

The MacKenzie Family

JULY 9, 1917-JULY 9, 2022



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Chief Gunner, Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot, Allen S. MacKenzie, age 47 at his death. Born in London, England

Chief Gunner Allen Scott MacKenzie, USN

Chief Gunner Allen S. MacKenzie was killed along with his wife Malvina and their two youngest daughters, Dorothy, age 12 and Mildred, age 8, on July 9, 1917, at the Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot in their home, the southern half of a duplex situated on a hillside directly across the main roadway into the Ammunition Depot from the magazine that exploded. The blast killed the family instantly, along with their gardener and an employee who was in the magazine at the time of the explosion. This year marks the 105th year since the explosion that rocked the naval base, caused destruction in the community of Vallejo across the River and was felt throughout the region. A recently published article written by Stephen C. Ruder, in the [June 2022 Naval History Magazine](#) (link available only till July 22, 2022), offers an alternative to the Navy's narrative of the cause published shortly after the explosion. It points to the source of the explosion as a murder-suicide by the employee whose remains were found at the explosion site. The oldest daughter, 18 year-old Roberta, was spared because she was in Ohio where she was to be married later in July 1917. Newspaper accounts indicated that her mother, Malvina, was to have departed by train for Ohio later in the day on which she was killed.

Cover photo from left to right: Mildred, 'Millie', age 8, with the girls' Aunt Millie and Dorothy, age 12, each holding a rabbit that has clearly been just taken from the rabbit hutches, for the photo. Note that they had hastily dropped their parasol. The garden had recently been planted, with the empty seed packages attached to stakes used to mark the seed rows. The shadow of the photographer appears to be Allen MacKenzie, the girls' father. Date: May 18, 1917, just a few weeks before the girls were killed.

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Allen S. MacKenzie "was a Navy man"

According to great granddaughter, Linda Garwick, who I discovered through Ancestrydotcom, her Grandmother, the MacKenzie's oldest daughter Roberta, described her father as having always been "a Navy man". Allen MacKenzie, shown here as a young sailor, joined the US Navy in Brooklyn, New York. He is listed in a 1920 Navy published book entitled "OFFICERS AND ENLISTED MEN OF THE UNITED STATES NAVY WHO LOST THEIR LIVES DURING THE WORLD WAR FROM APRIL 6, 1917 TO NOVEMBER 11, 1918".



Allen MacKenzie enlisted in the US Navy in Brooklyn, New York.

FOREWORD.

The Bureau of Navigation, in publishing this list of those who died in the Naval Service during the World War, desires to take advantage of the occasion and to express its high appreciation of the patriotism, devotion, and loyalty of those citizens of the country who have willingly given their lives to its service.

To the bereaved ones it wishes to express its deepest sympathy in the losses they have sustained and to offer them the comforting thought that the departed ones have died nobly, and their memories will ever be held in sacred esteem by their surviving comrades and by all citizens who appreciate the services rendered by those who have served in their country's defense.

THOS. WASHINGTON,
Chief of the Bureau of Navigation.

WASHINGTON, D. C.,
March 17, 1920.

(3)

Military Service Record
Allen Scott MacKenzie

His Military Service Record shows that Chief Gunner Allen S. MacKenzie, enlisted in the US Navy on January 5, 1897, in Brooklyn, New York. He served in the Spanish-American War and aboard the USS Iowa, the USS Texas and the USS Richmond. He was just shy of having served for 12 years in the US Navy when he was killed in the explosion at Mare Island on July 9, 1917.

7-9-23-5000 (40-78)

UNITED STATES NAVY

NAME	RANK OR RATE	DATE OF APPOINTMENT OR ENLISTMENT			
MACKENZIE, ALLEN SCOTT	Gunner	5 Jan., 1897			
ENLISTED AT OR APPOINTED FROM	TERM	SERVICE NO.			
Enlisted man in Navy	Officer	----			
TRADE	RESIDENCE AT APPOINTMENT OR ENLISTMENT				
----	Brooklyn, N.Y.				
BIRTHPLACE	DATE	HEIGHT	EYES	HAIR	COMPLEXION
London, Eng.	11 Dec., 1870	67 in.	Hazel L. Bwn.		Ruddy
VESSELS OR STATIONS (DO NOT GIVE DATES)					
SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR: USS IOWA; USS TEXAS; USS RICHMOND;					
Ordnance Inspection, Brooklyn, N.Y.					
ENGAGEMENTS					
(OVER)					
FINAL DISPOSITION	DATE	CAUSE		RATE	
Died (Mare Island)	9 July, 1917	Over		Chief Gunner	
OTHER NAVAL SERVICE					
Enlisted man 11 years, 9 months and 7 days.					
(STATE OF NEW YORK FORM)					

Military service record for Allen S. McKenzie shows that he served in the Spanish-American War and aboard a number of ships prior to assuming his post as Chief Gunner at the Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot.

Malvina MacKenzie, age 39, wife of Allen S. MacKenzie

Malvina D. Hunter MacKenzie, wife of Allen MacKenzie, was born in New Jersey. According to local newspaper reports, she was intending to leave the day she was killed in the explosion, to travel by train to join her oldest daughter Roberta, for her wedding in Ohio. Photo below is from the outdoor representation of their bedroom, in the field below where their home was, adjacent to the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve visitor center on the 100th anniversary of their death, July 9, 2017.



The MacKenzie Family Before Their Youngest Daughter was Born

Malvina and Allen MacKenzie with their eldest daughter, Roberta and their second daughter, Dorothy. Mildred, 4 years younger than Dorothy was not yet a part of the family.

I feel this deep, almost pathos as I look into each one's eyes. No matter when we come into this life, when we live on this earth and when we are taken from it, we share a common humanness. My heart touches theirs. I find myself wishing that I could have spent time getting to know them and their story and who they were and of course, how they came to live and work on Mare Island.

I've had the privilege of spending, luckily, a number of years with two women who grew up at the Mare Island Ammunition Depot. One, the other "Myrna of Mare Island", Myrna Rowser, who later changed her name to "Ginger", born in 1928 and Lorene "Lorrie" Palmer Seward, born in 1930. Both women grew up on the Naval Ammunition Depot. Lorrie would say, "I am the only person you will meet who lived at the Ammunition Depot before, during and after WWII". I treasure and cherish every moment I had with them and am honored to share this special place and its people, with you.



The MacKenzie "Women"

Linda Garwick shared this photo with me on July 9, 2022, the anniversary of the explosion on this date in 1917 in which the MacKenzie family except for her grandmother Roberta MacKenzie, shown standing in the middle behind her two younger sisters, Dorothy on the left and Mildred, "Millie" in the middle front, were killed. Their mother, Malvina is on the left. I am not certain who the older woman is on the right. She looks like she may possibly be Malvina's mother, or her aunt. I quite adore their clothing. Feel free to share your thoughts about the setting. I may be speculating to say that the boxes are ammunition shipping boxes. Maybe they are just ordinary shipping boxes. I can't read what the words say on the boxes. The two youngest girls are barefoot, but, the older woman also, doesn't have shoes on. My first thought was that they had been or were going swimming. Women wore quite different clothing to swim in, back then. Nevertheless, it's a fun photo.



Children's Play Ground at Mare Island

"This last one says it is at children's play ground at Mare Island. Left to right: Dorothy, Roberta, Mildred and Malvina."

- Linda Garwick,
granddaughter of Roberta
MacKenzie, second from
left.



Dorothy MacKenzie, age 12

Dorothy MacKenzie, age 12 was the middle daughter of the MacKenzie family. She was killed by the explosion that killed her younger sister, Mildred, age 8 and her parents. Dorothy is buried in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery with them. (Myrna Hayes and Alexis Gentry, who brought toys and decorations for the girls, next to Dorothy's grave, marked with the brown bear in a 2010 memorial service, hosted by the Mare Island Heritage Trust.)



*Photo: Lisa Evans, with Myrna Hayes and Alexis Gentry
Mare Island Naval Cemetery, 2010*



Mildred 'Millie' MacKenzie, age 8

The youngest of the MacKenzie family, Mildred, 'Millie' was 8 years old when she was killed in the explosion on the morning of July 9, 1917. She is buried with her family in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery. (far right grave decorated for a 2010 memorial service)

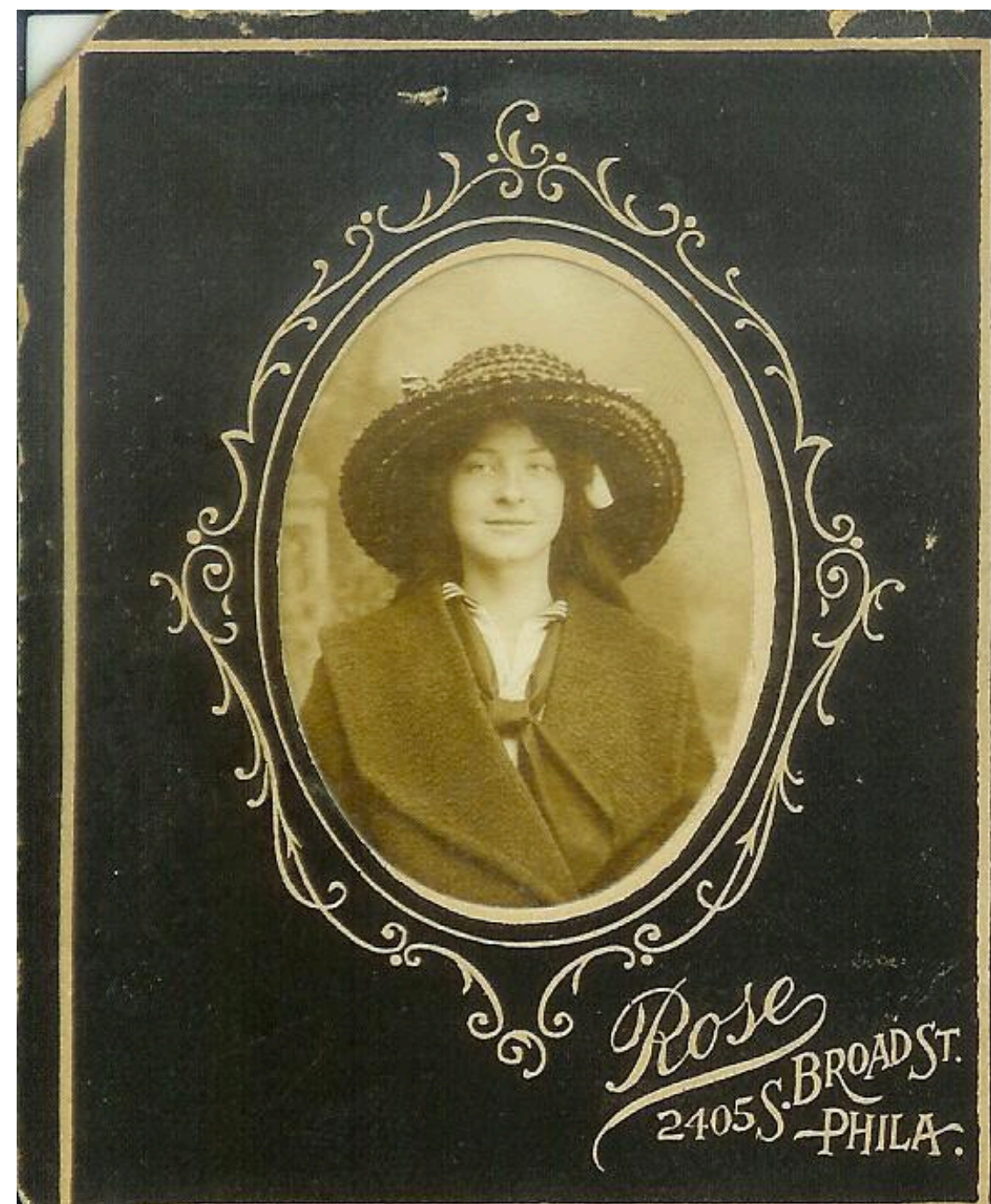


Photo: Lisa Evans, Mare Island Naval Cemetery, 2010



Roberta MacKenzie, age 18 was not living at home at the time of the explosion that killed her family

Roberta MacKenzie, age 18 had left her Mare Island home for Ohio several months prior to the explosion that killed the rest of her family. She moved to Ohio to marry a young sailor, who according to news stories of the time, had been dishonorably discharged from the US Navy at Mare Island. She would go on to live a blustery life as his wife and bear four boys, marrying and divorcing her husband, the son of a wealthy Ohio manufacturing family, twice, before she left him, permanently. Her granddaughter told me a story of Roberta going so far as to change her husband's name and also her boys' names when she remarried, to ensure that they could not be located by the boys' father. Roberta moved to San Diego to be close to her four sons who had all joined the Marines and located in the San Diego area.



Roberta MacKenzie Osborne Harris

Linda Garwick, Roberta's granddaughter, the daughter of Roberta's youngest son, wrote when she sent this photo to me the evening of July 77th, 2022, "My grandmother after the death of her family."

Roberta's youngest son, Allen Harris, shown here with his daughter, Linda, passed away in June 2020. I got to speak with him on the phone when I first reached out to Linda. In the conversation, he told me that both times he visited his grandparents' and aunts' Mare Island graves, there were long-horned cattle grazing the Cemetery. As the former Preserve Manager, I approve. Grazing Cattle would do no damage to the gravestones, as compared to mowers!

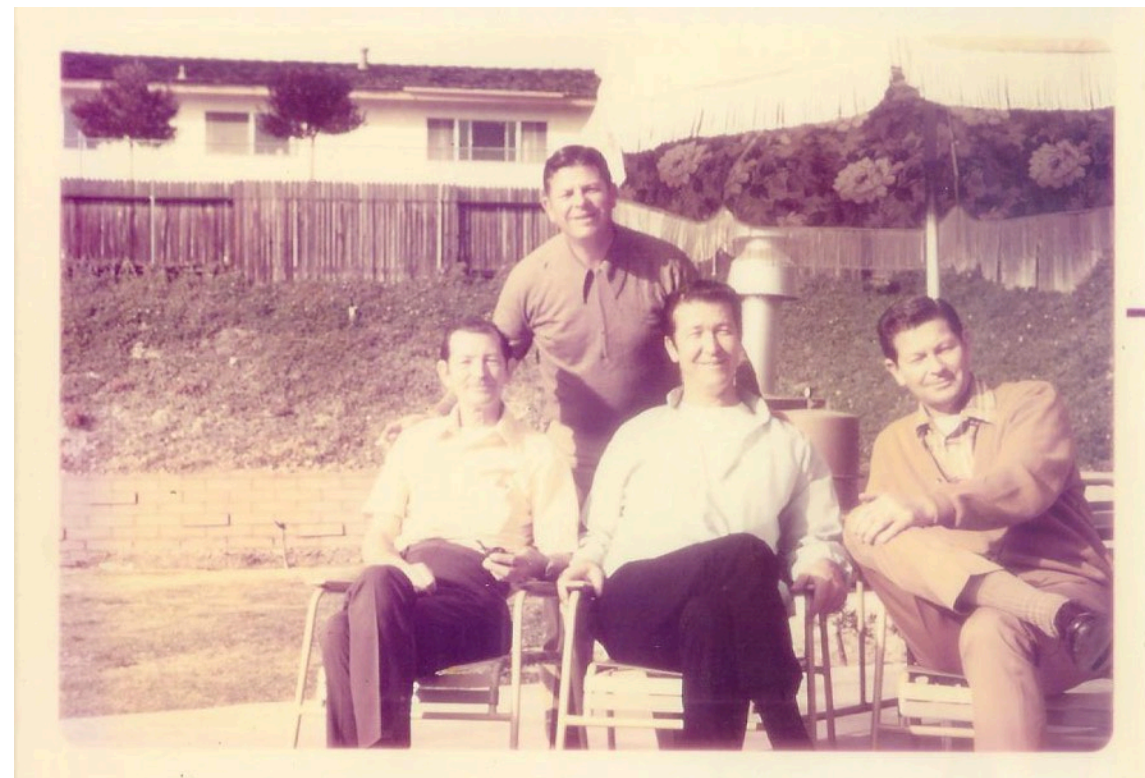




Linda Garwick wrote in an email about Roberta's photo, left: "Yes, my grandmother was beautiful, one of my favorite pics! In the last few years, thanks to ancestry and dna I was able to locate some of my dad's family on his father's side. He has no contact since he was 5 yrs old. One cousin of his sent me pics of that side of the family and I got goose bumps from one of my grandfather's pics, my youngest son is the spitting image of him!" (Photos above)

Photos next page: Roberta and her four young boys, left; her sons at their weekly family gatherings in San Diego, upper right; Linda Garwick with her brothers, children of Roberta's youngest son, lower right)

THE MACKENZIE FAMILY JULY 9, 1917-JULY 9, 2022



The MacKenzie Family

Navy Investigation, News Reports

JULY 9, 1917-JULY 9, 2022



Building 31, a nearby munitions storage magazine of the same design and vintage as Building 40, the black powder magazine that blew up on July 9, 1917, 1917, at the Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot.

Excerpts from the Navy investigation archived in the National Archives, Washington D.C. Reference to maps and photos on the following pages

Source: Mare Island Naval Shipyard letter dated 14 July 1917 from Public Works Officer to Commandant

Subject: Report showing condition of buildings at the Naval Ammunition Depot following explosion on July 9, 1917

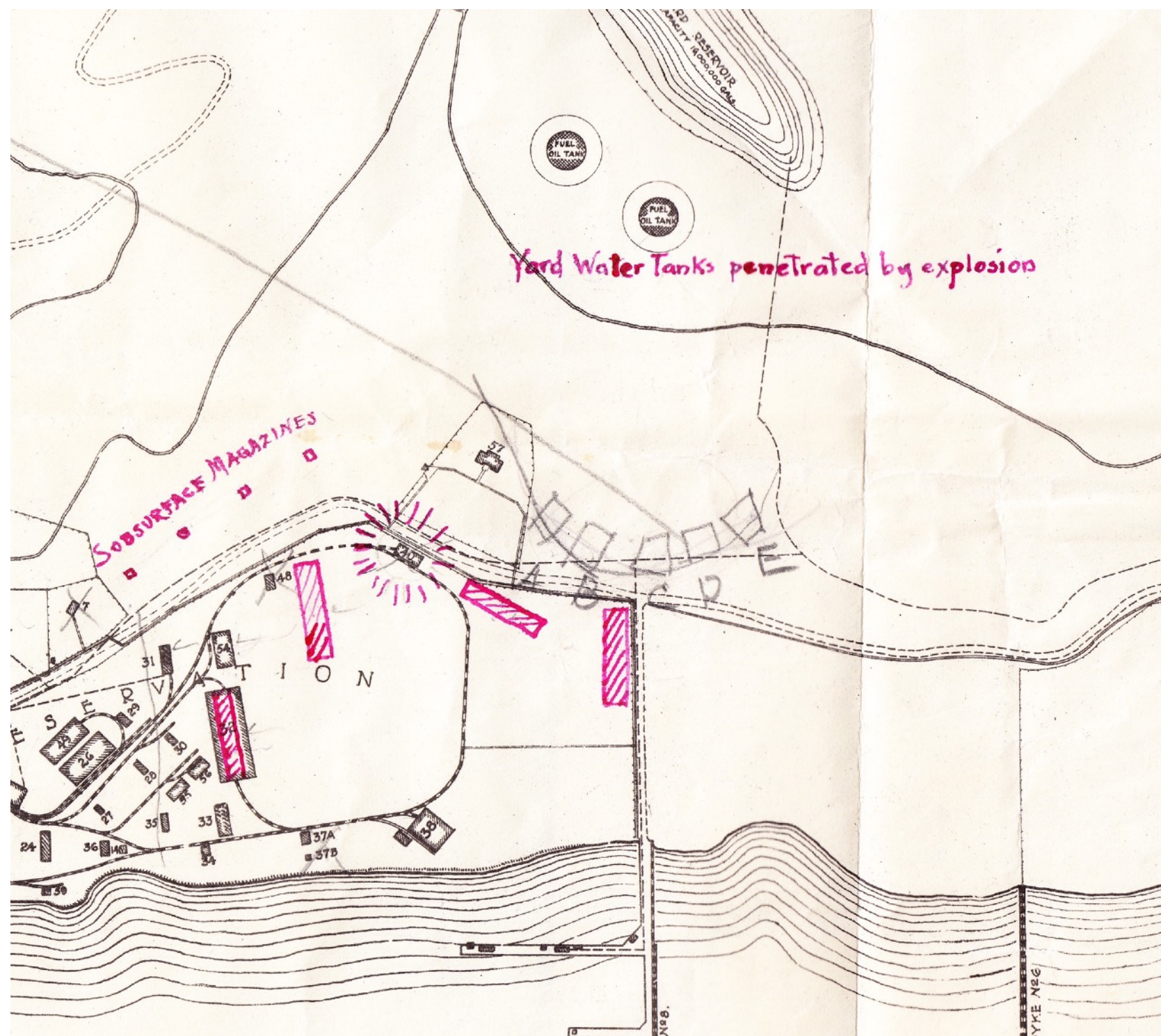
"The black powder magazine, Building 40, was a brick building, 30' wide and 80' long, 1 story high with wooden floor joists and wooden floor with ventilated air space underneath. A piece of the iron framing (of the roof trusses) fell on the Naval Hospital building and penetrated through the roof and two floors." ([see nearby magazine, photo left](#))

"Looking west. Building 57 was a one-story double quarters frame construction, erected in 1913. The South half of the building was occupied by Chief Gunner A.S. McKenzie and family, who were all killed."

Photo No. 3 (showing debris in foreground) "Picture taken at Building 32, looking west. In the right foreground, showing earthwork thrown up at site of Building 40; in the center, showing debris of double quarters Building 57." (Note the two persons standing in the crater of Bldg 40 and the probable Marines on guard in the enclosure on the left of the photograph.) File titled MINSY b57 b40 ([see photo page 17](#))

An existing Navy map used to hand sketch and orient to the location of the explosion and impacts for the Navy report

It is easy to seem how close the explosion was to the MacKenzie home in the duplex shown as Building 57. Many of the magazines shown on the original map, are still visible through the fence from the visitor center parking lot area and on the left of the chainlink fence along the main Trail. Additional buildings were filled in and used for munitions manufacturing during WWII. The small hand drawn-in bunkers referred to as "Subsurface Magazines" were built a short time before the explosion and still exist today. It is unclear how, if at all, the pencil drawn squares labeled with the letters A-E are relevant to the incident.



Map and explosion photos provided by Author Stephen C. Ruder collected from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

The MacKenzie home following the explosion

The explosion took place in an ammunition storage magazine located directly across the Ammunition Depot main access roadway from the duplex in which the MacKenzie family lived. The ruins of the home are shown in the hillside upper center. Shockingly, the Gunner's family living in the duplex to the right, survived, with a young baby and the baby's nurse. The Navy report indicates that as many as 1,000 Marines participated in the retrieval of evidence in the debris and guarding of the magazines. Some Marines are shown to the middle left. For current reference, the visitor center for the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve, closed at this time by the city of Vallejo, was built 17 years after the explosion



Location of Building 57, the duplex in which the MacKenzie family was killed at 7:56am, July 9, 1917.

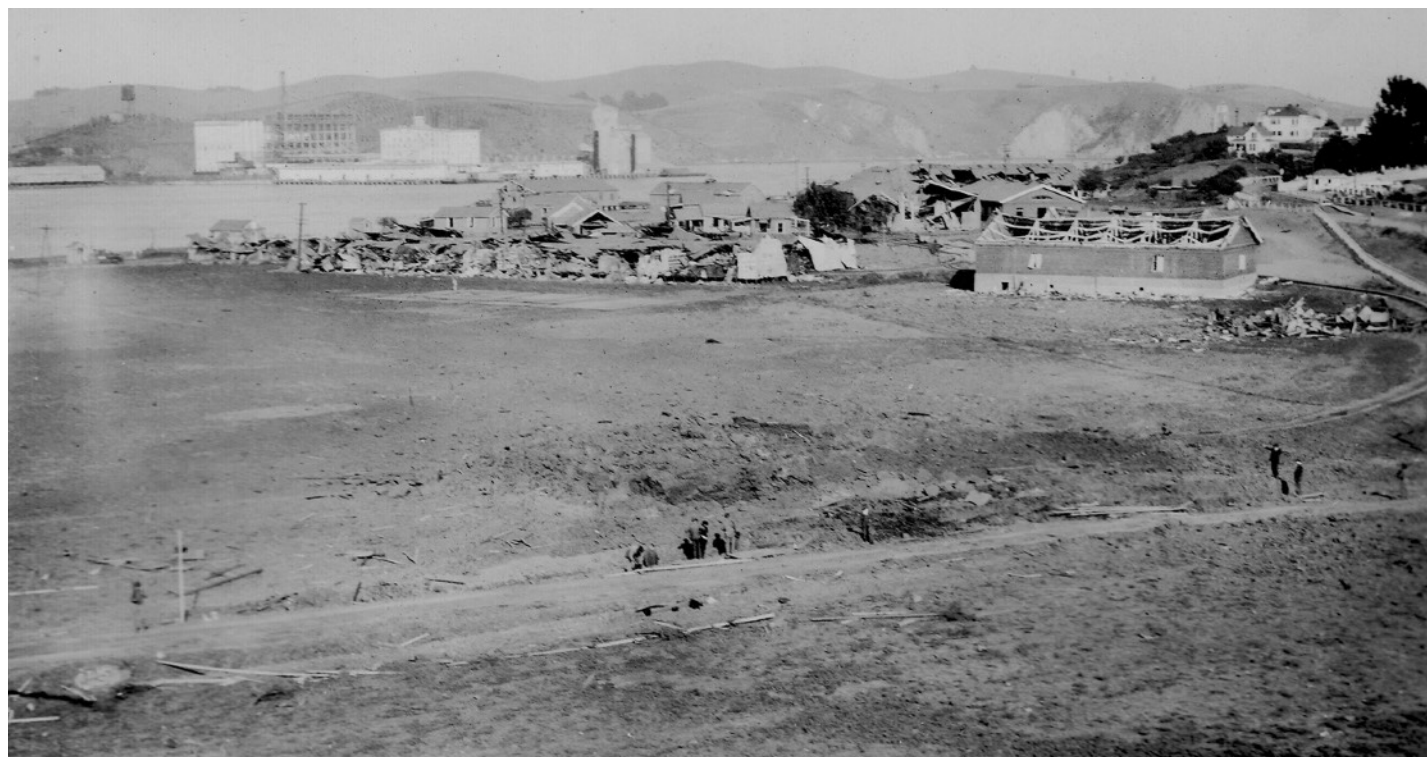
about 10 ft. to the south of the location of the MacKenzie home. The Marines are shown approximately where the parking lot is, today. The

small building on the next page, page 18, lower photo, was later built in the "crater" area shown above.

"Crater" where the magazine was located at which the explosion took place

The "crater" created by the blast that blew up a reported 2,000 tons of black powder stored in the magazine that killed the MacKenzie family and two Navy civilian employees, one a gardener and the other the longtime Ammunition Depot employee now thought to have caused the explosion. He had actually received a commendation, from the Secretary of the Navy, 25 years prior because of his swift response to another explosion at the Ammunition Depot on June 13, 1892, that killed 15 members of the crew of the USS Boston, also buried in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery.

Photos next page: 100th anniversary. Canopy at the home site immediately behind the visitor center built 17 years after family's death. Re-created rooms.



Sperry Mill under construction across the Napa River in the background. Extensive damage to the buildings of the Ammunition Depot, shown. The Cemetery and some of the Naval Ammunition Depot Worker's homes in the distance. Photo: National Archives, Washington, D.C. Below, a small building later built in WWII on the location of the "crater".



THE MACKENZIE FAMILY JULY 9, 1917-JULY 9, 2022



Dorothy and Millie's bedroom portrayed in the field below the location of their home Building 57

The MacKenzie family lived in a duplex on the hill above the field where I chose to re-create their bedrooms and dining room. The location of the home is shown on the previous page, page 19. It would have had sweeping views of the Napa River/Mare Island Strait, the Sperry Mill across the River and sparsely situated munition storage magazines, below. As you will note on the map on page 16, their home had a circle buggy drive from the main roadway which you still travel today when entering the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve. I chose to depict the family's bedrooms under the canopies because they were apparently still asleep or it was prior to beginning their day, when



The bedroom of Dorothy and Mildred, 'Millie' MacKenzie as portrayed on the 100th anniversary of the explosion that blasted them from their beds to heaven. The bears I have found in wetlands or along roadways during California Coast Cleanup days as much as 25 years ago. I washed them and kept them. They seemed poignantly appropriate for this day.

the explosion took place, killing them, instantly. I feel an unspeakable sadness in the telling of their story and re-creation of the setting in which they were killed. Yet, I also have felt a quiet, peace and comfort in knowing that I have searched for

and spoken to their family members and that I have told their story. Someday, I hope to use some of the video I took on the morning of the 100th anniversary of their death, to more completely and broadly share their innocent and tragic story.

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THE MACKENZIE FAMILY JULY 9, 1917-JULY 9, 2022



A dining room in which I planned to serve afternoon tea

The third canopy-covered room with its curtains blowing in the wind and family photos hanging on the walls, was intended for serving tea and cookies. However, the day grew unbearably hot and the thought of afternoon tea served in the scorching western sun seemed unlikely. To my surprise and somewhat shock, a Preserve user showed up with not one, but two kegs of beer that he insisted must be served because he had trekked around all week with them in the back of his truck, adding bag after bag of ice to keep them chilled at the right temperature. So, we went from a planned afternoon outdoor tea party, to a beer party inside the cool and inviting 8-inch thick, steel-reinforced concrete walls with smooth, cool floors, also of poured concrete, inside our visitor center. The ice keeping the kegs



A depiction of the MacKenzie family dining room in which I planned to serve an afternoon tea. The weather had other plans.

chilled, melted in puddles all over the floor with towels dropped in heaps. We somehow, I felt, did justice on the 100th anniversary of an explosion that killed a family who we don't know, but probably didn't even drink alcohol. We celebrated their lives in the way that our wildlands

community is accustomed to. With whatever Preserve Users bring to the table. If you believe in this way of running a nature and history preserve, please be in touch at mareislandpreserve.com phone: 707-249-9633; email: myrnahayes@mac.com

THE MACKENZIE FAMILY JULY 9, 1917-JULY 9, 2022



*The graves of the MacKenzie family left to right, Allen S., Malvina, Dorothy and Mildred; Mare Island Naval Cemetery. Placing flowers at the graves on the 100th anniversary, July 9, 2017. Allen S. MacKenzie, listing in **Navy Personnel killed in World War I, April 6, 1917 to November 11, 1918**, published in 1920 by the Bureau of Navigation, U.S. Navy.*



MACKENZIE, ALLAN S., chief gunner, United States Navy.
Died: At Mare Island, Calif.
Date: July 9, 1917.
Cause: Accident (explosion of ammunition depot).
Next of kin: Mrs. Roberta Osborne (daughter), 5618 Dibble Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio.
Appointed from New York.
MACLEISH KENNETH, lieutenant, Reserve Force (class 5).
Died: Reported missing October 14, 1898.
Later reported prisoner. Cables dated February 4 to 13 report body found at Schmore, Belgium, and buried.
Officially dead as of October 15, 1918.
Cause: Enemy action.

Excerpt from MARE ISLAND CEMETERY 1856 -1921
by Peggy O'Drain and Joyce Giles, Mare Island
Historic Park Foundation
Digitally formatted by: Tony W. Liang

CAUSE OF DEATH FOR FAMILY

From the **Vallejo Evening Chronicle**, July 9, 11, 17 of 1917

On July 9, 1917, Mrs. MacKenzie was preparing to go to Cleveland to join an older daughter, Roberta, for her marriage to James Osborn. She left two weeks prior to make preparations. She planned to leave at 12:30 for the first part of the journey. However, there was an explosion which wrecked the black powder magazine at 7:56 am. The officer's duplex quarters were completely demolished, and the MacKenzie family was thrown out of the house onto the hillside, dying instantly.

People walking in the direction of the magazine saw a flash of flame. The smoke poured out, and the entire building where the black powder was stored rose in the air. Smoke cleared, and you could see wreckage. Thirteen buildings, including packing houses, shell houses, etc., were partially demolished.

The adjacent house was occupied by Gunner and Mrs. McKenna, their baby and the baby's nurse. However, the adjacent duplex was not destroyed, and the family survived. 31 people were injured by the explosion, some seriously.

Neil C. Damstedt, who opened all the magazine buildings in the morning to take the temperatures, was also killed. His body was mangled. He had been employed at the magazine for 24 years, and a long-time Vallejoan. Damstedt left a wife and four children. Neil Damstedt was a Mason, and his funeral was handled by the Solano Lodge of Masons, and he was interred at the Masonic and Odd Fellows Cemetery.

The other person killed by the explosion was George Stanton of South Vallejo. He was the gardener at the magazine, and his body was found near the MacKenzie's. His funeral was at 8pm, and the body shipped to Oakland for cremation. Stanton was 75, and a native of England. He left a wife, daughter and 3 grandchildren.

Excerpt from MARE ISLAND CEMETERY 1856 -1921, continued

Fire bells immediately sounded, as all rushed to the scene. All Naval doctors living in Vallejo were rushed to Mare Island Hospital. Clergymen were also summoned. Marines came to surround and guard the area all day. No one was allowed to leave the Yard. The thought was that the Germans caused the explosion.

Stores and homes in Vallejo were damaged by the explosion. Many store windows in downtown Vallejo were shattered. South Vallejo also suffered structural damage to buildings. People soon learned that their insurance did not cover this damage to windows. Two bricks were thrown across the channel and struck in the Sperry Mill property without causing damage. Windows were also broken in Crockett, and shock waves were felt in other cities within a 50-mile radius.

Telephone and telegraph offices were crowded as people were calling family to announce they were safe. 823 messages were handled by the telegraph office.

There were many thoughts and theories of what caused the explosion. Marines continued to guard the magazine, with orders to shoot-to-kill anyone there after dark. Civilians living in area of magazine now had to live off the shipyard, and Marines would open and close the magazines.

A board of inquiry tried to determine the cause of the explosion, but most evidence was destroyed in the explosion. On September 25, an announcement stated that the disaster was "the deliberate act of a person or persons unknown".

Two days before there had been a fire at the stables, and 12 out of 50 horses were killed. A month later, a report came that a local dance hall had a bomb, and it was immediately cleared. Vallejo became very "bomb conscious".

Proof of a German sabotage plot involving a military attaché in San Francisco was revealed at the end of World War I.

Author of revised history of the deadly explosion and his family with Nitro and me in July 2016

Historian and author Stephen C. Ruder and his family came to visit the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve in July 2016 just a week before the 99th anniversary of the explosion that killed the MacKenzie family and two other civilians. We are shown with the explosion site in the background. What an honor to meet up with them, learn about his research, and contribute to the story, including sharing many of the family photos. It was the boys' birthday. They enjoyed meeting Nitro. It was hard to keep from sharing the details of the revised story for 6 years, other than in our visitor center displays. Mr. Ruder is an intelligence analyst for the U.S. Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS). Taking a second look at military history stories using modern forensic techniques is his keen interest. His Mare Island explosion article was published in the [**June 2022 issue of the Naval History Magazine by the U.S. Naval History Institute.**](#) *(link is available only till July 22, 2022)* Prior to publishing, Stephen allowed me to print the maps and I posted the family photos in the visitor center. I have told their story during ghost story walks. I am so pleased to share what I know of this tragic and historic event with you.

Myrna Hayes, President, Mare Island Heritage Trust, Founding Manager, Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve 2007-2019.



Photo: Erik Halberstadt, Myrna Hayes and Stephen C. Ruder and his family with Nitro, Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve, July 2016