

DEFENDERS OF THE ATOLL.

Fanning Island, or to give it its more romantic name "Angel's Footprint", lies some one thousand miles roughly due south of Hawaii. Not a well known island, it emerged from obscurity during the first decade of this century, but in the sixties lost its only distinction, and sank back into comparative obscurity.

It is a typical atoll, of coral formation, bordered by a fringing reef of between some one and two hundred yards wide. Though thirty-four miles in circumference, the land area is only some thirteen square miles. It encloses a lagoon of some forty-three square miles, unfortunately studded extensively with coral heads and patches thus rendering navigation difficult. The island is low and flat, and of an average elevation barely exceeding some ten feet. The rim of land is broken by three passages into the lagoon, from the north, the east and the south-west, the first two, however, being only navigable by boats and canoes.

In the mists of time, the island was a staging post for Polynesians travelling in their huge sea-going canoes between Polynesia and Hawaii, as is evidenced by the enclosures of dressed stone with a technique similar to that of Tonga and a form akin to that of Tongareva. But those mariners never seem to have stopped there for long, and it seems very probable that the island was insufficiently fertile and attractive for settlement; it probably just provided sufficient food and water for the onward voyage.

The island first emerged on the world scene in 1798, as the result of a voyage made in 1797 - 99 by Captain Edmund Fanning in the brig "Betsy"; the vessel was of less than one hundred tons, and carried a crew of twenty-seven. The aim of the voyage was to engage in the fur trade. The vessel sailed from Stonington, Connecticut, on the 13th June, 1797. It rounded Cape Horn and reached Masufuera Island on the 19th January, 1798, where it found an abundance of fur seals. The vessel was then filled with skins. It sailed from thence for the Marquesas "to obtain refreshments" and anchored in Tahuata (Santa Christina) Island on the 21st May. After obtaining a supply of fresh food from Nukuhiva, the "Betsy" set sail for Canton, China, on the 11th June, 1798, and discovered an uninhabited island en route, where Fanning landed and procured a good supply of coconuts. He named it Fanning Island.

Just over half a century intervened, however, before the island came to notice again. In 1848, one Lucette, of the firm of Collie and Lucette of Tahiti, and owners of the trading vessel "Fairy", landed on Fanning Island to set up a coconut-oil factory there. Once on the island he discovered that some months before his arrival -

"A man of Crusoe habits had taken up his abode there with his family and, isolated from the rest of the world, had devoted himself to the rearing of pigs, depending on the chance call of any whaler for a supply of those necessities which his habits of civilization had rendered indispensable ... His wife is a Kanaka woman of the Sandwich Islands, and he had a large family of children and grandchildren".

This was one John English, after whom the principal passage into the lagoon on the south-west coast, was named English Harbour. It was, however, somewhat shallow and unsuitable for ships of any size.

It is not germane to this story, nor would it be profitable, to record here the long and tangled history of the ownership of the island. Two aspects do, however, merit mention at this point. John English later became associated in his business on the island with a Scotsman from Ayr, by name William Greig, who married a princess, the sister of the leading chief of Manahiki, and who left numerous descendants who dwelt on the island for very many years.

Secondly, despite changes in the occupation and ownership of the island, the British Government insisted on reserving a modest area of several acres on the north-west shore of the island, opposite a passage through the reef to the shore, the entrance to the passage being known as Whaler anchorage.

Various British warships visited the island in the seventies and eighties of the last century and it was during those years that the idea of laying a trans-Pacific submarine cable was contemplated by the British Government. But, to achieve such an end, it was found that it would be necessary to establish a relay station between Canada and Fiji, the next British territory to the south.

Accordingly, on the 2nd February, 1888, the Colonial Office asked the Admiralty to despatch one of its warships, based on the North American west coast, to take possession of two islands, either of which might be needed for the relay cable station.

Captain Sir William Wiseman of H.M.S. Caroline was chosen to undertake the expedition and, on the 15th March, 1888, he landed on Fanning Island. He had previously been warned to make sure that there were no American citizens on the two islands and that there was no evidence that the islands were claimed by the United States, before annexing them in the name of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. As, however, there was no American presence, nor evidence of any American claims to the island, he issued a Proclamation annexing Fanning Island, before proceeding from thence to Christmas Island to take similar action there.

But it was not until 1906 that the submarine relay cable station was finally established on Fanning Island, thus providing a link between Bamfield on Vancouver Island and Fanning Island - a distance of some 3,500 miles. From Fanning Island the cable ran on to Suva, Fiji, where it divided, to New Zealand on the one hand and to Norfolk Island and Australia on the other. The value to Imperial communications was, of course, of the greatest importance, and Fanning Island emerged into the light of day once more, as a crucial factor in such developments.

And so on to the first World War, when the island again came, even if briefly, to world notice. In 1914 Germany was well represented in the Pacific, for example, in Samoa, the Marshall and Caroline Islands, Nauru and Papua. Perhaps more important it was also represented in that ocean by a light cruiser squadron at the outbreak of war.

No steps, however, appear to have been taken either prior to, or at, the outbreak of war for the defence of Fanning Island, rather typical perhaps of the British habit of 'muddling through' being the fact that legislation for the establishment of a defence force for the island was not enacted until 1917. Whether the inhabitants were, however, expected initially to make some attempt to defend the island seems very unlikely if only because they apparently lacked appropriate resources to do so.

One day, however, soon after hostilities had broken out in 1914, a resident of the island noticed smoke on the horizon from two vessels, one of which took shape as a warship. The handful of residents were accordingly alerted and the manager of the cable company, suspecting that the warship might possibly be a German cruiser, carefully hid all the gold coin in his possession in one of the water tanks adjacent to the main office. At the same time - and, with hindsight, this seems unbelievable - he made a sketch of the hiding place of the coin and locked the sketch in his office safe - surely the very first place any enemy would seek and search.

As the vessels drew nearer to the island, it was observed that they were a light cruiser and an attendant supply vessel, in fact a collier. Residents were greatly relieved, however, to note that both vessels were flying the 'tricolore', showing them to be of French nationality. It was also noted that the cruiser had one more smokestack than was the case with the German cruisers.

All the residents, including the manager, therefore assembled on the shore at Whaler anchorage to extend a warm welcome to their French allies, as a boat from the warship came shorewards manned by sailors wearing the familiar flat dark blue caps and red pompoms, typical of the French Navy.

Their welcome was, however, cut abruptly short when, as the boat grounded on the shore, guns appeared in the hands of a number of the sailors, who were Germans in disguise. The residents were locked up in one of the houses under guard. The manager was taken at once to his office and made to open his safe. Thereupon the sketch revealed the hiding place of the gold coin, which the German sailors lost no time in retrieving. Fortunately, some members of the cable company's staff, rather more astute and suspicious than their manager, had hidden away in the bush at some distance from the main building some vital replacement parts for the cable system. These were neither revealed nor discovered.

Meanwhile the collier dragged for the cable at Whaler anchorage, and cut the Fanning/Suva cable first. But the Germans failed to make the cable fast before cutting it, with the result that both ends sprang violently back into the sea. When they cut the Fanning/Bamfield cable, however, they secured the seaward end before cutting it, and then towed it out to sea beyond the twenty-fathom mark.

Finally, the Germans left in a hurry, but not before they had wrecked the main operating room at the cable station. But, when the coast was clear, Hugh Greig (a descendant of the original William Greig) dived for the severed ends of the cable in about nine or ten fathoms and managed to secure a line to them, thus enabling them to be hauled to the surface and roughly jointed together. As this feat was undertaken long before the days of under-water masks, oxygen tanks, flippers, etc., at the depths above-mentioned, it was both a notable and meritorious feat.

Then, with the roughly repaired cable and the spare replacement parts retrieved from the bush, a temporary service from Fanning Island to Suva was resumed within three days. It is said that those in Suva refused to answer at first, suspecting that the Germans were still occupying Fanning Island, but the truth of that story is in some doubt.

So, the defenders of the atoll, if such indeed they were supposed to be, had little cause for rejoicing over that chapter in the island's history. Apart from the uniforms worn by the sailors, and those aboard the two ships, and the 'tricolore' flown by the cruiser and the collier, the former, which was in fact the light cruiser Nurnberg, was disguised in that it had rigged up a dummy smokestack to cloak its identity. But, after Admiral von Spee had spent two days off Christmas Island from the 7th to the 9th September, and won the battle of Coronel, his squadron, including the Nurnberg, was annihilated not long afterwards at the battle of the Falkland Islands by a British naval force under the command of Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee.

Nearly twenty-five years later, with the steadily deteriorating situation in Europe and some uncertainty as to Japan's future intentions, the defence of Fanning Island came under review in Navy Office, Wellington; for the island, though several thousand miles distant, fell within the huge area for the defence of which the Government of New Zealand was responsible. This review also happened to coincide with various proposed staff changes with the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony.

Some time previously I had been transferred from Tarawa to Colony headquarters in Ocean Island, and found myself assisting in the Treasury, Customs and Postal Department there pending my taking over the duties of the post of Secretary to Government. Whilst I was greatly looking forward to the much more varied and interesting duties of the latter post, I learned that the holder of that post was extremely upset, not only at my taking his place since I was then a comparatively junior officer, but also because he was to be posted to act as District Officer at Fanning Island - some 2,000 miles to the eastward - which was, in fact, a marked demotion. The truth was, however, that this move was because the Resident Commissioner had a very poor opinion of his competence and also disliked him personally - always a possible risk in a small Colony with limited numbers of departmental staffs, which demanded that personal relations should usually be paramount in the interests of efficiency.

I found it hard to sympathize with the officer from what I knew of him and had seen of his work. He had a foreign-sounding name and an Eurasian cast of countenance; it was said that he or his forbears had arrived in Fiji from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). His talents were, however, little more than those of a chief clerk, happy to sit in his small office behind a pile of files and books, and pontificate pompously from there, rather than face others in discussion or provide any glimpses of innovation or imagination. He had never served in the districts and had little real interest in them; further, he could speak neither of the two native languages. He was devoid of any personality and held an exaggerated idea of his own importance. He signed all letters with a single slightly curved line above two dots, from which no one could possibly have guessed his name; but he evidently thought it conveyed a sense of rank, importance or urgency to the recipient, and seemingly bolstered his ego. Such was the officer sent, or perhaps I should more correctly say, banished, to Fanning Island in the somewhat forlorn hope that he would prepare a report on the defence of the island, and raise a defence force there.

A week or two before the departure of himself and his wife, the latter, an elderly, large, pompous social climber, visited the office in which I was working. I invited her to be seated and enquired how I might assist her. She replied that she needed a new

passport. I asked her, as the law required, to surrender her previous passport for cancellation and gave her a form of application to complete. This polite request, however, produced an outburst of protest; she said that she had lost her old passport and that there was no necessity whatever for her to have to complete a form of application. I tried to show her the relative provisions of the law, but she waved the Ordinance aside and departed in high dudgeon muttering somewhat audibly something about "young upstarts in the Service throwing their weight about", and threatening to report me for impoliteness.

However this did not worry me for her foibles were well known. Further, I knew that my good friend, the Chief Postmaster, who was temporarily acting as Resident Commissioner, would support me in upholding the law, quite apart from the fact that he despised the lady intensely. She returned a day or two later, however, with her old passport and the form of application duly completed. Scanning the form, I noted that she had given her age as forty-eight years, whereas it was patently obvious to any observer that she was at least ten years older than her husband whom I knew from the Civil List to be forty-nine. I therefore politely asked her, as the form required, for her birth certificate or a statutory declaration as to her age. This request produced another tirade of rudeness, whereafter she left the office again in a bad temper, repeating her earlier threats. Unfortunately for her, I knew that there existed a widows' pensions fund in which the age of all participants and beneficiaries had to be authoritatively certified and, on examining the relevant documents in the Treasury, I found her age stated as sixty.

Her husband visited the office two days later and complained in a mixture of bluster and criticism of my allegedly unhelpful, and indeed impertinent, attitude towards his wife. I waited until he had 'run down' and then showed him the document from the Treasury records. At that he collapsed like a pricked balloon and, whilst falteringly agreeing that the age of sixty years must be shown in the passport, left the office still muttering criticisms of me.

Such were the quite ridiculous trivia which one was sometimes called upon to deal with in a small Colony where personal relations often presented problems. But I could not help feeling that the characters of the new acting District Officer of Fanning Island and his wife boded somewhat ill for the peaceful and progressive administration of that island especially since, apart from the Gilbertese there, the population of the island comprised mostly Australians with whom I did not think they would be completely en rapport. And so, alas, it turned out.

After some months, no report on the possible defence of the island and the establishment of a defence force having been received at headquarters by the year's end, the Resident Commissioner, who was under pressure from various authorities to produce such a report, decided to send me there to submit such a scheme and, if possible, establish a defence force on the island. I cannot say that I was particularly enthusiastic at taking on the job and supplanting my predecessor once more. However, in obedience to instructions, I took passage in a small coastal vessel and, after a long and tedious voyage of some 1,800 miles during which we first visited Washington and Christmas Islands, disembarked in Fanning Island on the 9th February, 1939.

The small European population was down on the beach to meet the ship, and I was astonished to note that every man was sporting a beard; there were black beards, blonde beards, and even one reddish beard; and there were spade beards, vandyke beards, and even one which approximated to a dundreary. I must confess that I found it confusing to identify everyone at short notice. Soon afterwards I learnt that, in boredom with their lot on this lonely island lacking social amenities, they had decided to hold a competition for the biggest and most attractive beards.

After a brief and brisk taking-over from my predecessor, he and his wife left that evening, he for Ocean Island in the vessel in which I had arrived, and she in the cable company's ship bound for Honolulu. The lady, true to form, as I learned later, had the most frightful row with officials of the United States Immigration Department on arrival in Honolulu by refusing to sign a registration form for aliens. Deaf to argument and impervious to reason, she insisted that, as she held a British passport, she could not therefore possibly be classed as an alien. However, having some knowledge and experience of United States immigration officials, I feel pretty sure that they finally got their way even though the lady was almost always reluctant to concede anything, at least without a struggle.

The next morning the manager of the cable company, an elderly Australian, called on me at the office and welcomed me to the island. He was, to my surprise, immaculately turned out in white ducks, with coat and tie, which was certainly not the usual attire in the outer islands, though one favoured by my predecessor. His welcome, and our conversation, was entirely formal, though friendly, and I could not help but sense some reservation on his part. I surmised that, if my predecessor and his wife had not been acceptable to this small society, he might well be reserving judgment as to my suitability and acceptability before relaxing in his attitude towards me. In the event, my surmise proved entirely correct, as he later admitted.

Later the same morning the engineer of the company called at my office - sensibly dressed island-style - and offered to help in any way that he could in facilitating my settling into my new quarters. This turned out to be a most welcome offer, especially as the quarters were a curious mixture of European and native construction and there were many small jobs to be done. His attitude was entirely relaxed and, after adjourning to my quarters for a couple of drinks, I learned from him much that had been happening on the island during the preceding months. To sum it up, my predecessor was, in the eyes of the cable company's staff, a complete failure as a District Officer and Government representative, certainly in comparison with his predecessor, an elderly, gregarious, genial, friendly and hospitable man. My predecessor and his wife had made virtually no effort to participate in the life of the small community, he, as I feared, apparently feeling that as District Officer and Government representative (posts he had never previously held, so he never lost a chance of emphasizing his status), they should hold themselves aloof and above the rest of the small community, all of whom save one were married. They did not entertain and very seldom visited the company's station adjoining the Government station, though both stations, with their houses and offices would easily have fitted into less than a football field and together formed a very compact unit.

All communications, whether with the company's manager or the cable company's store, were conducted by way of memoranda. I recall a somewhat typical one of which I found a copy in my office, which read as follows:-

"Dear Sir,

My lavatory is blocked. Please send your
"engineer" to fix it.

Yours faithfully, ...".

The placing of the word "engineer" in inverted commas was clearly intended to be a slight, but in fact the engineer was the possessor of a Marine Engineer's Licence, in addition to a Licence from the New Zealand Harbours and Rivers Board; he was also Company Sergeant Major on the Reserve of the New Zealand Royal Engineers. But my predecessor had never taken the trouble to verify such qualifications. In any case, in my wide experience of out-of-the-way places, I never knew a more helpful and practical man; he could turn his hand to almost anything and with great competence.

To sum up, I suspected that, in succeeding my predecessor, the staff of the cable company and their wives would look upon me as being on trial until such time as they made up their minds about me. But I need not have worried. I could not have fallen among friendlier neighbours. The use of small memoranda almost immediately became a symbol of the past and virtually all matters were dealt with by day to day discussion.

One of the measures which upset the cable company's staff

was my predecessor's attempt to form any kind of a defence force for the island. There were only eight on the staff, apart from the elderly medical officer, but my predecessor decided that the first requirement for such a force was a spell of "square-bashing". Neither Australia nor New Zealand had a conscript army and the attitude of citizens of the former on the subject of military service save in respect of real or major emergencies has always been, to say the least, unenthusiastic. Though quite prepared, as I later discovered, to participate in the formation of a defence force, they were resolutely opposed to any form of "square-bashing", which they regarded as totally unwarranted in the conditions of Fanning Island. I must say that I entirely agreed with them. But, as my predecessor was stupidly adamant on the issue of "square-bashing", the establishment of any kind of defence force simply faded away.

When I judged that the time was ripe, and after consultation with the manager of the cable company, I held a buffet supper party to which all the members of the staff, save the member on operating duties, were invited to discuss the question of a defence force for the island and a defence scheme. Discussions started after supper and I opened them by making it quite clear that there was no question of any "square-bashing" being introduced. This was greeted with much satisfaction. It was quickly agreed that the only potential enemy was Japan, and that the only worthwhile objective on the island was the cable station. It was further agreed that, in the event of an attack, it was highly unlikely that the Japanese would decide to occupy the island, which had no facilities in the way of air strips or harbours, quite apart from the fact that it was within striking distance of Pearl Harbour by air and that it would be at the end of a very long line of communications back to Tokyo itself.

I instanced what had happened in the first World War and suggested that, if a similar raid of equal strength was undertaken by the Japanese, it might be possible for a small band of nine determined men to deal with the representatives of the Rising Sun. But this idea of higher authority which I put forward struck all those present as highly unreal and the wishful thinking of chair-borne experts in Whitehall, and occasioned much jeering and laughter.

One aspect of any such attack was, however, discussed at some length. It was entirely reasonable to assume that the Japanese had long ago pinpointed the exact position of the cable station on the island, and it seemed that their method of destroying the station would best be served by its being shelled from the sea or bombed from the air. True, the cables would probably remain undamaged, save where they came ashore, but the numerous delicate instruments in the company's buildings would be completely wrecked. Whilst there might have been a danger

in undertaking this as a single operation before the tragedy of Pearl Harbour - which would in any case only have served to have alerted the United States before the real attack on the 7th December, 1941 - it could possibly have been safely undertaken by a submarine on an isolated mission. Alternatively, a submarine could have been silently detached from the main Japanese fleet to undertake the mission an hour or two after the attack on Pearl Harbour. Such an attack would barely have been noticed in the light of what was happening at Pearl Harbour. Why the cable station was not so destroyed I find quite inexplicable, as it would have caused great disruption to communications between the United Kingdom, and Australia and New Zealand.

In considering the defence of the island, there were it is true some one hundred and fifty Gilbertese employed by Fanning Island Plantations Limited, and based on English Harbour. But that was $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles away to the southwards over a rough track through the coconut plantations; in addition, they lived on the south side of the passage at English Harbour. Unfortunately, however, they could not be used in the defence of the island since, not only were they completely untrained, but there was no one on the island who could train them. Apart from those considerations, it seemed highly probable that, if any crisis developed in the vicinity of the cable station, it was likely to arise suddenly, and the Gilbertese would arrive too late to be of any assistance - and none at all if the station were shelled from the sea or bombed from the air.

Nevertheless, valuable use could be made of their services. With a defence force of only nine men, eight of whom had of course to undertake their operating schedules at the cable station, it was impossible to arrange any kind of effective coast watching service, especially bearing in mind the circumference of the island - 34 miles - and the passages into the lagoon on the north, east and south-west coasts. I had therefore arranged with the manager of the plantation company that Gilbertese should be used as coast-watchers by day and by night, especially in the vicinity of the passages. The news of the approach of any unidentified vessel could probably thereby be sent by cable to New Zealand and Fiji before trouble developed.

As for our material resources, these were limited to a few aged .303 rifles, the muzzles of which were very faintly bell-shaped like those of blunderbusses, and a few hundred rounds of ammunition of indeterminate age - an armoury totally inadequate to repel any Japanese landing however modest in numbers. As any emergency was likely to arise suddenly, it was agreed that all members of the defence force should be allowed to keep their arms and ammunition in their quarters. It was agreed that an urgent request should be made at once for more arms (including Lewis guns) and ammunition.

Two sites in the bush were also chosen- one where the spare parts for the cable operating machinery and the generator might be safely hidden, and another whither the wives of the staff might retire in the event of a sudden attack from overseas. In this connexion, I recall the case of one wife of a member of the company's staff, who used to take to bed with her each night a rifle bayonet - a somewhat uncomfortable bedfellow I should have thought. But whether the bayonet was to be used in a final banzai charge against the Japanese intruders, or with which to commit hara kiri, I never discovered.

There was also an old overgrown rifle range to the north of the cable station, which had not been used for many years and the targets on which had fallen into serious disrepair. However, it was cheerfully agreed to clean up the range, to repair the targets, and to organize week-end shoots in future. This programme was in fact carried out in the succeeding months and gave considerable enjoyment developing as shoots did into day-long picnics; but then the Australians in my view seem to have the ability and talent more than the folk of any other nation I know to manage to enjoy themselves whatever the circumstances.

Finally, it was decided that each member of the defence force in turn, including myself, should take up position on the sandhills covering the passage through the reef at Whaler anchorage before dawn each day to scan the sea for shipping. How well I recall that duty. One used to creep cautiously in cover to the sandhills, fling oneself down on the ground, and blaze away at tins or drums anchored to the beacons on the edge of the reef. No one in fact ever sighted an enemy ship, but morale was so good that this watch was maintained throughout the succeeding months.

So much for the elements of an amateurish defence scheme, virtually without resources of men or materials. Fortunately, the establishment of a defence force presented fewer problems. Under the Ordinance, there was a President of the force, and I had been appointed to that elevated post by the Resident Commissioner before I left Ocean Island. But, whether it was a civilian or a military post, and its functions, I never discovered; nevertheless, I participated in all defence force activities, increasing the size of the defence force by so doing by 12½%.

As for the others, only the cable company's engineer had undertaken any military training. But it would obviously have been impossible to have appointed him a lieutenant to command the force since he would then have been in a position to give orders to the company's manager which could hardly have been countenanced. Reluctantly, therefore, and although the manager was a great little fire-eater but not much else,

he was appointed as commanding officer with the rank of Lieutenant, and the engineer as Sergeant, with six privates under them. But I seriously doubted if any member of the defence force, save the engineer, had any idea of how to handle a rifle without immediate danger to his fellow men. But, by the mercy of providence there were no accidents, and perhaps the policy of allowing each member to keep his rifle at home was a more sensible precaution that appeared at first sight.

The foregoing appeared to me to be about the limit of what could be achieved in the way of a defence scheme and the establishment of a defence force, given our meagre resources of manpower and arms, and I so reported to the Resident Commissioner.

It was not long after the formal formation of the defence force that I received a signal from New Zealand advising me that a supply of uniforms was on its way to us, thus signalling our official status as at least a quasi-military unit of Her Majesty's Forces. It provided a small boost to our morale, though this was dissipated in due course. Twelve sets of khaki uniforms and the typical New Zealand Army hats were duly received. Unfortunately, however, there had been no consultations whatever as to the approximate sizes which might be most suitable, although there was ample time in which to exchange cables on the point. Further, the condition of the uniforms left much to be desired. All smelt strongly of disinfectant, and the moths had been at them before then. This made it seem very probable that some junior member on a New Zealand Quartermaster's staff, on being told to pack up twelve sets of uniforms and hats for the Fanning Island Defence Force, had simply reached into the furthest and darkest corner of his store and blindly grabbed the numbers required.

To say that none of the uniforms fitted would be a serious understatement; not that we had expected them to do precisely that, but we had at least expected them to make a reasonable approximation of doing so. I think it is probably fair to say that most New Zealanders, or at least those undertaking military service, are in general large, well-built men, and the uniforms which we received had obviously been cut on that basis. Unfortunately, several members of our defence force were both small and slim men. But, despite swapping of items of clothing between members - tunics as well as trousers - the final result was, to put it briefly, hilarious. The programme entitled "Dad's Army" on English television would seem like a representation of the Guards on parade compared with the Fanning Island Defence Force in their newly acquired uniforms. In some cases, the tunics reached almost to the knees, whilst in others there was ample room

for a cushion to be worn inside as a kind of breastplate. In other cases, trousers had to be hoisted up almost into the armpits lest they covered footwear and impeded movements.

For myself, I was in a quandary as to what, if any, uniform I should wear in my capacity as President. After considering the matter and discussing it with my colleagues, I decided to wear one of the New Zealand uniforms, but with a large "P" on each shoulder, on the ground that, if the Japanese did invade the island, there was a slim chance that they were a trifle more likely to spare a person in uniform, even with a mysterious "P" on each shoulder, than if he were dressed in civilian clothes. Fortunately, with my build, I was able to obtain a uniform which did not bring forth peals of laughter from my colleagues when I appeared in it.

As for the New Zealand army hats, some sat insecurely on the tops of heads, whilst others came down over the ears and allegedly precluded the person from obeying commands.

In sum, we were an outfit only suitable for a comic opera and it was even suggested that we could defend the island by merely standing in line on the beach whilst the Japanese invader, even with his very limited sense of humour, at first paused, mistrusting his vision, and then laughed himself to death at what he believed he saw.

At the beginning of September, 1939, I received a very discreetly worded signal informing me that I might expect a number of important visitors very shortly. Fortunately, I took care to advise members of the Defence Force, as otherwise the member on duty in the early morning who suddenly saw H. M.S. Leander appear round the south-west corner of the island very early one morning might have been tempted to loose off a few shots before announcing that the Japanese had indeed arrived.

In fact, the cruiser brought us a number of surprises. First, on board, much to our astonishment, were the Chief of the New Zealand General Staff, the Chief of the Naval Staff, and the Chief of the Air Staff, from which it seemed as though the Government of New Zealand might be taking the defence of the island very seriously, though later events tended to belie that first impression.

However, also on board was a platoon of thirty New Zealand soldiers, under the command of a Captain, with all their equipment, etc.,

Finally, the cruiser had brought two Lewis guns, some rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition for the Defence Force.

In view of the somewhat tense international situation, the cruiser did not drop anchor as it would normally have done, but proceeded to stand off the island. However, as it was still peacetime and I was not anxious to be found wanting in matters of protocol, I went out and called on the warship, clambering up a long and steep rope ladder - not an easy nor graceful progress as I was dressed in civil uniform, complete with helmet and sword. The three Chiefs of Staff later came ashore, together with members of their staffs. I gave a buffet lunch for them at my quarters and, when it seemed that they were about to return to the cruiser, I asked one of the staff - I forget which at this point in time - what the views of the three Chiefs of Staff were regarding the defence of the island. He thereupon called for a piece of paper or the clean back of an envelope and hurriedly wrote a few lines upon it. Alas, I cannot now, nearly half a century later, remember just what he wrote, but there was something about establishing a defence perimeter near the pier; he also noted that they had brought the Lewis guns, some rifles and ammunition and concluded that "if the island is invaded, it should be held to the last man (or to the death)". I was somewhat stunned by the brevity of the notes, and hoped his last few words referred to our newly landed gallant allies, the New Zealand soldiery, rather than the amateurs of the Fanning Island Defence Force. However, with those few succinct comments, the three Chiefs of Staff and their retinue left for the cruiser, which sailed very shortly after they had arrived aboard.

The immediate reaction of the members of the Defence Force, with whom I discussed the note that evening, was that it was a great compliment on the part of the Chiefs of Staff if they seriously imagined that the handful of defenders of the island was likely to be able to cope with a Japanese invasion, and the evening ended with many jokes about "the scrap of paper".

Meanwhile, I had arranged for the commanding officer of the New Zealand troops to be shown a site for his camp of tents, among the coconut trees just to the south of the Government station, and where to procure water, etc. The tents were pitched well before nightfall and those in camp seemed well settled in. It was with a sense of relief that I felt that I could turn over the defence of the island to the New Zealand force which had just arrived; but the services of the Defence Force still continued to be made full use of, especially in coast-watching.

The following day the commanding officer of the New Zealand force invited me to give a talk to his men, an invitation which I gladly accepted. I told them of the long and interesting history of the island but, more important, I warned them particularly of the dangers of sunburn, of drinking unboiled water, and of bathing in the passages where sharks were often to be found, and so on.

As, however, they were unaccustomed to tropical temperatures and sunshine, and worked stripped to the waist, within two weeks every man in the platoon was sunburnt in greater or lesser degree, which would certainly have adversely affected their combat abilities if the Japanese had arrived.

Another incident illustrated their thoughtlessness. One morning the manager of Fanning Island Plantations Limited arrived in my office at an early hour from English Harbour, obviously very disturbed about something. The soldiers had been engaged, inter alia, on improving the track between the Government station and English Harbour. On several days, feeling thirsty in the heat of the tropical sun, they decided that the simplest way of assuaging their thirst would be to chop down some coconut trees and drink the contents of the moimoto (green nuts). This they did. If, however, there is one sin which cannot be countenanced on a coconut plantation, it is to chop down any trees which, in most cases, have a productive life of several decades. It was small wonder that the manager was upset, especially lest the soldiers continued to quench their thirst in this matter whenever they felt like it. However, after discussions with the commanding officer, the matter was amicably concluded without further trouble.

Other more serious matters, however, soon engaged my attention. During the two weeks after the arrival of the soldiery, reports had been made to me by members of the cable company that cans of beer or bottles of spirits had been slowly disappearing from their homes. Such had never happened before in this law-abiding community and it was impossible to overlook the coincidence that this had been happening since the arrival of the New Zealand troops. During the daytime the houses were often empty as the staff were on duty, and the wives often foregathered in the houses of others and on the beaches; and, oddly, it was during the daytime that such thefts were taking place.

Meeting the sergeant of the platoon one evening, I mentioned the matter to him and he told me that all his men were confirmed beer drinkers, at the same time letting slip the remark that the commanding officer liked his spirits.

Meanwhile, the commanding officer, a gregarious person, had in fact been seen calling at various houses in the daytime and, somewhat incredibly, suspicion began to rest upon him, though he professed to be just as nonplussed and worried as I was over these threats from private houses.

One night, about 11 p.m., I was awakened by a burst of firing which seemed to come from the direction of the cable company's station. Slipping into a pair of shorts and shirt, putting some shoes on my feet, and grabbing my rifle and a few

rounds of ammunition, I rushed out, appalled at the thought that the Japanese might at last have decided to invade the island noiselessly at night. I then noticed some members of the cable company's staff hurrying towards the far corner of their station towards what looked like a bicycle on the ground with a man lying beside it. I rushed over to discover that the man on the ground was the commanding officer, complete with two revolvers from which all rounds had been fired, and a badly damaged bicycle from which he seemed to have fallen off after hitting some obstruction. His breath smelt heavily of spirits and he was obviously quite drunk. It appeared that he had knocked himself out in his fall from the bicycle. I called for his sergeant as the next most senior amongst the New Zealand troops to take charge, and the commanding officer was then conveyed on a stretcher to the small hospital unit maintained by the company. At the same time I asked the Medical Officer to come and examine him. He pronounced the commanding officer to be drunk and suffering from concussion, though not unduly seriously. Some hours later the commanding officer awoke and, in heavily slurred tones, asked to be released, but the Medical Officer persuaded him to stay and gave him some sleeping tablets.

To cut a long story short, it turned out that it was the commanding officer who had been raiding the houses of the company's staff (and mine too) for liquor. When his tent was examined, quite a number of bottles of spirits were found. On awakening in hospital, but whilst still suffering from the effects of his concussion, he had demanded to be supplied with liquor and, on this being refused, he became more aggressive and angry until the Medical Officer decided, after several days of such behaviour, that the man must be a dipsomaniac with a morbid craving for alcohol. The sergeant, the manager and myself, therefore, with the agreement of the Medical Officer, decided that the commanding officer must remain in hospital where he was sedated to prevent further trouble.

I then had the most unpleasant duty of sending a cable reporting the circumstances to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in Fiji, and to Army Headquarters in Wellington. In both places the news was received with incredulity but the evidence of the Medical Officer, the manager, the sergeant, and myself was so clear and overwhelming that it was accepted, though not without some degree of disbelief at first.

Whether the commanding officer should ever have been appointed to command of such an independent unit in such a distant place is doubtful. He had, I learned later from the sergeant, who proved to be a tower of strength though not long afterwards killed in the Middle East, been the secretary of the Auckland Trades and Labour Council and he suggested that, as a Labour Government was then in power in New Zealand, the

commanding officer may have persuaded the politicians that he was well qualified for such an independent command. But, quite apart from his political views, his drinking habits must surely have been known, and also the fact that he, like his men, seemed to think that Fanning Island represented a cushy job in tropical surroundings, with lovely bathing beaches, native belles, and so on. He was, however, evacuated from Fanning Island as soon as possible and replaced by most competent and agreeable successors. What happened to him I do not know.

Nevertheless, despite the vicissitudes associated with the Defence Force - the uniforms, the holding of the island "to the death" or "to the last man", a commanding officer who turned out to be a dipsomaniac, and so on, we were not depressed as war grew slowly more imminent, continuing to undertake our share of coast-watching, shooting practices, etc.

I well remember the outbreak of war and how we received the news. There had been a buffet supper for members of the Defence Force and their wives, and afterwards we had a poker school going in the cable company's library in the main building. In the late hours, the operating officer suddenly stuck his head through the door of the library and said "I have just heard...", but what it was he had heard was silenced by one of the players who held three aces in his hand and was about to buy another card; this he did and, mirabile dictu, he drew the fourth ace, giving him a hand I had never seen before and have never seen since. He then turned calmly to the man at the door and asked him what it was he wanted to say, to which the latter replied "Oh, merely that we are now at war with Germany", which he had learnt from the torrent of cables passing through Fanning Island to Australia and New Zealand.

Poker suddenly seemed trivial and dull after that and, after a desultory discussion, the engineer and I and two others made our way to the beach - it was a glorious moonlight night I recall - where we ate waffles and maple syrup and consumed large quantities of beer - an odd combination but then it was an odd situation.

It only remains for me to recall one more incident connected with "the defenders of the atoll". Eventually, it was decided that Fanning Island and its cable station deserved a little more protection than that so far accorded to it, and a 6-inch naval gun was shipped to the island. A place such as Fanning Island is not, of course, geared to handle such items and the barrel and its mountings had to be floated off in lighters and landed in a little bay on the north side of English Harbour. It was too heavy to bring across the lagoon because of the patches of coral and coral heads, so it was dragged over rollers the entire distance to its final resting place near the southern anchorage range marker. There it was set up in a massive concrete base with ammunition bunkers below.

Everyone on the island turned out for the first firing. There was a captain of the New Zealand Coast Artillery in charge of the gun, and a captain of infantry in charge of everything else. Unfortunately, these two men did not get on together, and somehow it just happened that the latter was in the bowels of the emplacement when the gun was first fired. He was deaf for a week afterwards as no one had warned him in advance that he should have stuffed his ears with cotton wool or some other material.

Everyone thought that the first firing was a great success, especially as the gun barrel was pointing directly upwards to the sky after the firing, those in charge having forgotten to tighten the recoil clutch mechanism. The captain of infantry remarked that he had never seen a 6-inch naval gun used for 'ack ack' purposes, which drew a rude rejoinder from the other captain though, because of his deafness, the former failed to hear it. Anyhow, a good time was had by all at the ceremonies which were in the best traditions of the original "defenders of the atoll".

And there my account of "the defenders of the atoll" must end, for soon afterwards I was posted to the Western Pacific High Commission in Suva, Fiji, and never again returned to Fanning Island. The island was in fact never attacked nor invaded in the second World War, so that the members of the Defence Force never had an opportunity of displaying their undoubted martial qualities, though I suspect it would have been in a most unorthodox commando style, rather than a more regular military one. Nevertheless, I hope that each member became entitled to the 1939-45 Star and the Pacific Star (though I have never discovered whether the President of the Force was so eligible) to remind them of those rather anxious days when eight of them and their President awaited the Japanese onslaught.

It only remains to add as a postscript that, when the new British Commonwealth coaxial cable across the Pacific was opened in December, 1963 - a ceremony in which I participated when acting as Governor in Fiji - all the cable installations on Fanning Island were closed down and the island returned once more to that obscurity from which it first emerged some sixty years before.