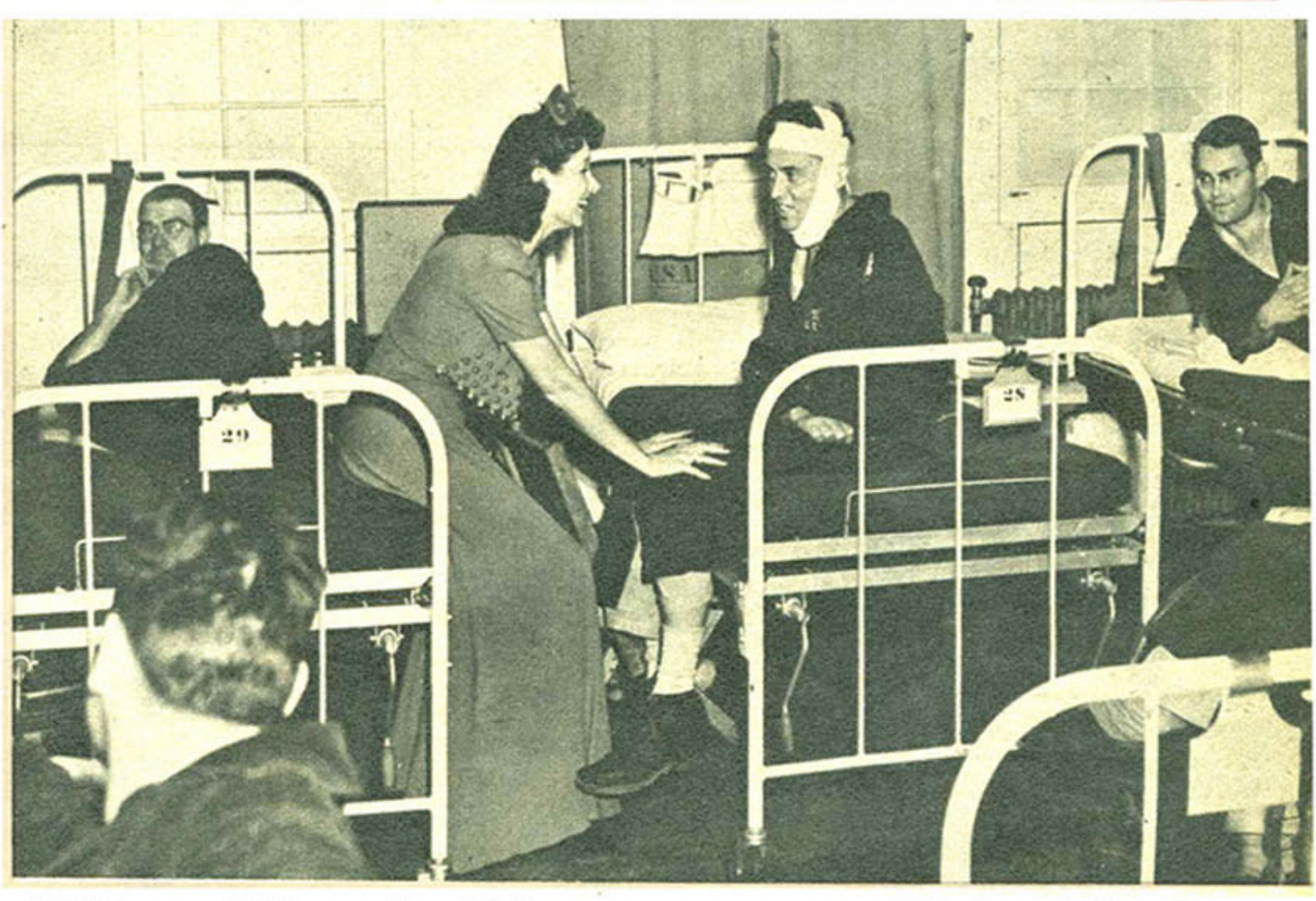
THE FOXHOLE CIRCUIT

BY TED SHANE

Shakespeare said all the world's a stage, and the USO took it for gospel. That's why our G. I. s are getting entertainment that makes Broadway look like a tank town



When Margie Liszt came to this Alaskan hospital, bed 28 became box seat 28.

"GIVE me a thousand soldiers who get a little entertainment now and then," said General Pershing during the last war, "rather than ten thousand who don't." In Pershing's war, Mademoiselle from Armentières was the USO. Today ours is the best entertained army in history.

The sight of "round" actors doing and saying American things, or of a pretty leg kicking a musicomedy script around, builds up the G. I. He laughs, cries, whistles, and wolf-calls during the show, chews it over for days after.

So V-E Day meant new turmoil for USO Camp Shows. Although 1,061 performers in 205 theatrical units were already doing their stuff overseas, the Army asked for seventy more units, including forty-four Broadway shows, to help troops in Europe forget the horrors of war and waiting. The Army also wanted a 120-per-cent increase in units for the Pacific.

To meet the order, the USO Camp Shows had to do some redeploying and barrel-scraping of its own. By sending overseas the so-called Tabloid Circuit, a miniature vaudeville show hitherto held on this continent, part of the order is being met. More volunteers are being mustered from the rest of the 2,000 USOers working around U. S. camps and hospitals. USO talent scouts are on a twenty-four-hour shift, and no act of any promise is being refused an audition. A new USO Camp Show Workshop has been opened, and if you are a personable young cutie hiding your talent behind a typewriter, you may be trained for dancing and line-reading work.

In its forty-five gyrating months, USO Camp Shows has sent some form of entertainment to every place on this globe where an American soldier is stationed, resting or fighting. About 7,500 performers have done their stuff for a total attendance of millions and millions of G. I.s—many of whom have seen several of the shows. Every type of entertainer from juggler to movie star (with entertaining legs) has hit the Foxhole Circuit. These soldiers in grease paint have performed to audiences of one in a lonely Texas sentry box; and to 8,000 in a blinding typhoon on Bougainville. They've played in 50-below temperatures along the Alcan Highway; in Sahara sandstorms; between bombings on Pantelleria. A Mr.

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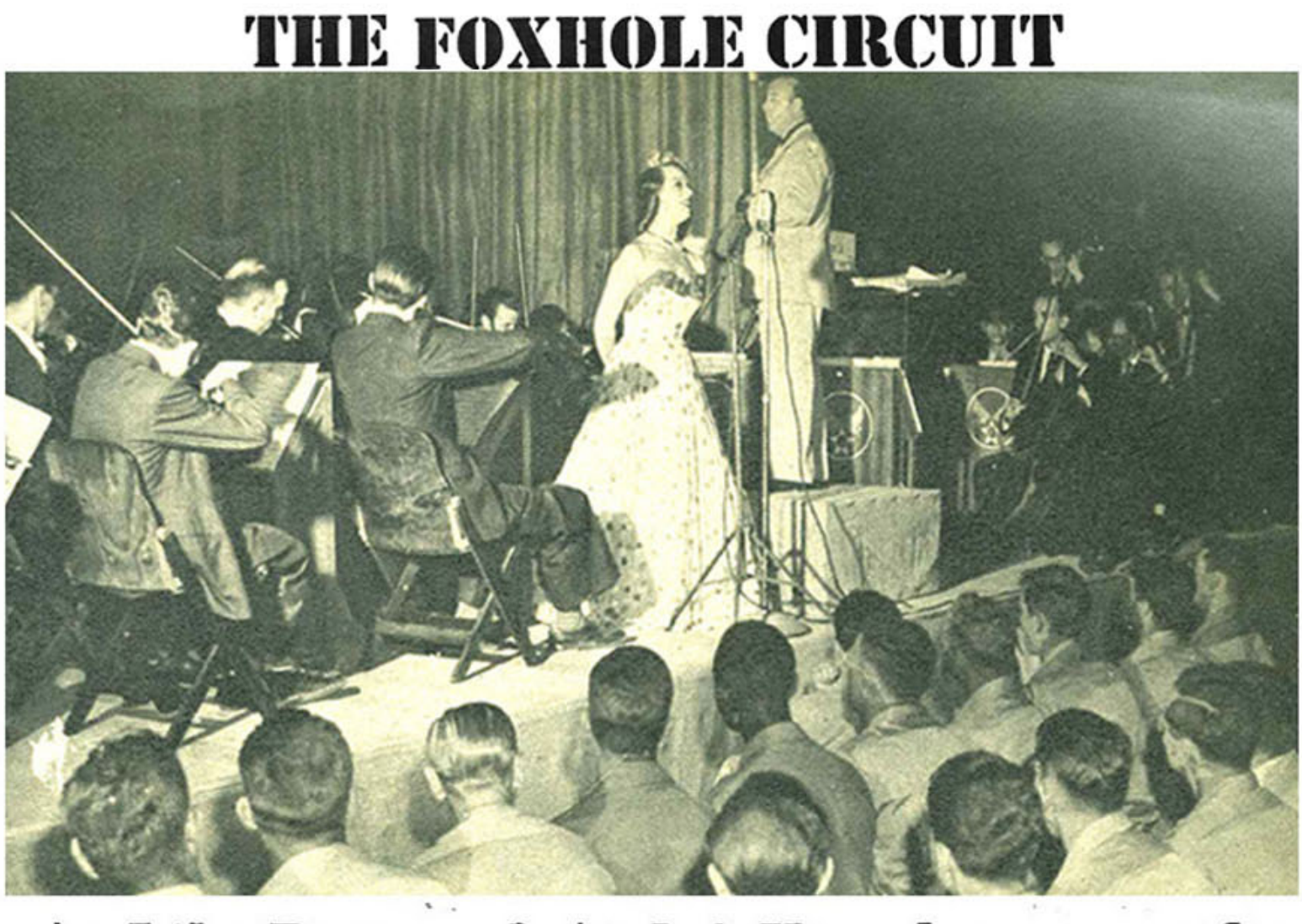

As Lily Pons and André Kostelanetz amply demonstrated, the boys love "long-hair" stuff.

and Mrs. Duke, members of a variety unit, gave an Easter-morning service among the whizzing bullets of the front lines of Italy early this year.

USOers have done their stuff in G. I. camp theaters, hospitals, gilded foreign opera houses, in cellars, barns, open fields not entirely cleared of mines, on trucks, ferryboats, subs, table tops and mountaintops. The picture of a man leaping into a foxhole with a tuba and crying, "I'm from the USO!" is taken from life.

One Franklin Heller, lately George S. Kaufman's right hand, and Harry Krivit, musicals man, aided by leading Broadway producers, are rushing out the Army play order. For free, the producers mount the shows from scenery building to dress rehearsals. They turn the completed package over to the USO, which does the paper work: transportation, insurance, inoculations, and the thousand-odd details global booking has thrust on show business. The USO gives them to the Army, which does the rest.

Only Broadway wows such as Dear Ruth, Arsenic and Old Lace, Our Town, Junior Miss, and Up in Central Park are being mounted. They will be top-notch, if slightly streamlined productions. Ruth Gordon's Over 21, with Helen Ford, first legitimate overseas show, went out for a tentative six months—and with much reluctance on the Army's part. It opened near Lae, New Guinea, on the Pacific Circuit, and would still be on tour but the scenery and the actors wore out. A modernized Nothing But the Truth, which panicked the last war's doughboys, is slaying them in this, with Benny Baker. Three Men on a Horse, with Sam Levene, is many months overdue because the boys won't let it go home. Mexican Hayride and Oklahoma! are out somewhere on the seven world circuits. "I'm glad I joined the Army," a G. I. wrote home. "I finally got to see Oklahoma!"

ORIGINALLY the Army frowned on plays. A large cast, heavy furniture and scenery make cumbersome plane luggage. Broadway solved the problem. Mexican Hayride went out with its Broadway cast of 107 cut down to sixteen, including ten dancing-line reading gals. The dyed scenery collapsed into suitcases; the prop crate broke in two and became twin beds, a tortilla stand, and park benches. Mike Todd's current smasheroo, Up in Central Park, now being readied, will be cut into a tasteful cameo. The cast of eighty-five telescopes to twenty-eight, several actors tripling in brass. An hour has been taken from the two and a half hours of playing time. Two hundred costumes have shrunk to seventy-one and a half—the half presumably Gypsy Rose Lee's.

On Broadway, Up in Central Park cost $230,000; the G. I. version will come to about $13,500. USO puts up a flat sum. Todd, as usual, is paying the difference. Incidentally, you're a backer of this show, as of the rest. Every American who contributes to the USO automatically becomes an angel.

For risking life, limb, and prosperity, the actor, no matter how famous, gets $100 a week. In hardship cases, a contract for a little more may be negotiated. The Crosbys, Bob Hopes, Leo Durochers, and Mischa Elmans donate their services except for a

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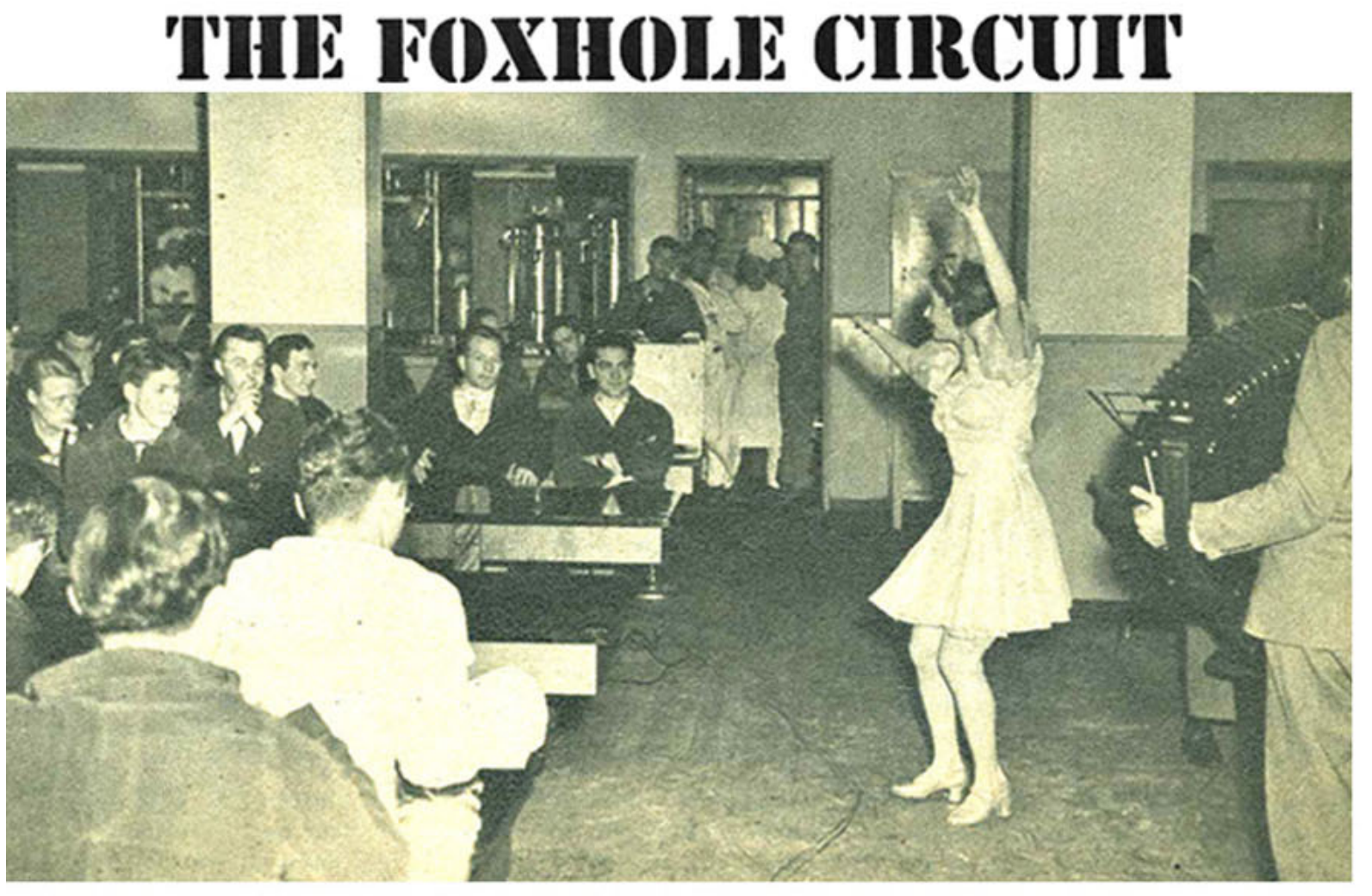

Gertrude Brieffer stops the show with this number in a Newfoundland hospital mess hall.

ten-dollar-a-day expense account. Thus an unknown gal dancer will be getting $100 a week, while a Martha Raye on the same show will be snagging bare expenses.

Ever since USO Camp Shows was known as the Citizens Committee (show business volunteers) the Variety Unit has been the backbone of G. I. entertainment. When we exchanged old destroyers for new bases, the Citizens Committee became the USO, and in October, 1941, the Army provided a B-18 transport christened the Flying Showboat. In it were crowded Mitzi Mayfair, Jane Pickens, Ray Bolger, Laurel and Hardy, John Garfield, and accordionist Louis Polenski. This million-dollar cast blazed a 13,000-mile Caribbean circuit from Puerto Rico to British Guiana, and returned grimy, exhausted, and thrilled. Their welcome had been colossal, and G. I. Joe and his parents wrote in to thank the USO.

Four units of good old-fashioned vaudeville went out immediately to Newfoundland and outlying spots. Al Jolson and Joe E. Brown donned longies and toured Alaska; and in August, 1942, Jolson, Allen Jenkins, Frank McHugh, Patricia Morrison, and Merle Oberon invaded Northern Ireland and England, giving fifty performances to our expanding population in camp and hospital. General Eisenhower dropped the USO a note of thanks, and the Transatlantic (ETO) Circuit had begun.

But big-shot performers could work only between contracts, so the standard Variety Unit was formed. Consisting of a dancer, singer, em cee, magician, juggler, puppeteer, and accordionist, about 300 of these units are now vaudevilling the world over. Vaudeville, theoretically kaput, has magically reappeared from night clubs, movie houses, tab shows, carnivals, and retirement. The only requirements are that the act be clean and professional, the performer between eighteen and sixty and able to travel light, and that he or she will sign for a period.

Accepted, the performer squares himself with his draft board, is fingerprinted and cleared by the FBI. Then he or she is neatly uniformed, passported, insured, and inoculated against everything except housemaid's knee. He stands by for the USO.

One day the phone rings and he's asked: "Will you go offshore to a place we cannot name (because we do not know it) for from four weeks to six months?" The men ask a few questions, the women seldom more than one: "What clothes shall I take?"

AFTER welding his act with his unit's, the performer takes the Espionage Oath, buttons his lip. He is not told where he is going. He *is* told that the Army will feed him afield—when and if possible. He gets an APO number, is advised what to lug in his fifty-five pounds of baggage, plus a purse of normal size, an overcoat, and a book—not an encyclopedia. If he's a dame, he learns warm panties can be bought at most PXs abroad. Vocalist Martha Tilton found, however, that when she washed her pink things overseas, they'd always disappear from the line, only to turn up as the battle flag on a tank going into action. This trip Martha is toting two dozen panties, her name embroidered thereon. "The foundation of the Tilton Pantser Brigade," she explains.

The alerted one also studies the USO

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Guide Book. Gals are advised to remain brunette while away; peroxide is unobtainable on Okinawa—as are perfume, nylons, nail polish, and such feminicessities. These they should carry along with lots of civvies. (Always perform in costume.) Performers are warned not to gripe, wave the flag, give pep talks, oversympathize, or overstay their welcome. They mustn't play down to the G. I. or up to the officer, and mustn't gamble with the boys. (Some have been sent home for this.) They mustn't call the boys boys, since the Army has taken such pains to make them men. They must leave all racial gags to Tojo, and they mustn't bicker with each other. Since every gal abroad mirrors the G. I.'s womenfolk back home, they're told that the lass who makes with the wiggles and other whistle-pulling tricks won't get so many encores as the one in organdy who sings plain songs without undulation. No smut can creep into the act abroad under penalty—invoked several times, too—of being sent home. And, above all, no temperament must be displayed in the battle zone. There's no room for it there.

When the actor gets back he can talk—within Army Security limits. The files of the USO and the annals of our military history are jammed with the doings of the USOite abroad. Take Peggy Alexander, a pretty pint-sized dancer, singer, and mimic out of vaudeville via Brooklyn. She's the USO ideal—young, hardy, and willing. She's hit all seven USO circuits, has covered more ground than Patton, and has worked harder than an old joke on the radio. Once she was the only woman on Bougainville but never had felt safer in her life. During a performance there, a dog howled persistently. Afterward a young Seabee came up, leading a shepherd. He apologized: "You gotta excuse him, ma'am. He hasn't seen a woman in two years either!"

OR take Joe McKenna, a sort of junior Bob Hope from Teaneck, New Jersey. When war came, Joe was kicking his sister Jane around, and she was kicking him right back, in a funny act called Slappy and Slaphappy. One day in 1942 Joe and Jane did a show in a hospital, and afterward quit Jimmy Dorsey, with whom they were touring for substantial money. For the USO in 1943 Joe and Jane were buzz-bombed in London. After London shows, Joe stood A. R. P. watches, put out incendiaries, dug for bodies in rubble.

His unit was one of the first to wade ashore in Normandy from an LST on July 23, 1944—the USO D Day. Joe & Co. were in grease paint, for they had done a show on the boat coming over. Within a few hours Joe was em-ceeing his unit atop a thirty-ton trailer with new plywood laid down for tap dancing. Men who had been in foxholes for forty-eight days went nuts about the twenty-six performers who waded ashore. Some soldiers walked two and three miles through sand to see it!

Joe & Co. played the Brest country during the hedgerow fighting, often so close to the action that Joe insists the snipers applauded. They dived for foxholes more than once, crawled out and picked up where they'd left off. Once Joe stopped the show during a dogfight overhead. "That," he said, "I can't compete with."

Joe became "Stinky" when he jumped from a truck into an open French cesspool in the blackout, and when water was unobtainable they washed their teeth in grapefruit juice. Biggest thrill came when Joe's unit became the first to cross the Rhine at Remagen. Joe, who had gone out for only six months, stayed seventeen, coming home only because of illness in the family. His hair had grayed.

Veteran Unit No. 99, all male, which arrived at a Naples airport while it was under attack, has been battered on several continents. It performed through hell and high water in the Near and Far East, then deliberately got "lost" for three months on the CBI Circuit so it could fly over the

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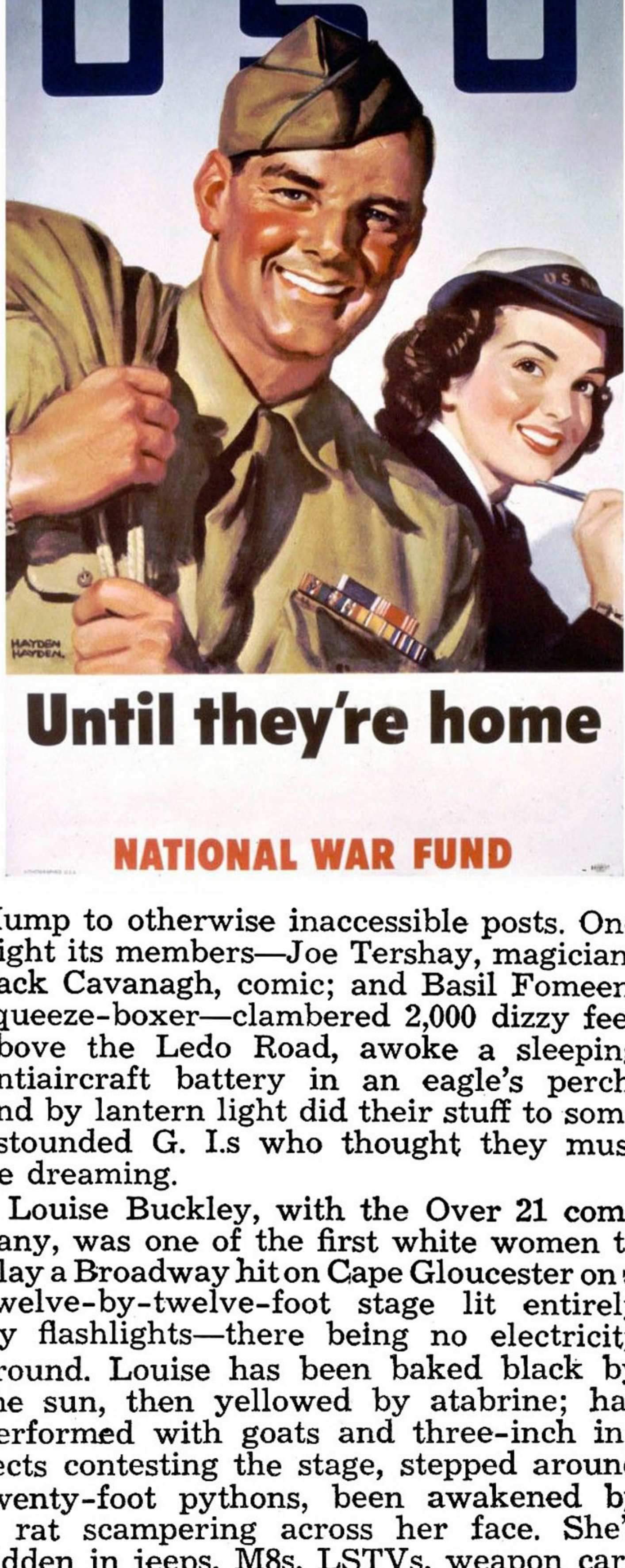

Hump to otherwise inaccessible posts. One night its members—Joe Tershay, magician; Jack Cavanagh, comic; and Basil Fomeen, squeeze-boxer—clambered 2,000 dizzy feet above the Ledo Road, awoke a sleeping antiaircraft battery in an eagle's perch, and by lantern light did their stuff to some astounded G. I.s who thought they must be dreaming.

Louise Buckley, with the Over 21 company, was one of the first white women to play a Broadway hit on Cape Gloucester on a twelve-by-twelve-foot stage lit entirely by flashlights—there being no electricity around. Louise has been baked black by the sun, then yellowed by atabrine; has performed with goats and three-inch insects contesting the stage, stepped around twenty-foot pythons, been awakened by a rat scampering across her face. She's ridden in jeeps, M8s, LSTVs, weapon carriers; has flown over Jap-held territory in bombers, and been discreetly escorted to the powder room by a captain who then stood guard. Toughest part of this journey was walking down a street of tents—aware that every G. I. knew her destination. She learned that every woman in the Pacific wears a halo. "I've heard a girl swear," she wrote home, "and you could feel a roomful of men freeze instantly."

No USOers have been killed under fire, but near misses are as common as Göring's medals. Pianos have been blown up while the pianists lurked in near-by foxholes; Martha Raye's baggage was rubbleized at her bivouac while she was out at an African camp doing a show. A USO field official has been wounded by shrapnel; another has lost a leg. Maxine March, tap dancer, Christine Street, singer and accordionist, and Adelaide Joy, singing comedienne, lost their lives in an R. C. A. F. plane crash near Vancouver a couple of years ago; and Tamara, the singer, and Roy Rognan, comedian and dancer, died in the Clipper crash at Lisbon. In the same unit Gypsy Markoff, the singer and accordionist, got a broken leg and head; Jane Froman also was seriously hurt. Both are back in action. Yvette Harris and Grace Drysdale of the same troupe got a bad dunking in the Tagus River. Exhibiting true trouper spirit, Grace immediately started diving for her puppets; and Yvette's first act when pulled out of the river was to cable Cordell Hull, then Secretary of State, to get in touch with her ma and have her send some evening gowns—but fast. Yvette knew what G. I.s liked.

BESIDES splendid all-colored units which dispense boogie-woogie, and sport celebs who ripple muscles for the boys, the war's biggest surprise is the Long-Haired Unit, run by Gini Baldini. Though the Army figured only 2 per cent of the boys loved

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Beethoven, early in the war Baldini boldly took the entire Philharmonic out to Camp Joyce Kilmer and gave a going-away concert to about 2,000 soldiers, 90 per cent of whom had never seen a live serious musician. There wasn't a single walkout, and when it was over the entire front row swarmed over Mr. Schuster, the first cellist. "Mistuh," cried one, obviously from the Ozarks, "you-all plays mighty fahn! When this war is over, Ah'm gittin' me one of them sittin'-down fiddles and learn to play like you-all!"

Encouraged, Baldini in a month had sent out forty-five concert units with Elman, Iturbi, Vivien della Chiesa, Heifetz, and other very long-hairs. They played the toughest boot camps in the Second Service Command—to audiences of from 500 to 3,000. I saw a careful Army report of an Elman G. I. concert. One thousand and forty had attended, 3,000 couldn't get in. The program was solid, serious, no jive, no intermissions, two and a half hours long. No walkouts.

Baldini—a concert booker in prewar days—counted his audiences for a year: 2,579,990. "If this is two per cent of the Army," he cried, "I'm satisfied!"

SINCE then, Szigeti and Heifetz have lugged their fiddles abroad and sawed away in competition with the bombing planes. Lily Pons and husband Kostelanetz have tootled around the world. In Coblenz the engineers hung a canvas over a yawning shell hole in the rear of the Opera House and Leetle Leelee sang the Bell Song from Lakmé with the artillery behind the canvas serving as metronome.

Last Christmas, Baldini got a call from N'Orleans for a Bach specialist. Baldini dispatched one comely young Constance Keene, pianist, to the camp for a tentative run of one concert. Connie stayed a week, gave fourteen full concerts in the territory, playing Bach toccatas and fugues. They loved it and telegraphed frantically for permission to keep her there longer.

USO No. 475 was the first long-hair unit to arrive on Bougainville. Eight thousand Seabees, many fresh from finishing an air strip under fire, gathered to absorb culture. They hadn't seen white women for some time, and as they faced the rude platform set on gas drums they chanted, "Bring on the girls! Bring on the girls!"

Baritone Rand Smith trotted out and tried to get things going. He retreated before a barrage of Bronx cheers. One Anne Buckley, however, had come a long way to do her work. She walked up to the mike and, amid the continuing berries, said firmly, "Men, let us all join in singing the Lord's Prayer!" The audience shut up and sang. A cloudburst interrupted. The men singers stripped to shorts, the women donned ponchos G. I.s flung up to them, and the concert continued. The fame of 475 spread around the islands. It has been cited and commended many times since.

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Cunningly, Baldini has created a taste for the ballet among the military, who had long considered the stuff sissy. He has included a ballet dancer in each long-hair outfit, to toss her cultured hips around in a ballet called The Date—a G. I. from the audience obliging as the latter. Somewhere on the global circuits Baldini's Foxhole Ballet is entre-chating right now, and for a time he had a permanent ballet stationed at Capri. During the Italian campaign it was a part of a rest cure to send exhausted airmen there to see it.

In the hospital several Baldini string quartets play for the wounded; psychiatrists have found there's healing power in Mozart. "There are more uses for G strings than in burlesque," says Baldini happily.

THE least publicized USOer is the Tabloid Trouper. A miniature vaudeville show, the TT gets in where the airplane can't, seeing to it that there are no stepsons of Uncle Sam. "One stormy night," says a Trouper, "I had my smallest audience—just one soldier who was guarding a bridge somewhere in Texas and couldn't get to see the show. They drove me out to his hut and I played and sang to him." Eight and nine shows a day aren't unusual for the TTs. One unit has done as many as eighteen, some on a piece of canvas spread on desert sand lit by jeep lights.

"If you've watched the faces of the men light up," says a performer, "while you're giving them everything you've got on a rough board stage in the middle of nowhere—then yours is the power and the glory forever."

Ella Logan, the Holler Girl from the Hielands, was making a little speech in a great Naples theater, expressing the hope that she'd been able to bring the boys their wives, sweethearts, and mothers. A tall blond G. I. climbed on the stage. He grabbed the mike. "Miss Logan," he said, "you don't look like anybody's sweetheart, you don't look like anybody's wife, and God knows you don't look like anybody's mother." He lifted Ella's face, kissed her on the forehead. "You look like an angel!" Then he ran out of the theater.

Don Rice, veteran USOer, was playing at a British airfield and some fliers asked him if he could hold the show till they got back from a raid over Germany; they'd be back by nine—they hoped. The entertainers waited in a control tower, listening to the radio. Over Germany the going got tough, but above the sound of the ack-ack came the voice of a pilot talking to a fellow bomber: "Wonder if that camp show will wait for us!"

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The hospital circuit brings heartaches. Singing Ave Maria to a dying soldier is not easy. It's also tough to hear a blinded lad say, "You know, I saw your show the other night. I didn't know then that it would be the last show I'd ever see." It's also tough to walk into a ward of amputation cases and hear the sound of plaster casts; tapping on the wall. That's the kind of applause even an actor can't take.

Charles de Loache, a booming baritone, sang an Indian ballad to a pain-clutched, full-blooded Indian in a Pacific field hospital—and saw releasing tears of recognition pour down the soldier's face. Alec Templeton brings hope to the blind: a polioo-crippled singer named Charles Caruso from Highland Falls, New York, brings hope to the disabled. Caruso, on his jungle tours, has to be carried and has been sniped at often. Even the handshaking tours of Hollywood celebs serve a purpose. "Now I don't want to die!" a G. I. cried after seeing Betty Grable's legs twinkle down a ward corridor.

Liberty
JULY 28, 1945