



# *Entertainment* *During the War*

Radio and the USO





# Radio

On the Homefront and the  
Warfront

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## *Radio on the Warfront*

- Soldier's life: 90% boredom interrupted by moments of sheer terror
- Form of recreation: importance of this realized after WWI
- Knowledge of home/ distress from war
- *Command Performance* (1942-49)



As seen with music during World War I, the importance of any form of recreation or relaxation for the troops was finally becoming recognized. “It has been pointed out that the soldier's life is 90% boredom interrupted by periods of sheer terror.” (“World War II on the Radio”) If the energy and hope of the soldiers faded there could be an increased chance of a fatal decline in combat efficiency. Experiments with radio for troop entertainment had been attempted in various overseas locations before WWII with varying degrees of success. The most important improvement needed was for reliability and desirable content. The men needed to know what was going on back home; but they also needed entertainment, something to take their minds off the stress of war.

*Command Performance* (1942-49) was one of the first hits of these types of shows. Servicemen could write to the show and request their favorite stars or suggest performances they would like to hear. As the show gained popularity among the forces stationed overseas, producers began to lose the resources to obtain talent to fill the

show. Stars like **Bob Hope**, Dinah Shore, Fred Allen, Frances Langford, Spike Jones, **Frank Sinatra**, Burns and Allen, Vincent Price, Ginger Rogers, Gary Cooper, Tallulah Bankhead, Andrew Sisters, Bette Davis, **Judy Garland**, **Bing Crosby**, and **Margaret Whiting** all volunteered, free of charge, to produce extremely high quality shows for far less than expected. These free performances by celebrities became a tradition during the war.

Photo 1 and 2 (“World War II on the Radio”)

## *Radio on the Homefront*

- 1930's Gradual increase of electricity in American homes
- News Networks- A quicker and more efficient way to spread news
- War related content added into comedies and dramas
- The importance of a radio in each home
- Edward R. Murrow “ **“They’ve got to stop this. It can’t go on.’ Her neighbor said: ‘Have you ever thought of what would happen to you if we gave in?’”**



Throughout the 1930's electricity slowly made its way into most of the American homes, and soon almost every home had a radio. By the time the second world war started, the majority of housewives considered the radio to be a necessity in their homes, more important than a refrigerator or clothes iron. Although most radio stations were music, comedies and dramas, several radio networks developed news departments due to the war. ("World War II on the Radio") At that time the reading level was significantly lower than it is today because most of the American population never finished high school. The radio made it easy for people to find out what was happening in the war because all they had to do was listen. Listening to the radio became a daily activity in most American homes ("The Radio's Effect..."). War related content also found its way into regular programming. The dramas and comedies would often change the script to have a character join the military or bring one home scarred with battle injuries. Villains would suddenly change from gangsters and rustlers to Japs and Nazis, or people who worked for them ("World War II on the Radio").

The radio was extremely important in America at this time, because it created a quicker and more efficient way of keeping people informed on the war (“The Radio’s Effect...”). Unlike a newspaper, which has to be printed and delivered to people’s homes, the radio networks received reports and aired them. The American people could have the latest news of the war within days after events occurred. It revealed the awful reality of the war with front line descriptions. Most importantly, it educated people on the importance of winning the war. Edward R. Murrow hosted a radio show that reported specifically on the German air raids during 1940-41. While actually living in London, Murrow first handedly saw the effects the war was having on the world. “I must have seen over a hundred fire bombs come down and only three small fires started.” He aired this at ten minutes until five on the morning of October 10, 1940. This would seem to be the enemy failing, but he goes on to share that, “...back at headquarters I saw a man laboriously and carefully copying names in a big ledger- the list of firemen killed in action during the last month. There were about a hundred names.” (Murrow, “This is London”) This showed that even those not directly involved in the fighting, payed the price of protecting their homes from the terror of war. He included in his show on September 23, 1940 the statement of a woman in London during one of the bomb raids. “‘They’ve got to stop this. It can’t go on.’ Her neighbor said: ‘Have you ever thought of what would happen to you if we gave in?’” (Murrow, “This is London”) Reports like this opened America’s eyes to the urgency of winning the war and the consequences that would occur if they lost.

Photo 1 (“World War II on the Radio”).



# The United Services Organizations Inc.

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Photo (Eric Brandner)

## *The United Service Organizations Inc.*

- Established in 1941 as a non-profit organization: provided programs, services, and live entertainment to troops inside and outside America.
- “Camp Shows” a “home away from home”
- 186 makeshift military theaters in United States
- Extended to Allied camps around the world
- Main Point: keeping the spirit and hope of America’s men alive
- Huge risk for traveling groups



The United Service Organizations Inc. (USO) was established in 1941 as a non-profit organization. During World War II it provided programs, services and live entertainment to troops inside and outside the United States. The USO became most popular with its live performances called “Camp Shows”. These shows began in October 1941, and later that year 186 makeshift military theaters existed in the United States. The main point of these shows, was keeping the spirit and hope alive of both those at home and abroad. This went a great way to helping the war effort. It became a “home away from home” for G.I.s who desperately needed it. Later on, the USO’s shows extended to Allied camps around the world. The travelling groups that would operate along the front lines took the biggest risk to bring a piece of home to the men abroad. There were many close calls with the teams, but it was worth the risk (“Entertaining Allied Troops...”). During one of the first tours, German bombers destroyed the land and buildings near the area Bob Hope and his team were staying in Palermo, Italy, barely missing them (Eric Brandner).



Photo 1 and 2 (“Entertaining Allied Troops...”)

## *The United Service Organizations Inc.*

### **-Bob Hope**



- First and most well known person to be a part of this
- Comedian: challenge performing for soldiers
- Remembered for bringing hope to the places filled with fear

Bing Crosby, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich; 7,000 other performers

-“At the height of the USO, in 1944, ... there were 700 shows a day.”

-By the end of the war over 425,000 shows had been put on around the world

Bob Hope was the first, and most well known person to have been part of these shows. His profession as a comedian made it quite the challenge to put on shows for soldiers. Especially since he was the first person to undertake this idea, he had to design new ways to display his shows that would be enjoyable for them. He had to see things from their perspective, and he had to change things enough that his performances would not contain the same things they had heard the week before on the radio. Ultimately, “Hope’s rise to icon status can be linked to both his prolific work rate and his unique ability to unite the service members he entertained through laughter, poking fun at universally loathed topics like boredom, homesickness and superior officers.” (Eric Brandner) He is remembered for bringing hope to the places most filled with fear. That was the importance of these shows to the war. It encouraged American soldiers and energized them to fight another day. It really did give them a rare piece of home from across the world and a much needed dose of hope in a hopeless place. Alongside Bob Hope were dozens of other stars such as Bing Crosby, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich and around 7,000 other performers

who made these shows possible (Eric Brandner). “At the height of the USO, in 1944, there were over 3000 clubs, and there were 700 shows a day.” (“Entertaining Allied Troops...”) By the end of the war over 425,000 shows had been put on around the world.

Photos (Eric Brandner)

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