

CONCERTS FOR THE TROOPS:

(Written for "The Listener" by "SHIBLI")

A **SPLENDID** beginning was made this month with the new schedule of entertainments provided by the National Broadcasting Service for the Army Education and Welfare Service. The Army authorities naturally regard entertainment as an important part of the new service. Up to the present, a good deal of valuable work in providing entertainment in camp has been carried out by voluntary organisations, and this work will no doubt continue. But the furthestmost camps have, of course, presented a problem, and these were the places where entertainment was most needed. However, a concert company has already completed a tour in a North Auckland district, while in other parts of New Zealand parties large and small organised by the National Broadcasting Service are visiting camps and posts with variety shows and music and gramophone recitals. It will be possible now to cater more fully for these distant camps under a co-operative arrangement between the army and the National Broadcasting Service.

This month, therefore, all entertainment schemes in the army have been co-ordinated, and the first important concert party was sent to a distant camp. Big difficulties had to be overcome to ensure that the party could operate at such a distance. There were questions of transport and the arranging of suitable times so that the members of the concert party might be absent from their ordinary work without inconvenience to their employers or themselves. With the approval and sympathetic guidance of the Minister in Charge of Broadcasting (Hon. D. Wilson), Professor Shelley and the Army authorities, these arrangements were successfully completed. Shortly after 3 p.m. on Friday, March 5, a small convoy of performers departed on their 200-mile trek. The concert party of a dozen performers, their costumes, instruments and electrical equipment were accommodated in accordance with strict wartime economy.

A Free Hand

I was included in the party as an independent observer, and not being "on the staff," was given a free hand to write as I wished about the enterprise. Some of the concert party were known to me, but the majority were strangers. I was curious to know how, after such a long and tiresome journey they were going to stand up to the three performances scheduled. Over 400 miles to travel and three shows—all within the compass of about 54 hours! Here, indeed, was a crucial test for the new scheme. The few performers, I knew, could face the critical audience of a thousand or so soldiers; but how about the rest of the company? How about the all important "composition" and production of the show? When I learned that owing to the manpower shortage "the orchestra" had a numerical strength of three, I just wondered. But then, I thought, these YA people have vast experience of "putting over" their programmes; yes, in the comfort of a city broadcasting studio, but how about

EDUCATION in the Army is more than education, and far more than instruction. It is welfare as well: building up and maintaining morale. So it means concerts and plays as well as classes and lectures, and that part of the work has been undertaken voluntarily by the National Broadcasting Service. The Army says what it wants: the Broadcasting Service supplies the want if it is reasonably possible.

Here are two examples—one an account of a visit by a party of entertainers to a very large camp in a remote area, the other an impression of a visit to some small isolated groups who cannot normally leave their posts.



"Anything from a Swanee whistle to a Wurlitzer"

performers enduring travelling trials reminiscent of a Leonard Merrick novel?

We arrived at our destination at about 10 p.m. on the Friday; some arrived at 2 o'clock the next morning (ah, the hazards and uncertainties of war-time transport!). However, only a few hours later, the party were having their first rehearsal in the camp theatre, a fine building capable of seating over a thousand soldiers. By the time the first performance was due at 2 p.m., the wireless man had amplified the hall, the scenery and lights man felt reasonably sure of the effects, the orchestra of three had tried over its many instruments (one musician seemed to be at home with anything from a Swanee whistle to a Wurlitzer), and the performers had scrambled through a few of their items.

Would the Audience Approve?

The afternoon was almost unendurably hot, and the thousand diggers present waited for the curtain—possibly a critical audience? The opening chorus found the going hard, and the comedienne to follow had to work very strenuously. Yet, slowly there was generated that psychological atmosphere that is born only of something that is really good. By the middle of the fourth item a thousand heads were swaying to the rhythm of the show, and laughter was holding both her sides. The applause was mounting in steps of appreciable volume.

I could see the show was right. It was "the goods." When the curtain fell the enthusiasm was a joy to watch. The good word must have been radioed round the camp, for the theatre doors

had not long closed on the first matinee when soldiers were waiting on the steps and then queueing up for the night performance.

That night was a triumph. I have seldom seen such enthusiasm, and with a memory that goes back to the days of Dixie Vaudeville, I have rarely seen and heard such a fine show. Every artist was an artist, the items given were without exception first-rate, and that three-man orchestra played like a 30-man one.

The applause, a cacophony of hand-clapping, stamping, shouting and whistling, mounted the slopes of a nearby mountain and caused, possibly, some minor avalanches. And, if this warmth of feeling and of later hospitality could have been transferred to the same snow-clad peaks, they would have melted away into a hundred joyful streams.

A Good, Clean Show

The third and final matinee on Sunday was a repetition of the triumph of the night before. All this may sound super enthusiasm, but I am recording my sincere admiration for a real achievement in the first big step in one branch of a new State enterprise. One of the most important aspects of the success was that our soldiers have signified their unqualified approval of a good, clean show. We may now put aside the exploded idea that to be entertained soldiers must have "the rough stuff."

As for the great hospitality given and appreciation shown by men and officers, the members of this company experienced something they will never forget.

Meanwhile, the Broadcasting Service has started something that will continue and grow. Our soldiers will be happier because of its existence.

A Request Party On Tour

THE kitchen of a disused house, lit with only one candle, the room of an unfinished State house with unplastered 'slat walls, a couple of army bunk huts, an old dance hall turned into sleeping quarters—any place with a roof on will do for an Army Education concert party when it goes by request to entertain soldiers at the smaller posts. We went with one of the small touring parties one evening a week or two after it had begun its work.

"Defence Area—Keep Out!" met our eyes as our army car pulled up to

an ordinary gate that was once anybody's thoroughfare. Inside, greeted by officers, we tumbled out of the car, and introduced ourselves through the party's compère. "That's Jim, and that big bag he's got is his piano-accordion; that's Yvonne, and that's Doreen—they sing; that's Wally—he sings, too. And this is a reporter from *The Listener*."

A Novel Auditorium

A room chosen for the entertainment had perhaps seen the same sort of thing before—at all events it had a sort of stage at one end. Army office equipment had been pushed to the sides to make room for rows of chairs, which were soon full of soldiers; the artists assembled near the stage, and *The Listener* was comfortably seated. Only one thing remained—the Colonel. We all sprang to our feet as he entered, but that was the beginning and the end of formality. "Please sit down," he said, "and smoke—" and the concert began.

Jim, a bright-eyed youngster of six feet got on to the "stage," and slung on to his shoulders a gigantic instrument—his piano-accordion. The thing resembles a huge, modern streamlined typewriter, only with a piano keyboard instead of QWERTYUIOP, ASDFG etc. It even has tabulator buttons, three red and three white—presumably "couplers." It is capable of an enormous volume of sound, and with its wide scope of varied effects it is just the instrument for such a mobile concert party as this one. At the end of a piece, if the instrument is extended, the player squeezes the air out again with a sound exactly like the hum you hear from a power pole by a country road on a still day.

He began to play the latest popular tunes. By the time he got to *In the Mood*, feet were tapping, and the audience was beginning to get the feel of this new situation. A single naked electric light bulb above his head was a luxury to the accordionist, who in one other place had relied on a candle held close to such music as he had to read (in songs requiring accompaniment).

After a few accordion items, it was time for the two girls of the party to do their turn. Such informal circumstances, and the mere factor of space, left no room for the conventional music hall compère, so our entertainers whispered their intentions to each other in the full hearing of everyone—"three verses this time, with the gag at the second"—and members of the audience began to feel as if they were enjoying things behind the scenes.

Songs of Yearning

Appealing to the nostalgia of men who spend their hours in gun-pits, at look-out points, at communication points, with limited leave the same as everyone else, the two girls sang of "A Simmery Summery Day":

Give me a book that's entertaining
When I'm lying in the hay
To while away the hours
On a Simmery Summery day.

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