



My dearest Peggy...

Eighty years on, courtesy of This England magazine and Gill Steiner, we can experience the intense terror of the bombing night thanks to a surviving letter from Florence Hardy, who was living in Woodside Avenue. 'Auntie Flo' kept in touch with her niece Eileen, known as Peggy, who had travelled to South Africa to work as a children's nurse, and these extracts from a letter she wrote on 16 May, five days after the bomb, are vivid testimony to what the people of East Finchley, Highgate, Muswell Hill and London as a whole were forced to endure.

Woodside Avenue,
Friday 16th May 1941

My dearest Peggy...

It happened on Saturday night (May 10th/11th). Auntie Kate was sleeping here that night as I was alone. Well, the siren moaned about 11pm but we decided to get into bed, dressed of course, and hope for the best. We listened to what seemed like hundreds of planes going over and there was intense gunfire. Suddenly about 12.30am there was a violent crash (Leaside and Fortis Green) which we knew must be a bomb not far away. The house seemed to quiver and we were nearly shot out of bed. I rushed to the front door to see if there were any incendiaries in the front, while Kate dashed upstairs to see if our roof was on fire. I couldn't see anything in front except the flashes of shells bursting and the glow of a great fire far away in the London direction.

I came in and shut the door and called to Kate to come down as there were so many planes going over. At that instant there was another sickening crash, the house seemed to rock, the front door and the back door were wrenched off, nearly all the windows crashed, tiles on the roof were broken and sliding off and three bedroom ceilings crashed down. The house was filled with all this noise and with thick dust and soot which poured down the chimney. Well, that's what you get when two land mines fall near.

The second (Woodside) bomb fell on No 37, the first house past the allotments (going from this house towards the Great North Road). So you see we only got the blast from them. The Smith family lived at No 37. The house is just an indescribable heap of rubble, also several beyond it and opposite, and many uninhabitable. The number of casualties is very small considering the damage. Mrs Smith was killed outright and her son, aged 19, died the next day from the effects of a fractured skull. Mr Smith was badly cut and bruised. There were 14 seriously injured (broken limbs etc) and over 40 minor injuries (cuts, bruises etc). Miss Preston got a cut on her head which had to be stitched.

I do not know how many casualties there were from the first bomb but a great deal of damage was done. The two bombs have demolished and damaged many houses, a lot of which have been condemned as impossible to repair. You see, blast travels so far. You can't imagine how this poor road looked, and indeed still does present a sorry spectacle though it has been tidied up a good deal.

To go back to that awful night. When we found that the whole house had not collapsed, we went into the cloister and sat close together on my bed with eiderdowns round us as our teeth were chattering. I couldn't control my trembling. The electric light failed so we had only our torches and a candle. Then Mr Reid, our warden, climbed over the fallen front door and came to see if we were all right. Then Mr Alexander also came, and as I was too scared to go and turn on the gas, which is in the garage, to make tea, he said he would get some for us as his house was not so badly damaged. So, he returned with a pot of tea and a jug of milk, and I plucked up the courage to grope for cups.

I tell you, that tea saved our lives. We felt ever so much better and were able to scramble out of the front and by the mighty flare of a broken gas main we could see the ruins of where the bomb had fallen. We could see the huge cloud of smoke over the fires London-wards and the planes and gunfire continued. As there was nothing we could do we crept back into the cloister and waited for the all-clear which came at 6 o'clock. It was daylight then, so we went out the front and found everyone coming out in miscellaneous garb.

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It is impossible to describe the state of the house: broken glass, three whole ceilings down, dust and grit everywhere, soot everywhere, as there were no doors and few windows left the breeze blew it about. Tattered strips of curtains were hanging and blowing about; it all looked like a crazy nightmare. I plodded on alone as Mrs Barton does not come on Sundays. The Martins were coming to tea and when they arrived at 3.15, I was just finished clearing up the pantry, scullery, kitchen, hall etc.

I hadn't attempted to touch the dining room which was covered half-way over in soot, so we had tea in the kitchen. They are really a pair of bricks for they insisted on coming next morning to help. They arrived at 9 o'clock in overalls, bringing dustpans and brushes, so that we should have enough for us all to use. Mrs Barton was here as usual so we all toiled all day carrying the broken glass and ceiling plaster, broken crockery etc out to the roadway where each house had a bigger and bigger pile as the day wore on.

By the time the dining room was finished and all traces of the soot had vanished. I feared the carpet and chairs would have to go away, but the Hoover did the trick. Also the three bedrooms were cleared. Amy and Horrie came on Sunday and carried away a dress and jumper which I had left out in my bedroom upstairs and were covered deep with plaster and dirt, and washed them and brought them back on Monday at teatime. Auntie Kate also came Monday afternoon to lend a hand, so I was surrounded by a band of real pals. Also, Leonard, who used to do our gardening, heard of the trouble in Woodside Avenue and came Monday morning straight from all night duty (full time A.R.P.) and stayed the whole day helping me and Mrs Want. So, you see there is nothing like a spot of trouble to find out your real friends.

You may like to know how our A.R.P. services work. Within a second or two of the bomb exploding wardens and police are on the spot! Followed immediately by Rescue Squads who dig out buried people, ambulances, first aid parties, Mobile medical units, Repair parties (who deal with burst gas and water mains if necessary), and Fire Services. When all the people are accounted for and taken away, the Damage Repair parties start to arrive. These are local building firms who do the work under contract to the Council. Each firm has a section of houses to deal with.

First roofs are repaired, then window spaces are covered by black waterproof felting, then outside doors are repaired and replaced and the chimney stacks are repaired. This is called first aid and makes the house habitable. Mine was finished by Friday, except the garage doors which are smashed to pieces and will be done later. All the interior damage I have to arrange for myself. If a house is badly smashed a surveyor comes round to see if it has to be pulled down or is repairable.

Well, Chicky, what do you think about this tale of woe? Of course, the first point that emerges is how marvellously fortunate I have been to get off so lightly. I am very, very thankful.

Excuse this hasty screed. My hand is still a bit shaky, but I am quite all right and carrying on with my firefighting duties.

I sent birthday wishes to you a fortnight ago with a parcel. I don't know how long it will take to reach you (in South Africa). And don't forget that my thoughts and a little prayer come for you every single evening with Big Ben's chimes,

Fondest love,
Auntie Flo

P.S. When he was free at 12 o'clock on Sunday morning the Rev. Stanley came along and called at the houses to enquire and offer help. Wasn't that sweet of him?