

Role-playing away a nuclear attack

Third Person



Helen Chappell

It had been a hell of a day. They'd had all the mass burials to organise and the dissidents to round up and they hadn't even started to find billets for the refugees from the tower blocks. No wonder the bar was packed after dinner and the cash register chiming at a demented pace. "I'd been issued with an allowance for the bar from the council before I went," says Hilary, "and I'd thought, 'this is

immoral; I shouldn't be given this money to spend on drink.' But, by golly, I didn't half need it."

Working in an antique shop and serving on her local council had not prepared Hilary Richmond for the reality of her nuclear civil defence training course. At the Eastingwold College near York, an impressive stately pile, she came face to face with the Government's vision of the end of civilisation as we know it. After the initial shock had sunk in, she recalls, she made a bee-line for the bar and set about steadying her nerves like there really was no tomorrow.

Dropping the notional bomb seemed to have a curious effect on other people's morale too. Outnumbered by ten to one, the handful of women course members found themselves surrounded by disoriented, overstressed male delegates eager to share a drink or three. "On the first night I was getting quite pie-eyed," recalls Hilary. "It was all the tension I was under." She felt intimidated by the heavy masculine ambience of the place with its military teaching staff and officers' mess attitudes. It hadn't helped, of course,

that she'd put "Ms" down next to her name on the register. "I thought they must be expecting a lesbian with woolly hat to turn up," she says, "so I was determined to appear as respectably middle-class as I possibly could." She was also weighed down by a sense of responsibility — not to be swayed by the official line away from her CND sympathies: "I thought, 'This is the government's big chance to prove I'm wrong.'"

She needn't have worried. On the second day, the party was split up into groups of five or six to role-play their way through a simulated nuclear attack. Gathered round a TV set, Hilary's group was put in the mood with authentic-sounding news reports of escalating tension in the Middle East. Then, before they had time to write a protest letter to Points of View, a two megaton bomb had taken out the town of Naption (aka Nottingham) and made a terrible mess.

"Our group was supposed to deal with public health," recalls Hilary, "especially coping with all the dead bodies. We had to go through the process of deciding who was 'expendable' among the survivors." It

was no good, for example, pumping a lot of time and effort into children or the elderly. Middle-aged councillors who could remember the last war were horrified to discover that old notions of mucking in and smiling through were chillingly obsolete.

"Some members of the group seemed to find it very hard to face," says Hilary. "When people argued that only fit young adults should survive and the rest be left without medical help or 'disposed of quickly, they became very quiet and subdued."

Calmly discussing the termination of radiation-sick babies was a world away from Vera Lynn, the Second World War and digging for victory.

"The official view was that neighbouring counties would rally round and help Naptionshire," she says. "But in fact we showed that there would be such chaos it would be impossible. As each practical decision was taken, we found ourselves confronted by total hell."

Conversions to the cause of nuclear civil defence were few. On the contrary, believes Hilary, the contradictions of Government policy were thrust naked into the spotlight.

"The Stay Put Policy, for instance, was shown up as completely cynical because in our role-play exercise the bomb was targeted on a centre of population. So people's instinct to shift was the right one." The duty of councillors, however, was to stop them jumping in the motor and driving to granny's to take refuge. Not that Hilary and her fellow-elected representatives would have any power left in the brave new world. "Only the most senior council officers would have places on the government advisory committee or in a bunker," says Hilary. "The rest would be stripped of their powers as the military and police took control. Democracy was clearly an expendable luxury."

Roads closed to all but military vehicles, summary executions, tiny pockets of survivors clinging to devastated landscapes reminiscent of TV episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, circa 1958 — it was all too much for some people.

"But, Mr Chairman, that's a dictatorship!" exclaimed a provincial burgher after a long silence. "One Tory pig farmer had been a solid supporter of government policy until he was

told he wouldn't get compensation for his roasted pigs," says Hilary. "I looked on it as an instant conversion to the cause of peace."

She was struck by the rich, black absurdity of it all. After four days, the course felt quite unreal. As far as she could see civil defence had nothing to do with defending the civil population in peace or war. In fact, you wouldn't be able to cope with a lot of survivors anyway.

"It was so frustrating that at one point I had to rush out into the grounds and have a good cry." Looking back now, though, she's glad she went. In fact, she thinks everyone should go and find out what's going on behind their backs. She laughs. On reflection, it strikes her as the sanest thing to do.



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