

RUMOUR IS A WEAPON OF THE ENEMY

Why It Starts: How to Deal With It

A KORERO Report

"COME HITHER, Catesby, rumor it abroad, That Anne my Wife is very grievous sicke." Richard III (in Shakespeare's play of that name) had his reasons for the order; people to-day, nearly four hundred years later, certainly "rumor it abroad," but in most cases with no reason at all. Rumour is a weapon of the enemy, and has been a weapon, a dangerous weapon, in all the wars of history. Probably it was the first sign of what we know to-day as propaganda. Rumour was a weapon of war before the invention of gunpowder and when Bren-gun carriers were knights with shining armour on white chargers; there is little difference in technique. But it is no less effective, and the damage it has caused, with the conditions of modern warfare, is incalculably greater.

Ships sunk; lists of casualties from islands where the enemy has been waiting, hidden on the beaches; surprise bombing attacks from the air; nerves strained and morale weakened from stories of no truth. Rumour. Lies, with death and suffering the result. Security officers know only too well. In this fifth year of war, the lesson has been taught too often, but people, civilians and servicemen, have not understood the answer.

There are many types of rumours. Stories with little or no truth which are intended to weaken morale, with consequent damage to the war effort. Enemy agents and sympathizers sometimes start them; their circulation may safely be left to idle chatters and gossip experts. We all know the trouble that can result. Typical examples can be remembered from the days of 1941-42 when the Japanese occupation of Pacific islands was in full swing, bringing closer to New Zealand the chance of invasion.

Many were the stories, supposedly heard from Japanese broadcasts, of the futility of the black-out precautions. "Don't go to all this trouble and inconvenience, don't cause all this discomfort—all aero-



plane attacks are to take place in the daytime." "And," Japanese radio was heard to say by so many people (but not including the officials whose job it was to listen), "we hear that New Zealand has had an unusually good wool season; that's fine, we'll be over to collect it soon." It was rubbish, with all the rest; it should have been recognized as rubbish, but many people were worried and upset needlessly.

A similar type of rumour was also started in a military camp when the buzz went round that the reinforcement stationed there until embarkation was to be hurried away because the British Government was paying the New Zealand Government sums varying from £250 to £500 for each man sent away—the mission was so dangerous. The absurdity of the story is obvious. The value to the enemy of troops with morale weakened in this manner is also obvious.

The enemy is shrewd. If he hasn't information, if he wants to check reports that have come his way, he can start a rumour that will cause so much upheaval and confusion that the only means of squashing it is a flat denial. From such a denial he is often able to learn plenty. A serious example of this occurred when a troop transport left New Zealand with reinforcements for the 2 N.Z.E.F.

Soon after the ship was away from port, a rumour that she had been torpedoed