

# HOME FRONT CASUALTIES

## The Trenton Explosion of 1917

When the young men of Perth went to war in 1914-1918 not all of those who lost their lives fell on the battlefields of Europe - some died much closer to home.

On Wednesday November 28, 1917, Philip Macdonnell (17), Edwin Noonan (18) and James Smith (19) left Perth on the morning train and travelled to Trenton, Ontario. With more than 600,000 men serving under arms, Canada was contending with a critical labor shortage, so, when they presented themselves at the employment office of the British Chemical Company Ltd. at Trenton, there were few formalities. All three were hired on-the-spot.

Built in 1915 with British Government financing, the British Chemical Company Ltd. plant occupied the site of an old sawmill and was the largest munitions factory in the British Commonwealth. Its complex of five plants, housed in 204 buildings spread over 255 acres, produced TNT, sulphuric acid, nitric acid, gun cotton, smokeless powder, artillery shells and small arms ammunition. Cheap hydroelectric power had attracted the company to the site, but Trenton's small-town population of only 4,500 could not alone meet the company's demand for labor. British Chemical's need to fill more than 3,000 positions drew in factory hands from across eastern Canada.



*British Chemicals Ltd. Munitions Plant, Trenton, Ontario, c1917*  
(Photo courtesy of Quinte Public Library)

Seventeen-year-old Philip Doynes MacDonnell, born at Almonte on August 7, 1900, was the son of Philip John Cotter MacDonnell (1862-1940), manager of the Perth branch of the Bank of Montreal. His mother was Lily Hall Smith-MacDonnell (b.1866). MacDonnell attended Perth Public School and had just graduated from Perth Collegiate Institute. He spent the previous summer working for the National Geological Survey in the Renfrew area, but with the approach of winter weather, was looking for 'inside' work. MacDonnell's elder brother, Shirley John MacDonnell (1898-1918), had enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in July 1916.<sup>1</sup> Philip planned to follow his brother into the army and, as he anticipated reaching enlistment age the following summer, work at a munitions factory in direct support of the war effort seemed the next-best-thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley John MacDonnell (1898-1918) was wounded at Vimy Ridge in April 1917 and killed in May 1918 in a German air raid on Etaples Military Hospital.

Edwin Charles Gerard Noonan, at 18, was less than a year older than MacDonnell. He was the son of Thomas Henry Noonan (1874-1930) and Lillian Teresa Morrison (1875-1917), born at Perth on August 24, 1899. He was a graduate of Perth Separate School and Perth Collegiate Institute. When he set off for Trenton, Edwin was still living with his father, partly because his mother had died six weeks earlier.

At age 19, James Bernard Smith was the eldest of the three. He had been born at Perth on March 8, 1898, to Thomas Smith (1860-1938) and Sarah Jane Conlin (1856-1935) and was also a graduate of the Perth Separate School. His brother, Thomas Patrick Smith (b.1896), had enlisted in November 1915 and was serving in England with the Signals Corps. With the Military Service Act of 1917 (conscription) having come into effect in August, James was daily anticipating his call-up. In the meantime, 'doing his bit' by working in a munitions plant for good wages seemed an all-round sound idea.

After basic orientation and what must have been some rather cursory training during the day on Thursday November 29th, the Perth trio was assigned to the grave-yard shift (midnight to 8:00 a.m.) at a small, detached building known as the 'solvent recovery department'. There they joined four other young men - Francois Xavier Mentha of Quebec, Leonard Norris from New Brunswick, and a pair of brothers named McLean from Ottawa. At 1:45 a.m., less than two hours into their first shift, a massive explosion demolished the 'solvent recovery department'. On the front page of its December 7, 1917, edition the *Perth Courier* outlined what was known of the tragedy,

*There was a large powder bin at one end of the building and MacDonnell and Smith were standing on one side of this bin near a narrow-gauge track on which a small car was run, conveying the powder out of the building.*

*The two McLean boys were standing at the other side of the bin ... and, not so close to it. Mentha was also near the bin. Noonan and Norris were further away from the bin, standing near the entrance.*



*In fact, there were seven men in the building and four died*  
(Daily Ontario November 30, 1917)

*The small box car was being reloaded with powder when suddenly an explosion occurred, which could be heard for miles around, and a sheet of flame flew in the air over 100 feet, carrying the roof of the building with it. Fire broke out immediately and no one was allowed near the building until the flames had subsided, for fear of more explosions.*

*MacDonnell, Smith and Mentha, who were either stunned or killed outright, were burned in the building. Noonan was thrown some 40 feet in the air, and the Norris boy also some distance in the air, but both were clear of the flames when picked up.*

*The most miraculous escape was that of the two McLean boys, who were near the powder bin. The explosion seemed to go straight up in front of them, and other than being thrown some distance from the concussion and experiencing some severe bruises, they were able to be up and around again this week.*

Philip MacDonnell and James Smith had been killed outright in the initial blast, and their bodies partly consumed by the ensuing fire. Edwin Noonan was pulled from the burning ruins alive but he,

*.... experienced terrible burns, his body being a mass of burns from waist to the head and face. He and the Norris boy were injured the most and were rushed to the private hospital maintained by the company. Edwin was conscious soon afterwards and maintained great cheerfulness throughout. On reaching the hospital he spoke to the doctors, asking them to tend to the Norris boy first. However, Edwin's injuries were the worst, and he was given prompt attention.*



Perth Courier, December 28, 1917

The Norris boy from New Brunswick shortly succumbed to his injuries. Initially, some hope was held out for MacDonnell's recovery, but he lived less than a week, dying on December 5th.

The boys' bodies were brought home to Perth. MacDonnell was buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Noonan and Smith were interred in St. John's Parish Cemetery.

There are no surviving reports of any compensation paid to the dead boy's families. Philip MacDonnell's father received, at second-hand, only an expression of "*deepest sympathy to all concerned*" from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, conveyed via a letter from the British Chemical Company's plant manager W. E. Harkness, who offered only his "*sincere regret for the sad occurrences*".

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### Postscript

Less than a week after the Trenton explosion, on December 6, 1917, the French cargo ship *SS Mont-Blanc*, laden with explosives manufactured at the British Chemical Company's Trenton plant, collided with the Norwegian vessel *SS Imo* in the harbor at Halifax, Nova Scotia. The resulting massive explosion devastated much of Halifax and Dartmouth. The blast was the largest man-made explosion to that date, releasing the equivalent energy of approximately two kilotons of TNT. It killed 1,782 people and injured 9,000.

Three weeks after Halifax was leveled and less than two months after MacDonnell, Noonan and Smith were killed, another explosion at the Trenton munition works, on January 20th, 1918, claimed the life of 29-year-old Joseph Georges Leroux of Quebec.

Then, on Thanksgiving Day 1918, just weeks before the end of WW1, the plant blew up yet again, this time in a series of explosions that continued throughout the night of October 14th-15th. The blasts, and the resulting fires that burned for three days, completely levelled the factory, and seriously damaged the town, breaking windows, knocking down chimneys, and hurling debris over a huge area. British Chemical Company Ltd. management announced, however, that, miraculously, there had been no deaths ... although they admitted that 20 employees had failed to turn up to collect their pay.

- *Ron W. Shaw (2022)*