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Willimantic and the H-Bomb

It's difficult to remember, now that the cold war is over, how two generations of Americans grew up in the shadow of nuclear annihilation. Many reading this column will recall the days when they had to "duck and cover" at school, in preparation for the big blast. It certainly looked as if nuclear warfare would become a reality during the 1962 Cuba Crisis. But how many residents of Windham and vicinity recall the statewide air raid practice of 1957?

These were the years of Ike's second term as President. Willimantic was a prospering community, with American Thread and Electro Motive Company providing secure employment for numerous families. Many would argue that the local urban renewal programs of the late 60s and early 70s did more damage to town than any planned by Nikita Krushchev! Let's go back to a steamy summer day in Willimantic, over 40 years ago, to the days of the Bomb. Connecticut's Civilian Defense Organization planned "Operation Alert" during the second week of July, 1957. It was a statewide mock-up of a Russian (although you couldn't say that) then) nuclear attack. During the week, almost 1.5 million state residents were "evacuated" from urban areas to find cover in the outer fringes of the state and in rural New England. The casualties, deaths and injuries in the state, were estimated at 160,000. This was the majority of the 200,000 key personnel left behind. The supposed casualties were inflicted by two 20 megaton H-Bombs, each the equivalent of 20 million tons of TNT. The first was detonated over Derby, flattening New Haven, Ansonia, Orange, Seymour and parts of Bridgeport, Newtown, Oxford, Hamden, Bethany, Beacon Falls and East Haven. The second exploded over Burlington and "devastated" Farmington, Canton, Plainville, Avon, New Hartford, Harwinton, and "wiped out" parts of New Britain, Torrington, Thomaston, Wolcott and New London.

The "take cover" alert was sounded across the state at 1:45 pm on July 11, 1957. It was planned to clear the streets and stop all traffic for 15 minutes. It was calculated that the only sections of the state saved from radio-active fallout and the blasts were the northeast and northwest sections of the state. Greenwich received no fallout from the Connecticut bombs, but was heavily hit by fallout from the H-bombs which destroyed New York City. At 2 o'clock, Governor Ribicoff made a radio broadcast and thanked Connecticut for its participation. Things went smoothly across the state - but Willimantic had its problems.

Willimantic Police officer Ed Haddad did a sterling job to clear Willimantic's Main Street, as traffic ground to a halt. But despite all the warnings of the "attack," many Willimantic residents knew, or cared, nothing about it. A lady lectured Officer Haddad about citizen rights as he urged her and her daughter to take cover. He carefully explained that this was a mock air raid drill. The lady complained that she could see no planes as she headed for the cover of H. C. Murray's front door. Haddad then had to head off a group of young girls coming across the footbridge, and told them to return to

Pleasant Street. The girls were devastated. Pat Boone's movie was playing at the Capitol Theater, and they would miss the start.

Traffic ground to a halt, and the many people who ignored the warnings, were ushered to cover by Officer Haddad. Many gained shelter under the Woolworth's awning on the hottest day of the year. Temperatures and tempers were raised. Instead of taking cover, Willimantic's Friday-afternoon shoppers, in these pre-mall days, looked bemused, and came on to the street to see what was happening.

The *Chronicle* editorial the following day was highly critical of Willimantic's laissez-faire attitude to the alert. "Willimantic would have been piled high with dead bodies . . . had the Civil Defense Test been a real air raid by enemy bombers. As soon as the sirens blasted, everyone inside raced outside to watch the air raid!"

In grim mood, the editorial writer continued, and warned that Americans lived under the threat of enemy bombs, "as long as there are men in the world who despise the way of life we enjoy." He went on to hope that enemy aircraft would never rain death-dealing bombs from Willimantic's skies. The numerous deaths would certainly would not be the fault of Willimantic's Civil Defense Director, Francis J. Barrett who had worked tremendously hard to make the mock air raid a success. "The obvious inference to be drawn from the public's reaction is that they consider preparedness a joke." The girls who missed beginning of the Pat Boone movie were not laughing.