



### THE FORGOTTEN HERO

**By J Peter Farmery JP**

**Ex-PS 146964 (CD2,LP,MM,ZD,SPG 6unit,ZW and TS)**

*"The Minister of Munitions regrets to announce that an explosion occurred this evening at a munitions factory in the neighbourhood of London. It is feared that the explosion was attended by considerable loss of life and damage to property".*

This announcement was made by the Metropolitan Police Press Bureau on Friday 19th January 1917, at 11.10pm and reported exactly as shown above in the national papers throughout England on Saturday 20th January. There was a complete black-out on news for the next 36 hours and as a result rumours were rife of the extent of the explosions, with suggestions that there were up to 4,000 deaths.

It was not until the following Monday that further news was published to give a more accurate account of the incident. However, it was only in 1974, that the Public Records Office (the National Archives) opened their files to reveal the full details of the incident.

The Great War of 1914 to 1918, was dragging on into its fourth year and the production of high explosives was a major concern, especially as there were insufficient factories in Britain engaged in the processing of TNT. One of the factories involved was Brunner Mond and Company at Crescent Wharf, North Woolwich Road, Silvertown, East London, part of which was formerly used for the production of caustic soda, this section of the factory had been closed for several years, and was now re-opened for the War effort.

This factory was chosen for its ability to be quickly converted to the production and purifying process of TNT rather than its location. There were many objections raised by the company to this, not least that it was surrounded by a plywood packing case factory, an oil depot, a school and thousands of residents living in narrow streets. However, the Government pressed ahead, and production began in 1915. The purification process involved melting crude TNT in a large melting pot, then adding alcohol which attracted the impurities. These were then separated and the pure TNT was dried and packed into 50lb bags for transport to munitions factories actually making shells for guns. At the time in question there were some 63 people regularly employed in this section of the factory in three shifts of 21, and stored on the premises were over 80 tons of TNT in various

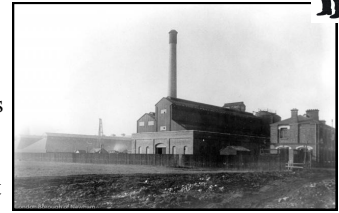
stages of purification.

The fact that so much highly volatile material was kept there was not likely to be generally known, not even to some of the work-

ers, and especially not to the thousands of residents in the adjacent streets. It was only known by a few that if a fire or explosion were to take place then the results would be catastrophic. Of those people who knew the dangers were Dr Andrea ANGELL, the chief Chemist at the factory and his assistant Frederick Blevins, also the local fire chief, and some of his officers and the local police, including the officer on duty on that fateful day, PC 389'K'Edward George Brown GREENOFF.

There were many theories as to how the explosion was caused, and one which has never been thoroughly discounted was that of sabotage. However, the explosion took the lives of 73 persons with some 578 people injured, 125 seriously, most of them living in close proximity to the factory, and totally unaware of the highly dangerous activity taking place. The factory was completely destroyed as were the plywood factory, the fire station, and part of the oil refinery and there was damage and destruction scattered over a very large area. It was estimated that between 60 to 70,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed. The explosion was heard in central London, with windows being blown out in the Savoy Hotel. The fact that so few people (under the circumstances) were killed in this incident may be attributed to two men, but more of them in a moment.

The fire broke out on the top floor of the works where the crude TNT was being poured out of the bags into a hopper, leading to the melting pot. No-one to this day is absolutely sure how the fire started which culminated in the massive explosion. As I have stated, one theory which has never been totally discounted was sabotage. During the war years, it had been discovered that there had been many instances of German agents infiltrating into Britain. Although the likelihood of anyone of them being on the premises that day is highly improbable, the possibility of the materials being interfered with on routes from the North of England has always been a possibility. TNT in its crude form was transported by rail and road from the north and then purified at the Brunner Mond factory, for



Brunner Mond Factory



use in munitions production. It was said that barrels of material often arrived damaged with the lids broken open. It would not have been impossible for someone on route to have tampered with the contents, for example, by placing some caustic soda into the crude TNT. It must also be taken into consideration that Brunner Mond factory had manufactured caustic soda in that section of the factory as well. This would, when the material was later placed into the melting pot, have the effect of instant combustion, even at a low temperature. Half way through the late shift on that Friday everything was apparently normal and two of the employees, Hetty Sands and Ada Randall were going to tea. The time was 4.45pm. Just two minutes later these two women heard a dull bang, and looking outside saw the melting room ablaze. As far as can be determined it was 6.52pm when the place shook with a tremendous explosion and turned Brunner Mond into a giant bomb. All buildings within 400 yards, were completely demolished, with severe damage being caused to thousands of other buildings and dwellings over an extended area. The local fire station at Silver-



The destroyed Fire Station

town together with rows of houses and two oil tanks at the nearby oil storage plant were blasted, the oil being ignited to add to the difficulties. The firemen had not long been out of the station.

Dr Andrea ANGELL, the Chief Chemist of the factory was immediately made aware of the fire and went to the plant to tell everyone to evacuate, and assisted in guiding several people to exit doors. he went upstairs to check if there was anyone left, after making sure the fire brigade had been informed. This courageous act ensured that several people escaped, who might not otherwise have got out. As the fire brigade arrived and commenced to spray their hoses on the fire, a massive explosion occurred and Dr ANGELL was never seen again.

Another selfless individual, who could so easily have run for his life and saved himself, was PC 389'K' GREENOFF. He was on duty outside the factory having started that tour of duty at 2pm and was posted to the beat which included the Brunner Mond works. This factory, because of its importance in the war effort, was an obvious security risk and merited the attendance of a police patrol 24 hours per day. As soon as he heard of the fire, PC

GREENOFF began to assist in the evacuation of the employees. He guided many people to safety and also tried to warn some of the people gathering outside of the imminent danger, when the explosion occurred. He was badly burned on his hands and a large piece of metal hit him in the head. He was found, crawling among the ruins of the factory on his hands and knees. He was taken to hospital where he later died on the 28th January as a result of the terrible injuries. Constable GREENOFF had given his life in the preservation of others, the highest tributes were given and even King George V sent the following message to the Commissioner of Police, Sir Edward HENRY:-

*"I am grieved to hear that Police Constable George GREENOFF through whose self-sacrificing efforts, many lives were saved on the occasion of the recent explosion at a munitions factory in the vicinity of London, has succumbed to the injuries he then received. I ask you to convey to his widow and family my sincere sympathy and at the same time, to assure you of my sense of admiration that the best traditions of the police have been so nobly maintained in this signal act of courage and of devotion to duty".*

Edward George Brown GREENOFF was born in Kentish Town in 1886, and as the son of a plumber, at 14 began his apprenticeship with his father. In 1908 he married Ada, and in the same year joined the Metropolitan Police. PC 389'K'/wt no 96389 was posted to K division on 7th December of that year. He found the police force a more rewarding job despite the varied hours he was required to work. By 1917 they had three children, Edwin George age 7½, Elsie age 4, and George age 2 and lived at 13 Rhea Street, North Woolwich, not far from the Brunner Mond factory.

Mrs GREENOFF used to take the children to see their father on duty occasionally and to give him some sandwiches to eat whilst on patrol. On the evening of the explosion the children were at home with their mother. The blast from the explosion blew the blind from the window striking young Edwin on the head and shoulder. Mrs GREENOFF realising instinctively where the explosion was, cried "My poor George!". When she eventually saw him, he was in a terrible state and never recovered. He died on the 28th after considerable efforts to save him, despite his extreme pain, he remained courageous to the end.

His eldest son Edwin, went with Mrs GREENOFF to Buckingham Palace later that year to receive the King's Police Medal for Gallantry. In addition to this immediate



award he was also honoured by the erection of a plaque in Postman's Park, Aldersgate Street, London EC1, and a memorial certificate from the Carnegie Hero Fund Trust. In the confusion of the subsequent Government inquiry into the fire, the deeds of Constable GREENOFF were overlooked by the police, and it was not until 1978 that his name was added to the Official Police Roll of Honour, recorded at Scotland Yard over 60 years after his death. Young Edwin GREENOFF, no doubt inspired by his father's deeds related above, joined the Metropolitan Police in 1929 and after serving at Commercial Road and Islington Police stations retired on pension in 1955.

It must be noted here that among the toll of those killed, were two of the firemen attached to the West Ham Fire Brigade who attended the scene. On their arrival, the officer in charge, Samuel Betts, was told that there was nothing they could do, because of the intense fire and immediate danger of the factory being destroyed in a massive explosion. However, in the highest tradition of the fire brigade, they immediately began to run out hoses, and fix up the fire hydrant. Before they could get the hoses in operation, the massive explosion occurred and the fire engine was blown away, two of the firemen were killed instantly, Frederick Charles SELL, and Henry VICKERS, and the rest of the team were seriously injured.

London Gazette entry of 22 June 1917 shows the following citation :-

*His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award... "The Edward medal of the First class to the representatives of Dr Andrea Angel, and Mr George Wimbourne, who lost their lives In endeavouring to save the lives of others on the occasion of a Fire which broke out at the Silvertown Chemical works on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1917, and his Majesty has been graciously pleased To award the King's Police medal to the representative of Police Constable Edward George Brown Greenoff, who lost his life on The same occasion"*

Although these were immediate awards the following members of the West Ham Fire Brigade who were killed and injured in these extremely dangerous circumstances were also each awarded the King's Police Medal for Gallantry in the New

Years Honours List for 1918:-

*Station Officer Samuel Scott Betts*

*Sub Officer Henry Vickers (posthumous)*

*Fireman James Joseph Betts*

*Fireman Henry Chapple*

*Fireman Frederick Charles Sell (posthumous)*

*Fireman James Henry Rich Yabsley*

The recommendation for their awards reads in part:-

*"The above named officers answered a call to the Brunner Mond factory in Silvertown, East London on the occasion of a fire and explosion on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1917. They were all well aware of the risks, knowing the nature of the explosives stored at the factory. According to evidence at the inquest, when they reached the premises they were told to run, as they could do no good, but nevertheless they set to, to fix a hydrant.. Before it could be got to work, there was a massive explosion, and the engine was blown away."*

In addition to the above, there were a large number of Medals of the Order of the British Empire awarded vide the Supplement to the London Gazette on 7 July 1920, to members of the West Ham Fire Brigade, the East Ham Fire Brigade, and Romford and Barking Fire Brigades, for "conspicuous courage and devotion to duty on the occasion of fires at chemical and Munitions factories". Although there is no specific connection to the above incident, it may be assumed that at least many of them do refer.

There are some whose self sacrifice should never be forgotten, and whose memory we must never allow to fade, as they show the standards that we all must try to attain and maintain.

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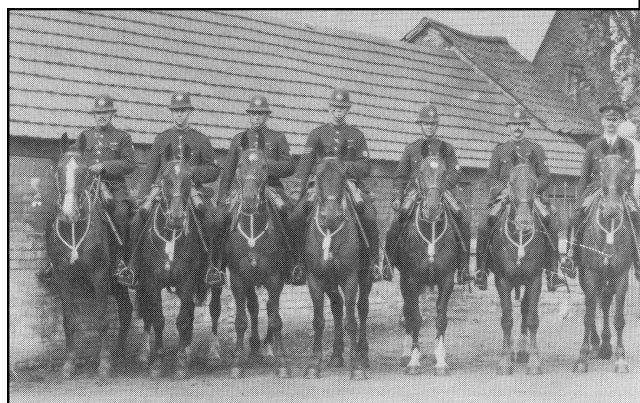
L.G. 22.6.1917 Page 6181

LG 1.1.1918 Page 85

Supplement to the LG 7 July 1920 Page 7301 et seq

### UNKNOWN MOUNTED BRANCHES

#### GLOUCESTER SHIRE 1926



*Gloucestershire Mounted Officers 1926.*