunners took the politic course by deciding that no gun should be fired towards the inner harbour, with its heavily built-up shores, unless a ship was "obviously hostile."¹⁰

At the centre of the difficulty was the six-inch examination gun in Fort McNab. In this role the weapon was more likely to fire in the direction of the city and outlying settlements than any other in the fortress. It had, in fact, already displayed an awesome ricochet. One round fired at a target 1,500 yards out in the main channel had finally ploughed up a farmer's field far beyond the opposite shore, over six miles from the battery, and distressingly close to a church. The hundred-pound projectile of the six-inch gun, moreover, was eight times heavier than the shell that hit the house on Lucknow Street.¹¹

On studying the situation, the militia and navy agreed that if the examination service was to be effective in preventing a potentially catastrophic attack on the city by a disguised enemy raider, then the examination gun had to be free to fire without restriction. "[D]amage to property on shore must be accepted as a possible consequence" of fully ready defences. Militia headquarters in Ottawa therefore ordered that the examination gun should fire warning rounds at every ship that defied the examination service, even if the gun had to fire towards the city.¹² At this very time, the Canadian government received intelligence that Germany might be preparing a naval raid on the Canadian coast.¹³ Although this alarm, like many other similar ones during the early months of the war, came to nothing, it did confirm the wisdom of not relaxing defence measures at key ports like Halifax. Certainly the British Admiralty was adamant on the point, insisting on the maintenance of the full

Author's Note

I originally learned of this incident from my great uncle, E.A. Thompson, who had spent the whole of his life in Halifax. During my first forays, as a graduate student, into the military records at the National Archives in Ottawa, I was delighted to find documentation in both the militia and naval files on the city's defences. During the summer of 1976 I pursued the story during a summer research trip to Halifax, and discovered that Miss O'Brien still lived at the house on Lucknow Street. She was then a very spry 86, and had vivid recollections of the events of 1 March 1915.

The article is a slightly cleaned up version of the original drafts that I produced in the late 1970s. There are two points I would add on the basis of subsequent work. The failure of communication between the navy and the militia, and the obvious shakiness of the navy's arrangements, is not surprising considering the newness, troubled beginnings, and meagre resources of the navy. It had been founded only in 1910, and soon thereafter, because of political controversy, virtually abandoned by the government. The naval aspects of the Halifax defence scheme had previously been poorly handled by the Department of Marine and Fisheries, and in 1910-14 the navy did much to improve the arrangements, but had almost nothing, aside from resources borrowed from other government departments, to work with.¹⁹

More generally, the incident to some limited extent foreshadowed the catastrophic Halifax explosion of December 1917. The navy was legally responsible for shipping traffic control within the port in wartime, but did not have the resources or support of other government authorities to make that control fully effective. This was obviously the source of the 1915 incident. It was less obviously the case concerning the collision between merchant vessels that caused the disaster in 1917, but the navy's shortcomings were the target of public outrage, and figured prominently in the official inquiries into the disaster.

Notes

1. M.S. Hunt, *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War* (Halifax, 1920), pp.236-71.

2. G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada, I: Origins and Early Years* (Ottawa, 1952), pp.237-44; C.E. Fayle, *Official History of the War: Seaborne Trade. I: The Cruiser Period* (London, 1920), pp. 100-5, 369-73.
3. Descriptions of Miss O'Brien's experiences are based on two interviews, one by telephone on 30 August 1976, the other in person on 8 September 1976. Information on the O'Brien and Davidson families confirmed by *McAlpines Halifax City Directory* (Halifax: McAlpines, 1890-1 to 1911).
4. National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 42, Box 249, File 36266, Daniel Walker to C.H. Harvey, 2 March 1915.
5. Tucker, *Naval Service of Canada, I*, pp.223, 228.
6. NA, RG 42, Box 249, File 36266, Daniel Walker to C.H. Harvey, 2 March 1915.
7. *Halifax Herald*, 2 March 1915, pp. 1-2.
8. *Ibid.*; *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 2 March 1915, p.3; *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 2 March 1915, p.7.
9. NAC RG 24, Box 6196, file G. 1-6-5, Commander R. M. Stephens to director of naval service, 1 April 1915, Naval Service Headquarters to Captain-in-Charge, HMC Dockyard, Halifax, 7 April 1915; Naval Secretary to Military Secretary, Interdepartmental Committee, 8 April 1915.
10. NAC RG 24, Box 2323, File HQS 66 v.9, Commanding Royal Canadian Artillery (CRCA) to General Staff Officer (GSO), 6th Division, 9 March 1915.
11. *Ibid.*, same to same, 19 March 1915
12. *Ibid.*, Captain-in-Charge HMC Dockyard, Halifax to General Officer Commanding (GOC), 6th Division. 17 March 1915. GOC. 6th Division to Secretary, Militia Council. 20 March 1915, "Extract from the Proceedings of the 22nd Meeting of the Interdepartmental Committee, 2 April 1915"; NAC RG 24, Box 6196, File G. 1-6-5, Cmdr. R.M. Stephens to Director of the Naval Service, 1 April 1915, quoted.
13. NAC RG 24, Box 2323, File HQS 66 v.9. Governor-General of Canada to the British Ambassador to the United States, 31 March 1915.
14. *Ibid.*, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General of Canada, 12 April 1916.
15. *Ibid.*, minute by the Master General of the Ordnance to Chief of the General Staff, 23 March 1915.
16. G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada, II: 1919-1967* (Toronto, 1972), pp.447-77 *passim*.
17. *Morning Chronicle*, 2 March 1915, p.7 ; *Halifax Herald*, 2 March 1915, pp. 1-2
18. Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, MG 12, vol. 235, minutes of Halifax city council, March-May 1915.
19. Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders 1880-1918* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991); Barry Gough and Roger Sarty, "Sailors and Soldiers: The Royal Navy, the Canadian Forces, and the Defence of Atlantic Canada, 1890-1918" in *A Nation's Navy: In Quest of Canadian Naval Identity*, Michael L. Hadley, Rob Huebert and Fred W. Crickard, eds. (Montreal and Kingston, 1996), 112-30.

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