

getting back to our own territory. Miles of tussock, miles of road, miles of enemy lay between me and them—and it was starting to sleet like the South Pole.

I walked up to the bike. I lifted one leg over the saddle. I tried the throttle. A deep-seated roar shook me—but it wasn't the bike—merely its owner. He towered over me:

"What's the idea, mate?"

"Just trying it out," I said.

"Damned cheek!" he said. "Get off." I climbed down slowly and walked away. He hadn't noticed that I wasn't wearing the white arm band of his own battalion. I walked away; it was getting dark; the rain was drizzling down; sleet was mixed up in it like sand in sugar; and while Mr. X was going back to beer and a fire in the officers' mess, I vanished in the sodden darkness.

Every one in these days knows about fox-holes—they're as well known as tea-caddies. Every soldier finds his way into a fox-hole almost as soon as he finds his way into the King's uniform. But in those days back in 1941 it was different. We never dug fox-holes on manoeuvres, we built bivouacs—primitive wigwams of sticks and manuka scrub, with a ground-sheet stretched over and tied down to make them waterproof. They weren't waterproof, though—rain always trickled in one way or another, and following the ancient method of torture, dripped molecule by molecule down your neck or in your eye. If a storm blew up, the whole penthouse was twitched away like the sheet in a magician's trick, or else the elements, failing to take it from above, tried the underhand way, with flood waters sluicing the ground beneath.

Whatever happened "bivvies" were seldom a success.

Another thing that was remarkable about those Waiouru manoeuvres was the way people disappeared. It was not unusual for a whole section, platoon, even company to disappear for days on end—just disappear into the vast, untrodden pampas of the Waiouru Desert. A few days would pass while the manoeuvre tangled itself up like a child's fishing-line. Then at the height of the confusion, red-hats on every hill-top, rumours ricocheting right and left, imaginary bombs forming an imaginary hail overhead, the missing company would emerge with triumph from the Vast Unknown, claiming innumerable prisoners and a victory of "strategic surprise." Which done, they would sit down and eat their heads off, having fared meagrely on roots and iron rations during their disappearance.

Those were the days when we played at war in New Zealand. The Pacific dozed comfortably in a lull of false security—Japan, although an aggressor in China for years, had not yet turned her guns to the south-east, whither her eyes had long been glancing covetously. So manoeuvres were casual affairs, not taken too seriously. Many of us repented of this flippancy later and wished that we had learnt more on the Desert Plain. Some day, perhaps, we will go back and look at the road on which we marched, the streams we drank at, the holes we dug, and the emplacements we constructed with so much grumbling, and think, "Well, we were lucky that we didn't have to use them." We *were* lucky.

