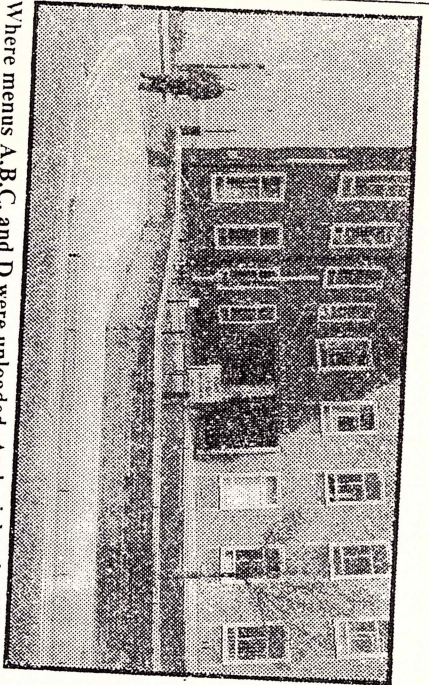


Where menus A, B, C, and D were unloaded. And, right, the 288 boxes of emergency rations



Aylesbury stocks up a hot line in nuclear rations

INSIGHT

THE BUSY but otherwise peaceful market town of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, rarely features in news of natural or man-made disasters. If hurricanes hardly happen in Herefordshire, bombings barely bother Bucks.

Yet, at 8 am one recent morning, a lorry drew up at the main telephone exchange in the town centre. Under the watchful eyes of senior British Telecom managers from Oxford, men unloaded eight pallets stacked with 288 large boxes stamped EMRAT, meaning Emergency Rations.

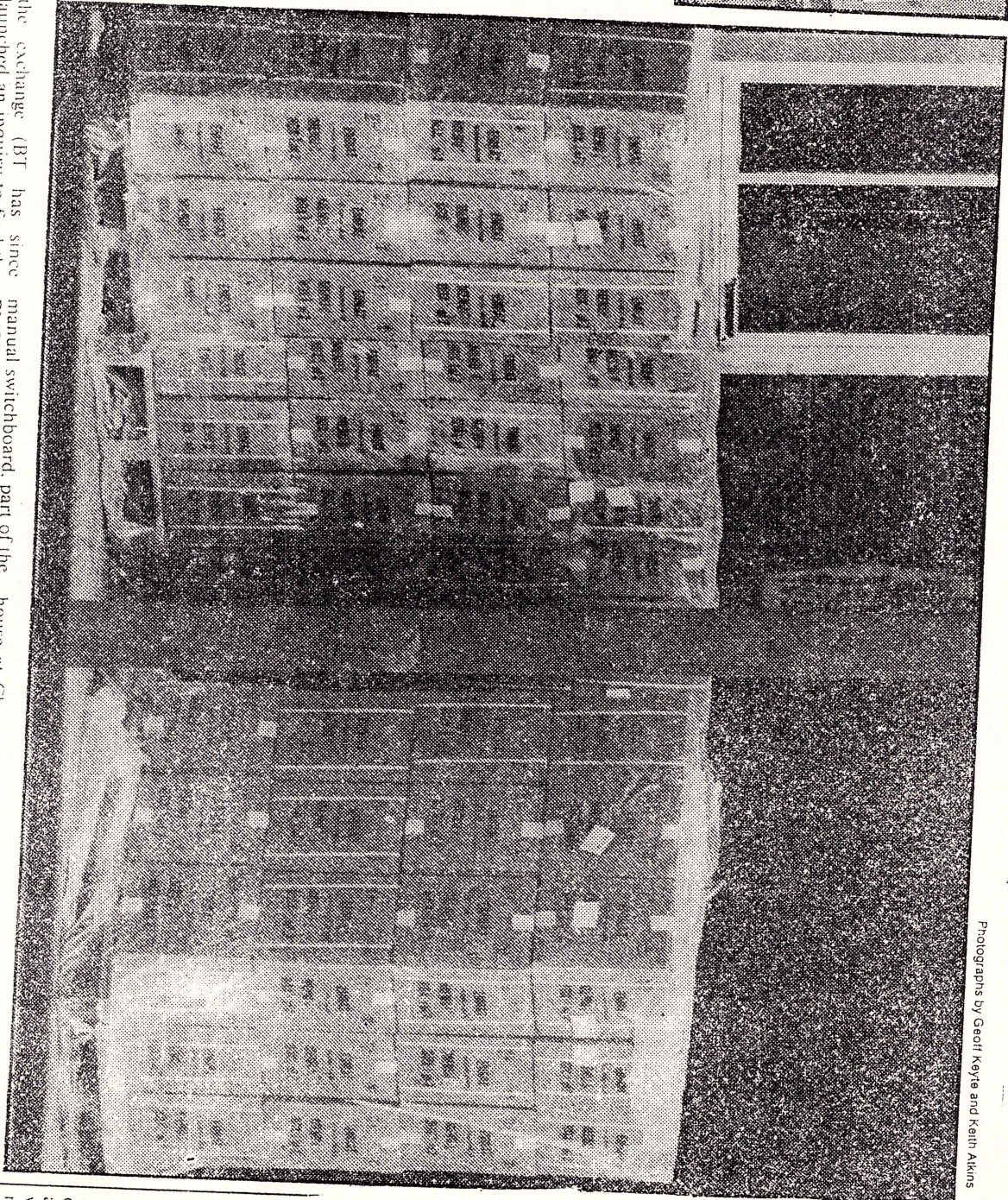
There was enough food - neatly labelled Menus A, B, C and D - to last between 16 and 20 people for 144 days. What calamity was expected? Flooding of the nearby River Thames?

An indefinite sit-in by switchboard supervisors?

British Telecom was not best pleased to be asked. It had hoped that the delivery had been unobserved. In due course, a press officer read out a statement: "As the major provider of communications services for the UK, British Telecom has the responsibility for their maintenance in all circumstances."

The press officer added helpfully that such supplies would be useful when, for example, dealing with a rail crash. Aylesbury, on a suburban line, is not noted for the frequency of its rail crashes. But the press officer would not elucidate.

An exchange employee, however, volunteered the information that the food was for an underground bunker beneath



Photographs by Geoff Keyte and Keith Atkins

the exchange (BT has since launched an inquiry to find the source of the leak). Aylesbury exchange was preparing for the worst disaster of all - nuclear war.

Like a number of other exchanges, Aylesbury's has a dual purpose. In the bunker is a

manual switchboard, part of the EMSS - the Emergency Manual Switching System - which will attempt to maintain a skeleton trunk network after nuclear war has begun.

Peaceful Aylesbury has, in fact, a strategic significance - it is close to the prime minister's

house at Chequers, to the new US European Command headquarters at Daws Hill, and to the RAF strike command headquarters at Naphill. Direct lines have been laid between the Aylesbury bunker and Chequers and Naphill.

Route: A, B, C, D

was tight-lipped. "We do not discuss security matters," he said. Nor would he divulge the contents of Menus A, B, C and D. A food company which supplies EMRATs was no more revealing. "That," it said, "is covered by the Official Secrets