

# Confessions of a Community Controller

There were about a dozen of us. We were sitting round a table, nervously fingering the sturdy looking instruments which were arranged on it.

"We" were a group of Wartime Community Controllers receiving our first briefing on how to protect our villages and communities in the event of a nuclear attack. For those not in the know, Community Controllers have been appointed in most villages to learn how to deal with a "Wartime Emergency Situation." We were awaiting the arrival of the Emergency Services Planning Officer who was at that moment changing a wheel on his car outside.

The instruments we were looking at were "Radiac" meters for measuring radioactivity. We were each to receive one of these when war broke out (unless it was a surprise attack). They were, we were to learn, the only weapons we would have with which to combat the aftereffects of a nuclear attack.

Eventually, the Emergency Services Planning Officer (who, I am sure, will be known as the ESPO as soon as World War III gets under way) arrived, brushing mud off his hands. He addressed us as though we were a small band of troops ready to go and fight in the jungle. He didn't actually use the word "Jerry" but he referred to the enemy as "he" and confidently predicted that we had another 18 months before "he" would start to drop bombs on us.

After an initial pep talk, we were handed over to the Scientific Officer who gave us a quick rundown on the more exotic aspects of nuclear war.

We had fireballs over our heads, electromagnetic pulses pumping thousands of volts through our household wiring and, of course, radiation. We were allowed to play with our Radiac meters (but only with 'pretend' radioactivity from a makeshift control panel). We quickly grasped the principals of protective factors for buildings (the aounts by which different types of building reduce exposure to radiation) and learned the drill for keeping contamination off our bodies. When we were fully knowledgeable about such technicalities we were handed back to the ESPO for our briefing on how to carry out our duties.

Maps were handed out showing the control posts to which we had to report. The control posts in turn were answerable to sub-District Control, who had to obey commands from District Control who themselves were directed from afar by County Control. At that point we reached the top of the page but no doubt the pecking order goes all the way to Heaven - where many people will already be!

In spite of this well-ordered chain of control, we were told that our villages could well be cut off from the outside world for days, weeks or even months. Therefore it had been decided that control would be delegated to levels where it could be exercised most efficiently - namely to each village - to us. At our briefing we were also issued with a survival guide book instructing us on everything from the creation of latrines to changing the batteries on our Radiac meters.

It goes without saying that even if people die, bureaucracy must not. Our guide book included a set of twelve different types of form for us to fill in as we cheerfully set about extracting what was left of our friends from what was left of their houses.

Eventually it was over; the Radiac meters were put in their boxes and we were allowed back into the real world outside.

That was some months ago. Since then we have been briefed again. We had a refresher course on our Radiac meters, heard a nice lady from the WRVS telling us about emergency feeding and were given a chilling talk by a police officer about their role in time of war.

With such scanty knowledge as we could retain from less than four hours of coaching, we were each to be responsible for organising the survivors in our village into life-saving, rescue, fire-fighting, provision of food, law enforcement, first aid, burial of the dead and all the other grisly activities which would be needed after a nuclear attack.

Leon Brittan QC, the Minister with responsibility for civil defence, made it clear in a radio debate that much of the government civil defence effort is directed at establishing information networks to warn the public about radiation doses. This perhaps explains the great emphasis on the Radiac meters (at least half the time of both briefing sessions was spent getting to know how they work). Such knowledge is no doubt important for the protection of the public, yet there is little point in knowing that radiation has reached a lethal dose if there is nowhere to go to get away from it.

There is even less point in Community Controllers making radiation measurements every 15 minutes if there are greater demands on their efforts - like people burning alive in buildings.

The government is currently

committed to spend £45 million a year on civil defence. This is less than £1 per head and contrasts starkly with the thousands of millions spent on nuclear weapons. There is an alternative argument put forward in the book "Protect and Survive" that we should spend little or nothing on nuclear civil defence because to do so only conditions the population to expect a nuclear war which they believe they can survive.

Certainly there is far too much talk about the possibility even inevitability of a nuclear war. There is far too little thought about how grotesque it would really be. It would, according to a recent editorial in the British Medical Association Review, be a "time when the living would envy the dead."

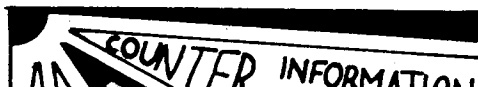
Nobody really knows how many would die instantly in a nuclear attack on this country. The best information we can ever get from the experts is that millions would die - but millions would survive. Taking the population as about 50 million, we therefore could have a choice of anything from 2 million to 48 million dead.

The total civilian and military deaths for Great Britain during the six years of the Second World War was 388,000. The suffering caused by such loss of life is still acutely felt 35 years later. Increase that number of deaths by a factor of 10 or 100 and inflict it on a country unprepared for war and which has not had a period of years to acclimatise itself to the battlefields.

Quite apart from the continuing health risk, the genetic mutations and the future deaths, the psychological effect on the survivors could well be such as to cause all of them a complete mental breakdown. It would almost certainly cause the collapse of civilisation as we know it.

Against this background, the present programme of training Community Controllers is likely to be as effective as tilting at windmills.

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