

## National Caravan Council



In the year in which the National Caravan Council celebrates its first 21 years, and the disarmament is a headline international issue, the story of one of the Council's first activities – the report on “The Use of Caravans in Wartime” – may be of interest.

The shadow of war in 1939 was darkening over Europe.

Czechoslovakia had been overrun, the pressure against Poland was mounting. The Council had been formed on May 18, and in June half a dozen men forming a sub-committee started meetings at The Caravan offices, from which the NCC was then operating, to examine urgently what contribution caravans could make if Britain were involved. The report was ready about a month before the war started.

It covered a great deal of ground, but three uses were given special importance. First was evacuation from cities and other target areas to safe zones in the country.

This demand had already started. People were placing caravans on suitable remote sites as refuges from bombing. Children, mothers attending them, expectant mothers, invalids, and the elderly were some who could be sent to safety, thus reducing the worries of their families and the burdens on Civil Defence. Caravans would be useful also, the NCC pointed out, for housing research workers and other perhaps almost irreplaceable

**An NCC flashback to a historic  
moment in 1939, told by**

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people who were not needed for the day-to-day running of the country and whose lives ought not to be risked purposelessly.

Caravans make good temporary homes, said the report, and had the special advantage that if a danger spread to new zones they could be moved quickly. Moreover they could be installed without calling on scarce labour or sterilising agricultural land.

The report went into such detail as the food supplies and first-aid equipment with which an evacuation caravan should be stocked.

Next the sub-committee glanced back to 1918, when Field marshal Haig sent to England for 50 horse caravans as a mobile headquarters for following up the great German retreat which succeeded the breakup of trench war.

A second world war, they said, would be a war of movement from the start, a motorised war. Caravans would make ideal mobile operations rooms and personal quarters for commanders, who would be under great stress. Vital battles might turn on whether a commander, faced with a crucial decision, was rested or worn-out.

### **Vans for Civil Defence**

Third was the use of caravans in Civil

Defence. Between 1,000 and 1,500 existing caravans, the sub-committee suggested, could be adapted as emergency dressing stations. This was merely a large-scale development of the pre-war use of caravan first aid posts by the St. Johns Ambulance Brigade at large open air events such as sports meetings and pageants.

Old readers will remember that the late Mrs. M.M.M. Fowler, of Leamington Spa, a vice-president of the Caravan Club, pioneered this use and until her death in 1957 used her own Blue Caravans for first aid work at successive National Rallies.

### **The mobile hospital**

Much more venturesome was an idea due, if I remember, to Mr. N. Wilkinson-Cox, founder of the caravan manufacturing firm of Raven. It was a scheme for a mobile hospital all accommodated in trailers.

Sixteen ward vans with four beds each would provide for 64 in-patients, and other caravans would provide living quarters for the unit commander, two doctors, nurses, stretcher bearers doubling the jobs of drivers, cook, etc., dispensary, operating theatre, office, kitchen, water tankage, power unit, etc.

Each fleet comprising 30 trailer caravans and one lorry, would be able to rush to a

The late Mrs. M. M. M. Fowler was a pioneer of the use of caravans for first aid purposes. She is seen here during a War office inspection in 1939.

Below: Air raid drill at the Elstree site of the London Caravan Co. twenty years ago.



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blitzed city and deal with the most urgent of cases within minutes arriving, even if the local water and electric mains had been destroyed.

Think what a boon the suggested Army caravans would have been in the North African campaigns. As it is, we shall never overtake the popular belief that the Allies copied the idea from the Italians and Rommel. It was not until the preparations for the Normandy landings that the Allies were provided with these essential aids to a war of movement.

Think, too, what a boon the mobile hospitals would have been to Coventry, Plymouth, and other victims of the Nazi bombers.

But the report was literally lost in the pigeon holes of Whitehall. We were advised that Sir John Anderson was the man to send it to. He was Neville Chamberlain's Chief co-ordinator on war and defence questions touching more than one Department. I handed the report to Dr. Leslie Burgin, the former Minister of Transport and a friend of THE CARAVAN'S managing director, who had persuaded him to become a Vice-President of the Club. Dr. Burgin handed it personally to Sir John Anderson. He never heard any more.

War started. I went to Whitehall to find out what the Council could do to help, and was passed on from one official to another, from one building to another.

A woman in Sir John Anderson's office thought she had seen the report. "It was

something to do with evacuation, wasn't it? So we sent it to the Ministry of Health". After hours of inquiring and waiting I found another woman in the Ministry of Health who thought she had seen it. "But I don't know where it is now, and I can't spare anyone to search for it".

Back to the office. I dissected the report and sent suitable chunks of it separately to the War Office, Air Ministry, Ministry of Health, British Red Cross Society, etc. Some of them were acknowledged. There is some reason to think that some of them bore a little fruit indirectly and tardily, but the results of this effort, if any, will never be really known.

What we do know is that today the caravan industry is recognized, resources and skills are known, and its voice is powerful. That it can make a unique contribution in any future national emergency as the experts in the design and manufacture of all kinds of specialised accommodation and functional units on wheels is clearly established.

### **And the future?**

Danger moves too quickly in the atomic age for Britain once again to recover from unpreparedness by superhuman efforts. The NCC has done some thinking on the use of Caravans in future emergencies. One would like to that complete blueprints, agreed with the Whitehall experts, were ready in the files.

