

A Bitter Winter

By Ryan Tibbitts

December 6, 1917.

My son's third birthday.

I awoke to the soft hum of the ship gliding through the cold winter water. The breakfast bell chimed and I made my way below decks to get some food before it ran out. By the time I got to the front of the line, the eggs were all gone, so I scooped some potatoes onto my dish and sat down. I spent the rest of breakfast by myself. Just as I drained the last drop of water from my wooden cup, a deafening sound reached my ears. It was a sound I'd never forget, the sound of metal tearing apart metal. Our boat shook furiously, and my dish clattered to the floor. I scrambled on deck to survey the damage. The smoke cleared and the dust settled. I could tell something was wrong.

A smaller boat was sticking out of the port side and fragments had gone every which way. I stepped over a smoldering shaft of wood and examined the damage. My heart slammed to a halt and I struggled for breath. If two and a half million kilograms of explosives in the hold caught fire, all hell would break loose. Flames from underneath began to lick at my heels, and I made an impulsive decision. Grabbing the icy guard rail, I hoisted myself over the side. The fall to the water seemed like eternity, but I couldn't have imagined the feeling when I hit. The second my body plunged under the surface, my lungs contracted and a flurry of bubbles burst from my mouth. It chilled me to the bone, but I finally broke the surface. By the time I swam to shore, the *Mont-Blanc* was a roaring bonfire. I took off running through the thick bushes, though my legs pleaded otherwise.

The flat countryside turned to rolling hills in a matter of minutes, and my legs felt like they might be wooden poles. I must have run at least five miles. A church steeple loomed on the horizon. I slowed my pace. From this point, I could see the ship. Thick black smoke rose hundreds of feet in the air, and the flames could be seen from where I was standing.

Suddenly, without warning, the ship became an expanding ball of flame. A shockwave rippled the water as it rocketed to shore. The flame must have been a kilometer in height. Houses were torn to shreds and trees snapped like twigs when the wave hit them. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. It had been five seconds since the explosion, and it was about a quarter of the way to me. At this rate, it would reach me in fifteen seconds,

and I was standing in the open!

My heart froze and I dropped to the ground. I flung my hands over my head and squeezed my eyes shut. Those fifteen seconds stretched indefinitely, and I wondered when the end would come. A deafening noise blurred my vision. Blazing heat scorched my skin and thunderous wind rolled me onto my back. Sand stung my face like a thousand needles. A shard of glass or something of the like buried itself deep in my thigh, and pain shot through my spine. The church behind me crumbled and disappeared.

Finally, the wind ceased, and wearily, I sat up. An eerie silence engulfed me, but I was alive. I was safe.

I would see my son again.