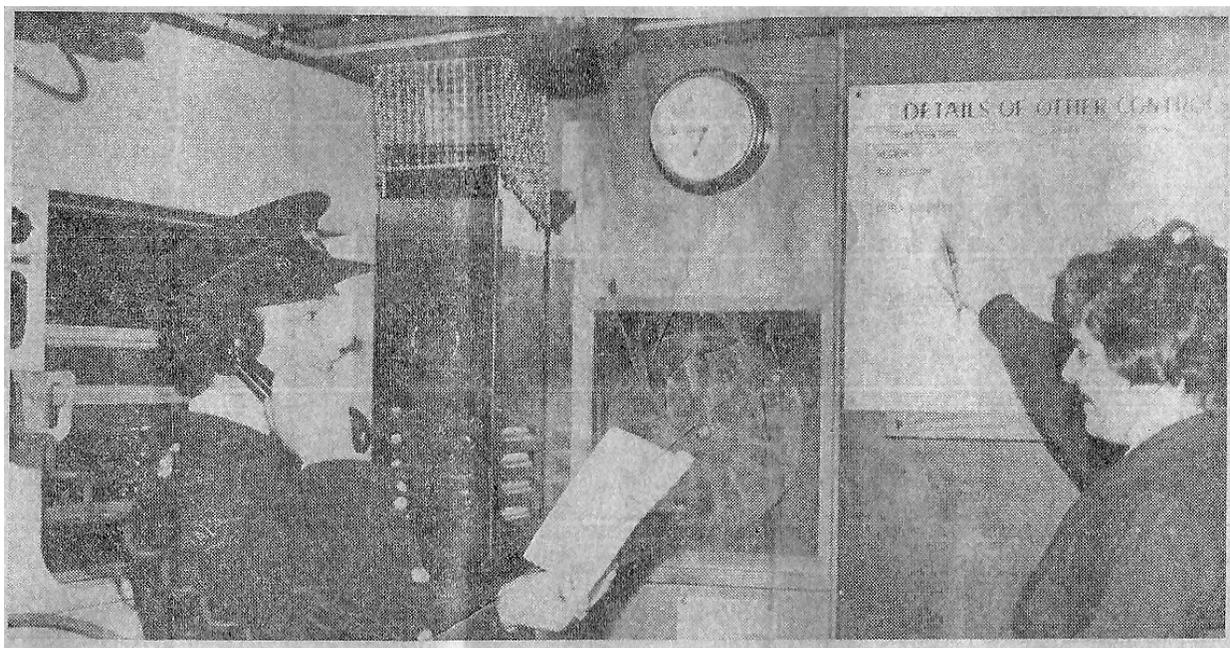


## Volunteers Fall Out

Michael Holloway



On March 31 89,000 men and women of Britain's home defence forces will stand down for the last time. They will do so unwillingly.

Twenty-four hours after the Prime Minister announced his £750 million cutback in Government spending, more than 100 Men and women met in Sheffield to speculate on their future.

Faced only with Mr. Wilson's blunt statement that their services would no longer be required, they decided unanimously that they would not give up their work until they were made to give it up. If necessary they would continue without pay and without expenses.

Today, a fortnight later, those men and women, members of Sheffield's Auxiliary Fire Service, have: a clearer picture of their future: they will be axed on March 31.

Their determination has largely given way to disillusionment and bitterness, but not entirely. There may still be some way their years of training can be used, they argue, some way they can continue unofficially to be available if they are needed in an emergency.

If there is an obvious danger that without skilled and regular instruction they will become quickly unfamiliar with new equipment and modern methods, they will not acknowledge it at the moment.

Like their 14,000 colleagues throughout the country, they are grasping at any straw that might maintain a link with what has been for some of them a two-nights-a-week job for the past 12 or 15 years.

Formed 30 years ago to support the professional fire brigades in times of war, the AFS has escaped much of the critical questioning of its peace-time role that has made the Civil Defence Corps the subject of heated argument. But it has met the same fate.

Though couched in careful language, the Home Office circular that spelled out in greater detail the Prime Minister's statement makes it fairly clear, that both voluntary bodies will cease to exist at the end of March, though the Civil Defence will continue on a "care and maintenance" basis.

According to the Home Office the run-down will mean the axe for 14,000 AFS personnel and 75,000 Civil Defence workers, saving eventually about £20 million of the present annual bill. About £7 million will continue to be spent on the upkeep of the Women's Royal Voluntary Reserve and the Royal Observer Corps.

If the Government seem now to be agreeing with those many critics of the voluntary services, like Civil Defence, which, they say, have no practical role to play in a modern nuclear age - at least, a role that is worth paying £20 million a year for - the volunteers are still convinced that they have not been wasting their time.

Both AFS and Civil Defence organizers point to the very real help they gave during the gales that brought havoc to Sheffield three years ago.

The AFS are proud to hear professional firemen acknowledge the invaluable work they did in fighting a severe outbreak of heath fires in 1959 - the volunteers turned out something like 800 calls - and in assisting when periodic flooding has stretched the Brigade's resources to the limit.

Sheffield's Assistant Divisional Officer for the AFS Mr. F. Claude Topliss says: 'We have never tried to do the regular's job but we have been available to supplement the work of the regular firemen.

"Take those 800 heath fires. The regular brigade would have spent all their time going from one to the other. At the same time they would have to maintain adequate coverage for the city's protection.

Mr. Topliss a member of the AFS for 30 years and associated with it too, through the Sheffield Fire Brigade Committee, on which he served until recently, insists that his unit still has a practical job to do.

"Unlike the Civil Defence - and there is no criticism of their role in what I say - ours is essentially a practical job, a physical job in which we are constantly putting to use our training."

Being a part of the Sheffield AFS has meant more than simply giving up a few hours' each week and for many of the volunteers the threat of March 31 has brought more than a feeling of bitterness - there is a deep sense of bewilderment and loss.

"I don't know what I will do with my spare time now. I suppose, just sit staring at the

television two nights a week instead," says 35-year-old Eric Stanley, a plant attendant of Sky Edge Road, Park, Sheffield.

Mrs. Joyce. Thompson, of Wingfield Crescent, Frecheville is one of the unit's many women members who work in communications. She finds the AFS an exciting change from looking after a home and two children and she introduced her husband to the service when they met.

"This has been my only hobby for years and I shall miss it. The spirit here is wonderful you meet other people who have the same interests - a change from the housework."

The determination to continue at any cost that found in the AFS is just as strong among the 400 members of the Civil Defence in Sheffield. They, too, are prepared to forgo the annual bounty of between £10 and £15 and travelling expenses.

"Obviously there is a certain amount of bitterness about this decision but a magnificent team spirit has been built up and they want to continue until the last moment," says Mr. J Hetherington, Civil Defence Officer for the area.

"If there is any way they can continue their work after that think they will. They have talked about forming themselves into an unofficial unit but whether it is practical I would not like to say at the moment.

Despite the confidence of the committee that their voluntary work has been necessary, the Civil Defence has come in for a great deal of criticism in recent years and the arguments about its role in a modern society will continue long after the 'volunteers "stand clown" on March 31.

But whether you believe the voluntary services are a practical emergency force or not in an age when emergencies are likely to be on an unprecedented scale, or whether you believe they are simply useful vehicles for allowing those of us who have a compelling urge to help our fellows for nothing to indulge ourselves, the question remains "Can we afford it?"