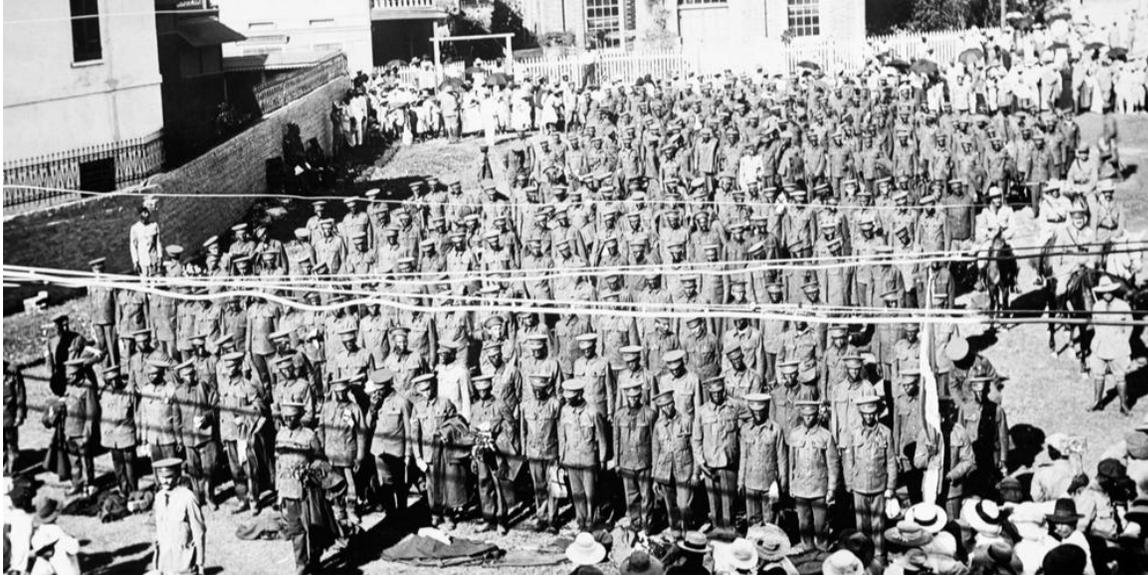


## The Halifax Incident in Context

The Halifax Incident, as it is known, occurred after a transport ship, the Verdala, carrying men of the British West Indies Regiment, was diverted to Halifax in Nova Scotia and encountered a blizzard, leading to around 600 cases of hypothermia and five deaths, due to the ship not having adequate heating or the men sufficiently warm clothing.

Understandably, this caused a public outcry in Jamaica, and sufficient resentment against the authorities who had diverted the ship that recruitment activity was suspended for a time. It should however, be seen in the context in which it happened.



British West Indies Regiment soldiers in Jamaica, ready to embark for Europe

The Verdala had sailed out of Jamaica on 6th March 1916, carrying 1140 officers and men, bound for England. The men had been issued with the standard clothing which it was expected that they would need both aboard ship and when they reached England later in the spring. There was no expectation that they would have to encounter the far colder temperature to be expected off Nova Scotia.

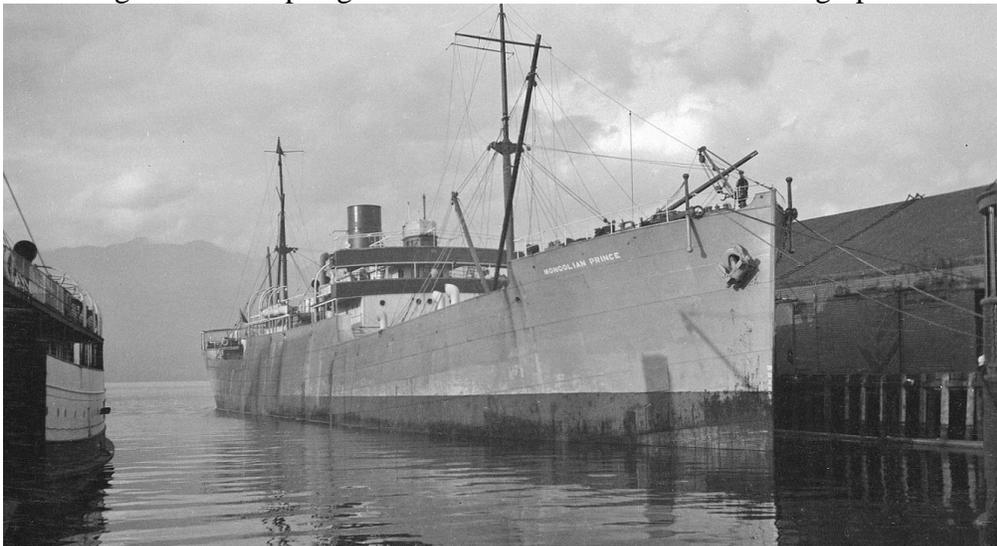
There was also no expectation that the Germans would suddenly intensify their submarine campaign against allied shipping in the Atlantic. Although they had started to attack commercial shipping as early as February 1915, this had not been nearly as frequent as it later became. Without warning, in March 1916, after the Verdala had already set sail, submarine attacks off the British and European coasts increased markedly in number. In order to avoid the loss of the ship and the men aboard her, the Admiralty ordered the Verdala to divert to the closest friendly port which could be relied upon. At the time the USA had not entered the war and so could not have been expected to allow a ship carrying soldiers of a combatant nation into her ports and the Irish ports would have been in just as much danger from submarine attacks (in fact a German submarine had been seen off the Irish coast only a month before). Therefore the closest friendly port for the Verdala to divert to was Canadian port of Halifax, where it was expected the men could wait until a crossing to Britain was safer.

However, the men, who were used to the warmth of the Caribbean, were not equipped with extra clothing and the ship was cold, being largely unheated, leading to a great deal of suffering. As

has already been stated though, there had been no expectation that they would require clothing suitable for the Canadian climate.

It would also be wrong to blame the Admiralty for the state of the ship. The British army had only ever had a handful of troop ships and had always relied on the Royal Navy for most of its transport needs. When this was not possible the government contracted commercial ships to carry soldiers instead. Colonial governments sending troops had always had to provide their own transport and often the ships used were the ones which they could most economically charter. Often these were freighters which were designed to carry inanimate cargo or animals. The Verdala had been launched the previous year, so was a new ship, but it had been designed to carry cargo not passengers. New Zealand and Australian soldiers also found cause for complaint about their transport as they were forced to travel for months in ships designed for animals, which lacked heating and suitable washing or toilet facilities.

The expectation prior to the sailing of the Verdala would have been that she would be less than comfortable for the men on board but would get them to Britain safely and within the expected timeframe. The lack of heating would not have caused great concern, as the ship expected to reach England in the spring when the weather would be warming up.



The Verdala, photographed some years later, after her name had been changed to Mongolian Prince

In conclusion, when the Verdala set out, there had been a quite reasonable expectation that she would reach England without incident and that the men's clothing would be sufficient. The lack of heating would not have been seen as an important issue and no-one knew that German submarines would suddenly increase both in numbers and in the frequency of their attacks. The sole reason for the diversion to Halifax was the realisation that this increased activity might put the Verdala and her passengers in danger. Far from it being an example of the Admiralty deliberately placing Jamaicans in a situation where they would be likely to suffer, as it is often held up as being, the diversion to Halifax was actually an attempt by the Admiralty to keep the 1140 men of the contingent alive and safe from marauding submarines.

When placed into its correct context, the Halifax Incident can be seen for what it really was: an unfortunate wartime event which sapped morale but which no-one could reasonably have planned for or done anything about until it was already too late.