

# THE UNION DEFENCE FORCE ENTERTAINMENT GROUP IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In November 1941, Major Myles Bourke flew from South Africa to Cairo to investigate the possibilities of sending South African concert parties to the Middle East. He was accompanied by Capt (then Lieut) Mrs Sybil Gaiger.

At that time ENSA was not very active and there was an urgent need for entertainment for the large troop concentrations in the Middle East.

The Chief Entertainment Officer's visit lasted from Nov 15, 1941 until Jan 13, 1942. On his return he submitted a report on conditions as he had found them. This report was sent to the QMG, COA, Col Rendell, SO Welfare, and to SSO (QT) UDF Admin HQ MEF.

Referring to conditions which prevailed on his arrival in the ME, Major Bourke wrote: "It became immediately noticeable that there was no co-ordinated organisation of live entertainment, either for our troops or any others stationed in the ME".

A number of local organisations worked independently and without reference to each other, continued Major Bourke. He had met Major Morrison, OC, ENSA-NAAFI (Entertainment Section) and found that this officer had the running of four imported companies consisting of men and women, and two parties, drawn from Imperial troops, of men only. Fixed itineraries did not appear to be arranged for these companies, and they appeared to travel from one camp to another, as they were asked for by the units concerned.

Dates were made a few days ahead by a routing officer, but there seemed to be no idea of drawing up a properly scheduled itinerary with which other entertainment sections could fit in their dates, or on which one could depend with any degree of certainty.

"When I went up to the Middle East a few days before the arrival of my Unit No 3 (Crazy Gang) I was under the impression that a well-balanced and co-ordinated organisation already existed" continued the report. "I had hoped to hand my party over to such an organisation, for them to run it in conjunction with ENSA parties and other parties drawn from Imperial and Colonial troops. I intended to make only three conditions:—

1. That the unit was to retain its name and identity.
2. That South African troops were to receive first consideration wherever possible.
3. That all performances should be free to troops.

I had hoped also that I would find this organisation so well equipped with transport, generators, stages, etc., that my unit would need nothing further in the way of equipment than what they had brought from the Union. I discovered, however, that although Major Morrison at first seemed to be delighted at the prospect of having another entertainment unit at his disposal, he was not prepared to do the routing, i.e. the arranging of dates and stands where the party could play, and that he had no transport, no stage, and no lighting equipment to offer them.

As our meetings on the subject progressed, it became more and more apparent that the ENSA organisation would only be prepared to undertake the responsibility of sending my party round on tour on various conditions with which I was not prepared to fall in. Major Morrison also wished to have the right to alter and reproduce the party's turns himself and this was obviously out of the question."

## **ME Live Entertainments Committee**

Major Bourke refers to attending the second meeting of the ME Live Entertainments Committee. This committee had been formed with the object of co-ordinating all live entertainment in the ME, and was under the control of Imperial HQ. Major Bourke was of the opinion that every one was talking at cross-purposes and without apparently getting any nearer their object. A sub-committee was formed called "The live entertainments Executive committee". This was apparently to run the enormous organisation which would result from the pooling of all entertainment effort in the ME, by meeting once or twice a month.

"It would be wiser "continues the report" and much more practicable to institute our own organisation which would run under the direction of SSO (QT) and would work in close collaboration with ENSA, and any other organisation with similar aims, but which would remain for the time being at least entirely outside any co-ordinated scheme."

## **Launching the first concert party in the Middle East**

Realising that no facilities or equipment could be obtained from ENSA as he had originally thought possible, Major Bourke then set about launching the first UDF concert party — the Crazy Gang — in the ME. Considerable additions would have to be made to the equipment to enable this party to perform at many of the ME camps, which were totally unequipped for theatrical purposes, without even taking into consideration the forward areas, which at that time Major Bourke was given to understand would be beyond reach.

## **The Company's Equipment**

The party was equipped with costumes, make-up, back and side curtains, middle tabs, props, irons, etc, complete public address equipment with gramophone turn-table and batteries, musical instruments with the exception of a piano; in fact they were fully equipped to perform anywhere where a stage, stage lights and front curtains were available.

## **Equipment needed**

The necessity for further equipment was reported to Col Rendell by Major Bourke, who made enquiries regarding the cost of a portable stage, generator, lighting equipment, front curtains and a piano. The approximate prices of those necessities was £500. Col Rendell wrote immediately to the Union for permission to spend this sum. DHQ answered by letter, refusing to take the matter before the Authorities Committee and stating that the party must manage to carry on with the same equipment as other parties in the Middle East.

"It is hardly necessary to state that all concert parties functioning in the ME, are equipped with the properties we were requesting" continues the report, "and that the request would never have been sent forward had this not been the case."

As no authority for the necessary expenditure was granted, no performances were given by the concert party for some time, owing to the lack of a number of essential details. To avoid further delay, and as there seemed little chance of quick results from the Union, Major Bourke purchased a considerable amount of wire rope, coarse and fine hemp ropes, pulleys, tools, flex, reflectors, electric fittings etc, at his own expense.

The Stage Manager of the Crazy Gang having obtained miscellaneous equipment from various stores at Helwan, set to work and made quickly and efficiently a complete lighting system consisting of switchboard, light battens, flood lights and stands, etc.

## **Transport**

Although the establishment allowed for all necessary transport in the Union, no allowance had been made for transport in the ME. Consequently the Crazy Gang was entirely dependent on UDF Admin HQ in this respect.

Capt Mrs Gaiger (then Lt) tackled the vital question of transport and after considerable difficulties arranged that two utility vans, one 1-ton truck and one 3-ton lorry should be taken on to strength of UDF Admin HQ, pending receipt of authority from the Union for these vehicles to be put on the strength of the Unit itself.



At Pretoria before leaving for the North

### Chief Entertainment Officer's Conclusions on ME Conditions

It would be absolutely necessary to have an administrative office at HQ, Cairo, to consist of at least one officer and one senior NCO. Major Bourke suggested 2/Lt Denis Mitchell and S/Sgt J. W. Keenes. Lt Mitchell had many years of professional experience on the stage both as artist, stage manager and producer. S/Sgt Keenes ran a professional concert party for years with success, was himself a lighting sketch artist and was also an artisan carpenter with detailed knowledge of the erecting of stages, stage lights and properties. The duties of the administrative office would be as follows:—

1. To act as liaison between the visiting companies; the SSO (QT); other concert parties and entertainment organisations in the ME, including ENSA and the UDF Entertainment Unit, Pretoria.
2. To report on the progress of the visiting UDF concert parties and their reception at the camps they visited.
3. To receive reports from officers in charge of concert parties; to lay them before SSO (QT) and to render copies to HQ, Pretoria.
4. To make advance bookings and arrange advance propaganda at all camps to be visited.
5. To work with all other organisations functioning in the ME, so that UDF dates would not clash with theirs.
6. To draw up itineraries for the parties in such a way that there would be no undue delay between performances, and to ensure that the best possible use was made of their time.
7. To arrange accommodation in camps wherever convenient, and if not, in hotels, pensions, etc.
8. To arrange S & T for the parties while on tour.
9. To make all other financial arrangements necessary for the efficient running of each party.

10. To undertake all such administrative duties necessary for the efficient running of all parties from the UDF.

At this time Major Bourke suggested that four concert parties should be kept continually employed in the ME area. This was later increased when the UDF Entertainment Unit grew larger, and when the demand for UDF parties became so much greater.

All parties arriving from the Union should go up fully equipped in readiness for conditions existing in the ME, i.e. they should have transport, pianos, generators, travelling stages and all other details contained in the supplementary establishment table which was brought out to meet the special requirements of the ME.

The question of advances on S & T was one of considerable urgency, as the conditions to be experienced by visiting concert parties from the Union were different from those applying to any other unit or individual in the ME. The final arrangements made were:—

Each officer in charge of a concert party had the authority to draw an advance against S & T from the Paymaster. This was done through a UME 59 which was filled in in triplicate, one copy going to the Paymaster, one to the Supervising Paymaster and one being retained in the book.

This money was used for living expenses of the Unit, when barracks were not available, and the maintenance of costumes, musical instruments and other theatrical equipment. The following system of accounting was followed:—

1. For every purchase made a receipt had to be obtained.
2. The name of the firm and articles purchased were then entered on the debit side of a cash book.
3. On returning to base, all purchases were entered into a Z26 book which was signed by the officer in charge of the concert party, SO Ent and SSO (QT).
4. Expendable items such as cotton, repairs, etc., were certified as such, but non-expendable items were taken on charge and entered into the stock ledger.

5. Living expenses, casual meals when on duty, etc., were accounted for as follows:—

- (a) Receipts were obtained.
- (b) A double-sided sheet was printed. On the left-hand side the itinerary of the tour was entered, and the amount each person was allowed per day when staying in or out of barracks. This amount was totalled up and the expenditure during the tour could not exceed this amount. On the right-hand side the actual amounts spent were entered in detail. Each member of the concert party signed the back of this form.
- (c) At the end of the tour the receipts, cash book, Z26 book and S & T forms were taken to the Supervising Paymaster where the accountant examined and cleared them.

Experience showed that, apart from accommodation and food, concert parties' average cost per month did not exceed £15.

There should be some type of imprest account or petty cash account to meet small expenditures necessitated by the nature of the concert parties concerned. These could be kept either by the individual officers in charge of companies, or by the Admin Officer at HQ. (i.e. such expenditure as washing of shirts, underclothes, washable costumes, etc.), used in the production of the shows, also repairs to costumes necessitating the purchase of material, safety pins, lace, ribbon, silk, etc.

"The above reports covers everything of importance" concluded Major Bourke, "and deals with the situation as I found it on my arrival, as it stands today, and as it is likely to develop in the future. As both GOA and General Brink are anxious that further parties should be sent up immediately, and as conditions existing at HQ of the Entertainment Unit, 15 Artillery Row, Pretoria, were urgently needing my personal supervision I returned to the Union, leaving Lt (Mrs) Gaiger in charge of administration. This officer will remain until Lt Mitchell and S/Sgt Keenes relieve her."

In March, 1942, Lt Denis Mitchell arrived in the Middle East and came under Colonel K. Laysell, Senior Staff Officer, QT, 2i/c to Gene-

ral Theron. Mitchell was appointed Staff Officer, Entertainment.

For disciplinary purposes when at base the concert parties came under the Base Commander, and it was decided that they would be based at Helwan, 26 miles from Cairo. Special bungalows were put up for their use, and one bungalow was turned into a rehearsal hut. One of the first and most important jobs was to draw up a War Equipment Table which was a difficult task as there was no precedent.

### Routing

In the early days of SA Entertainments in the Middle East, SA concert parties were routed to the Cairo area, the Canal and Suez areas, Alexandria, the Western Desert as far as Mersa Matruh, Palestine and Syria.

Later the routing was extended and the concert parties followed close on the armies advancing across the desert, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, Algiers, etc. Paiforce was also included in the itineraries of three SA concert parties, and these three tours were undertaken at the special request of the British authorities and as a gesture of goodwill.

### Difficulties

When SA Entertainments were first established in the ME, the shortage of transport was one of the greatest difficulties as it was with many other units, and this problem remained with the units to the bitter end. Microphones were very difficult to get and far from easy to maintain, as these delicate instruments suffer terribly from jolting in the course of transport, and are immediately affected by rough handling. Generators were also difficult to obtain and lack of staff with adequate technical knowledge made it difficult to maintain them. Although some pianos were sent from the Union, most of those used by the concert parties were large second-hand German ones bought in the Middle East. They were too large for easy handling, but small ones were unobtainable. The ideal piano for touring concert parties is the small Steinway in a steel case which was often used by American shows. Although it is almost a miniature piano it has a full size keyboard, is easy to handle and stands up to the most strenuous travelling conditions.

### Lack of staff

Lack of staff has always been the biggest problem facing SA Entertainments in the Middle East. After a lengthy battle SO Ent was given an establishment of Captain, Lieutenant, S/Major, Sgt and Cpl. Shortly after this establishment was granted, Italy was invaded, and it became urgently necessary to send entertainment to Italy.

Captain Mitchell visited Italy to make preliminary arrangements with ENSA and UDFI to route and accommodate the first South African concert party — the Troopadours — to visit Italy. At this time the authorities would not consider a separate establishment for CMF and SO Ent had to send his staff to Italy. This meant that all entertainment for South Africans in the ME area had to be organised and directed by SO Ent alone.

SO Ent's duties apart from those connected with SA concert parties, included finding other entertainment for the various camps, booking dance bands, advising camps on the production of their own shows, obtaining scripts, and assisting, if possible, with costumes and obtaining music and instruments. The policy of SA Entertainments was to firstly entertain South African servicemen and women, and then as many Allied troops as possible.

SO Ent ME estimated that 75 per cent of SA shows were given to Allied troops in the Middle East, and the remaining 25 per cent to South Africans. This is obviously because of the small number of South Africans as compared with other servicemen.

When SA Entertainments was first established in the ME, there was a tendency on the part of ENSA to regard it as an interloper. When the position became clear, a very cordial relationship was slowly built up and maintained.

In SO Ent's opinion ENSA in the Middle East was an overlarge top-heavy organisation with too few "theatre" people in it. The ENSA shows were not, generally speaking "produced," but consisted of a series of turns strung together.

### Difficulties and duties of the OC of a concert party in the Middle East

The OC of a concert party is in actual fact the OC of a non-divisional unit. He has to

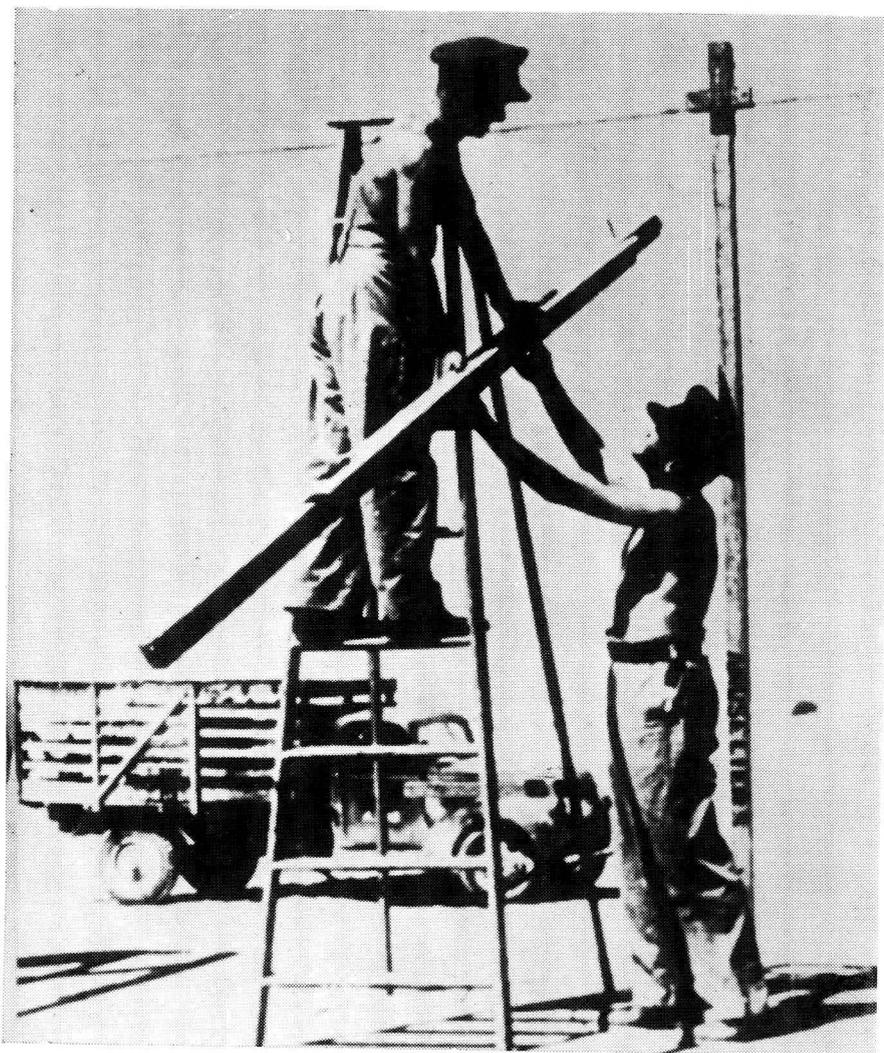
submit casualty returns, field returns, attend to pay queries, war diaries and records of performances. He has also to make arrangements for the concert parties when they arrive at their destination, and in some cases, has to do his own routing.

Concert parties in the Middle East had to improvise to a much greater extent than in the Union.

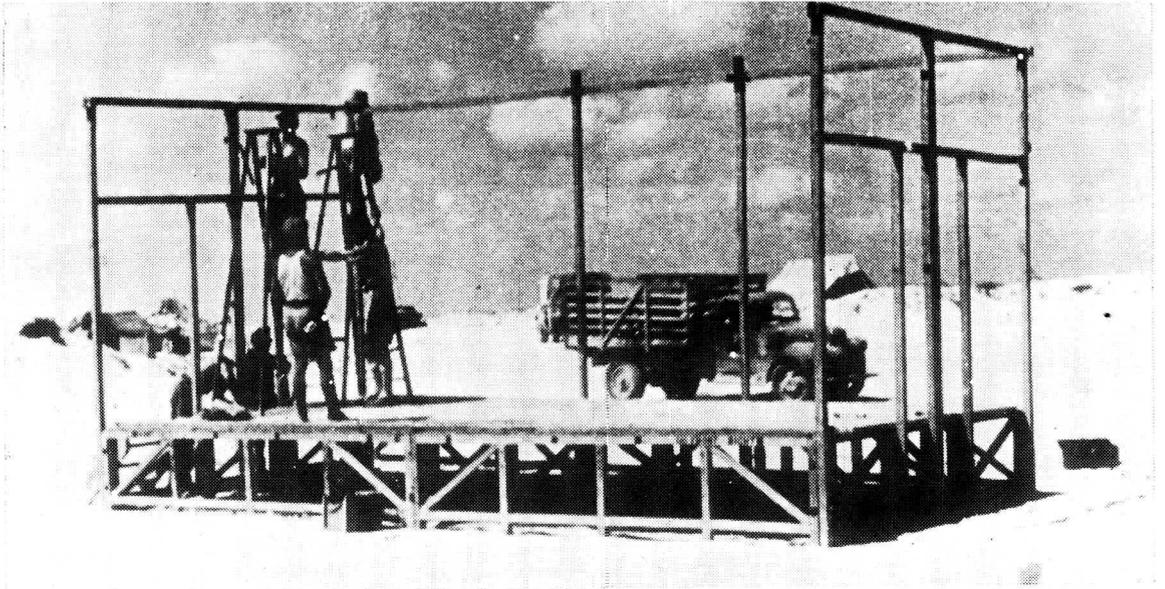
Maintenance of generators on which concert parties are dependent for lights, microphone

and ironing of costumes, etc, was much more difficult in the ME, owing to strenuous travelling and rough handling.

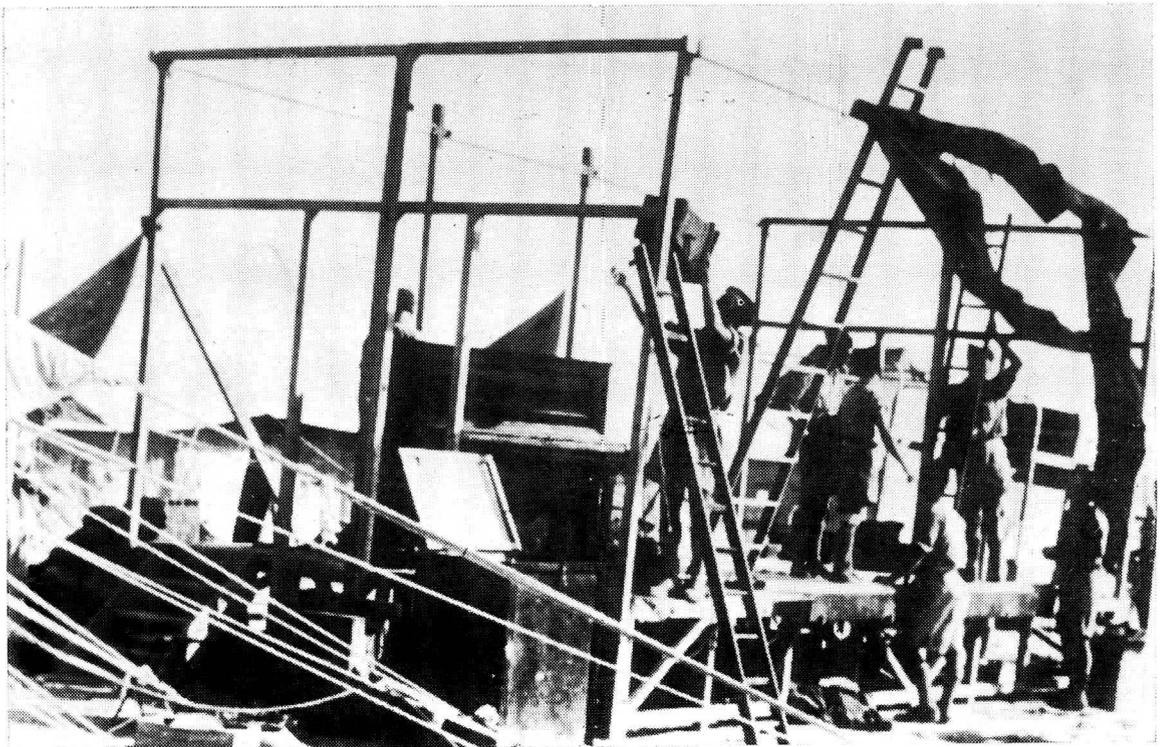
When there are no facilities for presenting a show the OC has to improvise from whatever material he can find. Stages are erected from table tops, petrol drums, in fact any type of board which can be used for a flat surface. The officer must personally direct the building of this improvised stage, but in certain cases portable stages are carried.



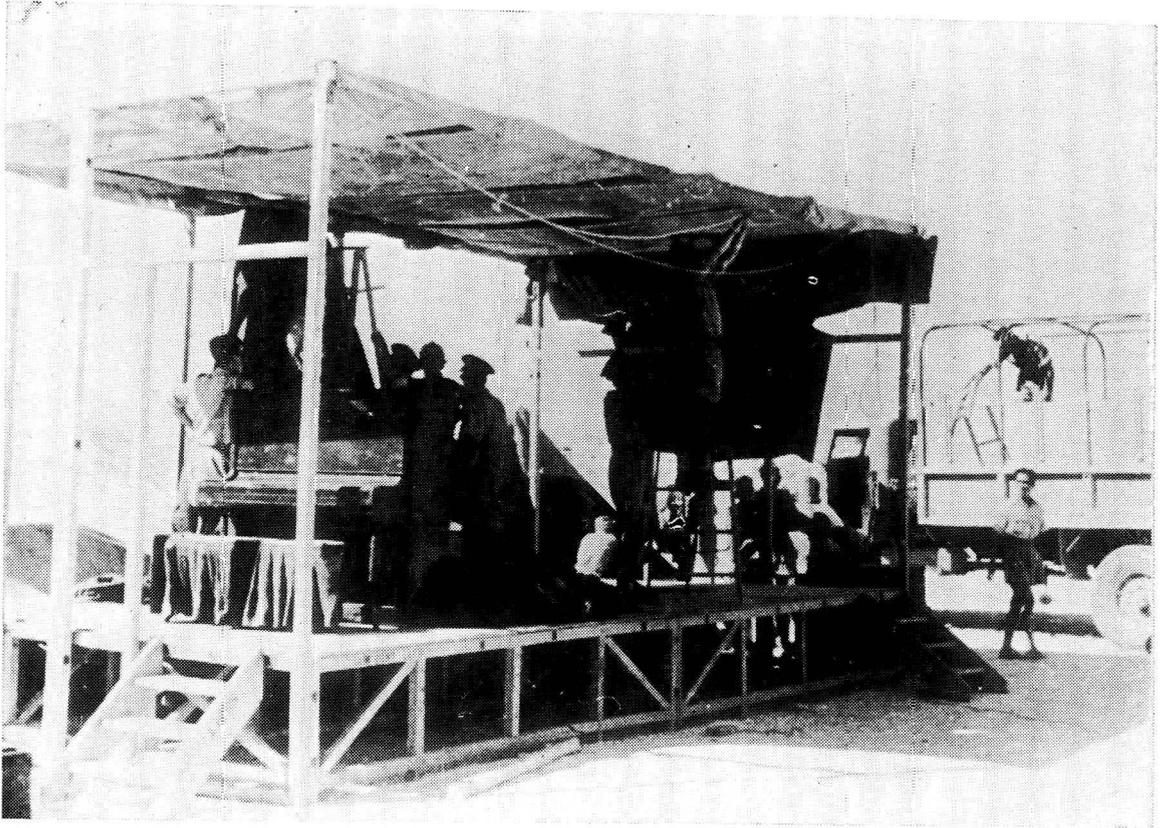
**Building a stage: the first step**



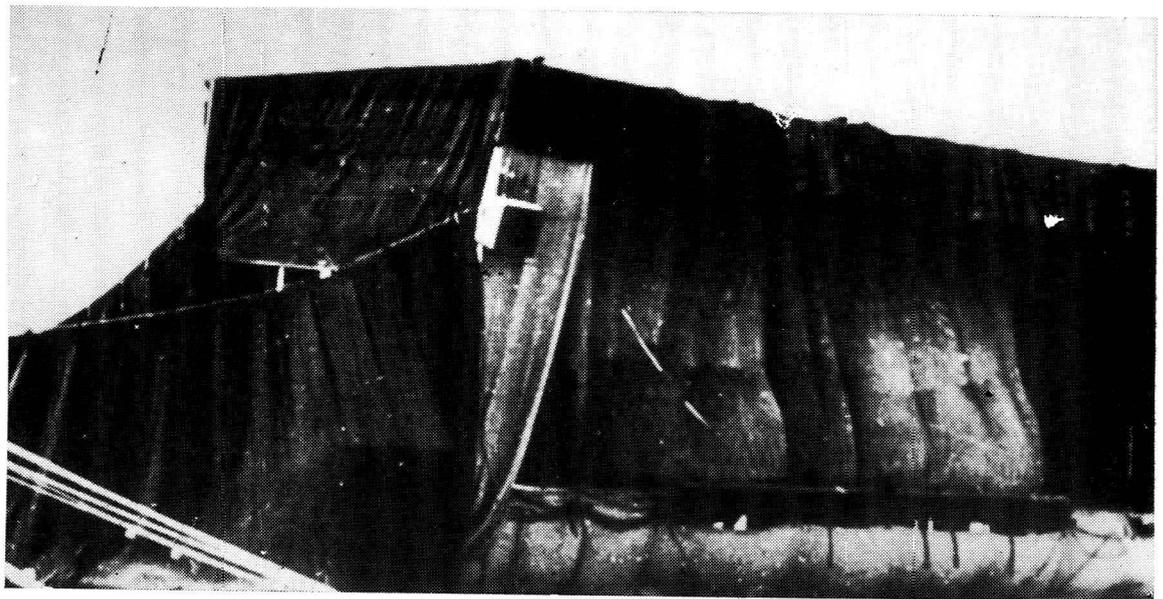
The platform is complete, and the sides are under construction



Fitting the lighting equipment



**Rigging the tarpaulin which acts as a roof**



**The finished stage. On this particular stage the Entertainment Unit gave two shows a day at El Alamein during the three weeks preceding the battle**

## **Non-European entertainment in the Middle East**

After repeated requests for non-European entertainment in the Middle East, an NCO was detached from a South African concert party and detailed to produce available talent at Garawi, the non-European Base depot near Helwan. This was successful and eventually the NEAS authorities sent a Lieutenant and two S/Sgts from the Union to take over this unit which was subsequently called the "South Easters". Two other non-European parties were eventually produced in the Union and sent up to the Middle East. They were the "Africa Star" and "Jabulani". Both were moderately successful, but it was felt that neither the production nor the dressing could compare with the European parties — this was disappointing as there was no mistaking the enormous talent and vitality of the non-European artists.

## **First South African concert party in the Middle East**

On Nov 7, 1941, the first SA concert party left South Africa for the Middle East. The "Crazy Gang" sailed from Durban in the "New Amsterdam," and during the voyage gave shows to more than 1 500 troops and ship's crew.

The members of the Crazy Gang were the pioneers of the SA Entertainment Unit in the ME, and blazed the trail for the many concert parties which followed. They were based at Helwan and their opening performance was given in Shaftos Theatre, Helwan, on Nov 28, to an audience of more than 2 000. Many senior officers were present, including Major Morrison, head of ENSA in the ME and Major Myles Bourke, Chief Entertainment officer, UDF. Bad luck was in store for the Crazy Gang on this important opening night when a South African show was being seen for the first time. The microphone equipment failed and only the first few rows of the enormous audience could hear the show at all. From the performers' point of view the show was definitely a flop, but in spite of the fact that hardly any of the audience could hear, every item was cheered to the echo. This extraordinary fact only emphasised the vital need for live entertainment. The high reputation of South African shows was once and for all

established at the next performance the following night.

Major Morrison of ENSA was convinced that the show would not go down in the Middle East. He suggested a test performance at the Fleet Club on Jan 1, 1942, as he considered that on that night the Fleet Club audience would be the toughest to be met in the ME. This performance was given and proved one of the most successful of the tour. It established the Crazy Gang and UDF Entertainment Unit throughout the Middle East.

The five girls and nine men in the Crazy Gang left Alexandria for El Daba in a one-ton lorry. The props and stage equipment were carried in a 3-ton truck, and another lorry carried the personal kit. Seventy costumes had to be ironed by the girls before the performance while the men set stage.

In the desert all shows were given on the portable stage carried by the company. This stage had to be assembled and the parts bolted together before each performance by the men in the company, who then hung curtains; set up lighting (footlights, overhead battens, floodlights and spots) adjusted microphone equipment, off-loaded the piano and put it into position, placed all hand props ready for use on the stage, and then gave their show. After each performance the stage was dismantled by the men in the company while the girls folded and packed all costumes. Everything was loaded on to the transport, ready for the next move.

When the Crazy Gang arrived at El Daba the hall was packed, men standing on petrol tins at the back, and as fresh convoys kept arriving from the desert, more and more men tried to squeeze in. The majority in the audience were South Africans, Coldstream and Scots Guards. Capt Mrs Gaiger was touring with the Crazy Gang at this time to get a first hand idea of conditions under which SA concert parties would have to operate. She has written an interesting account of these early days from which the following quotation is taken.

Referring to this first night in the desert she says "I take my hat off to those girls. We were given a very draughty bungalow with small divisions in it and a wooden plank bed for each. No light or water, no sheets or pillows, only a pile of 30 rough army blankets

in one corner. As this was the first time many of us had slept in army blankets, sleep was usually far away.

At Mersa Matruh the girls slept in dugouts at the hospital. The dugouts were approximately 6ft by 8ft with two bunks and a wooden shelf for one's kit. The only drawback was the water allowance —  $\frac{1}{2}$  gal per day for everything including cooking. Washing in the morning was no problem — you either cleaned your teeth or washed your face."

Mrs Gaiger refers to several air raids which took place during the Crazy Gang's stay at Mersa Matruh and says "bomb splinters went right through the side of our converted one-tonner, through the back of the front seat, ripping up all the upholstery, and out through the door. Luckily we were all in a slit trench with our tin hats on, and except for the shaking and the horror of seeing our first casualties, every thing was O.K."

During this part of the Crazy Gang's tour the number in the audience was limited to the number of slit trenches which had been dug round the stage . . . the concentration of troops was the biggest problem to be considered when staging shows in the desert in those days.

The Crazy Gang's last show at Mersa was interrupted by an air raid and is vividly described by Mrs Gaiger who writes "When the alert went the scene in the girls dressing room was almost indescribable. Fluffy panties, arms and legs all over the place trying to find tin hats and some sort of covering, for the girls were changing for the next number when the alarm went. Having grabbed the best they could, we all filed out to our trenches to a perfect howl of laughter from the men already in theirs, and some of the men even got out of their trenches to take photographs of us. One of the girls had a rose over one eye, a tin hat on top of that and yards of flimsies tucked up under an army coat; another girl in an old fashioned circus costume was wearing Charlie Chaplin boots at least two feet long, making it impossible for her to get into a trench. She had to be lifted in and lay in the bottom with her feet sticking up into the air. The only satisfaction we had was the knowledge that there had never been a raid in Mersa which caused such hearty laughter."

After this diversion the company went back to the stage and continued from where they had left off in the programme. After the show the men in the audience cheered for several minutes.

Incidentally many of the men in this audience were survivors from Sidi Rezegh.

The Crazy Gang travelled on and gave shows at all camps in Egypt and in Palestine, Beirut, Tripoli and Damascus. At Beirut they gave a show to 800 Lebanese students, and in spite of the language difficulties the show was very well received.

On their return to Cairo one of the artists Sgt L. Alter, a mandoline player was commanded to appear before King Farouk. (Members of the party were always amused to see Sgt Alter covar his mandoline with his tin hat during air raids.)

The Crazy Gang were a remarkably fine "show window" for SA Entertainments in the Middle East. They were the pioneers, and their shows were remembered long after they returned to the Union in the "Queen Mary" in June, 1942.

It is interesting to note that the Crazy Gang was the first SA concert party with the 8th army on its formation and the 4th Crazy Gang was with this famous army when it was disbanded at Udine, Northern Italy in 1946.

### Second Concert Party to Tour ME

In the early days of SA Entertainments in the Middle East, the tours were restricted to Egypt and the Western Desert, with an occasional visit to Palestine if the number of SA men stationed there warranted the tour.

The second concert party to go to the Middle East was the "Ballyhoos", who sailed from Durban in March, 1942. They covered practically the same ground as the "Crazy Gang" and many of their shows were given to the accompaniment of air raid alarms and sandstorms. The entire company contracted ptomaine poisoning during a tour of fighter and bomber squadrons stationed along the desert road between Cairo and Alexandria.

Major General Frank Theron paid high tribute to the work of the Ballyhoos on their departure from the Middle East. He wrote "After many months of excellent work done in Egypt,

Palestine and Syria, I wish on behalf of the many thousands of troops of most of the United Nations in the Middle East who have witnessed these shows, and of myself, to have placed on record our appreciation of the work they have performed." General Theron refers to remarks of senior officers of various camps and says "from these remarks it will be recognised what an important part this unit, like the others, must have played in the gradual building up of a morale that eventually swept every obstacle before it".

### Third Concert Party to Tour ME

The third UDF concert party to visit the Middle East — the "Amuseliars" — arrived in Egypt during the black and depressing days of May 1942. After giving several shows at Helwan the company set out for the Western Desert. On the first night of their trip from Alexandria they could not find their destination and had to sleep in the desert rolled up in blankets.

There were intermittent raids throughout their stay in the desert and shows were given in intense heat under black-out conditions. The roads were crowded with troops and transport ready to retreat, and the Amuseliars were at a hospital outside Mersa Matruh when they were summarily told to "get out". Their tents were dismantled by the hospital staff and they left for Alexandria at 4 a.m. Rommel was at the door and Egypt was in a state of high tension.

When the Amuseliars arrived at Helwan the women members of the company were evacuated to Assuan with 900 other service women. They received the sudden evacuation order one night before dinner, when they were told to pack only necessities and to stand by. Later that night they were driven by truck to the Cairo Station, where they found a milling mass of SA nurses, WAAS, WAAFS and piles of luggage. At 3 a.m. they started for Assuan by train and arrived at their destination 21 hours later. Tins of bully beef and army biscuits were passed up and down the packed train. The women lived at Assuan for one week, during which time the menu was strictly bully.

They were billeted in a large hotel and in many cases there was one bed to 15 women and no mattresses. The members of the com-

pany put on a show for the 900 women who were not allowed out of the hotel. After a week they were allowed to return to Cairo and the Amuseliars were immediately sent to play to the many thousands of troops stationed on the Alexandria-Cairo road. This road was so congested with camps and airforce stations that it took six weeks adequately to perform to all the troops. During one show a terrific sandstorm broke and the show was given under the most trying conditions.

The girls' dressing room was a lorry and they had to jump up on to the stage and off again everytime they had to make an entrance or exit. During this trip the water allowance was one can between seven girls and they did not have a bath for a month.

The Amuseliars then played the Suez area and returned to the Western Desert where they gave morning and afternoon shows at El Alamein.

As a contrast to their previous visit the rain came down in sheets and the soldiers stood round for hours in great coats in the pouring rain waiting for the shows to begin. An unusual theatrical note was struck by the anti-aircraft guns which were mounted on either side of the portable stage, which was covered with camouflage nets.

The late General Dan Pienaar attended the Amuseliars performance on October 7, given for the 1st SA Division at El Alamein. After the show General Pienaar wrote "A very good show. The finest we have seen for years. Come again". General Pienaar then stood on the stage and was photographed with the company.

Brigadier P. J. Palmer saw the show on Oct. 10, and commented "tophole show which sent up pleasure and morale barometer umpteen degrees".

During this period the Amuseliars had the pleasure of lunching with the RDLI, who had sent to Alexandria for roses for the girls in the company.

Most of these performances were given under the most difficult conditions. For one show boxes were thrown together to form a stage and the curtains were tied from a truck and a station wagon.

By this time the Amuseliars piano had gone the way of all flesh through a diet of dust,

sand, salt-water and rain, so the entire show was given to the accompaniment of an accordion. To add to the general misery a terrific sandstorm broke, and continued for a week. Only one show had to be cancelled, and on this particular day the storm was so bad that the girls could not get the scarves off their faces to put on their make-up.

In November the Amuseliers gave many shows to the First SA Division who were at Quassasin waiting to return to the Union on leave. The lighting failed during one show and the performance was given with the help of a hurricane lamp on the stage, and several other hurricane lamps held by men in the front row of the audience.

In Dec 1942, the Amuseliers toured Palestine where they stayed in several communal settlements and received remarkable hospitality. When the company was about to return to the Union one of the artists contracted typhoid and the entire company was put into quarantine at Helwan. They eventually returned in the "Salandia" in July 1942. Nearing Durban the alarm was sounded as a show was about to start.

Several members of the company made incongruous pictures as they stood at their life

boat stations in their costumes. One girl rushed down to her cabin and collected her sewing!

Once again General Frank Theron showed his appreciation for the work of the concert parties by writing "It must be very difficult for those in the Union to realise the beneficial effect the shows given by this unit has had on the morale, not only of our troops, but also of most of the other united nations in the Middle East.

A perusal of the glowing remarks made by senior officers of various camps, gives some indication of the results achieved by units such as these".

### Other Concert Parties in the Middle East

It would be impossible and would make tedious reading to give full details of every concert party which visited the Middle East. Their anecdotes and experiences are legion, and maybe one day they will be collected, but for the time being it will suffice to say that one concert party followed another, keeping a continual flow of South African entertainment throughout the war period and until January, 1946.



The Swingboks in 'Jumpin High'

There were as many as 10 concert parties performing at a time, and throughout that period the reputation of South African Entertainments never decreased. It is significant that even after the end of hostilities the Tura Times — a British army paper produced for British troops — printed the following article, which speaks for itself: —

**Extract from the "Tura Times" Egypt, 5-12-45.  
Bandoliers Bout ENSA**

I only wish that a representative of that famous body known as ENSA could have been out front on Saturday night when the UDF show "Bandoliers" were doing their stuff. He could certainly have picked up a few points.

For one thing, the turns were original, and for another the artists seldom if ever fell back on smut to get their jokes over. This was a show really worth seeing. The singers all of them, were very good indeed; the show was very well dressed; the continuity was par excellence, and the music by the show's five-piece band was right on the top line.

**On the beam**

Scenery of any kind was conspicuous by its absence, but this did not in any way detract

from the show as a whole. The "Bandoliers" were booked as "A high-speed, non-stop show" and the billing was not exaggerated. On the contrary, after 90 minutes non-stop fun we were left with the feeling that we had not had sufficient, which is exactly as it should be.

Best turn of the show to my mind was the "Hats" monologue by the show's leading comedian.

This original turn was one of the best I have ever seen, and very clever it was too.

The excellent arrangement of the musical numbers, added to the attractive chorus girls were highlights in a show where nearly every turn brought a spontaneous round of applause. Even the little sketches which so often flop when presented by our ENSA friends were well done.

The show played to a packed house and at the end the Commanding Officer paid the company a very well-deserved tribute.

Thanks a lot South Africa. Let us hope that we shall have the pleasure of attending more of your shows in the future.



New Zealand troops watching a UDF concert party near Cairo

**South African Concert Parties Performances  
in the Middle East Dec 1941-Dec 1945**

| Name of Concert Party | Number of shows | Number of troops entertained |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Crazy Gang 1          | 100             | 45,000                       |
| Amuseliers 1          | 212             | 119,880                      |
| Ballyhoos             | 127             | 83,321                       |
| Bandoliers 1          | 240             | 200,224                      |
| Troopadours 1         | 171             | 117,275                      |
| Accelerators 1        | 166             | 131,984                      |
| Boomerangs 1          | 179             | 136,370                      |
| Wotnots 1             | 140             | 102,138                      |
| Bullytins             | 107             | 75,068                       |
| Sundowners            | 146             | 65,650                       |
| Modernairs            | 131             | 90,899                       |
| Troopadours 2         | 38              | 33,650                       |
| Swingboks             | 131             | 56,370                       |
| Crazy Gang 2          | 59              | 38,850                       |
| Amuseliers 2          | 66              | 34,720                       |
| Wotnots 2             | 47              | 22,720                       |
| Accelerators 2        | 56              | 29,355                       |
| Bandoliers 2          | 87              | 145,910                      |
| Boomerangs 2          | 95              | 63,642                       |
| Springbok Dance Band  | 110             | —                            |
| Springbok Parade      | 16              | 12,100                       |
|                       | <hr/>           | <hr/>                        |
|                       | 2424            | 1605,126                     |
|                       | <hr/>           | <hr/>                        |

**ME Non-European Parties**

|               |       |         |
|---------------|-------|---------|
| South Easters | 91    | 49,652  |
| Africa Stars  | 113   | 77,410  |
| Jabulani      | 95    | 53,590  |
|               | <hr/> | <hr/>   |
|               | 299   | 180,652 |
|               | <hr/> | <hr/>   |

**Memorandum by SO Entertainment (ME)**

Having organised troop entertainment in ME since its inception, and having routed and controlled UDF Entertainment Units, civilian artists and Military bands, and performed many other welfare entertainment duties for 4 years, my conclusions are: —

1. Live entertainment is necessary and fulfils a rather different function to the films.
2. The UDF shows were surprisingly popular, especially with other Allied troops. The UDF shows concealed an almost total lack of professional experience by speed of production, excellent costuming

and pretty girls. It was the general opinion that these shows compared favourably with the much larger organisations run by the British and the Americans.

3. From a theatrical point of view, and apart from the artists lack of training, the weaknesses of the shows were:
  - (a) Lack of original material.
  - (b) Lack of a Professional Producer.
  - (c) The Afrikaans side of the shows was very badly represented. No use appears to have been made of competent Afrikaans writers, designers and composers.
  - (d) A troop show should essentially and primarily remind the soldier of home. Too often the style, the ideas, the sketches, etc., in UDF shows were taken verbatim from the gramophone, the radio and the film. They did not in any way reflect the South African character.
  - (e) Frequent complaints were received concerning the type of jokes presented. Troop audiences did not like doubtful jokes, especially when girls were appearing in the show.
4. Behaviour was reasonably good. Their morale and effectiveness depended to a great extent on their officer. No show with a really bad officer survived a tour of ME or CMF.
5. Officers should either be non-playing or else they should have a WO II (Stage Manager) as their 2/i/C.
6. Equipment was the biggest trouble. The effectiveness of any show would have been doubled, and a great deal of money, transport and time saved, if the equipment had been satisfactory from the start. Each concert party should have been sent up with a closed truck, into which was built a cushioned PA system, a miniature piano, a generator, tools, wardrobes, etc.
7. UDF shows tended to become too large. Experience proved that a show with 25 members was unmanageable in operational areas. (The No. 25 includes drivers).

8. The Stage Manager of every show should be a qualified electrician and theatrically experienced. He occupies a key position.
9. My impression was that all male members of Ent Units should have had 2 months infantry training.
10. The civilian artists sent to ME arrived far too late in the war. It is therefore difficult to assess the wisdom of their employment. The Lindeque and Marie Ney tours were almost complete failures. Miss Elsie Hall's tour was moderately successful. None of the artists sent had signed a contract, and this made them difficult to deal with. There was jealousy between the soldier and civilian artists. My conclusion is that civilians should not be sent outside the Union to entertain troops but should be used extensively in the home area.
11. Disappointment and surprise was felt by many troops that the Entertainment Unit

confined itself exclusively to the provision of concert parties. No classical music, plays or ballet were provided. Another frequent criticism was that the shows were all exactly the same in style and context. A few small informal shows should have been provided since large mixed units could not operate near the front line without great difficulty.

12. It is felt that all activities concerning the welfare and morale of troops should function under, or be co-ordinated by, one department.
13. Insufficient staff was provided throughout the entire period. Too little importance was placed on entertainment during the course of the war (when it was most essential).

DENIS MITCHELL, (Capt,)

SO ENT ME