

Newsweek

July 31, 1944: p. 61

Smilin' Through: Camp Show Troupers Cover World to Give GI Joe a Laugh



GI audience in Alaska: USO-Camp Shows travel the world's greatest circuit

Somewhere in England 108 USO-Camp Show performers last week awaited their own D Day. Equipped with regular officer's field equipment, including bedrolls and tents, they were ready to cross the Channel when—and only when—the Army should decide it wants and needs them. (Camp Shows overseas are under the jurisdiction of area commanders.) That they had been held back thus far probably was partly because of the odd fact that morale needs less boosting at the front than in quieter zones remote from battle lines.

Foxhole Circuit: The performers who were selected to make up the first entertainment invasion wave, as part of USO-Camp Show's "Foxhole Circuit," are not famous in the ordinary sense. Comedians, singers, hoofers, and other folk from vaudeville, they are known chiefly in show business. But as variety units equipped and able to put on a show under any conditions, they are the backbone of this war's entertainment scheme. They have willingly frozen in the Aleutians, sweated in New Guinea, and burned in the Persian Gulf.

Together they constitute the vast composite known as USO-Camp Shows, Inc. Organized in November 1941 as this war's answer to the last one's mistakes (too little which came too late to too few), Camp Shows sees to it that as much entertainment as possible reaches

OldMagazineArticles.com



In New Guinea for the USO, Jack Benny finally finds a listener for his fiddle (others from left: Martha Tilton, Larry Adler, Carole Landis, June Brunner)

as many soldiers as possible—in contrast to the fact that the last war produced only an Elsie Janis.

The money to run Camp Shows comes from the National War Fund; the authority to use its services rests with the Army and Navy. As the only organization authorized to recruit talent for entertainment in military reservations overseas, Camp Shows is therefore currently operating the biggest theatrical circuit in the world. Over 700 of its entertainers are now at work throughout the service commands here at home; 468 are overseas. One thousand more could be used.

Victory, Blue, Hospital: For entertainment in this country, there are three circuits. The Victory circuit presents full-size and full-dress musicals, revues, plays, and concerts to all posts and naval stations with theater equipment large enough to accommodate them. The second, (Blue Circuit) is made up of "Tabloid Troupes" who can play anywhere. Small, mobile variety units, they can perform indoors or out, with or without theaters. Camp Shows' latest pride is the Hospital Circuit, now performing at 80 general hospitals in this country. It carefully selects entertainment for the sick and wounded and in close collaboration with medical officers.

To accomplish all this, USO-Camp Shows has spent \$14,000,000 in three years—\$7,800,000 in the last year alone. Overseas, 3,818 weeks of playing time produced more than 40,000 performances. For the same period in this country, an audience of 50,000,000 watched 61,000 performances. The near-miracle of these figures is that administrative costs were under 3 per cent, an accomplishment* for which Lawrence Phillips, Camp Shows executive vice president, is largely responsible. A former expert in management engineering, Phillips left private enterprise to take over the business direction of Camp Shows. Its president, Abe Lastfogel, general manager of

The U.S.O.

the William Morris Agency and one of show business's greatest back-scene figures, serves as a volunteer worker.

Into USO-Camp Shows Phillips and Lastfogel have brought every phase of show business: comedians, actors, dancers, jugglers, magicians, singers, and every other type of musician. Though drama groups and concert units are invaluable for satisfying highly articulate minorities, it is the variety unit which more often answers the GI's prayer. He wants a comedian or two to make him laugh and a couple of girls who sing, dance, and look like the girls he left back home.

Glamor Department: The Hollywood Victory Committee, which provides movie stars willing and able to serve, supplies most of the glamor. But on the Foxhole Circuit, just glamor is not enough. A celebrity has to fit in somehow with the unit's entertainment scheme. Besides wearing sequin gowns, for example, Marlene Dietrich in Africa and Italy played a musical saw, recited some lines, and sang on request. Comedians like Bob Hope and Jack Benny (both now in the Pacific) are prize packages because they are both famous and funny.

Through a plan sponsored by the American Theater Wing—but which will necessarily be handled through Camp Shows—the bright lights of Broadway also will shine overseas in the near future. A repertory company to be called the American Theater Wing War Players is now in rehearsals with "The Barretts of Wimpole Street" as its first production. The cast will include Katharine Cornell, Brian Aherne, Guthrie McClintic, Margalo Gillmore, Brenda Forbes, McKay Morris, and Robert Ross.

Though the high-priced stars perform on a volunteer basis, some Camp Show entertainers are paid as much as they would receive otherwise. Others take cuts. From one point of view, it's noteworthy that in this day of indifferent vaudeville, many accordion players, jugglers, magicians, acrobats, comedians, and the like have been provided with steady work and the most appreciative audience in the world. But there are professional drawbacks. Riding the hump to China is a long way from Broadway. You don't get Delhi Belly in a Chicago Loop night club. And there have been seven entertainers who never came back.