

TERRORIST ATTACKS ON THE WELLAND CANAL

At about sunset on April 21, 1900, the peace and quiet of Thorold was shattered by a huge explosion, quickly followed by another. The blasts shook houses nearby, broke windows over a wide area, and were heard as far away as Port Dalhousie. Terrorists had dynamited Lock 24 of the Third Welland Canal.

The canal was a vital link in the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence transportation system, and the aim of the attack was to destroy that link. It became headline news across the country, and since then has become firmly entrenched in local lore. This, however, was not the first terrorist attack on the canal, nor was it to be the last.

“Rob Roy,” 1841

The first attack took place 60 years earlier, on the First Welland Canal at Allanburg in the centre of Thorold Township. At about 11 p.m. on September 9, 1841, a charge of gunpowder was exploded at the head of the upper of two locks in the village. One of the lock gates was completely destroyed, and a disastrous flood was averted only when the sudden rush of water caused the guard gate above the lock to slam shut. A spare gate, stored nearby in case of an accident, was quickly installed, and navigation resumed by noon the following day. A reward of £100 was offered for information leading to the arrest of the “evil disposed persons” responsible, but they were never identified, let alone caught.

There was much speculation as to who they were, most of it easily dismissed as wild rumour. But three strangers had been seen in the area prior to the attack and the local consensus was that they had come from Buffalo. Only the previous year in April 1840, the monument to Isaac Brock on Queenston Heights had been badly damaged by gunpowder. Though nothing was ever proven, suspicion fell on Benjamin Lett, an Irish-born Canadian who as a member of Mackenzie’s Patriots had been conducting guerilla operations from the United States since 1838, gaining him the sobriquet “The Rob Roy of Upper Canada.” Though he was arrested by the American authorities on another matter after the Queenston incident, he escaped and was still at large when the lock was bombed. Lett, or others sympathetic to the rebel cause, may well have been responsible for the Allanburg attack.

Whoever it was, the assault caused considerable anxiety in the Niagara Peninsula. The War of 1812 was still in living memory, the Mackenzie Rebellion of 1837 was barely over, and after the attack on Brock’s monument the frontier was patrolled by

regular troops. Not only was the political situation unstable, but industry, commerce and finance were a mess. Major changes were underway — the government had bought out the financially-strapped Welland Canal Company, construction had begun on the Second Canal, and Upper and Lower Canada had just been united into the Province of Canada. Change brought uncertainty, and the terrorist attack at Allanburg did not help calm nerves.

“Dynamite Luke,” 1900

If the perpetrators of the 1841 attack are unknown, there is no doubt about those responsible for the attack in 1900. The two culprits, John Nolin and John Walsh, arrived in Thorold on April 21 by the evening train from Niagara Falls (the “Buffalo Express”), each clutching a “canvas-covered telescope valise,” a type of adjustable carrying case, containing dynamite. They alighted at the Thorold station of the St. Catharines and Niagara Central Railway (later the NS&T), located at the head of Front Street where the Thorold Community Credit Union now stands. They then walked back along the tracks that curved in a south-easterly direction towards Chapel Street, and crossed the Third Canal by the bridge leading to Niagara Falls (just beyond the present-day Peter Street Bridge).

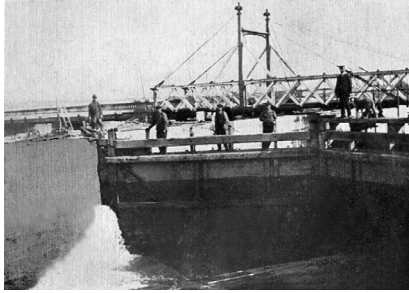


Lock 24 looking north, with the bridge and road to Niagara Falls at bottom and the Constable home at top right

Lock 24 of the Third Canal was located just north of the bridge, east of Lock 7 on the present canal. Nolin went to the head of the lock and Walsh to the foot. They lowered the valises by rope alongside the lock gates, ignited the fuses and ran off towards Thorold Stone Road and Niagara Falls. Walsh’s dynamite exploded a few minutes after 7 o’clock and Nolin’s a moment later.

Fortunately for those who lived downstream, the charges were placed at the gate hinges, not inside the V where the gates met, so the damage was relatively slight. Had the gates been destroyed the outcome

would have been very serious indeed, for upstream from Lock 24 was a mile-long reach containing an estimated 12 million cubic feet of water. While this would not have killed everyone in Merritton, as some alarmist reports claimed, it would certainly have resulted in loss of life and property, and would have put the canal out of commission for some time. As it was, all that happened was that holes were blown in the gates, and the damage was easily repaired. The canal, which had been closed for the winter, opened on schedule.



Lock 24 showing water pouring through the head gate

The residents of Thorold soon realized what had happened, and Mayor James Wilson and Police Chief Adelbert Clark formed a “posse” to pursue the “dynamitards.” It was split into three parties, each taking a different route. The Mayor and Chief went down Thorold Stone Road by carriage, and soon caught up with the bombers, but instead of apprehending them continued to Niagara Falls to warn the police. This was a wise move, for when Nolin and Walsh were captured on Bridge Street they were carrying loaded revolvers. Very soon after another arrest was made — of Karl Dullman, who was staying at the Rosli Hotel nearby. Several witnesses had seen him with the others in Thorold and Niagara Falls in the week preceding the attack.

There was only one witness to the bombing itself, 16-year-old Euphemia Constable, who lived on Cemetery Road just north of Lock 24. She saw Nolin and Walsh lower the valves alongside the lock gates, but was struck unconscious by the first blast. The following morning (a Sunday) she was the centre of attention as she walked to St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church escorted by a red-coated militiaman, one of two who had guarded her home overnight. Euphemia was a prime witness, and there was concern that she might be abducted, especially when rumour spread that four strange women had been asking around town where she lived.

The military was very much in evidence in the days following the attack. The 19th St. Catharines battalion of infantry was sent to guard Lock 25, and immediately became the centre of controversy when local MP William McCleary complained that they had to borrow ammunition from private sources! Soldiers ringed the jail in Niagara Falls where the prisoners were first held, and at the preliminary hearing on April 30 the court house in Welland was

swarming with redcoats, rifles in hand and bayonets fixed, while other soldiers patrolled the aqueduct nearby. The military continued to guard the canal during the trial, often with humorous outcomes, as when the “sojers” at Port Robinson mistook a tramp and then a black dog for terrorists.



Euphemia Constable

At first the authorities had no idea who the bombers were, except that they came from the United States. Speculation was rampant, and early suspicion fell on Buffalo grain handlers, who had been engaged in a bitter dispute with their employer, the Conners Syndicate. The Syndicate was building grain elevators in Port Colborne and Montreal, which threatened to divert trade from Buffalo and the Erie Canal to the Welland Canal and the St. Lawrence. Other theories suggested that the attack was the work of Boer sympathizers (the Boer War was approaching a conclusion in South Africa), or Irish nationalists, or some combination of the two. It was some time before the attack was shown conclusively to be an Irish-American plot.

This followed ten days of investigation in the United States by Chief Inspector John Wilson Murray, arguably Ontario’s leading detective of the day. He found that Nolin and Walsh were both Irish-born members of the Napper Tandy club of New York. This was a branch of Clan-na-Gael, the successor organization to the Fenian Brotherhood, which had been responsible for the Fenian raids in Niagara in 1866. However, Murray had no information about Dullman, the suspected ringleader, but since “Karl Dullman” turned out to be an assumed name this was not surprising.

If the case against Nolin and Walsh was ironclad, the evidence against Dullman was largely circumstantial, and his lawyer did his best to disassociate him from the other two. But the effort failed, and on May 25 all the accused — who had not testified on their own behalf but maintained a “rigid silence” in the face of over 50 witnesses — were found guilty and sentenced to life in prison.

The verdict must have pleased John H. Thompson, proprietor of the *Thorold Post*, who had earlier described the trio in most unflattering terms. Dullman was “fat, pockmarked, yellow ... looks like the manager of a medicine wagon or a ‘Sapho’ burlesque.” Walsh was “smooth shaven, with big rabbit teeth; his mouth is always open, and he has a

hairless and vacant face ... would be called a gossoon in his native land.” Nolin was “what biologists call a low-browed pug-ugly ... the type of man that cleans spittoons because he has not enough enterprise to be a burglar.” Dullman was the “slick man” of the trio, while the others were “degenerate outcasts.” All in all they were “about the toughest looking specimens of humanity imaginable.”



John Walsh and John Nolin

The three were incarcerated in Kingston Penitentiary, and it was not until two years later that Dullman’s true identity became known. He turned out to be Luke Dillon, a leading member of Clan-na-Gael with an impressive pedigree of terrorist activity. His parents left Ireland for England during the potato famine, and he was born in Leeds in 1848. After emigrating to the United States he served in the army and worked as a shoemaker and bank teller. Though he had never set foot in Ireland (and never did so throughout his life), he became active in the nationalist movement, and allied himself with a faction in Clan-na-Gael that favoured extensive use of dynamite. (The group’s slogan was “Not one cent for blatherskite, every cent for dynamite!”) In 1884 he was part of a group that bombed Scotland Yard and the Junior Carleton Club in London. The following year he was involved in an explosion at the House of Commons and an attempt to destroy London Bridge.



Luke Dillon, a.k.a. Karl Dullman

Dillon, known as “Dynamite Luke” in the Irish underground, was clearly well qualified to launch an attack on the Welland Canal, and his exploits were later commemorated in song in *The Ballad of Luke Dillon — The Hardest Man of All*. One of the nine verses reads as follows:

At the Welland Canal they captured me,
My secrets I would not tell,
The Orange warden cursed me hard
As I sang in my prison cell,
“Go to hell you Limey warden,
You can screw me to the wall!
You’ll never break Luke Dillon!
I’m the hardest man of all.”

Dillon never did admit his guilt, and though he was clearly involved in the canal plot the clumsy manner in which it was carried out suggests that the other two may have done the detailed planning. Clan-na-Gael mounted a major campaign for his release, and took it to the highest levels of government in Canada and the United States, arguing that his sentence was much more severe than for others convicted of similar crimes. In 1908 Dillon’s wife even wrote a plea to President Theodore Roosevelt, testifying to his service in the American army and his qualities as a father. Eventually, on July 12, 1914, at the age of 66, he was set free and deported to the United States, where the “aged and bent ... Irish patriot” was united with his wife and family. Though he never made it to Ireland, he remained an active republican until his death in 1926. As for the other terrorists, Nolin and Walsh, one went insane and died in prison, while the other was released soon after Dillon. But the sources available can’t seem to agree on who was which!



Detail of scroll presented to Mayor Wilson

On May 3, just two weeks after the attack on Lock 24, Thorold Town Council presented Mayor Wilson with a splendid hand-drawn illuminated scroll in recognition of his role in the capture of the terrorists. It is now in Thorold Historical Museum.

“Satan in Top Hat,” 1914-15

The more recent attacks on the Welland Canal also originated in the United States, but this time it was Germans rather than Irish who were responsible. When World War I broke out in August 1914 the United States remained neutral, understandably so given that Germans were the second largest ethnic group in the country. Germany sought to keep the States neutral and at the same time to impede the flow of war materials and food supplies from North America to the allied powers. This required a combination of diplomacy, espionage and sabotage.

Count Johann von Bernstorff, the German ambassador to the United States, had overall charge of these strategies, but the real work was done by military attaché Captain Franz von Papen, naval attaché Captain Karl Boy-Ed, and commercial attaché Dr. Heinrich Albert. With Bernstorff in Washington, the others set up offices in New York City and began seeking out recruits. One of the very first to be enlisted, at the very start of the war, was Horst von der Goltz, this with a view to destroying the Welland Canal. The aim was not only to cripple a vital supply route from Canada to Britain, but also to create such panic among the Canadian people that the troops training for Europe at the newly-established Valcartier camp in Quebec would be forced to remain home to defend Canada.



Franz von Papen and Horst von der Goltz

As befits someone involved in espionage, Goltz's background is full of mystery, and he came to the States following a stint in the Mexican army (which included, so he claimed, no fewer than three last-minute reprieves from death by firing squad). Barely a month into the war he had met with Papen, acquired dynamite and plans of the canal (the latter apparently from Irish Americans), and lined up accomplices. They took a train to Buffalo, where they stayed for a few days, possibly crossing the border to reconnoitre the canal. Goltz even claimed to have flown over the Niagara River by aeroplane. But then, for reasons that are not entirely clear, they suddenly returned to New York City.

Goltz's explanation was that he received news that the troops had left Valcartier on September 23 (this would have been the 30,000-strong First Division of the Canadian Expeditionary Force), which removed a prime motive for an attack on the canal. But it could also be that the canal was too well guarded — the Welland Canal Force, recruited largely from two militia regiments, the 19th Lincoln and the 44th Lincoln and Welland, was in position within hours of the declaration of war. According to one participant, however, the real problem was the amount of time Goltz, who seems to have enjoyed the high life, spent carousing in Buffalo instead of concentrating on the task at hand.

Goltz was recalled to Germany, travelling on an American passport obtained illegally under the name Bridgeman Taylor. By his own account he was

then directed back to America, but on returning via London he was recognized by a Russian agent. Fearing that his cover was blown, he offered his services to the British authorities, without however mentioning the Welland Canal. Understandably suspicious, the British jailed him “for failing to register as an alien enemy” — a technical offence, but enough to keep Goltz in custody while further investigations were made. As it happens, this was a very prescient move.

Meanwhile, Papen and his cohorts engaged in a variety of subversive activities in the United States, including the acquisition of fraudulent passports to enable German reservists to return home and German spies to enter Britain, plans to place explosives on allied ships leaving American ports, attempts to foment labour unrest that would impede the export of munitions and other supplies to Britain, and dynamite attacks on the International Bridge linking Maine and Quebec and on facilities at Walkerville and Windsor in Ontario. Some of these involved Paul Koenig, Police Superintendent for the Hamburg-American shipping line, and it was Koenig that Papen engaged in early September 1915 to lead another attack on the Welland Canal.



Paul Koenig

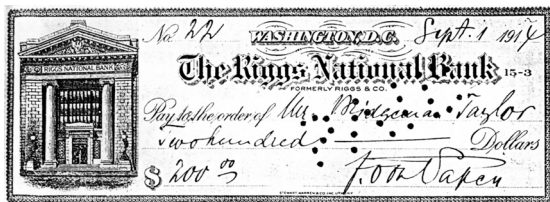
In some respects this second attempt was much like the first. On September 27 Koenig and his co-conspirators (who included his wife) proceeded to Buffalo. He booked into a hotel under the name Mundy, one of 13 different aliases, German, Irish and English, that he was known to use. Like Goltz before him, he spent some time surveying the canal — an unnamed retired St. Catharines manufacturer later recalled seeing Koenig and his wife in Port Dalhousie — but then abruptly called off the mission. Koenig's reasons were twofold: the canal was very well guarded, and he suspected (correctly) that he was being trailed by American secret service agents. In fact they had been watching him from the beginning, but lacked evidence to make an arrest. It was only after tapping his phone following his return to New York City that they were able to do so, and he was charged on December 17.



Newspaper headline on December 18, 1915

Just six days later Papen was on his way back to Germany, having been expelled from the United States (together with naval attaché Boy-Ed) for activities that violated its neutral status. The documents found in Koenig's office obviously implicated Papen, but his fate was sealed well before their discovery. German Embassy personnel had been under surveillance by the secret service since mid-May, and two lucky breaks in July and August yielded conclusive evidence of their guilt. The first came when commercial attaché Albert left a briefcase full of incriminating documents unattended on the Sixth Avenue El (the elevated railway), where it was picked up by the American agent who had been trailing him. A month later, American journalist James Archibald, whom Papen had persuaded to carry (illegally) a pouch of documents to Berlin, was pulled off his ship by the British and the documents confiscated. Among them was a letter from Papen to his wife in which he spoke of "these idiotic Yankees," a remark that did not endear him to the American public.

Papen's problems were not over. As a diplomat he was guaranteed safe-conduct back to Germany, but when the Dutch ship on which he sailed put in at the English port of Falmouth on January 2, 1916 the British impounded a suitcase-full of receipts, cheque stubs, cancelled cheques, letters and documents further implicating the German Embassy in Washington. The safe-conduct applied to Papen himself, but not, argued the British, to his luggage. Among the items confiscated were cheques made out to Koenig and Goltz, the latter under his alias Bridgeman Taylor. Goltz was still in a British jail, and when confronted with the new evidence he freely admitted to his role and that of Papen in plotting to blow up the Welland Canal. Having been granted immunity from prosecution, he was returned to the United States on March 28 to testify at the trial of Hans Tauscher, who had supplied the dynamite for the attack. As a result of this Papen was formally indicted by Grand Jury, though as a diplomat he was not going to be called to account.

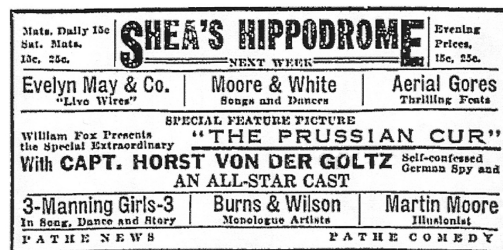


Cheque from Papen to Goltz a.k.a. Bridgeman Taylor

What was the fate of the three principals, Papen, Koenig and Goltz? About Papen we know a great deal. After serving in World War I he entered politics, and in 1932 was appointed Chancellor of Germany (at which point the American indictment was quietly dropped). Forced to resign a year later for lack of support, he was nonetheless instrumental in helping Hitler gain power, and served as Hitler's Vice-Chancellor and later as Ambassador to Austria

and Turkey. Called "Satan in Top Hat" by one biographer, he was tried at Nuremberg, but was acquitted on the grounds that "political immoralities" were not war crimes.

About Koenig we know nothing, but Goltz is another matter. In 1917, only a year after testifying at Tauscher's trial, he brought out a 288-page book called *My Adventures as a German Secret Agent*, in which he laid bare his entire career, though how much is fact and how much the product of a fertile imagination is unclear. Two years later he was starring in a movie called *The Prussian Cur*. This was one of a series of films made by Hollywood at the behest of the Committee for Public Information, established in 1917 to prepare the American people for entry into the war. The movies were classic propaganda, designed to portray Germans in the worst possible light, as is evident from titles like *The Claws of the Hun*, *To Hell with the Kaiser* and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*.



Movie advertisement featuring Horst von der Goltz

There were at least two other plots against the Welland Canal during World War I, though neither came to anything. The first involved a most unlikely culprit — Harry L. Newton, a foreman in the munitions plant established at the McKinnon Dash and Hardware Company in St. Catharines as part of the war effort. In April 1916 he was arrested in Buffalo with a bomb he had smuggled across the border. His motives were purely mercenary, for as he told police posing as German agents, he was prepared to blow up the canal or any munitions factory for \$5000. He proposed to bomb the canal "from a boat ... and [he] would carry the dynamite past the guards in a dinner pail." The second plot, the brainwave of "Count" Max Lynar Loudon, would have seen the Welland Canal seized as part of a huge invasion of Canada by an army of 150,000 German reservists based in the United States. A fund of \$10 million was established, arms were stashed in secret locations, and men were recruited, but nothing was done. The end finally came in October 1915 when Loudon was arrested, on a charge of bigamy...

Principal Sources (in addition to those cited in text): *Globe*, 1900, 1915-16, 1919; *New York Times*, 1900, 1914-17; *St. Catharines Journal*, 1841; *St. Catharines Standard*, 1900, 1915-16; *Thorold Post*, 1900; *Times of London*, 1884-85; *Papers Found [on] Archibald*, 1915; *Papers Found [on] von Papen*, 1916; Brannigan, "The Luke Dillon Case and the Welland Canal Explosion of 1900"; Clark, *The Irish Relations*; Green, "The Fearful Forties of Welland County"; Jones, *America Entangled*; Koeves, *Satan in Top Hat*; Murray, *Memoirs of a Great Detective*; O'Brien and Ryan, *Devoy's Post Bag*; Rogers, *History of Lincoln & Welland Regiment*; von Papen, *Memoirs*.