

Air Raid Precautions (ARP) 1938 – 1945 (Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar>)

After World War One, military experts predicted that in any future war there would be large-scale bombing of the British civilian population, resulting in huge casualties. In April 1937, an Air Raid Wardens' Service was created. By the middle of 1938 about 200,000 people were involved, with another half a million enrolling during the Munich Crisis of September 1938. By the outbreak of war there were more than 1.5 million in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions), or Civil Defence as it was later re-named.

The most visible members of the ARP were the air raid wardens. ARP posts were initially set up in the warden's home, or in a shop or an office, but they were later purpose-built. Each post covered a certain area, varying across the country, but with about ten to the square mile in London. Each post was divided into sectors, with perhaps three to six wardens in each sector. An ARP warden was almost always local - it was essential that he or she knew their sector and the people living there.

Since no significant German air raids followed the outbreak of war in September 1939, the main duties of the ARP wardens in the early months were to register everyone in their sector and enforce the blackout. This meant making sure that no lights were visible which could be used by enemy planes to help locate bombing targets. These activities led to some ARP wardens being regarded as interfering and nosy.

However, during the Blitz of 1940-1 wardens and other civil defence personnel proved themselves indispensable and heroic. Whenever the air raid sirens sounded, the wardens would help people into the nearest shelter and then tour their sector, usually in pairs, at considerable risk from bombs, shrapnel and falling masonry. They would also check regularly on those in the air raid shelters.

The duties of an Air Raid Warden included ensuring that the blackout was observed, sounding air raid sirens, ensuring that people went into public air raid shelters in an orderly fashion, checking gas masks, evacuating areas around unexploded bombs as well as helping to rescue casualties from bomb damaged properties, finding accommodation for people who had been bombed out, judging the extent and type of damage and informing the rescue services.

In the aftermath of a raid, ARP wardens would often be first on the scene, carrying out first-aid if there were minor casualties, putting out any small fires and helping to organise the emergency response. Other members of the Civil Defence services included rescue and stretcher (or first-aid) parties, the staff of control centres and messenger boys. Their work often overlapped with the fire and medical services and the WVS (Women's Voluntary Service).

A small percentage of ARP wardens were full-time and were paid a salary, but most were part-time volunteers who carried out their ARP duties as well as full-time jobs. Part-time wardens were supposed to be on duty about three nights a week, but this increased greatly when the bombing was heaviest. One in six was a woman, and amongst the men there were a significant number of veterans of World War One. At the beginning of the war, ARP wardens had no uniform, but wore their own clothes, with the addition of a steel helmet, Wellington boots and an armband. In May 1941 full-time and regular part-time wardens were issued with blue serge uniforms.

The Civil Defence services, including the ARP wardens, were maintained through the war. There were still hundreds of thousands of volunteers in June 1944, although the numbers of full-time personnel had fallen from 127,000 at the height of the Blitz to 70,000 by the end of 1943. In all 1.4 million men and women served as ARP wardens during World War Two.