



# Entertaining the TROOPS

This is the story of the Kiwi Concert Party in the Middle East, as told to *Korero* by Private N. Habgood, one of the members of the party recently in New Zealand on furlough.

WHEN GENERAL Freyberg decided that the 2 N.Z.E.F. in the Middle East should have an entertainment unit of its own it was not with any thought of pampering his men with a luxury. He knew that a few months in the Western Desert would probably be enough to take the edge off the keenest sense of humour. And he knew, too, that when men forget how to laugh something must be done about it.

It was in January, 1941, when the unit first began to take shape. With money from the Patriotic Fund, costumes, musical instruments, and all the other necessary accessories were acquired wherever they could be found. The unit's Q.M., S/Sgt. Colin McBryde, investigated every likely source, including, of course, the Cairo bazaars, and after many months of laborious work nearly £1,000 worth of equipment had been assembled.

The unit started off with three or four shows in Egypt. And then came Crete. The party went to Canea and took over the Olympia Theatre, the owner of which had been taken into custody as a fifth columnist. The theatre had first to be cleaned of its filth, and when performances did start—mainly before audiences of Royal Marines—there was always the possibility of

being interrupted by an air raid. In one performance the conductor of the orchestra worked in a tin hat. On another occasion conditions were such that one member of the party stood at the door trying to reflect light on to the stage with a mirror.

When the German invasion came, bombs demolished the Olympia Theatre. All the party's equipment was there, and the whole of it was lost. The members of the unit were then attached to an infantry battalion and carried mortar ammunition to the front lines until the battalion evacuated the area. For a time they were left as front-line troops; they held a thinly-defended line from Galatos Hill to the coast. They were strafed from daylight to dusk, but suffered only several minor casualties.

Then came the historic march across the island to Sphakia, where the troops were embarking for evacuation. They threw away their blankets and all other gear except their rifles; but, even so, a number of men in the battalion the party was with had to drop out of the march from sheer exhaustion. One member of the concert party went off to find an R.A.P. and was not seen again. With four others who had to drop out of the march, he is now a prisoner of war.