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Navy's Laxity Blamed In Commission Report For Halifax VE Riots

Investigation

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Ottawa, Aug. 17 (Staff).—Victory celebration riots in Halifax on May 7 and 8 were laid to the failure of the naval command to plan programs for service personnel, in a Royal Commission enquiry report released tonight by Finance Minister Ilsley.

In the two days' riot 6,987 cases of beer, 1,225 cases of wine, two cases of alcohol and 55,392 quarts of spirits were looted from Halifax liquor stores and 30,516 quarts of beer from Keith's Brewery. Commission stores subsequently recovered 1,140 quarts of spirits, 10 cases of wine and 81 cases of beer.

In Dartmouth, the Liquor Commission lost 5,256 quarts of beer, 1,692 quarts of wine and 9,816 quarts of liquor, of which 550 bottles were recovered.

Halifax property losses involved 564 firms, with 2,642 pieces of plate and other glass broken and 207 of the firms suffered from looting in some degree. Unofficial figures earlier placed loss and damage at \$5,000,000.

Mr. Justice Kellock said: "Apparently the policy that no charge was to be laid for drunkenness on VE-Day was not departed from by the Navy until the Admiral's signal May 9, which provided that thereafter drunkenness was to constitute an aggravated offense."

"Once started, the development and continuance of the disorders were due to the failure of the naval command to put down the initial disorders on each of the two days," said the report submitted by Commissioner Mr. Justice R. L. Kellock of Toronto. In criticism of the Halifax police direction, the Commissioner said the Chief Constable "apparently forgot all about the liaison officer of the Air Force . . . and the security police of the Air Force was never asked for by him."

Apart from individual incidents, the Commissioner did not involve merchant seamen in the rioting.

Minister Expresses Regret

Tonight, in a statement, Navy Minister Abbott expressed regret for the occurrences. But in support of his service he said it should be remembered "that many of the naval ratings who took part in these unfortunate disturbances are the same men who have earned their country's gratitude for their courage and endurance in the long and arduous Atlantic campaign."

Of the Commander-in-Chief, Mr. Abbott said he had performed signal service. "His responsibilities have been great, and upon his shoulders rested a heavy proportion of the burden of the Battle of the Atlantic. This burden was still his at the time of the disturbances, for however great may have been the rejoicing ashore, the U-boat had not at that time ceased."

The Finance Minister at the same time announced the Government had decided to pay compensation on an ex-gratia basis for damage to property directly resulting from both the VE disorders and the explosions at the Dartmouth Navy Magazine on July 18 and 19.

In criticism of the Navy Command, Mr. Justice Kellock held that service personnel were left to roam the streets and that not a sufficient force was made available in event of trouble.

Police Lacked Direction

"Subsequently," said the report, "the insufficiency of the police forces, service and civilian, as well as their faulty direction on both days, and the passive conduct of the Naval Command in allowing naval personnel to continue unchecked on the afternoon of May 8 without taking steps to deal with the situation until a very late hour,

when the disorders had begun to play themselves out, explain the length of time during which the disorders continued."

The Commission found that both army and air personnel were controlled, kept in quarters or provided with programs. But of the navy, the report states that 9,000 personnel on May 7 left their ships and establishments, out of 13,306 and were free as from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. On May 8, 9,508 actually left their ships and establishments of 13,093 who were free to do so.

"It was not surprising," said the report, "that these large numbers of naval personnel went into the city. There was no adequate program to hold them away. . . ."

"For some considerable time prior to May, 1945, from 9,000 to 11,000 ratings and from 900 to 1,200 Wrens took advantage of their leaves on Saturdays and pay days and went 'on shore.' I assume little, if any, effort was put forth to keep the ratings in their quarters on such days.

"This, however, was not to be the case on VE-Day, but the acknowledged objects of the plans for that day was to keep the ratings off the streets.

No Conferences Held

"Had the navy, like the army, held one or more conferences with officers in Halifax to discuss these programs, I do not think they could have failed to realize their complete inadequacy."

And again the report emphasized, in scoring the weakness of navy patrols:

"If little imagination was to be employed in the preparation of the program which would entertain the men in their ships and establishments and keep them off the streets, then all the more was it essential that the navy police should be in sufficient numbers and prepared to act energetically to put down promptly at its very outset, whatever trouble should develop.

"In my opinion, 156 shore patrol were quite insufficient numerically to deal with 9,500 ratings."

Mr. Justice Kellock said Halifax did not have a police force sufficient to deal with such a crowd of naval personnel and that the force, if anything, was already overtaxed. In May the actual force was 94.

Not All Police Used

On May 7, he found that there was a failure to employ all the available police force in strength—at the time navy personnel wrecked and burned one street car and mixed crowds of navy personnel and civilians, with service personnel in the majority attacked liquor stores and looted 1,280 cases of beer, 275 cases of wine and 800 cases of spirits.

"All one can say is that the police forces should have been better directed and might have been more effective, particularly at the liquor stores."

He disputed the suggestion that a riot cause was resentment against restaurants being closed. Nor did he find any underlying discontent or resentment on the part of service personnel against Halifax because of overcrowding and other discomforts.

"The cause of the troubles of May 7 and 8 were, in my opinion," said the commissioner, "the same, namely lack of planning to occupy the minds and the time of the ratings and keep them from wandering in large parties about the streets."