The Halifax Explosion

World War I was a prosperous time for Halifax where the harbour bustled with fleets of men and materials headed for Europe. On the evening of December 5, 1917 two ships' captains anxiously awaited departure. Captain From, aboard the Belgian relief ship "Imo" anchored in the harbour, was annoyed that a late inspection had forced him to delay departure until morning. Outside the harbour the French steamship Mont Blanc, captained by Aime Le Medec, sat awaiting morning access to the harbour and official clearance. Four days earlier his freighter had been loaded with tons of picric acid, TNT, gun cotton and benzol. The Mont Blanc was a floating bomb.

Just as the Imo raised its anchor at 7:30 am the Mont Blanc began its slow entry into the harbour. Forced to the wrong side of the channel by a steamer and tugboat, the Imo continued its tragic course directly in line with the incoming Mont Blanc. After sighting each other, there was a confusion of signals and whistle blasts and at 8:45 a.m. they collided. Few people knew of the impending disaster.

As black smoke and flames rose from the Mont Blanc, crowds gathered on the Pier to watch the excitement, but one sailor who knew about the imminent explosion ran past the railway freight yards, warning the workers to clear out.

Fleeing the scene, chief clerk William Lovett shouted, "What do you think you're doing?" as his train dispatcher Vince Coleman raced back towards the office. "We’ve only got a minute or two left! Anyone in the office won’t stand a chance, and you’re a married man with a family to think of!" But Vince Coleman was only thinking about the passenger trains speeding towards the endangered harbour. He had to stop them. In a moment of selfless action, Coleman telegraphed his urgent warning.

At precisely 9:06 on December 6, 1917, the most devastating man-made explosion in human history tore through Halifax, killing 2,000 people, including Vince Coleman. He knew his life was at stake when he ran back to tap out his vital message. In the deadliest catastrophe of Canadian history, one man sacrificed his life to save 700 others.