

War games

Abunker the size of Whitehall, deep under leafy Wiltshire. This is the comfortable country retreat planned by Mrs Thatcher for the generals and herself in times of nuclear war. Other retreats are at High Wycombe, Stanmore, and Northwood. With communications, the bunkers have already cost about £1 billion. Duncan Campbell is our tour guide to Britain's priciest bunkers

Deep down in Wiltshire, they haven't heard that the cold war is over. A safe wartime home for Mrs Thatcher is being installed in a major new bunker and communications network designed to centralise Britain's emergency command and to protect the Prime Minister, the cabinet and military Chiefs of Staff in the event of nuclear war.

The new plan, according to both classified and openly published information, appears to be called Project Anchor, or "UK Anchor".

Both Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence have denied knowledge of the plan—even though the MOD has already authorised publication of some of its details. Despite the denials, Anchor appears to be the culmination of the redevelopment and replacement of subordinate military command centres during the 1980s. With the necessary communications networks, the new bunkers have already cost around £1 billion.

Other parts of the Anchor project came to light following the recent abandonment of the secret military bunker near the New Forest which had housed Britain's national military emergency headquarters. Fifty feet below a field at Sopley, Hampshire, the centre was until 1989 the War Headquarters of the Army's UK Land Forces Command. Sopley has now been replaced by a massive redeveloped underground headquarters at Hawthorn, Wiltshire, a few miles from Bath.

Hawthorn has been the central government war headquarters for almost 30 years, but fell into relative disuse and dereliction during the 1970s. The war headquarters is built inside Spring Quarry, a former bathstone quarry 100 feet below ground. It was originally converted for use as an underground aircraft factory in 1941, and could be entered via a special siding and tunnel off the main Bristol-Bath railway line

(now disused).

The vast quarry provides more than a 100 acres of underground space—enough to take all of Whitehall and enough food to keep Mrs Thatcher and the generals in rations for months below the surface. This subterranean space is reached by lifts and escalators similar to those used on the London underground. The southern part of the quarry is used as a Royal Naval storage depot.

The accuracy and power of modern nuclear weapons means that no government bunker can be utterly secure if its location is known. In a country as small as Britain, it would be virtually impossible—as well as immensely expensive—to construct a major new deep underground bunker in conditions of absolute secrecy and concealment from spy satellites and the like.

A few years ago, it was suggested that Britain might nevertheless be following this course, and that the cabinet had been found a new war headquarters site near Leamington Spa. It seems now that Mrs Thatcher—whose enjoyment of high technology command centres while attending the Northwood naval headquarters during the Falklands conflict is well-known—has decided to refurbish her existing war headquarters, and to centralise the emergency national military command there. Hence the generals' departure from Sopley, which would have cost the Army at least £1 million to convert around 1979.

The other armed services already have their own modern bunker HQs. The Air Force has just built a five-storey deep underground command centre at High Wycombe, with a reserve bunker at Stanmore in north west London. The recently rebuilt Navy HQ, at Northwood, Herts, also serves as a Nato command centre (it would take over if Nato's supreme headquarters in Belgium were destroyed), and is backed up by



Peter Schrank

the naval headquarters at Pitreavie Castle, Fife—where another new bunker is soon to be constructed. The Americans, too, have a new European war headquarters at High Wycombe.

Only the British government was left out, leaving Cabinet Office emergency planners anxious that the top level of civilian and government control was more vulnerable than subordinate military commands. Hence the Anchor project.

The relevant dictionary definition of “anchor” gives a characteristically Churchillian flavour to Mrs Thatcher’s intentions in the matter; “something which gives the certainty of security”. To give the “certainty of security”, the Hawthorn national “Anchor” will be backed up by other fixed command centres, and by mobile headquarters with their own satellite link terminals.

Two months ago, the Plessey company announced that it had been awarded a new government contract for ground terminals for the British military satellite system, called Skynet. Plessey are now constructing a satellite receiving and control station at Colerne, Wilts, two miles from Hawthorn. The Colerne station is to be linked directly to a new satellite network control centre at Hawthorn itself. The new project is code-named Skynet Anchor. Some of the satellite link receivers will be small and mobile, so that reserve government teams can be deployed with them to safer locations which cannot be identified in advance by the enemy—though it would be surprising if such an enemy did not deduce that many are likely to be in mid or north Wales, which is relatively free of nuclear targets and probably upwind of fall-out from an enemy’s nuclear strikes in the rest of the country.

The Sopley bunker was tied in to the Anchor network. The cover title for the bunker, displayed until recently on signs outside, was as a “training area” for “No 2 Signals Brigade”. (Similar signs are now displayed at Hawthorn.) This signals brigade is part of the UK Land Forces headquarters. They control the military communications teams who will work at the “UK Anchor” headquarters, and at regional military and civilian war HQs throughout Britain.

Distinctions of rank and class are meticulously preserved underground, even down to four grades of loo

Recent exercises have tested this system, which is operated by four part-time Territorial Army signals regiments.

Responsibility for providing emergency communications has been given to the units from the London-based signals regiment, number 71, based in Bexleyheath. Parts of the national military communications system were also tested during WINTEX-CIMEX, the large Nato command post exercise in February and March (see *NSS* 19 May). The latest defence white paper states that the exercise was designed to test Nato’s “crisis management organisation against a setting of rising international tension leading to war”.

The recent history of the Sopley bunker gives an illuminating impression of how the generals see life after the bomb. The bunker is one of a chain built in the 1950s by the RAF for use as radar control centres. It was closed and abandoned in 1974. A few years later, army officers at the UK Land Forces Command bagged the site for conversion into their war headquarters. But when they turned up to inspect their acquisition, they found that the Home Office had taken the ground above to house Ugandan Asian refugees. Rather than refurbish the bunker under their gaze, the Army beat a retreat until the Asians were resettled.

On the surface, only a guardhouse and two ventilator shafts now stand in an empty, but fenced-off, field. Full details and plans of the bunker have, however, been passed to *NSS*. A shaft concealed at the back of the innocuous

looking guardhouse gives access to a stairwell and underground tunnel—at the end of which is a two-storey bunker with about 50 rooms. It is strong: the roof is 14 feet thick reinforced concrete, the walls are ten feet thick.

Military distinctions of class and rank have been meticulously preserved, despite the fact that the bunker would have to hold about 100 people in cramped conditions for at least two weeks. There were seven separate grades of sleeping accommodation; generals had large private rooms, brigadiers and colonels small ones. Lieutenant colonels had their own dorm separate from other officers, who were in turn separated from sergeants. Soldiers had the least space of all. Sopley also had four grades of loo, one reserved for use only by “senior officers”.

The UK national military command centre on the bottom floor of the Sopley bunker comprised about 20 rooms, including a conference room, communications centre, a “volumatic disintegrator” (for shredding secrets) and a “Faraday Cage” (in which sensitive computers and coding equipment could be protected from electromagnetic impulses from a nuclear explosion). One office was devoted to “public information”; others to supplies, transport, evacuation, medical services and army operations in Britain and in the “Rest of the World”.

Other plans for putting Britain on a war footing include an emergency transport plan called the “Main Road Route System”. According to this plan, which is classified “restricted”, every major road in Britain now has a military code-name based on the name of an animal. The M4 is HEN, the M25 TIGER, and the M3, YAK. Other roads in the home counties have been codenamed WORM, MOTHS, MOLE, VOLE, PIG and NEWT.

The purpose of this bewildering nomenclature remains obscure, unless it be to deter the Russians from invading for fear of losing their way. Certainly, if war comes, you may rest assured that the Iron Lady and the military are as well prepared as the generals were in 1914. ●

Additional research by Nigel Townson. Duncan Campbell’s new book on Britain’s secret landscape, “Secret Places”, will be published by Banyan Books this summer.