

Jubilee year for civil defence

Sandy Harding, former chief executive of Rother DC, traces the history of civil defence since world war II

Arrangements are well in hand in many areas for celebration of VE Day on 8 May and there will also be many celebrating VJ Day on 17 August.

That VJ Day in 1945, which arrived much sooner than thought possible at the time, was a result of the first atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Although it is 50 years since the cabinet approved expenditure of £100,000 "on certain Air Raid Precautions services" it is unlikely there will be any celebration of this golden jubilee.

Why is this? Surely it merits a mention in the records — from the much ridiculed air raid wardens cycling around the streets with a whistle, to the valiant work of the ARP during the 1940 blitz, to 1941 when it was renamed civil defence.

The esteem in which the Fourth Arm was held at that time, can be measured by the fact that over 6,000 civil defence personnel paraded before Winston Churchill in London on 14 July, 1941.

Civil defence was again tested in 1944 with attacks by V1 and V2 weapons.

The total full time strength of the service in September 1944 was 220,000 and on 2 May 1945 it was stood down. It is interesting to note that this was three months before the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan.

The Civil Defence Act 1948 resurrected civil defence in the form of the Civil Defence Corps, and local authorities and others strived long and hard to enrol, train and sustain the interest of some 220,000 volunteers.

It was, however, becoming increasingly clear that in a nuclear war, planning for evacuation/dispersal of the population was unrealistic. As a result the corps was streamlined and its role con-

centrated on peacetime emergency activities.

However, in March 1968 the Civil Defence Corps was put on a care and maintenance basis and the volunteer force of 75,000 disbanded, buildings and equipment sold and a reservoir of experienced instructors and expertise lost.

In the succeeding years planning for home defence, as it had then become known, was a somewhat clandestine affair and involved mainly the Home Office, local authorities and senior officials in paper planning for war.

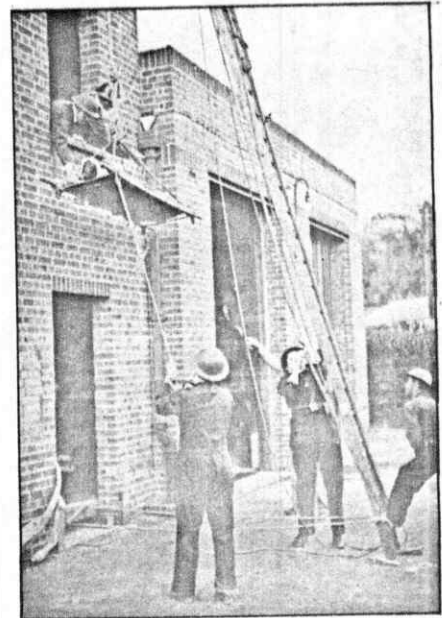
Such planning depended very much on the enthusiasm of the authority or the individual charged with the task. Consequently, there were considerable discrepancies between areas.

The situation changed again in August 1981 with the government's decision to make public the basis of home defence planning proposals for nuclear attack. Open criticism and challenges to the effectiveness of such planning were not unexpected. The publication *Protect and Survive* provided more ammunition for the opponents of civil defence.

OPPOSITION

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and peace campaigners offer outright opposition to any civil defence activity, ignoring that local authorities have statutory duties to discharge.

Further, there are now questions raised by local government officers and others regarding civil defence work and their personal involvement. Such involvement was, however, anticipated because provision is made in s5 of the Civil Defence Act 1948 for employees of local authorities to train and take part in



Burgess Hill Rescue Team, part of the Civil Defence Corps in 1953

any form of civil defence. No regulations have yet been made to implement this provision but for many officers such regulations have not been necessary.

What caused the previous willingness to be replaced by reluctance or refusal to participate? Are we less caring than our predecessors, or does what is being asked not match the reality of the situation and remedies needed?

Is the attitude of central government, which does little to encourage enthusiasm for civil defence planning, training and so on, adding to the general air of apathy which is actively encouraged by the opponents of civil defence?

There is an urgent need for a fresh appraisal of civil defence — what is meant by it, what is expected of it, who is going to do it, and its priority.

Not forgetting the Civil Defence (General Local Authority Functions) Regulations 1983, it is essential that these regulations are supported by central government policies which will enable the necessary planning, recruitment and training to be effectively implemented.

But the situation is not entirely negative because much has been achieved including the establishment of the UK monitoring and warning organisation. Regional control centres exist as do many control rooms in counties and districts.

A dedicated band of county emergency services officers continue to try to complete plans and engender interest in districts and parishes.

Much of the planning and preparations embodied in civil defence can have application in peacetime. Many people realised this in the flooding of 1953 and in other disasters since.

Whether civil defence has a meaningful future only time can tell but it certainly has a past, a part of which has rightly earned a place in the history books and it should be remembered in its golden jubilee year.



A window display in Burgess Hill, Sussex, encouraged volunteers in 1951