



U. S. O. CAMP SHOW PEOPLE ENTERTAIN APPRECIATIVE SERVICEMAN AUDIENCES THE WORLD OVER. HERE THEIR THEATER IS A THATCHED AUDITORIUM IN NEW GUINEA

# THEATERS OF WAR

"All the world's a stage" for top-ranking show people who go wherever servicemen are

By

**LEONARD LYONS**

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From north of the Arctic Circle, where Mary Elliott, the MGM starlet, received a home-made plaque from Maj. Gen. Ben Giles "for having gotten here before Eleanor did," to the Persian Gulf—where Sammy Walsh, the night club m. c., startled the Shah of Persia by singing for him "Bring the Patrol Wagon Closer, Sergeant; the Steps Are Too High for My Mother"—the show folk of America have been engaged, these many months, in fulfilling strange bookings in the newest and most exciting theater circuit in the world.

This is the new Big Time, no longer circumscribed by sleeper-jump or agent's whim, where a split-week does not denote Patterson and Pottstown, but more likely Algiers and Sicily. This is the real Big Time, reached by plane, by mule, by jeep, across jungle, sea and desert, to wherever men fight in this war.

Al Jolson was the first to chart this new circuit. The hardy minstrel got the seven inoculations administered to all entertainers going overseas, held a final conference with Abe Lastfogel, the USO-Camp Shows president who works at this full-time job without salary, and then went off to the British Isles, Alaska, Africa and the Caribbean.

The size of the audiences, just so long as they're soldiers, is unimportant to Jolson and to the 700-odd entertainers who since have followed him abroad. Al has entertained as many as 20,000 troops at one performance. Once, he did his entire routine for one lonely soldier, a youngster who had been wounded in battle and was on his way home.

This strange performance ended only when an air-alert was sounded and Jolson was ordered to the air-raid shelter. "I'm in this shelter not because I'm afraid," Al assured the others. "I'm really not afraid.

But just picture it for yourselves—wouldn't it look funny?—Al Jolson trying to sing 'Mammy' with one arm?"

Martha Raye, who, before performing for Queen Elizabeth of England, hurriedly borrowed a pair of panties because she somehow had forgotten her own, was in the first all-girl unit which went abroad. She made the now famous tour with Kay Francis, Mitzi Mayfair and Carole Landis. The girls were warned, before leaving, about revealing any information of a military nature.

Later, Miss Francis inadvertently revealed that they had been flown over by bomber, when she reported that the pilot had told his colleagues: "Sighted Dame; Dated Same."

The big-name volunteer USO-Camp Show stars, who go where the Army directs them, receive \$10 a day to cover expenses. Their tour usually lasts three months. The other USO-Camp Show entertainers, whose incomes are not as large, are paid approximately 60% of their normal salaries. They do their shows on platforms adjoining the slit-trenches, on ships and in recreation halls, in jungle mud and on landing fields, using the best facilities available, whether it be a truck, a rock or the porch of a small house.

The porch of a small house in Italy was selected by Jack Benny.

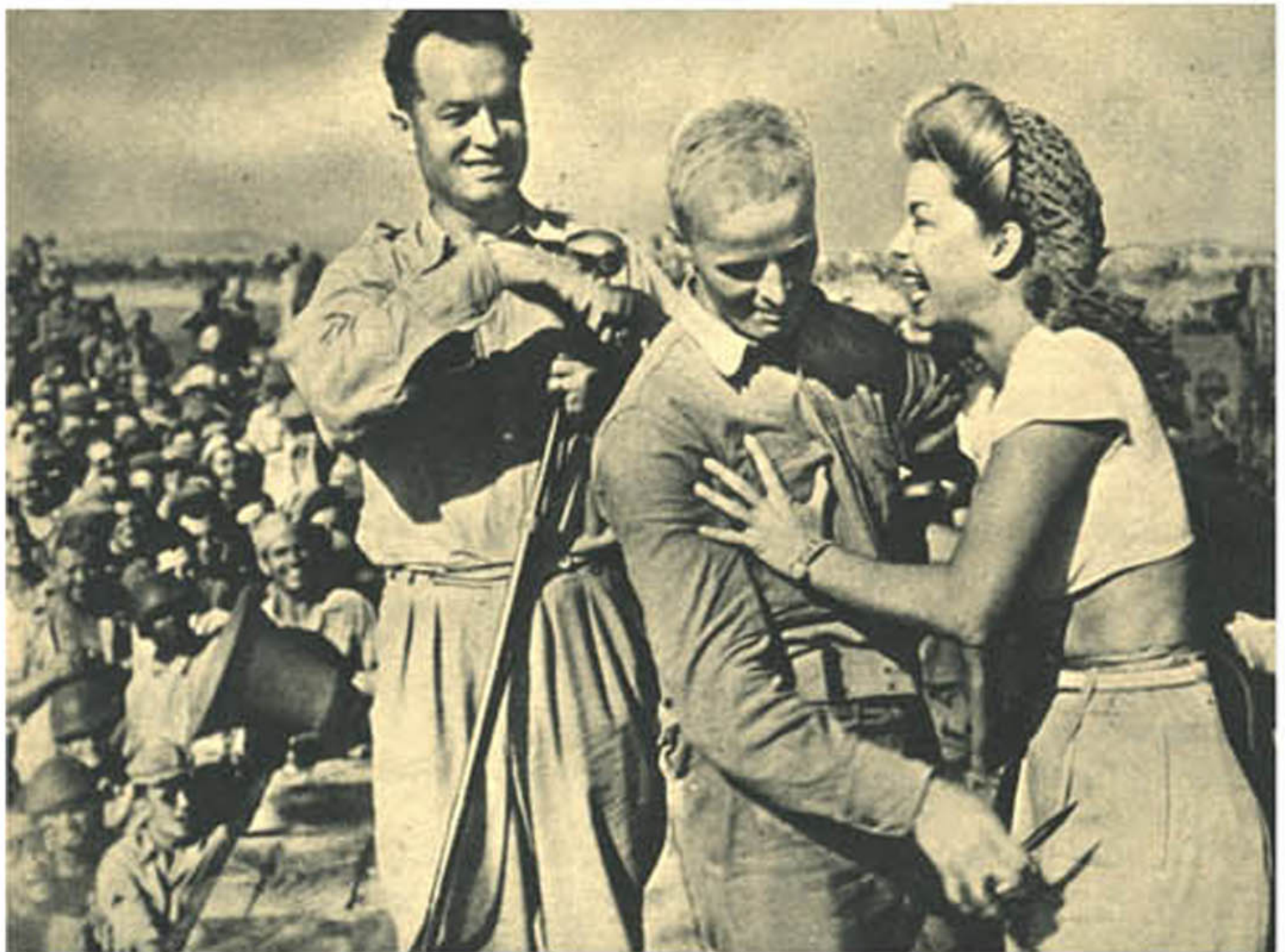
Larry Adler and Wini Shaw as the stage from which the first American wartime show on the continent of Europe would be given. They arrived in a bomber, by way of South America, where the commanding officer who previewed their show sent a coded message to all commanding officers along the way, advising them of Benny's imminent arrival and assuring the actors of satisfactory accommodations. The message, when decoded, read "Buck Benny Rides Again."

Italy was not the closing date for the Benny-Adler troupe doing the Battle Time. Persia was—the Persian Gulf Command, supply-route to Russia, where no entertainers ever had ventured before. There they performed not only for the Americans, British and Persians, but also for 60 Russian Army officers and their wives.

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**BASHFUL SOLDIER:** Frances Langford and Bob Hope, entertaining in North Africa, find this soldier shy before a mike. In Algiers Frances found a strange metal disc. She treasured it until she learned it was a U. S. trolley car token.

#### SERVICE MEN EXPRESS GRATITUDE IN MANY WAYS

The swing around the New York-to-Teheran circuit was Adler's second volunteer tour for USO-Camp Shows. Adler, who subsequently was followed by his concert partner, Paul Draper, first played the Labrador and Newfoundland break-in dates. In Newfoundland a grateful Navy captain extended his thanks, in behalf of his men, and added: "I wish I could do something for you to show our appreciation." Adler smiled, and said: "The privilege of entertaining your men was gratification enough."

"Smile again," the Captain suddenly ordered. "Now open your mouth—wider." The harmonica player obeyed. "I'm a dentist," the Captain told him. "Come upstairs to my office." And there, as a token of the Navy's appreciation, the Captain filled Adler's dental cavities.

The Marine Corps' token of appreciation to Ray Bolger, who played the Pacific route, was a souvenir ring made from parts of a Jap Zero. Martha Raye's mementoes were an ashtray made from one of the first shells fired by the AEF in Africa, and a hand-embroidered silk lingerie bag, handmade by some doting RAF fliers.

Frances Langford, who went to North Africa and Sicily with Bob Hope, treasured a memento found in the ancient dust of Algiers. It was a small metal disc, which she picked up and pocketed, believing it to be a relic of some extinct civilization. Then, when Miss Langford returned to Hollywood, she discovered that this disc was a commonplace item in Los Angeles. It was just a trolley-car fare token.

Bob Hope, the most beloved of all the Battle Time players, was honored by the American officials in Algiers by being assigned a hotel room to share with only one other person. The perplexed comedian studied the cubicle and wondered how two could possibly spend the night in a room so small. John Steinbeck visited Hope, listened to his lament, and said: "Come down and take a look at my room. It makes this one look like a bridal suite."

Hope followed Steinbeck downstairs, to the tiniest room he ever had seen. "The big guy sleeping over there is Quentin Reynolds," said Steinbeck, pointing to the reposing figures. "The guy sleeping in this bed is H. R. Knickerbocker. And see that little space between them? That's where I sleep." Hope noticed another man sleeping in the room, and whispered: "Who's he?" Steinbeck explained: "Oh, he's the British Vice-Consul. This is his room. He invited Reynolds to spend the night here, two weeks ago, and we came along."

Adolphe Menjou was less fortunate in finding safe quarters and



Una Merkel, Phyllis Brooks, Gary Cooper and Andy Ascarl give out with the stuff that makes home closer for servicemen overseas.



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good company. The noted fashion-plate, who considers himself nude unless he is within valet's reach of the ninety-odd suits in his wardrobe, toured the African bases with only one extra suit—and it was quickly appropriated by an admiring Arab who disappeared into the night, muttering not even a "Thank you, Lend-Lease." The distraught Menjou finished the tour wearing his remaining, worn-out suit, his aplomb preserved by a fresh carnation, worn on his frayed lapel. "This lovely flower," Menjou consoled himself, "may help the troops recognize at least a little something from my pictures."

Pat O'Brien also suffered a wardrobe loss during his trip, when he found himself the object of curious scrutiny by head-hunting tribesmen near a jungle outpost in Paramaribo, South America. The screen star suspected that the glances of admiration tossed at his head by the tribal chief were not the prelude to a request for an autograph. And when the loin-cloth'd Boss Head Hunter bellowed "Chapeau! Chapeau!" Pat surrendered his hat, as a gesture to the good-will program of the Rockefeller Committee and to the preservation of his head.

Felix Knight, the tenor, had a more pleasant encounter with a native chief. Knight did his two-hour repertoire for this South Pacific Fiorello who was touched by the white man's solicitude, and brought forth his two lissome daughters. "In appreciation," the chief explained to Knight, who feared that this might be the nightmarish beginning of a ritual famed in story-book . . . that of the grateful chieftain offering his daughters in marriage. "In appreciation," the young ladies repeated to the happily married singer, then they seated themselves at the piano and played Knight's favorite song, "Yours Is My Heart Alone."



**SOUVENIRS** picked up during her four-months tour of North Africa are assembled around Martha Raye (above) after her return to the States.



**WINI SHAW** has been voted Sweetheart of the World War II AEF by servicemen the world over whom she met during her four overseas trips for the USO. She headed the first unit to go abroad after Pearl Harbor.



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OF JOAN BLONDELL AND THE SILENT STRANGER

Joan Blondell, entertaining in Newfoundland, was sent to a distant Army camp. A special plane was detailed to fly her there. Miss Blondell had never flown before. She was nervous at the prospect. The plane had another passenger, a strange man to whom the pilot didn't introduce her. They sat side by side in awkward silence throughout the flight. The stranger made no effort at conversation but sat there grimly and coldly. When the plane landed, Miss Blondell asked the pilot about the stranger. "I knew you were nervous, so I didn't introduce you," the pilot explained. "He's the Army undertaker."

The pay is low and the billing nil, for those who play the Battle Time. But come snow or mud or tropic heat, they adhere to the peculiar tradition of Broadway that "the show must go on." Grace Drysdale and Yvette, who survived the tragic Lisbon Clipper crash, continued their overseas tour. Edith Delaney, who was in the Ella Logan troupe, stopped in Algiers only long enough to pray at the grave of her soldier-husband, Jack Feinstein, who was killed in the battle for Tunisia, and then went on to dance for the soldiers in Italy.

Johnny Barnes, the dancer, found no table, platform or even an open truck, when he arrived to entertain in the Australian bush. But Johnny did his show, dancing barefoot in the mud Down Under. He, with Earl Wrightson, the singer, Roger Warren, the accordionist-pianist, and the Wesson Brothers, practically hitch-hiked their way. They flew in cargo planes, when there was room, and helped load and unload the cargo. At Darwin they obtained a truck and a compass, and thus solved their transportation problem to Milne Bay. When they started to cross the bay, as passengers in an amphibious jeep, they received a quick elementary education in relative values in wartime. This was when the rear hatches suddenly opened, the jeep began to sink, and their parched driver pointed to the precious bottle-goods and shouted to the vaudevillians: "Never mind your life-belts fellas. Save the cokes! Save the cokes!"



**JOAN BLONDELL** brought welcome feminine entertainment to the boys up in bleak Newfoundland. When she introduced the Short Snorter Club there, she found plenty of prospective members who wanted bills autographed.



**THE SPHINX** looks down in awe when harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler and violinist torturer Jack Benny (above) do a duet in Egypt.



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Al Jolson, first to chart camp shows circuit, performs in coveralls in Palermo.

**SHOW PEOPLE, TOO, DIE FOR THEIR COUNTRY**

If the current proposal to issue campaign ribbons to overseas entertainers should be officially adopted, the most decorated volunteer USO-Camp Shows star will be Joe E. Brown, who was the first to reach Guadalcanal and has covered the most mileage on the Battle Time. And Purple Hearts will go to the bereaved families of the seven who died abroad in the service of their country—Roy Rognan, the dancer, and the beautiful Tamara, killed in the Clipper crash at Lisbon; Bob Ripa, the juggler, who lost his life while entertaining in the South Pacific; Maxine March, Adelaide Joy and Christian Street, killed in Alaska; and Charles King, the veteran song-and-dance man, who died in a London Army hospital.

This is the new Big Time, a circuit expanding day by day, with each new island captured, with each new city taken. This is the real Big Time, which will be played, in increasing numbers, by the show-folk of America until the last two billings become certain by conquest—the bookings in Berlin and Tokyo.

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