

SPEECH BY MISS ELLEN WILKINSON

Speaking at the Civil Defence Institute at Newcastle to-day (Friday) Miss Ellen Wilkinson, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Home Security said:-

The increasing demand for man power for the war effort has made heavy calls on the personnel of the civil defence services, and especially on the Fire Guards. What we have lost in numbers we can only make good by increased efficiency, and it is mainly for this reason that it has now been decided that in future every Fire Guard is to undergo a course of compulsory training. The recent 'Baedeker' raids have been the first of any magnitude since the present Fire Guard organisation of local authorities was established in August last year. These raids have shown very clearly how vital a part Fire Guards can play when an incendiary attack is made on a town. The National Fire Service naturally concentrate on the big fires that break out and it then depends on the Fire Guards alone whether other serious fires start or whether this is prevented by incendiary bombs being dealt with quickly before they can start a serious fire. Very large numbers of incendiary bombs were successfully put out by Fire Guards in recent raids and on many occasions Fire Guard parties, acting together, were able to localise a fire and so prevent it from spreading to neighbouring premises in the business districts or down the street in the residential areas. In the actual test of a raid everything depends on the Fire Guard knowing what he has to do and in his doing it quickly. The well-trained Fire Guard parties have proved themselves worth many times the number of parties whose training was incomplete or had been neglected. This is another reason why we have decided to introduce compulsory training.

The scheme will apply to Fire Guards serving under the local authority and also to Fire Guards at business premises and government premises. The training will not be an additional liability but will be carried out during the 48 hours of part-time service a month.

The training will not be confined to instruction in the characteristics of incendiary bombs and the use of appliances such as the stirrup pump. It will embrace also instruction in the operational use of Fire Guard parties. Every Fire Guard will need to know exactly where are the fire-fighting appliances on his premises; how to get about these premises; where he can get out on to the roofs and the general layout of the roofs.

Training is a continuous process. It is not a thing that is done and is then finished with. The training which will be given will therefore include periodical practices, check tests, and exercises. The Fire Guards have done fine work; they have saved many valuable premises engaged on war work and many homes, both large and small. When the new system is introduced, they will be far better able to face the tasks that lie ahead.

The Orders giving effect to the plan will be issued as soon as possible and every effort will be made to use for training the long nights during the coming months.

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MINISTRY OF HOME SECURITY