

Letters from Halifax: Reliving the Halifax Explosion Through the Eyes of My Grandfather, A Sailor in the Royal Canadian Navy

John G. Armstrong

Sat Night
8 Dec 1917
HMCS *Niobe*
Halifax

My darling;

Just a few lines to let you know that I am *alive* & have not received a single scratch. I wrote to you on Tues the last day I was ashore. This is Sat & I have not had my clothes off since the awful explosion. I have only had time to get one little wash so you can imagine how I look. I am alive but do not know why.'

There are defining moments in our lives which can forever become linked with our identities. Few of us can claim to have changed history but for those who have been swept along by its course, our usually unplanned, unremarked and not particularly significant presence at some extraordinary incident can profoundly change our lives. Red Deer, Alberta is not a place which springs to mind in terms of the great December 1917 explosion which destroyed much of Halifax and Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Yet several naval reservists from this small prairie city (population in 1911: 2700) were present, including my grandfather, Lambert "Bert" Griffith. He survived the explosion from a distance of approximately 850 metres while standing on the deck of HMCS *Niobe*, moored in the Naval Dockyard. The experience defined the rest of his life and left long lasting hidden scars. This perhaps greatest of Canadian calamities killed some two thousand souls, wounded five times that number and rendered twenty thousand homeless. It flattened much of the north end of Halifax as well as Dartmouth, and damaged much of the remainder. And it touched and changed lives even in remote Red Deer, Alberta.

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When I was little, I found three letters that Bert Griffith wrote to his wife in those first numb days after the catastrophe, in an envelope postmarked Halifax NS, 10 December 1917 at 6:30 PM. I knew little about my grandfather. Our lifelines had touched only briefly when, upon the death of my grandmother, my parents and their new son moved into his house so he would not have to be alone. I had been born in late 1942 and he died in early 1945. I have next to no memory of him other than through family pictures (including pictures of him in naval uniform) and reminiscences. There are shared family stories among his four grandchildren and various souvenirs and mementoes, of which one of the more remarkable is a taped reminiscence by one of Bert's sisters, recorded about 1971, which traced family memories back to her own grandmother. There is a Griffith Family Bible in England that records his birth and references to him in Red Deer newspapers. City directories provide an outline of residence and employment. Military records have also been helpful; indeed, his Naval Service file and his file at the Department of Veterans' Affairs proved rich beyond my imagination. These items, together with the long unread letters from Halifax provide some sense of a man generally unknown to his grandchildren. More particularly, the letters are a rare and literate account from the perspective of the "lower deck" of one individual's involvement in an important and calamitous event.

Lambert Barron Griffith was born in England on 21 November 1882, three years before the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway linked Canada's east and west coasts. The second son of a well-connected London insurance manager, he was raised and educated in the comfortable if not privileged surroundings of an English middle class family. Restless in the clerical employment his father had arranged for him when it became time to embark upon a career, however, he had been seduced by the clarion call of the CPR's campaign to attract immigrants to the Canadian West. In August 1906, in his twenty-fourth year, he emigrated, ending up in the small community of Red Deer, Alberta.'

Although the young arrival was more or less typical of the "tenderfoot" stereotype Englishman of the time, his sincerity and good humour won the sympathy of a local magistrate who helped him find employment in the local land office as a clerk. Now glad to have such employment, Bert settled into the community. In 1909 he married Dorothy Helen Walker ("Dolly"), an English girl born in South Africa, who had come to Red Deer in 1905. Two daughters soon followed, Marjorie, born in 1911 and Thelma, the following year.' When Bert's sister Dorothy visited the family for Christmas 1912, she found them comfortably ensconced in a newly-built home in the Village of North Red Deer with Dolly's two sisters paying board and living in the upstairs bedroom.

Bert was already over thirty by the time World War I began, a respected member of the community and sole support of a family.' He was therefore an unlikely candidate for military service in the first two years of the war. But his younger bachelor brother "Willie," who had followed him to Alberta in 1909, was among the first volunteers from Red Deer to go overseas with the 5th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force. Twice wounded, he survived a number of the great bloodlettings on the Western Front. By September 1917 he

was still in France as a temporary lieutenant and back at the Front.' Bert of course followed his brother's fate from the sidelines as did an anxious father and family in England.

By 1916 there was talk of conscription to meet the Army's growing manpower needs amid a growing atmosphere of recrimination and social pressure. The Royal Canadian Navy too was now urgently looking for men, a need better filled by older family men like Bert who still desired to serve his country (he was now almost thirty-four). The Navy had only been formed in 1910 but had not developed beyond the commissioning of two already obsolete training cruisers which had been provided by the British, HMCS *Niobe* on the east coast and HMCS *Rainbow* on the west. At the outset of the Great War, manpower needs were modest, enough merely for the continued operation of the two ancient cruisers plus a few small patrol vessels and the basic elements necessary for communications, control and examination of shipping and defence of the major harbours.' All told, the Canadian naval service numbered little more than one thousand in all ranks for the first two years of the war. This changed in 1916 when the virtual absence of Canadians visibly participating in the larger task of "watching and guarding the wide sea-front of the Empire" became a matter of public concern. The result was a decision in February 1916 to recruit 5000 men for the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve (RNCVR), with the idea that most would serve with the RN (only 1100 ultimately did).' The waves of public indignation that accompanied the unexpected appearance of submarines off the east coast later in the year and the fear that more would follow called for immediate measures to beef-up Canadian coastal defences. Most of the new sailors being recruited would therefore remain in Canada and a significant number of new Canadian-built trawlers and drifters, which the Royal Navy had intended to press into service, would now be diverted to the RCN to help expand local patrols.'

Bert Griffith appears to have been among the first to be enrolled under the new scheme. A recruiting party from Esquimalt had appeared in Red Deer and other Alberta centres in late September, well before the national recruiting scheme had been organized. They were seeking replacements for more experienced men already released to east coast service. At least six Red Deer men stepped forward, perhaps because the Master-at-Arms at Esquimalt, who would be responsible for naval training, was William Hadley, a prominent and popular Red Deer man who had immigrated after service in the Royal Navy.'

As their training proceeded to the end of 1916, Bert and at least one other Red Deer resident, Walter Webb, were eventually joined in Esquimalt by their wives and children. By January 1917 the men were ready to join the ship's company of the venerable HMCS *Rainbow*, by now nearly worn out from the strain of west coast shipping patrols.¹⁰ Indeed, *Rainbow* was badly in need of a refit and was proving too expensive in terms of the scarce manpower necessary for sea service. Men were required immediately on the east coast and the RCN's Director, Admiral C.E. Kingsmill, decided that the ship would have to be paid off as soon as its men could be sufficiently trained as gun-layers and gunners for the growing east coast patrol fleet." Thus it was, in the course of these events, that Bert Griffith and others left their families in Esquimalt and were despatched to the east coast port of Halifax where, on 9 May 1917, Bert was placed on the books of HMCS *Niobe*.'

Niobe was the 11,000-ton heavy cruiser which had been obtained from Britain. Although initially placed on a war footing in 1914 and indeed well used in the early part of the war for Royal Navy cruiser patrols in the western Atlantic, by mid-1915 the already much-worn and outdated ship was beyond further useful and economic operational employment. *Niobe* also represented a serious drain on the limited manpower available to the RCN for anti-submarine patrol purposes, for which smaller, more manoeuvrable vessels were required. Recommissioned as a depot ship at Halifax, however, the cruiser filled a vital need. Naval accommodation and office space was in very short supply and "Hotel *Niobe's*" 450-foot length could house and victual as many as a thousand sailors while providing additional space for training, classrooms and communications. As well, and perhaps most importantly, *Niobe* now provided a floating headquarters for the RCN in the port of Halifax and, as such, was moored at the extreme north end of HMC Dockyard opposite the Royal Naval College of Canada with its bow directly pointing to what would be the site of the destruction of the SS *Mont Blanc*, roughly 850 metres to the north." Acting Commander Percy F. Newcombe exercised nominal command over the depot "ship's company."

Halifax as Bert Griffith found it in 1917 was something of a grim contrast to the relatively halcyon west coast conditions of service and climate. While still distant from dangers to be found in the eastern Atlantic, the city (population roughly 50,000) was strategically positioned on the Great Circle route to Europe and was the only major ice-free Canadian east coast port. Wartime shipping from Halifax was limited only by the capacity of the single track rail line that connected it with Canada's interior. It was also the preferred port of embarkation and debarkation for Canadian soldiers. Now, with the appearance of the first German submarines in the western Atlantic, the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, and America's entry into the war, the port's role as an operational centre had been further expanded. Joint orders issued by the local army and navy commanders to douse all lights ashore and afloat which might be viewed from seaward, had first been given in late 1916. The virtual blackout made Halifax unique among Canadian cities."

Halifax had been a garrison town and a naval base since its inception in 1749 and an element of varying importance in the military security structure of the British Empire. Despite the priorities and demands of the overseas forces the former Imperial fortress was garrisoned by somewhat more than three thousand soldiers and sea approaches to the harbour were shielded by a considerable network of garrison coastal artillery and searchlights.¹⁵ The dockyard facilities, which had been handed over to Canada after the departure of the Royal Navy in 1905 and much neglected, had been repaired and refurbished with the onset of the war. On Bert Griffith's arrival it was a busy if not entirely modern complex of offices, residences, workshops, slipways, wharfs and storehouses. The dockyard's civilian and military staff were under constant pressure to meet the constant demands of repair, refit and maintenance to both the ragtag collection of Canadian vessels and passing units of the RN.¹⁶ The privately owned drydock of Halifax Shipyards Ltd., immediately north of the dockyard was also an important element in fleet maintenance.

Naval resources for defence of the port and dockyard were less extensive but had been increased somewhat in the face of the submarine threat. But organization of the convoys and travel clearance of neutral vessels were outside Canadian hands. An efficient and highly visible RN Rear Admiral, B.M. Chambers, had set up shop with a small staff in the port for these purposes in November. This had caused considerable consternation among Canadian naval authorities because he ranked above the Canadians on the spot and potentially undermined the autonomy and credibility of the Canadian service." Indeed, unlike the west coast, where the local public had welcomed the birth of the RCN, Halifax society tended to regard the RCN's "tin pot navy" as interlopers.¹⁸

Still, the unsung Canadians carried on with what they had. Close to two thousand commercial vessels passed through Halifax in 1917, over and above the normal coastal and fishing traffic. The RCN Examination Service, from offices aboard *Niobe* and using a number of small boats to meet each arrival, passed them into and out of the harbour and fulfilled the role of Harbourmaster in wartime.¹⁹ Naval transport, intelligence and communications staffs operated from *Niobe* as well.

While the Militia Department's coastal defence guns were the port's premier insurance against warships operating on the surface, they provided small comfort in the face of potential submarine incursions. Thus, in June 1915 the first anti-submarine net had been ordered to cover the inner harbour from either side of George's Island. By July 1917 a second net was in place further down the harbour between Ives Point and the breakwater off Point Pleasant.²⁰ There were also mounting fears that submarines might lay mines in the approaches to Halifax and other harbours. Thus a flotilla of ten minesweepers, most of them converted menhaden (herring) trawlers armed with twelve pounder guns, was moored in the Northwest Arm, outside the nets.²¹ Early every morning whenever weather permitted, the vessels would sortie in pairs more than twenty miles to sea in order to ensure clear channels into and out of the harbour for warships, convoys and coastal traffic.²²

No major submarine incursions occurred in the western Atlantic in 1917; the growing fleet of German U-boats found better hunting closer to home. Shipping losses had grown astronomically and in July a reluctant Royal Navy had been forced to adopt a convoy system if shipping routes to Britain were to be kept open at all. By July, trans-Atlantic convoys had begun sailing from Hampton Roads, Virginia, New York City and Sydney, Nova Scotia, where the small RCN patrol service was based. In September, however, fast convoys had begun to depart from Halifax. By December, the freeze-up of the St. Lawrence River would halt the movement of ships from the Canadian interior and ice would usually render Sydney untenable as well. Halifax had become the preferred winter port for the assembly of convoys and as the base for the RCN patrol service.

The shorter sea-route from Halifax made the challenge facing the RCN's diminutive coastal anti-submarine patrols somewhat less diffuse and difficult. Nevertheless, there were only eight effective auxiliary patrol ships available to perform this service at this point, most of them drawn from other government departments and the hydrographic survey and ranging from 700 to 1050 tons displacement.²³ These resources were supplemented by a

small flotilla of converted yachts and smaller vessels intended to support the Halifax defences. Of these only the fast low slung FMCS *Grilse*, with a torpedo tube and two twelve pounder guns, was of any real value for the purpose of rapid response to any surface threat.²⁴ More help was on the way, however. Before the freeze-up, the first three trawlers and a few drifters of a larger number intended to reinforce coastal patrols against anticipated German submarine incursions had arrived from shipyards in the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes.²⁵

Bert Griffith was doubtlessly among those earmarked as gunners for the expanded patrol service, probably aboard one of the new trawlers and drifters. By September, not even *Niobe* was sufficient to house the growing number of men on the books, who were assembling for this service and awaiting delayed deliverance of additional vessels.²⁶ Instead of going to sea Bert thus found himself one of the minor cogs in the port's military defences.

Bert's actual duties during the summer and fall of 1917 cannot be precisely defined but some information can be gleaned from his letters and his service records. Both he and Walter Webb were employed on the "boom" (either the inner or outer anti-submarine nets) where they might remain for as much as two weeks before being brought back to *Niobe*. Aboard the depot ship they appear to have been utilized more in those general duties peculiar to the Navy, including painting, scraping and that particularly beloved task of "coaling ship." Bert was rated Able Seaman in mid-July and his records show assignments to the *Wilfred C.* and the *Nereid*, armed tugs which served turns as gate vessels on the nets, opening and closing the "gates" for passing ships through in daylight.²⁷ Bert's records also show that all was not well in Esquimalt. A telegram received at Naval Headquarters in mid-November advised that Dolly needed a serious operation and the doctor concerned considered Bert's presence desirable. Even though the west coast navy offered to provide a suitable replacement for Bert, the request received scant sympathy in wartime OI

As Bert's letters have informed us, as dawn approached on the cold clear morning of Thursday, 6 December 1917, Walter was out on the boom and Bert was aboard *Niobe*, in his hammock in Mess No. 9. The sailors on the depot ship and the various patrol vessels docked to the south would have started their day at 6 a.m. with the calling of hands other than watchkeepers. As another sailor aboard at the time recalled:

lash up and stowing of hammocks, hands to the galley for cocoa 6.20 day men fall in the front battery for scrubbing down and brass polishing and cleaning of steel stauntings which supported top decks...Whilst the activities were in progress two hands were preparing for breakfast. Two men were told off each day to look after their particular mess, get the grub, set the table and draw the stores, these were known as the cooks...7.a.m. Cooks to the galley was piped and the hands would go to breakfast after the scrubbing down and cleaning was completed. The sooner the hands scoffed their bacon and fried tomatoes, bread, butter, and jam, and tea that you could stand a knife up in, the longer they would have to smoke before divisions.²⁹

At 7 AM two RCN minesweepers, *PV7* and *Baleine*, had set off from the North West Arm past the Examination anchorage where *Mont Blanc* was still awaiting clearance to proceed up the harbour.³⁰ The port was relatively full. Some thirty to forty ships being gathered for convoys scheduled to depart on 7 and 10 December were anchored in Bedford Basin as were two armed merchant cruisers, HMS *Knight Templar* and *Changuinola*. The latter was anchored in the "stream" roughly abreast of *Niobe*. Below was another RN visitor on convoy duty, the nimble light cruiser *Highflyer*. Other commercial shipping was berthed along the shore and in the drydock. As the now infamous *Mont Blanc* began its fateful passage upward through the anti-submarine gates and into the inner harbour, an outbound neutral freighter assigned to Belgian relief, the *Imo* rounded out of Bedford Basin and into the harbour channel. An unknown tramp freighter had just moved into the Basin and *Stella Maris*, one of the RCN's chartered tugs, was headed in the same direction with two scows in tow.³¹ As Bert wrote to Dolly two days later: "We had just finished breakfast at 7 30 am Wed morning [sic] & were having our usual smoke before falling in for carrying on coaling ship. A Belgian relief boat had just come in also a French boat. The French boat was getting ready to dock when the Belgian boat ran in to her stern. Apparently a very slight

Bert seems to have been somewhat disoriented in his recollection of the day of the week and the time, possibly due to fatigue, shock or the rush of events which ensued. Besides, gossip, rumour and innuendo were rife until accurate information, both about the explosion and the events leading up to it, became available, and this would not be for quite some time. *Mont Blanc* had set off up the harbour from the Examination anchorage just off the western shore of McNab's Island at approximately 7:30 and the collision did not take place until 8:45.³³ In the routine of the busy port, and had *Mont Blanc* been carrying a less hazardous cargo, the mild collision would have aroused little interest except possibly to the insurance adjustors. But sparks generated either by the collision itself or as *Imo's* bow sluggishly rasped back out of *Mont Blanc's* side ignited either benzol stored on deck or picric acid below or both within just a few minutes. "Shortly after this the French boat was seen to be in flames. She put in to shore about 500 yards [sic] from the stern of the *Niobe*. A lot of us boys went up on deck to see the sight. It did not look very bad. There were three pretty loud explosions & everyone just imagined that it was the oil blowing up."³⁴ *Mont Blanc* carried a mix³⁵ of almost three thousand tons of wet and dry picric acid, TNT, guncotton and benzol. The time was 9:04:35 AST.³⁶

All at once there was a most hideous noise & I saw the whole boat vanish, a moment after I saw something coming can't describe it. I was hurled on the deck & there was an awful noise going on. I got to my feet & ran with a whole lot of fellows. My one fixed idea was to get below. We all tried to get down the one ladder without any success. I had presence of mind enough to dig my head in between all kinds of legs & c. After that I ran along the deck & heard all kinds of things falling. It was shrapnel & bits of the side of the ship. I did not know this at the time.³⁷

The blast was followed by a powerful tsunami (or "tidal" wave) which struck *Niobe* one to two minutes later.³⁸ "I managed to get to the gangway unhurt & found that the ship had broken her big cable & the gangway gone. As she crashed in to the jetty I jumped off & got ashore just before she shoved the jetty over."³⁹

In the general pandemonium and panic of rushing squirming bodies seeking shelter or escape a number of sailors were either blown overboard or fell. Flying glass and debris also accounted for some deaths and serious injuries, although the majority escaped relatively unscathed or at least able to carry out their duties in the short term. Others were remarked to be suffering from "shock." Twenty members of the RCN died in the explosion, although not all were from *Niobe*.⁴⁰ This is far less than the impression given in a number of contemporary memoirs, one of which claims to have seen nineteen dead men in the litter and shambles of *Niobe's* deck alone.⁴¹ Indeed, *Niobe* looked like she had been through a battle. Three of her four funnels were down, there were gaping holes in her super-structure and stanchions, lines blast bags, broken glass and other debris were strewn everywhere, though much of the damage proved later to be superficial.⁴²

Bert had been lucky. Sailors who reached the site of the gangway after him had leapt into the water and more lives would doubtlessly have been lost had not one of *Niobe's* senior ratings, Gunner William O'Reilly, acted promptly to check the panic. Also under his direction, *Niobe's* cutter was manned in time to fish a number of freezing ratings from the chilly water.⁴³ "Once safe on shore & finding I was *unhurt* I started in to assist the wounded. I helped first to take a wounded man out of the water. By this time all the houses round the dockyard were on fire."⁴⁴ Gunner O'Reilly went on from his rescue efforts to bring a party ashore to rebury *Niobe's* port bower anchor, which had been dragged from its concrete bed. Then he turned his attention to clearing ammunition from nearby magazines.⁴⁵

By this time all the houses round the dockyard were on fire. I joined a party on the run to the ammunition magazines just on shore beside the jetty where the old Nobler was tied up. We worked like slaves, pulling out cases of cordite, & shells of all kinds & dumped them in the water. It was a perfect miracle they did not go off, as the 3 buildings where they were stored had been completely wrecked, but luckily had not caught fire.⁴⁶

It seems that Bert was among those who, despite the initial panic, remained under naval discipline in the aftermath. *Niobe's* First Lieutenant, Temporary Lieutenant-Commander Allan Baddeley, had sent about seventy ratings ashore, again under the redoubtable Gunner O'Reilly, to control fires in the dockyard. The spreading flames had also raised fears for the safety of the nearby partly demolished structures of the North Ordnance ammunition magazines on the Wellington Barracks property. Bert was among the sailors detailed to try to empty them while holding off the advancing conflagration.⁴⁷

From the standpoint of Commander Percy Newcombe's subsequent report of the disaster, it would appear that the depot ship's officers and non-commissioned officers were

equal to the task of dealing with the immediate crisis. The Head Steward even managed to serve dinner on the day of the explosion at the regulation time, he noted.⁴⁸ For men with families in Halifax, however, there were conflicting demands as the gravity of the disaster became apparent. According to one uncorroborated personal memoir many of these:

were about to make a break for it when some officer heavy on tradition, yelled thru a megaphone for all hands to stand fast, keep cool and everything will be alright, there's no immediate danger and to remember the *Birkenhead*. So someone yells back at him, to hell with you and the *Birkenhead* we got wives and kids ashore, so there was a general stampede for the gangplank which was somewhat out of kilter, it was a good thing those ratings took the law into their own hands, they did a lot of good saving lives and putting out fires after which they were commended for their bravery and in helping the civic authorities who at the time did not know that they broke ship and had a charge of mass mutiny hanging over their heads but said charge was dropped.⁴⁹

Bert's letter to Dolly sheds no light on the incident, which suggests that it occurred after his leap to safety, probably after some sort of temporary gangway had been restored. He does, however, provide some initial perceptions of the magnitude of disaster:

The ship that blew up had about 2000 ton of a more powerful explosive than nitro glycerine. The explosion was felt 10 miles away by ships. It makes it the more wonderful our escape. There is not a single pain of glass in Halifax. The yard is a complete wreck. A train coming on from Montreal was wrecked, also a street car. Our steam cutter along with her crew were lost. Several men here have lost their wives & children. Thank goodness you were not here. I have not seen a paper. I have not been thru' anything so awful in my life. We have been working so hard that 1 for one have not had time to realize what I have escaped.⁵⁰

Niobe's steam cutter and its volunteer crew of seven had disappeared without a trace after approaching the burning *Mont Blanc* in a futile effort to render assistance.⁵¹ Despite its shattered appearance and damage to nearly every building on the site, the Dockyard did not suffer as much as did the shoreline to the north, the residential districts of the North End and corresponding sectors of Dartmouth. Indeed, only two of the dockyard buildings proved beyond eventual repair, although contemporary photographs belie that impression.⁵²

Bert's letter ends with more bleak reports tempered by relief at his own survival:

The dead are just laid out anywhere. I saw a basket on the jetty this morning & in it was a little baby, quite dead. Next to it was a stoker with

his face all crushed in. I need not say any more. I have never seen death in this form before. I am sure that for ten minutes we have all been thru' worse than in the trenches. The whole town is a wreck even the roof off the station. A German fleet could not have done so much damage. An Imperial cruiser was just on the other side of us in the stream & they have lost their Commander & about 45 men. All the wood work on board the *Niobe* has been shattered & water cut off. The day after the accident it blew a blizzard & made rescue more difficult, but kept down the fire. Lots of ships have been sunk. The Belgian boat that caused the explosion is lying on her side on the opposite shore. The new YMCA in the yard of course is a complete wreck like everything else. I don't suppose I shall go up town till I return from the boom. Well darling, we have lots to be thankful for after all. There will be no Xmas leave now. Unless one went away there would be no where to go. Even the theatres are wrecked. Well love there are lots more details I could go on to but just as well not to. Write soon to your lucky old Lofty. Every minute I thought I was dead. We'll be working pretty near night & day for a long time yet.⁵³

The sailors on *Niobe* were indeed worked night and day for a long time. The ship had to be put back into proper state and drafts of seamen were regularly placed at the disposal of the militia authorities, who ultimately coordinated military manpower needs in support of the massive relief effort.⁵⁴ Despite these grim and urgent needs, the Navy's first priority in the immediate aftermath was to maintain the operational readiness and capability of its few ships and, perhaps more importantly, to restore the situation at the Dockyard and ship repair facilities. The war continued and ships required repair and supply. Most of the Yard's civilian labour force had lived in the devastated North End and the survivors were initially preoccupied with rescue and shelter for their families. In the meantime, urgent efforts were necessary to save the more perishable clothing and victualling stores. It was subsequently reported that stores worth \$250,000 had been recovered by working parties from *Niobe*, who "performed the work under most arduous weather conditions and at considerable personal risk to themselves as the buildings are in a very shaky state, the roofs having collapsed in places and their structures being badly shaken throughout."⁵⁵

Some of the sailors' exhaustion is reflected in Bert's next letter to Dolly, written aboard *Niobe* on the Sunday ten days following the explosion. It is also interesting that his estimate of his distance from the explosion had narrowed from his previous estimate:

I am just writing you...to let you know I am all right...I am very anxious to get a letter from you, letting me know how the news of the great explosion was received in Victoria. You poor old love, you must have had a scare. Never mind a miss is as good as a mile, & by this time you will have got my letter, written a couple of days after. We have been worked half dead

ever since & have only had shore leave for the last three days & that only, from five p.m. I got special leave to go up town on Thurs the 14 at 2:30 & have only been up once since. What a sight it is. Not a window anywhere. All the theatres closed & used for hospitals. YMCA and Union Jack Club the same. There is no place now to write letters, so we are better off on board. I wrote to father & told him that I was safe. We have been on the Niobe now for two weeks. Tomor'ow Mon we are going back on the boom & will quite likely be left there for two weeks. I shall be glad to get out of all the work & be able to do some washing & c. We have hardly had time to wash ourselves, let alone clothes. From ships coming in I am told that the explosion was felt *60 miles* away. Fancy me on the Niobe only about 300 yds [*sic*] having such a wonderful escape. The devil looks after his own as they say.'

Bert went on to remark that he was not the only one in the family to narrowly escape death. A letter from his father had arrived to say that younger brother Willie in France "had come thru a big charge & was the *only* officer not killed or badly wounded in his battalion."

Bert's stress and exhaustion as well as relief and despair is underscored by the somewhat rambling and disjointed written stream of consciousness which followed.

I will write you again from the boom I am trying to write this on the mess deck & it is very hard with all the row & shaking. The terrible accident has quite taken my mind off the great disappointment of getting turned down from Ottawa. Of course the Niobe has been badly smashed, but she saved our lives. Just the greatest luck. Hundreds were killed in their houses miles away. Even poor little children in their schools. No doubt you will read all about it in the papers. Hundreds of coffins in the streets. There is to be a big funeral tomorrow about 400 unidentified bodies to be buried. Thank God a hundred times that you & the dear little girls were not here.

There was a certain humorous aspect to the situation, but it only occupied Bert's mind briefly.

I wrote to the Home Office of the Sun Life in Montreal about the loan on the Policy. I will look after that. I expect that they will be glad to know that I am alive. There will be no Xmas here as it is a city of sorrow. Poor children without parents & c. We will get no leave. Do what you can old love & I will try & send something later on.

After a few details of efforts to deal with the family's financial troubles Bert concluded his letter.

I am tickled to death at being even alive. One of the officers who made my life & others extra hard has been killed. I am glad & wish some others had been with him. A lot of real nice boys have been killed & some of the rotten pigs left. This is rather blood thirsty from me. I have never seen a man killed before. I shall get over the affects in time.

Several of *Niobe's* senior petty officers had been killed in the explosion but, as will be seen, Bert almost certainly is talking about Temporary Boatswain Alfred C. Mattison. The remark is not tempered by the fact that Mattison had voluntarily gone off with *Niobe's* steam pinnacle to aid *Mont Blanc* and had died as one of the RCN's few recognized heroes.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in his third letter written four days before what would be a very grim Christmas day in Halifax, Bert recognized that the Bo's'n' might unintentionally have played a role in saving his own life. He also gives us a clue as to how quickly the "jungle telegraph" passed the news of the disaster to worried families in Esquimalt.⁵⁸

I was so relieved to get your letter of the 10th & to know that you received the answer to your wire. Now that you have got my letter & know that I am quite safe you will feel easier. Won't you love? The first news of the disaster must have upset you very much. Fancy Mrs Heal hearing of it at 10 AM on Thurs. It only happened at nine. Don't some people take a kind of morbid delight in breaking bad news. Well never mind old kid you have still got your hubby so far safe & sound. Hundreds of things might have happened but fortunately did not. One thing certain if we had not taken all the coal from the lighter the night before. At the time of the explosion we would have been coaling & a lot more of us would have been killed. My coaling station was in the lighter attending to the derrick rope. The B'osun [*sic*] by making us finish up that night did us a good turn unintentional. He got blown to pieces along with all the steam cutters crew.

Given the difference in time zones, Dolly would have received the news about five hours after the explosion. One can only imagine the emotional effects on a young mother with serious medical problems, having trouble coping with two small girls (aged five and six). Although this author has only known the two as distinguished and authoritative icons of respect, family lore has it that they were demanding little hellions at the time. Bert was not doing very well either.

I am afraid that this letter is rather rambling & disjointed. I am quite sure that my nerves have been severely shocked. Now that it is all over I am rather sorry in a way that I have not been wounded so that I could be sent back to Squimalt [*sic*]. Well this is Xmas week how about it. I last wrote to you in pencil telling you that I was once again coming back on the boom

after being on board the *Niobe* for two weeks. We expected to stay out for two weeks & the other relief go away for Xmas leave & we get New Year. Had word by phone that they were all coming out again to take our places & we are to go on leave first. I have arranged to stay & will get five days at New Year so that...you and I will be able to be together. Goodness knows what we are going to do. The town is all wrecked & in darkness. If we take our leave tickets we can not be fed on the *Niobe*. If we do not take them we will have to work in the morning & go ashore in the afternoons. I don't know what to do. It sure will be a rotten time. The worst Xmas I have ever spent.

Despite his gloom Bert still showed some capacity to appreciate ironic humour.

I got the photos sent from Town yesterday. They are not too bad. I really wanted them taken a bit lower down so that my badges would show. I am afraid I wanted my wife to give me the finishing touches, pull down my collar & c. & c. They came very near being the last photos. I paid for them when I had them taken & no doubt after the accident the photographer thought that he would not hurry in case I would never call for them. You bet I turned up & told him to finish them up. As I want to get this off right away I will close. Lots of love to your dear self & the children.

So ended the last of the letters retained in our family. The Christmas shared by Bert and his mates in unhappy Halifax is not recorded. There was little likelihood out-of-town sailors would have found welcoming accommodation for the holidays. Relief workers and labour brought in from out of town crammed all available space not already occupied by homeless Haligonians. Nor had the disaster improved the local popular image of the RCN. The search for scapegoats had begun with a public inquiry which seemed almost daily to reveal some new instance of criminal ineptitude, possible sabotage or bungling, which the local print media, particularly the *Halifax Herald*, belaboured incessantly.⁵⁹ The principal target of public venom was the pilotage service but the RCN, already an object of some local mockery when compared to the British professionals, was responsible for traffic control in the harbour. As one indignant editorialist in Ottawa held, they were not even up to "this simple policeman's job." However unfairly (for under maritime law blame for collisions normally rests with one or both ship's captains), many Canadians, particularly furious Haligonians, felt that their naval service had let them down. Thus the "Tin Pot" RCN and its leadership were publicly disparaged at a critical point in the war. This perception left a lasting legacy in Halifax, with detrimental effects upon the morale of the RCN."

The damage caused by the explosion to Bert's subsequent life was also lasting. According to his medical case history Bert's health, which had been relatively good until the disaster, was in "steady decline" after the explosion, and not simply as a result of the

shock and hard duty mentioned in his letters. Family stories that he had been struck in the chest by broken glass on *Niobe* cannot be confirmed but are credible in the sense of the amount probably thrown around from the structures built upon its upper decks. In January 1918 he developed a "severe cold" and was hospitalized for a time. At what point this developed into what was considered pleurisy is not clear. *Niobe* had become dreadfully overcrowded in the explosion's aftermath and the poorly ventilated mess decks presented dangerous breeding grounds for what naval authorities were as late as June 1918 still calling "consumption," the mild euphemism for tuberculosis.⁶² In March 1918 Bert was granted a one-month leave of absence to be present for the serious operation his wife still needed. Part of his time in Esquimalt also appears to have been spent in hospital. During this time the family's situation moved Captain E.H. Martin, Superintendent of the Esquimalt Dockyard and the senior naval officer on the west coast, to intervene with the Director of the Naval Service, Admiral C.E. Kingsmill, who genuinely cared for those under his authority; Kingsmill had Bert reassigned to Esquimalt for the rest of his service.⁶³

From 24 May 1918 Bert was diagnosed as having chronic pleurisy (fibroid phthisis) and his records show a long hospital stay extending into August; his lungs were twice "tapped" but "no fluid found."⁶⁴ At the end of August, after a short leave, he was rated as unfit for further service and discharged to the Department of Soldiers Civil Re-establishment for further treatment.⁶⁵ He remained in the Jubilee Hospital in Victoria until late September, when he was moved to the Mountview Sanatorium in Calgary. Dolly, whose own health remained poor, nonetheless managed to move back to Red Deer with the children in October. In February 1919 the Red Deer *Advocate* noted that "Mr. Bert Griffiths [*sic*] is back from Naval service at the coast. He has been in hospital for some time."⁶⁷

Treatment at the sanatorium and periods of home rest continued until June 1919 when a pension board sat in Calgary to determine his status. The documentation reveals that Bert had suffered the "practically complete loss function of left lung." He was "not well nourished — poor appetite — poor sleeper. Left chest fallen in...right side increased action almost emphysematous. Left side flatnote all over, no air movement....pulse 92 irregular."⁶⁸ Use of then-recent X-Ray technology enabled specialists to state that "while the findings of this right lung are not typical of T.B., still it is very suggestive of a Tubercular infection."⁶⁹ By the time of the pension proceeding, Bert's medical condition had reached a "quiescent" condition, so that it was now considered that he could "pass under own control." Bert was accordingly discharged into civilian life on 6 June 1919 from the Department of Soldiers Civil Re-establishment with a one hundred percent disability. As this disability arose from his military service, he was awarded a full (Class I) pension.⁷⁰

Bert's departure from the Navy with a full pension for life would be the logical happily-ever-after ending to the account of his letters from Halifax. The family would move to Edmonton and Bert renewed his employment as a federal (and later provincial) civil servant in the local land office (jurisdiction changed in 1931). There are mostly cheerful family stories as my mother and her sister grew up in the house their parents purchased. Photographs of the time reflect the usual family activities, excursions and vacations. There

was a cottage in Sylvan Lake, Alberta, whereby the Griffiths retained ties with the nearby Red Deer community. Brother Willie had also returned safely from the Western Front and married Dolly's younger sister Gwyneth. The couple also lived in Edmonton. Of course no life is idyllic. My generation of Bert's grandchildren had known for instance that he had lost a leg somewhere along the way — we have pictures of him, taken later in life, on crutches. We had also been told that, after Dolly had suffered a fatal heart attack in 1943, Bert had been grief stricken and had "lost the will to live" as the common euphemism goes. And Willie as well had died in 1943 for reasons attributed to wounds received in the war. Bert now lived with my parents and their son (born in 1942).

In the more immediate present this grandson had just finished editing Bert's letters from Halifax when an envelope from the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) arrived. I had filed an Access to Information request to see if any record of Bert's medical history or pension deliberations existed. This was considered unlikely. Most of these records had been destroyed in the 1950s, a tragedy in view of Canada's quite remarkable initiatives in caring for war veterans. The thirty-one pages I received were therefore something of a surprise. The file on Bert had indeed been stripped of most of its contents (104 pages!) but the original pension board documentation and supporting medical history had been retained. Documents produced in 1945, the year of Bert's death, were probably the reason that the file was not completely destroyed in 1951, however."

At the beginning of March 1945 Bert had gone out to the garage, shut the doors and started his car. He changed his mind before the effects became fatal, but about three weeks later his daughter found him locked in his room after an overdose of sleeping pills. He was rushed to the DVA's Colonel Mewburn Pavilion, where the staff were able to resuscitate him. The case history sheet prepared by his doctors has been preserved. The initial comments are consistent with what we know or can imagine of Bert after he lost Dolly — severe mental depression, feelings of uselessness and inability to sleep.⁷² Dr. Hamilton also noted that there was "extensive documentation" of Bert's case, which he summarized in part.

He was in the close vicinity of the Halifax explosion during the last war while in the Navy and ever since has been suffering from a Chronic Anxiety neurosis with many exacerbations down through the years for which he has been taken care of by Dr. Hepburn. On 23-12-25 his right leg was amputated through the middle of the femur and typical T.B. right knee was found pathologically...He has been hospitalized in the University Hospital on several occasions since the last war, chiefly on the grounds of exacerbations of chest condition, right leg and psychoneurosis. On many occasions he has exhibited panic, fear reactions chiefly over environmental difficulties such as financial, work and also concern over his health, pension and insurance and he has been one to worry excessively and exhibits outbursts of emotional instability all through the years. His wife has tended to spoil him and give in to his every whim and fancy.⁷³

While Dorothy Griffith had clearly had problems of her own, her care and support had been critical to keeping Bert in a functional state. Now the doctors who had brought him back to life were unable to offer any solution for his neurosis, depression or observed dysfunctional behaviour. This rather dramatically underscores the marked and extensive advances in psychiatry and drug therapy which we take for granted today. In Bert's case, however, the situation seemed beyond the coping capacity of his family and the only recourse seemed to be constant care and supervision "for the rest of his life." The Government House Convalescent Home could be tried but it was "doubtful whether he would fit in." If he failed to adjust "the only solution would seem to be admission to Mental Hospital."⁷⁴

In the event the dilemma was problematical. Bert's case history sheet over the next few days reported more cheerful occasions interspersed with periods of depression and agitation. On the morning of Sunday, 1 April, (perhaps his capacity for ironic humour served to make him think of All Fools' Day), Bert Griffith attended morning church service at the hospital and it was observed that he "seemed quite cheerful." Then, just before noon, he leapt from a fourth floor bathroom window and ended his life.⁷⁵ He was sixty-two.

For some time now the letters from Halifax which prompted my journey through the traces of Bert Griffith's life have taken on a personal dimension as I have tried to view events through his eyes. I have seen enough of myself in what I have found to feel not only an identity with him but a great relief that my own life has not been directly touched by anything like that great explosion which ruined so much of Halifax and Dartmouth. Bert Griffith survived that calamity but he nevertheless must rank among the casualties. The bright hopeful life of this once spirited and good natured Englishman from Red Deer, Alberta, was not merely defined by his presence in Halifax that winter morning in 1917 but it was darkly and permanently disfigured.

NOTES

* Major (ret) John Griffith Armstrong served in the Canadian Forces and contributed to Volume 3 of the Official History of the RCAF. He now lives in Nepean, ON, and is writing a book about the RCN and the Halifax explosion. This essay is dedicated to his family. It owes much to the sage advice of Roger Sarty. I am also very grateful for the help of my cousin-in-law, Mary Joan Cornett, of the City of Red Deer Archives.

1. Author's files, L.B. Griffith to Mrs. L.B. Griffith, 8 December 1917 (henceforth Letter 1).

2. Red Deer was settled in 1891 when a branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway was built to Edmonton. Incorporated as a town in 1901 and as

a city in 1913, the community numbered some 2700 souls in 1911. *Henderson's Alberta Gazetteer and Directory* (Calgary, 1911); and Michael J. Dawe, *Red Deer: An Illustrated History* (Red Deer, 1996).

3. Marjorie Armstrong is the author's mother. Thelma Foster, who died in 1980, was a well-known Red Deer resident and a mainstay for many years at the Red Deer Archives.

4. Bert had participated in the 1912 debate over annexation of the village by the adjacent city and made an unsuccessful bid for the Village Council. He was a leading member of St. Luke's Anglican church choir and "one of the prominent actors in

minstrel and other performances in connection with the society of the church." *Red Deer Advocate*, 13 December 1912; and *Red Deer News*, 6 May 1914.

5. National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Thumbnail Service Summaries of Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) officers.

6. Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin2Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders 1880-1918* (Montréal, 1991), 96-97.

7. *Daily Telegraph* (London), 12 October 1916; and NDHQ, DHH, Naval Historical Series (NHS) 1700-903, "The Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve: Its Establishment, Recruiting and Some Notes on Its Work Overseas — 1916-1918" (hereafter RNCVR, "Some Notes.")

8. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships*, 131-180; Charles Dana Gibson, "Victim or Participant? Allied Fishing Fleets and U-Boat Attacks in World Wars I and II," *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*, I, No. 4 (October 1991), 1-16.

9. *Red Deer News*, 20 and 27 September 1916; *Red Deer Advocate*, 29 September and 6 October 1916; and RNCVR, "Some Notes."

10. Public Archives Record Centre (PARC), RG 150, Acc 1992-93/169, L.B. Griffith Personal File (LBGPF).

11. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin2Pots and Pirate Ships*, 188; National Archives of Canada (NAC), Record Group (RG) 24, NSC 1065-7-2, vol. 1, Naval 686 to Navyard, 13 February 1917. See also Kingsmill to Coke, 22 March 1917 (same file).

12. PARC, LBGPF

13. NDHQ, DHH, *Niobe* Permanent Record File (PEF), "Brief History of HMCS *Niobe*;" NDHQ, DHH, HMCS *Niobe* 8000 file; and *Jane's Fighting Ships* (London, 1914). The position of *Niobe* at the time of the explosion was verified from photographs in NDHQ, DHH, *Niobe* PRF. See also NDHQ, DHH, HMCS *Niobe* 8000, vol. 2, 7, A.H.

Wickens to E.C. Russell, 16 November 1955. The position of *Mont Blanc* and its distance is derived from a map in Alan Ruffman and David Simpson, "Realities, Myths, and Misconceptions of the Explosion," in Alan Ruffman and Colin Howell (eds.), *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour* (Halifax, 1994), 312. Access to the ship was from the Hospital Wharf, positioned close to its stem; the bow was positioned approximately 200 feet short of the Magazine Wharf (on Wellington Barracks property).

14. R.F. Sarty, "Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence 1860-1945" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1982), 306; and NAC, RG 24, vol. 2323, HQS 66-Vol. 10, GOC MD 6, circular letter to editors of Halifax area newspapers, 28 October 1917.

15. Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 275.

16. Marilyn Gurney Smith, *The King's Yard: An Illustrated History of the Halifax Dockyard* (Halifax, 1985), 36-39; and D.R. Moore, *History of H.M.C. Dockyard, Halifax, N.S.* (Halifax, 1967), 54-58.

17. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin2Pots and Pirate Ships*, 202.

18. For an example of this antipathy see NAC, RG6E, vol. 621, file 350, Kingsmill to Chambers, 14 February 1918.

19. NAC, RG 24, vol. 6197, Naval Service (NS) 1001-13-1, "Responsibility of the Navy at Halifax in Time of War," n.d.; and "Port of Halifax, N.S., Public Traffic Regulations," 19 February 1918. This material was consolidated for the preparation of a report to the Minister of the Naval Service on the RCN's part in the Halifax Explosion.

20. Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 304 and 3082309.

21. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5662, NSS 58-53-24, [W. Hose, Capt. of Patrols] to Capt E.H. Martin, Superintendent HMC Dockyard, 25 July 1917.

22. NAC, RG 24, vols. 7750 and 7761, Logs of PV5 and PV7, November-December 1917.
23. Roger Sarty, "Hard Luck Flotilla: The RCN's Atlantic Coast Patrol, 1914-18," in W.A.B. Douglas (ed.), *The RCN in Transition, 1910-1985* (Vancouver, 1988), 103-125. For more detailed treatment see Hadley and Sarty, *Tin Pots and Pirate Ships*. At the time of the disaster the patrol fleet comprised *Canada*, *Lady Evelyn*, *Hochelaga*, *Stadacona*, *Margaret*, *Cartier*, *Laurentian* and *Acadia* (the last is preserved as a museum ship on the Halifax waterfront).
24. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin Pots and Pirate Ships*, 119-122.
25. The progress of trawlers and drifters can be tracked in NAC, RG 24, Vol. 5604, NSS 29-1621.
26. See NAC, RG 24, vol. 5662, NSS 58-53-24, Hazen to McCurdy, 12 September 1917: "at the present time a number of men are in training at Halifax and some who are already trained are awaiting completion of patrol vessels." PARC, LBGPF, also contains supporting references.
27. PARC, LBGPF.
28. PARC, LBGPF, Navyard Esquimalt to Naval, 14 November 1917; and Naval to Navyard, 15 November 1917.
29. NDHQ, DHH, HMCS *Niobe* 8000, vol. 2, 6, A.H. Wickens to E.C. Russell, 16 November 1955.
30. NAC RG 24, vol. 7761, log of PV7, 6 December 1917.
31. Shipping arrivals for the port of Halifax can be tracked in NAC, vol. 3774, RG 24, NSS 1048-4828. There are details of convoy sailings and composition in NSS 1048-48-2, vol. 3773. Movement of vessels in the harbour leading up to the explosion are tracked in detail in NAC, RG 24, vols. 596 and 597, Dominion Wreck Commissioner, Minutes of Evidence, 13 December 1917 to 31 January 1918.
32. Letter 1. Strictly speaking *Imo* was on Norwegian register, but its assignment to Belgian relief was prominently emblazoned on its flanks (thus Bert's description). Had he personally observed the collision Bert might have remarked that *Imo's* bow sliced into the starboard bow (not the stern) of *Mont Blanc*, when the latter cut to port to avoid what appeared to be too narrow a passage between *Imo* and the Dartmouth shore. Simultaneously, *Imo* reversed engines and the transverse thrust to starboard made the collision unavoidable. The man2 oeuvres are still controversial. For the most recent take, see Robert C.P. Power, "A Look Back at the Collision of the *Imo* and the *Mont Blanc* with Seventy-five Years of Hindsight," in Ruffman and Howell (eds.), *Ground Zero*, 377-388.
33. G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* (2 vols., Ottawa, 1952), 1, 229-233. Times were meticulously assessed in the ensuing report of the Dominion Wreck Commissioner. See NAC, RG 24, vols. 596 and 597, Minutes of Evidence, 13 December 1917 to 29 January 1918. Vol. 597 also contains a copy of *In the Supreme Court of Canada on Appeal from the Exchequer Court of Canada....* (Compagnie Generale Transatlantique vs. the ship *Imo*). The latter leaves out testimony from the original inquiry and adds new material.
34. Letter 1.
35. David Simpson and Alan Ruffman, "Explosions, Bombs, and Bumps: Scientific Aspects of the Explosion," in Ruffman and Howell (eds.), *Ground Zero*, 275-276.
36. Written accounts vary widely as to the exact time of the explosion. HMCS *Niobe's* log, for example, records it as 9:07 (NAC, RG 24, vol. 7686). Alan Ruffman and David Simpson found seismographic records from Dalhousie College which established the time given. See Ruffman and Simpson, "Realities, Myths, and Misconceptions," in Ruffman and Howell (eds.), *Ground Zero*, 301-306.
37. Letter 1.
38. Alan Ruffman, David Greenberg and Tad Murty, "The Tsunami from the Explosion in Hali-

fax Harbour," in Ruffman and Howell (eds.) *Ground Zero*, 327-344.

39. Letter 1.

40. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS 37-25-2, Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard to Secretary Naval Service, 24 January 1918; and NDHQ, DHH 73/1160, "Canadian Naval Fatal casualties Halifax Explosion."

41. NAC, Manuscript Group (MG) 30 E 183/6, Fred Longland, "Memoir of Halifax disaster."

42. NDHQ, DHH, *Niobe* PRF, "Brief History of HMCS *Niobe*." Details of casualties and damage are in NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS 37-25-1 and 37-25-2.

43. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS 37225-2, v.3, CO HMCS *Niobe* to Capt. Superintendent HMC Dockyard, 18 December 1917. For the account of another member present during the rush to the gangway, see NDHQ, DHH, Reuben Hamilton Biographical File, 13-15.

44. Letter 1.

45. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS 37-25-2, v.3, CO HMCS *Niobe* to Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard, 18 December 1917.

46. Letter 1.

47. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5635, NSS 37-25-8, Admiral Superintendent to Secretary Naval Service, 4 March 1918; vol. 5634, NSS 37-2522, CO HMCS *Niobe* to Captain Superintendent, 18 December 1917; *Niobe* log, 6 December 1917. See also NDHQ, DHH, *Niobe* PRF, "Brief History of HMCS *Niobe*."

48. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS 37-2522, v.3, CO *Niobe* to Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard, 18 December 1917; and NAC, RG 24, vol. 7686, *Niobe* log.

49. NDHQ, DHH, HMCS *Niobe* 8000, vol. 2, A.H. Wickens to E.C. Russell, 16 November 1955. Wickens' account is repeated in the ship's

unofficial history (NDHQ, DHH, *Niobe* PRF, "Brief History of HMCS *Niobe*"), but no other references to the incident have been found thus far in Naval Service records. *Birkenhead* was a troopship which sank in 1851 bound for the Cape of Good Hope. While the women and children were taken ashore in the ship's only cutter, the soldiers and sailors maintained their discipline and went down with the ship; 480 died in the disaster. See William O.S. Gilly, *Narratives of Shipwrecks of the Royal Navy: between 1793 and 1857* (London, 1864), 348-357.

50. Letter 1.

51. NDHQ, DHH, 81/520/1440-1446, vol. 9, CO *Niobe* to Secretary Naval Service, 20 January 1918; and CO *Niobe* to Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard, 21 January 1918.

52. Smith, *The King's Yard*, 40-41. Official Naval Service photos of the disaster are in NAC, RG 24, vol. 5635, NSS 37-25-12.

53. Letter 1. The Imperial cruiser was HMS *Highflyer*. Only three aboard died, but the number given by Bert approximates the number rated as injured. Like *Niobe*, *Highflyer* had sent a boat to render assistance to *Mont Blanc*, and all but one of those aboard perished, including the warship's Executive Officer. See Michael J. Bird, *The Town That Died* (Toronto, 1962), 90.

54. NAC, RG 24, vol. 4549, 6 MD 86-4-1, v. 1, "Detail of work done by Naval and Military search parties in Devastated area Halifax, from Dec. 8/17 to Jan. 3/18," at i/c Military Search Parties to DAA and QMG, Halifax, 12 January 1918.

55. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS-3722521, v. 1, J.A. Wilson, Director of Stores, to Deputy Minister Naval Service, 24 December 1917.

56. Author's files, L.B. Griffith to Mrs. L.B. Griffith, 16 December 1917 (Letter 2). Bert's observations and comments in the next few paragraphs are all taken from this letter. Note that 14 December was a Friday, not a Thursday as Bert stated.

57. NAC, RG 24, vol. 5634, NSS 37-25-2, v. 3, CO *Niobe* to Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard, 21 January 1918.
58. Author's files, L.B. Griffith to Mrs. L.B. Griffith, 21 December 1917 (Letter 3).
59. The initial investigation into the disaster was an inquiry conducted on behalf of the Dominion Wreck Commissioner of the Department of Marine, chaired by Justice Arthur Drysdale, which commenced on 13 December 1917. Acting Commander Frederick Wyatt, the RCN's Chief Examination Officer for the Port of Halifax, performed very suspiciously under testimony and appeared to perjure himself. He was ultimately charged with manslaughter, although the case was eventually dropped. A complete set of inquiry transcripts, together with Justice Drysdale's report, may be found in NAC, RG 42, vols. 596-597. For analysis of the post-explosion litigation, a major undertaking in itself, see Donald A. Kerr, "Another Calamity: The Litigation," in Ruffman and Howell (eds.), *Ground Zero*, 365-376.
60. J. Castell Hopkins (ed.), *Canadian Annual Review War Series 1917* (Toronto, 1918), 469; and *Canadian Annual Review War Series 1918* (Toronto, 1919), 652. Also see the cumulative coverage in *Halifax Herald*, 11 December 1917 to 21 March 1918. On RCN morale, see NAC, RG 6E, vol. 621.
61. Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), Pension Records, L.B. Griffith, Program Record VAC/MVA, Medical History, 6 June 1919 (LBG Pension File).
62. NAC, RG 24, vol. 3610, NSS 18-42-1, v. 2, Admiral Superintendent, HMC Dockyard, to Secretary Naval Service, 28 June 1918.
63. PARC, LBGPF, CO *Niobe* to Secretary Naval Service, 5 February 1918; and Martin, Navyard Esquimalt, to Director Naval Service, 3 April 1918. The author has no idea of Dolly's ailment.
64. PARC, LBGPF, Statement of Service; and DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, Medical History of an Invalid, 6 June 1919.
65. PARC, LBGPF, Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard Esquimalt to Secretary Naval Service, 26 July 1918; and Secretary Naval Service to Capt. Supt. HMC Dockyard Esquimalt, 6 August 1918.
66. PARC, LBGPF, Navyard Esquimalt 163 to Naval Ottawa, 20 September 1918; and Dorothy Griffith to Accountant Naval Service, 9 October 1918.
67. Red Deer *Advocate*, 21 February 1919.
68. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, Medical History of an Invalid, 6 June 1919.
69. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, McGuffin to McDonald, 5 June 1919.
70. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, Medical History of an Invalid, 6 June 1919; and Board of Pension Commissioners, Authority for Pension Payments, 6 June 1919.
71. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, DVA file 745-L-2, CPC 128738, Annotation as to non-essential documents destroyed.
72. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, Case History Sheet, 22 March 1945.
73. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, Case History Sheet, Consultation Dr. Spaner, 27 March 1945.
74. *Ibid.*
75. DVA, Pension Records, LBG Pension File, Case History Sheet, 1 April 1945.