

Why defence begins at home

MICHAEL YARDLEY talks to Lord Hill-Norton *S. Times*

THE DEFENCE of Britain has been the concern of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Hill-Norton since he enrolled as a naval cadet at Dartmouth at the age of 13. That was 56 years ago. Now at the age of 69, still trim and full of energy, he is campaigning for the creation of a nationwide militia force of 500,000 men and women. It is needed, he argues, to fill "an enormous gap" in the nation's defences, for in the event of a conventional attack most of the regular forces and Territorial Army are committed to mainland Europe.

As chairman of a privately-funded pressure group called Defence Begins at Home, Hill-Norton has put his ideas to Margaret Thatcher and to Michael Heseltine, the defence secretary. He is the sort of man who can go to the top, having been captain of the carrier Ark Royal, Chief of Defence Staff and finally chairman of Nato's military committee.

So far he has won no commitment. "If you have a new idea, people in office will always be suspicious," he says. "It doesn't fit into the nice tidy pattern." Now he and his colleagues are organising a national campaign which they hope will create so great a groundswell for the idea that the government will be pushed into action.

The militia would be community-based. Any physically fit adult without a criminal record would be able to join his "parish platoon" after a simple interview with a selection board of local people. Training, mainly at weekends, would be in such basic skills as small-arms fire and guerrilla tactics. Rifles would not be kept at home (as in the Swiss militia) but stored in armoured.

in the context of an annual defence budget of £18 billion - about £25m a year.

Weapons would be no problem. For example, the army's standard weapon, the self-loading rifle, is about to be replaced by a smaller-calibre weapon, so vast stockpiles will be available.

The campaign is being directed from an office in Holborn, London. Wall maps indicate the headquarters of 40 regional coordinators who are registering names of would-be volunteers, among whom are many members of rifle clubs.

Hill-Norton is anxious to point out that Defence Begins at Home is "an apolitical animal". He is against any thought of "a strike-breaking, picket-bashing, right-wing army", and to help dispel this idea the group has recently made approaches to trade unionists.

Although the proposed force would be a sort of peacetime equivalent of the last-war Home Guard (which by 1945 numbered 1,700,000), Hill-Norton is worried about Dad's Army mockery. "The Home Guard was a really splendid outfit," he says. "And the sort of people we are proposing will be better organised."



Hill-Norton: 'We're apolitical'

Nato forces in northern Europe, and Air Marshal Sir Frederick Sowerby, ex-commandant of the National Defence College.

Hill-Norton says: "In many ways nuclear war is the least likely option open to the Soviets." To skimp on our conventional defences, he says, invites catastrophe. Our allies are "astounded" that Britain is the only member of Nato without a volunteer militia.

Signs of some partial recognition of these ideas are seen in the recent government decisions to expand the Territorial Army by 11,000 men to about 81,000, and to build a Home Service Force of 6,000 men. But the planners of Defence Begins at Home says this is far too little. They reckon that a force of 500,000 would not be expensive!

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Home Office's new guidelines on nuclear war

By Andrew Vetch, Medical Correspondent

The Home Office has begun to issue what it hopes will be seen as a more credible assessment of the scale of a nuclear attack and the likely damage.

Cities might be hit by air bursts of up to 5 megatons, and the whole country could be in danger from fall-out, the Home Office says in a circular to chief executives of councils and chief police and fire officers.

A copy of the circular has been passed to the Guardian. It differs markedly in tone from previous Home Office war plans. It also includes, for the first time, an assessment of the likely effects of an attack with chemical weapons — by which it means nerve gas.

In the previous major civil defence circular the Home Office war planners declared that, short of an all-out attack, "there would be large numbers of survivors." It then gave a brief estimate of the blast damage caused by a single megaton ground burst (houses within one and a half miles of the explosion would be totally destroyed).

In the new circular, No. ES1/1984, dated July 30, the Home Office says: "It is assumed that . . . air bursts of up to five megatons might be used to destroy city areas. In some instances more than one weapon might be used to ensure destruction of a target."

After an attack on military installations, it says, "everywhere there could be a danger from radioactive fall-out." In an attack aimed at de-

stroying cities, "political centres" and industry, the numbers killed or injured could "amount to many millions" and industries, services, and communications could be destroyed "possibly beyond reconstruction in some areas. . . areas of intense radiation could persist for months."

The circular goes on: "Despite the potentially devastating effects of a nuclear attack, there could be many millions of people left alive . . . however, 'no clear assumptions can be made about the survival or recovery of the country' following a nuclear attack."

The Home Office has been revising its civil defence circulars in the wake of criticism by, most notably, the British Medical Association.

The use of chemical weapons, the circular says, "cannot entirely be ruled out, these agents could be delivered by bombs, missiles, of spray, and their effects would be to kill or incapacitate when inhaled or in contact with the skin."

"Deliberate attacks on civilian population areas are not likely, but chemical agents can drift and contaminate areas up to several miles downwind of the intended targets."

The circular goes on: "The Government . . . is examining ways of detecting and monitoring the presence of chemical agents and of warning the population who may be in danger. It is also considering what protective measures can be taken and what advice given to the population on precautions that can be taken in the home."