

CITY LIFE

MOVE: An Oral History

For years, the hostility between the city and the radical West Philly group MOVE had escalated. But nobody was prepared for the horrific way the fight would end one May afternoon in 1985. Now, decades later, the people who were there that day tell the still-unbelievable story.

by **VICTOR FIORILLO** • 3/26/2010, 6:00 a.m.

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Michael Nutter: At some point, what sounded like gunfire broke out. People were running for cover.

William Richmond: Once the shooting started, we turned on the squirts, but they were too far. We couldn't neutralize those bunkers.

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Tommy Mellor: What major city lets people build a bunker on their roof? You try to build a fence and L&I will shut you down.

William Richmond: The bunkers were critical. They overlooked everything. High ground, in military parlance.

Ramona Africa: Firefighters are sworn to protect life, but they were the first phase of the attack. The water was pouring into the house, and then we heard that the police were going to try to use tear gas.

James Berghaier: We used the charge in the wall next door, and Tommy Mellor started to put the pipe through but hit something.


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Tommy Mellor: We didn't realize how well-fortified the house was. I could barely make a dent in it to get the tear gas in.

James Berghaier: They had walls inside of walls. But we did get through and get gas on for a bit.

Marc Lamont Hill, *Columbia University professor and former Fox News correspondent:* I was only seven, living in Germantown. During the day, as things developed, the teachers were talking about it. I remember one was crying. They were upset.

Michael Moses Ward, *formerly Birdie Africa, in 1985 testimony before the MOVE Commission:* We was in the cellar for a while ... and tear gas started coming in and we got the blankets. And they was wet. And then we put them over our heads and started laying down.

Ramona Africa: They were shooting. They knew there was children. They had arrest warrants, yes, but we hadn't been convicted of anything. And what they claimed to be arresting us for was not capital offenses. They had artillery of war. M16s. Sidearms. Sniper rifles with silencers — the weapon of an assassin.

James Berghaier: The bomb guys were using some sort of charge to try to breach the wall. We attempted to get back into the [neighboring] house, but the way it was explained to me, MOVE violated the integrity of the house by knocking down joists. The first floor of the house we had been in collapsed.

Frank Rizzo Jr.: My father never had much respect for Sambor. People thought my dad was excessive. But Sambor ran around in fatigues. Dad heard that they were planning to drop an explosive.

Frank Powell: Around 4 or 5 p.m., they call me into a meeting. Sambor asks if we could use a helicopter to blow the bunker off. I don't know, I say. I never dropped a bomb out of a helicopter. What happens if they shoot the helicopter down and it lands on a house? What happens if I miss?

James Berghaier: We hear that a helicopter is going to drop a bomb. We're supposed to take a defensive position. I blew it off: *You're not going to drop a bomb.*

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