

Nearest to nuclear war

In 13 counties, London, Guernsey and the Isle of Wight, the heroes came—from the local councils. **ELIZABETH COOPER** met one on his Sevenoaks patch.

'THIS is the road between Brasted Chart and Ide Hill into The Philippines, a care village for 40 mentally handicapped adults and 20 staff,' said Bruce Cova, chief executive officer for Sevenoaks District Council. 'The road was solid for two miles with fallen timber. I climbed into the village on Saturday morning after the storm. The staff were cutting their way out with one tiny chain saw. It took the Army, working both ends, two days to saw their way through — like cutting a road through the Amazon.'

I was still in a state of shock from scenes reminiscent of the Somme and narrowly escaping a head-on collision with a fast car. Mr Cova comforted me: 'It's actually much better now than it was. I suddenly panicked about the A32, a newly discovered route to my boat on the Hamble, and heaven. Dark green tunnel winding through the Meon Valley from Alton to Fareham. Will it still be there? Driving through these shattered battlefields of Kent, I'm afraid to go to Hampshire.'

We came to Octavia Hills, 200 acres of 100-year-old beech wood, listed as a place of outstanding natural beauty where the National Trust first began. It looked as if clearing for a new motorway had started. In London, that night, listening to the tape made in Mr Cova's car, I'm shocked by the sound of my own voice trembling. 'Would you like to take a stroll round?' asks Mr Cova. I would like to sit down and weep. 'This is Toys Hill, Greensand Ridge,' he tells me; we gaze across the wide

open spaces, 'until 16 October a complete wood stood on either side.' Now there's fallen timber, obscenely piled trunk upon trunk, and freshly sawn stumps exposing raw ends to the sky, still listed as a place of outstanding natural beauty.

The bulldozers have scoured the green banks to raw clay. 'When the winter comes and the rain, the banks will fall unless they're planted quickly.' Bruce Cova's patch covers 300 square miles. He has just 500 staff, 'which includes everybody from the doorman to me', he says.

Camden Council covers about 24 square miles and has about 10,000 staff. Hammersmith has 12 square miles and 5,000 staff.

Like every other borough chief executive in the south and east of England, Mr Cova will receive a 90 per cent grant from the £2.75 million Environment Secretary Mr Ridley has given them, not for clearance of whole trees, just for removing stumps and replanting to the end of March next year. And the Commission wants to know the price tomorrow. 'We're going to have to guess a figure,' said the war-weary Mr Cova, who worked 18 hours every day for a fortnight after the storm. 'We hope we can spin it. Most woods we can't get into.' (They eventually estimated

£350,000—but they don't know what they'll get).

Mr Cova woke up one morning to find he had 900 miles of road to clear and only six experienced foresters. 'We took on anybody with a chain saw or a JCB. About 100 men in 20 gangs worked from dawn to dusk, from 9 a.m. Friday morning for nine continuous days, led by the WRVS. Thirty Royal Engineers came the next day with Elm-worth of equipment, for a fortnight. Trapped residents felt they'd been relieved by the cavalry.'

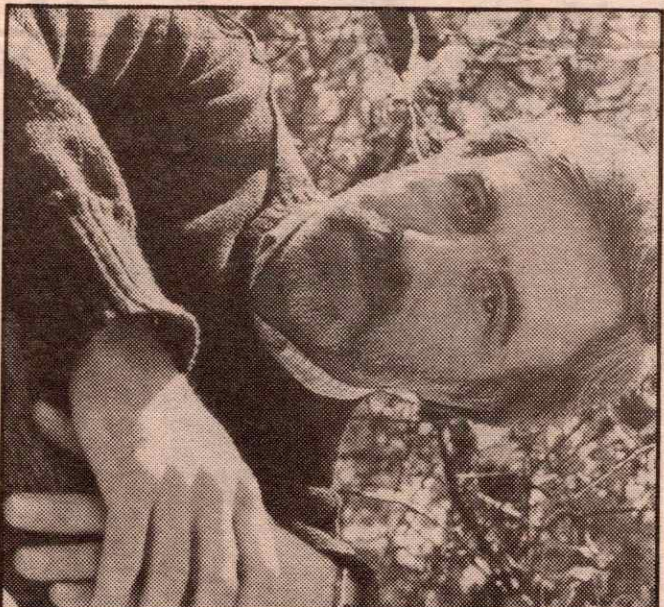
Sevenoaks has to spend its contingency fund and its share of the county of Kent's first penny rate (not much, about £21,000) before Mr Ridley comes up with more. Sevenoaks council housing repairs alone are estimated at £3/4m. The Government will then give 75 per cent of what is spent on 'immediate' work. 'Trouble is determining when the emergency ends,' says Bruce Cova. 'We have an obligation to remove trees from private land, and we will. The work will be done by taking people off their normal jobs. The Government won't pay for that.' Then, as things stand, the Government claws back 20 per cent of any extra money spent. 'They're starting to talk about waiving that 20 per cent on what they give for storm damage, up to March 1988. But

past then it's geared to London authorities, who just drag a tree off a road. In the winter in Kent, if it rains JCBs get stuck. If the ground's too cold, you can't plant trees.'

'Kent', he says, 'was worst hit by both the storm and the rate support grant. We've had a 12½ per cent cut; other counties lost nothing. Unless the Government thinks again, we could be looking at a fairly high increase in the rates.' And the work of clearing up, planning and replanting will take five years at least.

He hopes this is the nearest he will ever come to facing a nuclear war. 'We had no communications, no power and at one stage, no petrol. When we run practice courses for the next war, we assume we'd send people out to get things done before the fall-out. The fact is you're not going to get anyone out there. There was only one way in or out of Sevenoaks for many days. It's pointless to talk about liaising with the County or anyone else. The Army from Maidstone had a 20-mile detour to get here.'

If the storm had happened during the day, Mr Cova says there would have been thousands killed. 'Thank God,' he says, 'the Met men didn't know. Had they warned us there would have been many dead. Folks would have gone to fetch Mum or move the car. The trees on either side of one of our main roads, Everlands, fell together, like two great hands, fingers interlocked, suspended 15 feet above the ground for two



JOHN WILD

Bruce Cova, untypical bureaucrat. 'They call me John' miles. And nobody died. Saturday night would have been different.'

Tall and handsome, the bearded Mr Cova, blue jeans and Guernsey, isn't quite what one expects of a civil servant, chief exec at that. 'Bureaucracy's gone out of the window,' he says. 'We don't ask whose responsibility it is — if someone's got a tree through their roof and we've got a crane, we haul it out. We don't care if it's council or private. The council tip closed at 5 p.m. and refused to take branches. I told him I'd drive a truck through his gates if he didn't open up. They call me John Wayne.'

'I sent a man from the Planning Office across the fields in his shorts to see if the 30 people trapped in St

Julian's Commune were alive. He climbed out of wood and said "Hello, the District Council, are you right?" He was their first contact in three days. M the first time, people were paying their rates. I had remember when it goes to

On 6 December at 11 a Cova hopes several thousand witness the planting of young sessile oaks for Forestry Commission. Vine cricket green at Se To swell the funds of his Trees for the Future (0732 741222), he'll be slices from the fallen previous seven oaks of th