

# **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

**by Keith H Lloyd**

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**I**t happened on Friday the 19th January 1917.

World War I had been on going for three years, but the tide was beginning to turn, America was about to enter the war against Germany.

These were extremely hard times for Mrs. Orley (Agnes) and her four children, Robert aged 11, Albert aged 8, and Agnes (Aggie) aged 6 and Ivy just a little over 4 years of age. Agnes's husband Bob was in the Merchant Navy and was away at sea; at least that's what she told every one - in fact he was in Napier New Zealand had missed his ship home in 1912 and was living with his brother Fred on his sheep farm. Agnes was pregnant with Ivy when Bob left, a fact of which he was not aware. So Agnes was left to provide for herself and her family which she did admirably by working as a cleaner in a factory office during the day and supplemented this with scrubbing tables at night in a pub called the Ram Tavern.

They lived in the Dock area of Silvertown, East London at 14 Cranbrook Road in a 'two up two down' house with an attic. One room was for living/dining and Agnes and the two girls slept in the other room. The Seaward family lived upstairs and Albert and Bob slept in the attic which they shared with the two Seaward boys. They had a kitchen area which was called a scullery where cooking washing and ironing was carried out. There was no electricity - the iron had to be heated on a stove fire and lighting was by means of gas mantles. They had no bathroom so washing was carried out in relays. Bath night was by means of a tin tub, the scullery was a single story room with a glass roof visible from the back room upstairs, the Seaward boys never left the house on the girls bath night, so make of that what you will! There was an outside toilet in the back yard and a concrete copper for boiling the

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

clothes heated by means a small wood burning fire which needed to be stoked regularly to maintain boiling conditions.

However, Agnes would not have been able to manage without the help of her brother's wife Emily Gee who lived three doors away and was known throughout the community as 'Nurse Don' a midwife who brought all of Agnes's children into the world. Albert Gee, Agnes's brother, and his wife had seven children of their own; so it is a wonder how Emily managed to care for the Orleys as well as her own children and still maintain her nursing duties. Agnes's mother Pricilla Gee died in 1887 when Agnes was only 9 years old and Emily had been the mother to that family ever since.

On the day in question a children's party had been arranged at St. Barnabas Church Hall and all children under fourteen attending 'West Silvertown School' were invited. "I'm not going" said Robert, who liked to be known as Bob now, so only Albert and Aggie went, Ivy wasn't invited she was too young. "Well if you're not going to the party" said his mother, "You can make yourself useful and go up 'the top' and get us a loaf of bread" - 'the top' being a line of shops in North Woolwich Road at the top end of the street. Albert and Aggie had been at the party for some hours when Bob made his way to the baker's shop. Agnes looked at the clock it was 6:50 pm. "We are having bread and jam for tea" she told Ivy, and then she thought to herself 'Bob's been a long time' At precisely 6:52 pm a huge explosion devastated a large part of Silvertown and the shock wave and sound was heard over 100 miles away. The ensuing fires could be seen nearly 40 miles away in Kent and Surrey. Agnes and Ivy ran and hid in the cupboard under the stairs, this saved their lives because the house collapsed around them. Ivy screamed "Mum the walls are falling like jelly"

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Agnes covered Ivy with her body as they were showered with dust a debris; fortunately the stairs above their heads held but the weight was causing the wood to crack and they were in immediate danger. They were unable to free themselves from the cupboard because of the rubble piled against the door. Agnes was calling for help and Ivy was crying; both were coughing and spluttering with the dust. And then they heard the debris being moved from the cupboard door and after what seemed an eternity the door was dragged open and Bob was standing there. “Did you get the bread?” Agnes asked and then she fainted and collapsed in a heap.

The explosion was caused by a fire that had started in Brunner Monds factory setting off nearly 50 tons of TNT which was being produced for the war in France. The factory virtually disappeared and the adjacent factories were devastated, one of which was Ve-



**Damage to St. Barnabas Church Westwood Road**

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

nesta which manufactured plywood. Red hot pieces of metal smashed into the CWS Flour Mills in Victoria Dock. Almost 70 thousand properties were damaged including St. Barnabas Church and the cost was estimated at 3 million pounds, which at that time was an astronomical amount of money. Around 70 people lost their lives and almost half a million were injured. In view of the size of the blast it was considered that many more casualties would have been likely had it not been the end of the working week, so to speak - many workers had left the factories and were at home having their evening meal. Many living close knowing the factory produced 'weapons of mass destruction' made a run for it and were able to get reasonably clear.

Bob said, "The Seaward's baby pram shot off the half landing as he reached the house and it careered down the stairs, flew past his head and trundled 100 yards up the street"

Many thought a German spy had sabotaged the place, but it was not proven to be so. Mrs. Gammon a family friend lost an arm, Ernest Lloyd was blown down the street and had to wear an iron, for the rest of his life, to keep his leg straight. Triplet sisters were on the street corner and the one standing in the middle had her head blown off. There were many tragedies which have gone unrecorded.

Agnes Orley opened her eyes with some difficulty, nurses and Doctors were attending the injured. Agnes sat up. She was unhurt and looked around at the chaos. Bob was standing by her, with his loaf of bread still in his hand, but it was covered in bits of glass, Ivy was being

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

comforted by Aunt Emily. “Where’s Albert and Aggie?” Agnes asked, in a trembling voice. “It’s alright they’re here” - it was her brother Albert. And sure enough the two partygoers had come out of the St. Barnabas Church party unscathed. Many were taken to Poplar Hospital. People who didn’t have relatives elsewhere were sent to Lees Hall in Canning Town where accommodation, food and clothing were to be provided. However it was a shambles; the accommodation was ‘sleeping on the floor’, the food was ‘in short supply’ and the lorries bringing the clothing were hijacked on the way. As always in tragedies like this, some one makes a lot of money, the poor people suffer and the Government of the day turns a blind eye.

Some people moved from Silvertown never to return. The Seaward family went to live with Mrs. Seaward’s sister in Sidmouth, Devon. It was agreed that Agnes and her children would stay with Agnes’s sister Clara and her husband Dan McGee, who had no children of their own but lived with a number of cats in Bengal Street about three miles away in Canning Town. It meant a long walk to and from work for Agnes, but they had no choice. Albert, Bob and Aggie would attend a local school and Ivy would have to attend a kindergarten which was close by. Even the teachers at their old school had to be temporary transferred.

Clara was not at all helpful; she would not allow the children to enter the house after school until their mother arrived from work. The evening work had to be given up for a while, the Pub had to close for repairs anyway, although she still had a job there. The worse situation was

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

when it rained; Clara still wouldn't let them into the house, so they had to shelter in the chicken shed, which turned out to be rather cramped with the chickens almost sitting on their laps. The boys were fed up with this and found a modicum of shelter in a neighbour's doorway. Aggie didn't want to leave Ivy alone so she stayed with her in the shed. The vile smell was sickening for both of



**Houses damaged in the Silvertown Explosion January 1917**

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

them but Ivy suffered the most. She went down with measles and the chicken pox, which she blamed it on the chickens. Ivy caught every child's illness going the rounds. This situation continued for some months. It became desperate for Mrs. Orley, so she packed up her few possessions, grabbed her kids and returned to their home.

It was a bit premature, the repairs to their house were incomplete and in some instances floor boards were missing; but it was home and they managed. Once again Aunt Emily came to the rescue with food and blankets. Whilst they were away the Council had arranged for children between the ages of 6 to 14 to be sent to a care home in Swanley Kent for recuperation. Albert and Aggie were happy to go but Bob was having none of it, "I'm staying put" he declared. He almost changed his mind when his mother said, "Alright you can stay and help me around the house and look after Ivy". Ivy couldn't go, she was too young. It was a major operation involving most of the children from the area, buses were provided and off they went, some laughing, some crying, many parents were crying too. They were away for many months. Some parents who couldn't afford the fare didn't see their children until they returned home. When the children did return they found the town had been virtually rebuilt and the school looked brand new and so the ordeal was virtually forgotten.

But the accommodation was still sparse for the family. Aggie slept with her mother in a double bed and Ivy slept at the bottom across the bed, she complained regularly of her mum and sister kicking her in her side whilst asleep - of course they wouldn't believe her, "You must be dream-

## **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

ing” her mother declared. But Ivy had the bruises to prove it. Then Agnes’s husband return (*outlined in ‘The Wayward Sailor’.*) Ivy was only 6 years old and it was the first time she had seen her father and was afraid of him, however he settled in and the sleeping arrangements had to be changed. Aggie went up to the attic and Ivy’s bruising got worse, her father was contributing to the kicking. Three years later a third son was born called Daniel. Ivy was still having health problems so it was decided to send her to a Dr. Barnardo’s Home at Margate for convalescent. But that, as they say, ‘is another story’!