

Why the BMA chief exploded over the Home Office

THE WAY the wind blows, it shouldn't take long for the radiation from the bombs in the North to reach Shotover Edge. By the time the dust settles on the bone china tea cups on the terrace Sir John Stallworthy will be dead. That's the worst scenario. The best would be instantaneous evaporation. Not that Sir John would wish destruction upon the people of Oxford in the valley below or his neo-Elizabethan mansion. It's just that the best place to be if the bomb falls is beneath it.

Sir John is quite certain of that. He did, after all, spend two years leading the British Medical Association's investigation into the medical effects of a nuclear war which confirmed Khrushchev's view that the living would envy the dead, only as far as this country was concerned there would only be a handful of envious people left.

What Sir John can't understand is why the Home Office scientists, and Mr Heseltine, and Mrs Thatcher, persist in planning their sur-

vival. "Either they are very good liars, or they are very good actors," he said.

"The Home Office chappies came to us when we were preparing our report and we told them, imagine you come up from your bunkers and all the buildings are gone, the streets are running with water and sewage, they're piled with the corpses of people and animals, some of the people are still alive and the rats are eating them. There's no one to come to your rescue. Your food supplies are going to run out, and they're probably contaminated.

"And you know, they seemed surprised. It was as if they really thought they'd come up from the shelter and call for the Rolls and go down and get a hamper from Harrods, and all would be well with the world... oh dear..." he grinned. "You have to keep a sense of humour dealing with these wallies."

Sir John paused to pour tea from a little silver pot and offered a piece of rather

rich fruit cake. He preferred to talk on the terrace. Lawns and tall fir trees, and far away in the valley the colleges where, until his retirement, he was professor of obstetrics and gynaecology.

Sir John chuckled. "It rather appeals to my inverted sense of humour. When we were preparing the nuclear war report someone asked to what extent people would go if they were starving and they were in all these ruins, and one of us said that if it was him, and one of these Home Office officials came up from the shelter, it would be the first bit of uncontaminated steak he'd have access to."

What really annoys him (except that now he laughs about it instead of shouting about it) is that the Home Office war planners admitted to his BMA team that there were inaccuracies in their plans—their failure to mention the massive numbers of casualties due to burns, for example—and promised that they would revise the plans. The revised version, which

came out this summer, still assumes that people won't get burnt if they take the Government's advice and stay indoors.

"Stay indoors?" Sir John had told them. "There won't be any indoors to stay in. The blast will have taken the door off. How naive can you be?"

The Government, in his view, had been foolish to condemn the BMA report out of hand. When Michael Heseltine described it as alarmist, he obviously hadn't read it. Out of all the scientists the BMA team had spoken to during the two years it took to prepare the report, only the Home Office experts believed that a limited nuclear war was possible.

Sir John wrote to Mrs Thatcher with a plan. Since it seemed impossible for the heads of the great powers to sit around the table and discuss this thing sensibly and logically from a basis of fact, how about getting the scientists from all the countries together to present their

combined picture of what the world would be like after a nuclear war. The politicians would come to talk, but to listen. When they saw the picture as it really was, they would surely agree to talk to each other with a realism that did not at present exist.

"I told Mrs Thatcher that I was not a CND supporter, that I did believe the presence of nuclear weapons had been a deterrent, but that I did not believe that they would necessarily continue to be so.

"A letter came back signed by one of her minions to say that no one needed to tell her that nuclear war would be a terrible thing, and that she had said on more than one occasion that it would be horrible, and the rest was a summary of the Conservative attitude to nuclear weapons. "It was pathetic. I felt like going outside and being sick."

The BMA team, he said, had deliberately underplayed their report in spelling out some of the things that

would happen. "If I were doing a revised edition, I would not spare them. The public have the right to be told, and if the Government is not going to tell them, somebody must.

"If anyone has doubts about what will happen after seeing Threads, they won't after seeing On The Eighth Day (tonight's nuclear war programme on BBC 2)

"Yet the Home Office chappies were telling us how they'd have the Leader down in a deep shelter somewhere, and the peace officers or whatever they call them and at the appropriate time someone would give the signal... all as though it was the last war."

"You see," he said, at 78 very much the distinguished professor emeritus, "the earth will be the casualty if these weapons explode."

As if he had planned it, the sun was setting over Oxford, and the wind made the trees howl in the garden of Shotover Edge. "More tea?" asked Sir John, reaching for the bone china.

CIVIL DEFENCE

Guardian 24/9/84

Nato's conventional approach to a nuclear war

Sir, — The mock conventional battle to take place south of Hanover forming the final component of this autumn's "Lionheart" military exercise reflects not a "new realism" on Nato's part, as David Fairhall (Guardian, September 17) would have us believe, but a further attempt to manipulate opinion regarding the use of nuclear weapons. Whilst Lionheart proceeds with British troops using new high-technology conventional weapons systems, US troops will be carrying

out manoeuvres according to the recently introduced doctrine of "Airland Battle." The claim that these developments constitute anything approaching a non-nuclear defence strategy is a complete fallacy.

Airland Battle requires sophisticated hardware based on expensive "emergent technology" (ET) of the type being used by the British troops in Lionheart; however the emphasis is far from non-nuclear. As US Army field manual 100-5 puts it: "By extending the

battlefield and integrating conventional, nuclear, chemical and electronic means, forces can exploit enemy vulnerability anywhere."

It would seem that the US is leading Nato into a new and dangerous nuclear war-fighting strategy despite claims to the contrary. Any attempt to reconcile the involvement by British troops in purely conventional warfare with the presence of US troops and weapon systems in Europe operating according to strategies such as Airland Battle is doomed to fail.

At home the recent and long-awaited Government Planning Assumptions for Civil Defence contained in Home Office circular Ed/1984 contains a similar, and puzzling, preoccupation with conventional conflict. The assumptions represent a remarkable change in emphasis from the recent Home Office position. What has happened to suggest that the level of escalation would not proceed beyond the conventional phase? Finally, it is significant to notice that the last major

Nato exercise on the continent involving British troops — Crusader in 1980 — was accompanied by the civil defence exercise Squares at home. Why not this time? Despite the new civil defence regulations, could it have something to do with the existence of the 150 or so nuclear free zone local authorities? — Yours Simon Turney Chair, Public Fire Brigade Committee Members Lobby, The County Hall, London SE1.

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