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A.R.P.

DEFENCE AGAINST THE BOMBER

I.—HOW FAR HAVE WE GOT?

Below is the first of three articles giving the result of an investigation specially commissioned by "The Times" into the present state of Air Raid Precautions, and undertaken by a writer who, before visiting some of the chief centres in London and in provincial cities, had studied foreign methods in Germany.

From Our Special Correspondent

Fascists declare that democracy is incapable of the self-sacrifice and discipline which are the corner-stones of a strong State. The success or failure of the new Air Raid Precautions Act should settle that question. For it hands over the organization of civilian defence to general staffs of aldermen, local government officials, and improvised air raid precaution officers. It will be an experiment unprecedented in military history, a new test of local government. The Government will pay and the councillors will spend. The Government will have advisers with years of experience, the councillors will have advisers more or less qualified by the number of months they have given to their work. There is a roughness and readiness about the scheme which are at once charming and alarming. Here and there it has worked well; generally it is working badly. But that is no reason why it should not be working excellently in a year's time.

The problem is immense but its elements are simple. Lord Baldwin declared some time ago that the frontier of Britain now lay on the Rhine. He said this to prepare the country for a huge armaments programme. No one has yet thought of preparing the country for the even bigger plan of civilian defence by declaring that our first line of defence is the Thames. Yet that is the fact. No Minister has really taken the public into his confidence over the question of air raid precautions. The House of Commons debates have been scrappy and ill-informed. The average M.P. seems to have taken little interest in the defence problem of his constituency. It is not true to say, as a Government spokesman said recently, that we are all pretty well acquainted with the details of air raid precautions. The public, who have noticed only the sensational superficialities of newspapers, have the most fantastic ideas about the nature of aerial warfare, the dangers of gas, and the futility of resistance. Misleading articles have been drawn from the wars in China and Spain. As a result there has been general apathy and a lack of critical, informed interest. Local authorities have preened themselves on elaborate paper schemes or on their success in marking time while the financial question was fought out between Mr. Herbert Morrison's "United Front" and the Government. Eight valuable months were lost during the war. Yet the problem is such that public awareness and interest are the very essence of any scheme of precautions.

PATCHWORK OF SCHEMES

The chief offensive weapon of to-day is the bomber. Its object is to impose on a hostile population the will of the Government which

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II.—EXPERTS IN THE MAKING

THE OFFICER AND HIS DIFFICULTIES

The following is the second article on the investigation of the present state of Air Raid Precautions specially commissioned by "The Times."

From Our Special Correspondent

Whatever may be said about the practice of civilian defence in England there is no denying the excellence of the schemes drawn up by Wing Commander Hodsoll and his advisers. When carried out in detail they should be the best in the world. They will not only provide a system of defence in which every one will play his part; they should prove a deterrent to any Power that is prepared to ignore its pledges not to use gas in warfare. For the A.R.P. handbooks cover every aspect of the subject. Some of them are too ambitious; others are not very clear. They do not describe schemes but bits of schemes. Yet the retired officer becomes an A.R.P. expert by studying them, adapting their suggestions to his area, and perhaps attending a special course at Fairfield.

One A.R.P. officer admitted to your Correspondent: "For the first three months of my appointment I sat at my desk and swotted at the books and a map." That was 18 months ago. It is hoped that the officers appointed in future will not have to spend three months at their books; why should they not serve as apprentices under officers already experienced in local schemes, so relieving over-worked and sometimes disheartened men. There is no staff college for them to attend, though there might well be one. There is no official organization for the pooling of their ideas, but close touch is kept with the A.R.P. Department of the Home Office. An A.R.P. officer's greatest asset is his Service training, but every A.R.P. officer of experience will deny the Home Secretary's assertion that no other special qualifications are needed.

A TOWN OF 80,000

A new officer frequently starts work in a district where he does not know a soul. Unfamiliar with the methods of local government, he has to learn the technique of committees and the art of obtaining favours. He has to hold his own meetings, send out his own appeals, organize elaborate filing systems, map out his area, and get its features by heart. He has to approach local organizations and business men, professional men, working-class organizations, and the Press. When they appear, he has to select volunteers—a tricky task, because not every well-meaning and zealous person has the qualities and local standing necessary in a warden. Knowing in his heart of hearts that the problem is a military one, he has to secure efficiency by the methods of democracy and individualism. Let us see the full extent of his task in a town of about 80,000 people.

Fire, gas, and panic are the chief enemies; enlarged fighting services, trained wardens, and an instructed, masked, and gas-proofed population are the weapons of defence. His task is to mobilize the people and resources of the town. With "passive defence"

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THINGS THAT NEED KNOWING

III.—CONTRASTS IN A VAST EXPERIMENT

In the last of three articles on the present state of air raid precautions, further illustrations are given of the immensity of the national scheme and of possible shortcomings.

Our Special Correspondent expresses the view that if the energy and enthusiasm which rescued the Basque children and sent medical aid to Abyssinians and Chinese can be brought to air raid precautions, England's first line of defence should by 1940 be the most efficient in Europe.

From Our Special Correspondent

Most Air Raid Precaution officers agree that the enlightenment of the public is essential to the success of their schemes. The public have been told emphatically enough that some bombers will always "get through"; they now want to know what they can do and what the bomber can do. The bomber can drop high explosive, against which there is no inexpensive protection whatsoever, except very deep trenches. Alone it can drop enough incendiary bombs to start 10 times as many fires as occur in London during one day. It can drop mustard gas, of which a drop the size of a pin's head will cause a blister the size of a shilling. It can drop irritant, choking gases, dangerous to anyone without a mask, but quickly dispersed and diffused and therefore unlikely to be used. But it cannot cover whole areas with gas; it cannot choose its objectives with absolute certainty; it cannot be sure of finding its way if it is flying over a blacked-out district.

An official committee is at the moment studying the use of artificial smoke screens to protect vital industrial objectives; another is studying the development of camouflage. Remember that the bomber has to cope with defending aircraft, guns, searchlights, balloon barrages, and probably bad weather conditions, and it will be understood that it will have no easy task. During the black-out in the Nore Command pilots who had flown over the area regularly for weeks were baffled by a light mist in their search for the Thames and the dockyards.

DEMONSTRATIONS

But even then, says the ordinary man, supposing the bomber "gets through"? Unfortunately the idea that a scoop and bucket can dispose of an incendiary bomb has tickled the sense of humour of the public. Some laugh, but most scoff; although volunteers of either sex at Southampton dealt successfully with fires after short practice in the "spade and bucket" technique. The idea is practicable, but it will need many demonstrations to convince the public. Exhibitions of A.R.P. equipment will have to be more frequent; they attract great interest already. Over 35,000 people visited one in Holborn and over 20,000 saw a display at Boot's premises in Southampton. The same holds good of the respirator. For two years some of the most eminent scientists in the country have been advising the Government; at the moment nearly 100 are working on various problems. On Salisbury Plain the most elaborate experiments were