

The Effect of Nuclear War

on

Small Communities

Within a few miles of where I live are four large villages; they are all fairly similar to one another, but each lies within a different County.

Yet, in the event of a nuclear attack, one of these villages stands a substantially better chance of survival than the other three. This is not for any topographical reason, but simply because it lies within the boundary of a County which has an established network of volunteers, trained to cope with a war situation.

Recently I was talking with a Civil Defence Officer from another European country. He has a fairly considerable knowledge of British home defence policy and preparations. I asked him his overall impression of our approach, "suicidally negligent" was his reply.

It's not my brief to argue for greater spending on home defence, although it is undoubtedly needed. So let us look at the possible sequence of events in just one small community. No particular expense has been incurred beyond the training of a single volunteer.

I have chosen a large village, but really much the same would apply in almost any small community. What makes this village exceptional is the fact that this one local man has been trained by the County Emergency Planning department to advise the community and its leaders what action to take in the events leading up to an attack. He knows enough to instruct on protective measures, and he can advise on how to cope with the consequences of a nuclear exchange.

This is a fictitious tale, founded on fact and, regrettably, with a very good chance of becoming a reality. I have assumed that the Soviets are inconsiderate, and would not give us the full period of warning on which our current plans are based. The combination of right-wing pressure and press criticism provoked President Carter into leaning hard on the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from Cuba. Such a withdrawal would, of course, have been interpreted by the Soviets and their allies as a loss of face.

The fact that the annual Warsaw Pact exercises coincided with this diplomatic crisis was also unfortunate, since it served to mask the partial mobilisation which was taking place.

But in Manton, for that is the name of our village, not a great deal of attention was paid to the build up of Soviet armour around Erfurt and Magdeburg. The only event which seemed out of place was the arrival of large numbers of holiday makers, relations and friends; more than was usual for the time of year. Certainly no one thought of them as refugees.

Historians will argue about exactly how much warning was given, certainly the County Emergency Planning Officers were notified a week before the attack. By post. Our volunteer Community Adviser received a telephone call 3 days before the first nuclear weapon fell on us (D - 3). His instructions were to consult privately with the community leaders, and to note in general terms the resources situation in the village.

On the following day (D - 2), the Chairman of the Parish Council called his meeting to order. Only 6 members were present. They were, if you like, the natural leaders of the community.

The situation was critical, he explained. Due to the delicate state of negotiations, no official war warning had been issued by the Government, although it could now be expected at any time.

At his invitation, the Community Adviser made his report. The management committee received it in silence.

Copies of "Protect and Survive", the Central Government publication, were unfortunately not available, due to industrial problems in the printing industry, a shortage of paper, and the deplorable state of the posts. Nor had they appeared in advertisement form in the newspapers, due to strikes.

However, he, the Community Adviser, had prepared 1000 copies of a broadsheet of instructions to householders. These could be distributed from door to door.

A brief summary of the local water sources, livestock situation and availability of fuel were given. The stock of both village shops had been seriously depleted by a sudden surge of buying during the previous 48 hours. The position was the same with petrol, but there was plenty of grain in store.

The Committee then considered a list of key personnel, prepared by the Community Adviser. No doctors lived in the village, but there were two former nurses and a research physicist who commuted.

After some disagreement, a retired serviceman was nominated to organise a peace keeping force. For the time being, its role would be restricted to distributing the broadsheets and advising on protective measures.

The Committee adjourned.

The following day (D - 1), at a hastily called public meeting in the village hall, the Chairman of the Parish Council introduced the Community Adviser. His speech was short, and many questions followed.

In the other three neighbouring villages, no such preparations were in hand. These villages received no advice of any kind.

At approximately 5a.m. the following morning, Soviet tanks rolled across the German border. An hour later, two high altitude nuclear explosions produced massive electromagnetic interference which abruptly terminated the BBC's pre-taped attack warning. Throughout Europe, radio and telephone communications went dead. Only the steady rise and fall of sirens was to be heard.

Due to the prevailing wind, not everyone at Manton heard the hand operated sirens. But news travels fast in a small community, and by 9p.m., when the first nuclear weapon fell on the U.K., everyone was in cellars or hastily constructed refuges in their homes.

The three man crew of the Royal Observer Corps bunker just to the south of the village, rated the first nuclear ground burst at 10 megatons. A pretty large bomb by any standards, but given the relative inaccuracy of Soviet targetting, probably the minimum needed to destroy a stockpile of our strategic weapons hidden in the rock caverns 20 miles away.

At that distance there was blast damage to roofs and windows, two villagers were injured by flying debris, and a few suffered mild burns. It was radioactive fallout which would be the real problem - the bomb had been a very dirty one indeed. For three days the radios remained silent, and then a weak broadcast from one of the sub-Regional controls was received in a few homes. The message was "stay-put". Most people did, although three dairymen suffered fatal doses of radiation, going to the aid of their desperate herds, who had not been milked for 72 hours.

On the fifth day, the main BBC war service commenced. The transmitter links had previously been disrupted by the electromagnetic pulse from the high altitude detonations, against which they were supposedly protected. Families with children found the period under cover very difficult. Even with the benefit of full information, keeping a small child in a confined space for several days is no joke.

Most families badly underestimated the period for which it would be necessary to remain indoors. As a result, almost all were very hungry by the fourth day.

A few had also underestimated the amount of drinking water required, and despite covered buckets and baths, their supplies ran out.

Almost everyone experienced some of the symptoms of radiation sickness. For the majority, these were limited to nausea and diarrhoea. For others it was worse. There was very little anyone could do.

On the ninth day, the management committee met to take stock. Water and food were the first priorities. But with little expert knowledge, both problems seemed insoluble, at least in the short term.

The Community Adviser counselled immediate attention to the question of sanitation. This was necessary to avoid the spread of disease and pollution of the water supply. A squad of able-bodied, albeit somewhat weakened, men and boys, were drafted to latrine digging duties.

Health care was more of a problem. Those of the critically ill who could not be nursed at home, were moved to the village hall. Various epidemic diseases threatened. In the event, it was dysentery which took hold, although it was hard to say which of the symptoms were really those of radiation poisoning.

During the first few days of the post-strike period, the leadership went largely unquestioned and, on the whole, orders were obeyed. Only the refugees seemed truculent and unresponsive. This was perhaps understandable, since many of them had lost members of their families in the destruction of the cities.

It was on D + 11 that the first large batch of additional refugees arrived. Exhausted and ill, they exacerbated the problem of homelessness and placed an impossible strain on the food rationing system which had been established.

Tempers became frayed as more refugees trickled in each day. The looting of empty houses and the rape of a local girl brought matters to a head.

The village had no policeman of its own, and there was little hope of obtaining such help from any of the nearby towns. The peacekeeping force was reformed, and armed with stout sticks and instructions to keep all refugees out of the village. Those that had already arrived were allowed to remain.

What to do with the rapist was less easily decided. The village's one resident J.P. swore in two additional magistrates to hear the case. It was an unedifying occasion, but the justices felt that only a capital sentence might restore the rapidly deteriorating situation. Surprisingly, there was no lack of volunteers for the firing squad.

Generally, the courts attempted to follow normal procedures as closely as possible, although the majority of sentences were for corporal punishment.

It was two and a half weeks before a representative of the District Controller arrived across country in a landrover. The main roads were blocked by the massive columns of refugees, abandoned vehicles, and debris.

His subsequent report to the District Controller stated that due to the high degree of preparedness and the effective organisation, the proportion of casualties from radiation sickness, malnutrition and epidemic disease was lower in Manton than in the three adjoining villages.

Perhaps with a proper system of public education the damage, both human and material, might have been even less. It is clear that the only effective protection small communities have, is the protection which an individual can draw around his family. To do so he needs education, advice and training.

In the absence of such a public campaign, a system of trained Community Advisers represents the next best alternative. After all, which gives more protection - one small and protected land line between remote control centres, or 1000 locally produced and distributed broadsheets? In a number of other countries, notably Switzerland and the Soviet Union, civil defence is taken seriously, the authorities do not pretend that it is a state secret. Instead, courses are given in schools, lectures in factories, and in every home there is an appropriate survival guide now.

Cumbria has now taken the first steps in the right direction. The Community Advisers now under training will dictate the future rate of progress in this County.