

# BOB HOPE AND WWII

BY BILL OATES

*We've traveled far and wide together  
Did we travel too fast?  
Now I reminisce and wonder  
whether any good things ever last.  
But that, dear, is past.  
Thanks for the memory.*

Some years before that song became a hit, a brash young man from England first, then Cleveland, Ohio, attempted the long and arduous road toward theatrical stardom. And now, after seven decades of stage, radio, film, and television success, Leslie Towne "Bob" Hope enjoys instant recognition as an entertainer, while approaching his ninetieth birthday. For Bob "Performing Anywhere He's Needed" Hope, his road to the top of the entertainment world was paved with sacrifice and an unending challenge to make people laugh from the residents of the White House to the occupants of a fox hole.

Most people associate Bob Hope with the American flag and its placement at sometimes remote military camps and bases, so much so that it is hard to imagine his birth anywhere but in the United States. Even on his popular radio show in the 1940's he referred to his humble beginnings nearer Lake Erie than those of his birth in Eltham, Kent, England. In all fairness, only four years after he was born in 1903, the Hopes, with six children in tow, relocated to the States, so his connection to his British birth was early and brief.

Hope's early years were fraught with struggles. Boys in school began calling him "Hope-less," and so, the name Bob became more prevalent than did his christened Leslie. He obtained money

from a variety of sources, including Charlie Chaplin imitations, singing for his fare on streetcars, and ultimately boxing as "Packy East." More substantial financially were his stints as an instructor at Sojack's Dancing Academy and his proclivity at delivering monologs at Chandler Motor Company conventions and picnics. Eventually the stage beckoned him and with new partner George Byrne, the "Two Diamonds in the Rough" were off on the road to fame and fortune.

Hitting the boards on the Midwest vaudeville circuits was arduous and very competitive. Not only did the act dance and perform then popular blackface humor, but they also sang in a quartet, Hope played a saxophone, and both moved scenery. His fellow actors told him that he should shed the blackface and dancing shoes and concentrate on speaking. After Hope left his partner and their Siamese twin girl touring partners, a solo act was attempted. Hope quipped that he starved in a Chicago southside boarding house where "the maid came in once a day to change the rats." However, it was in the Windy City that the future star became a part of an increasingly successful company that included Edgar Bergen and his sapling partner Charlie McCarthy.

His first major stage role came in 1932 in *Ballyhoo*, and the next year he landed the part of an extremely suitable character, the fast talking Huckleberry Haines in Jerome Kerns' *Roberta*. Not only did he experience success on Broadway, but it was also during this time that he met and married singer Dolores Reade. Shortly thereafter, Bob Hope



was playing in the *Ziegfeld Follies* with Fanny Brice in 1935 and, a year later, with Ethel Merman and Jimmy Durante in *Red, Hot and Blue*.

Throughout the 1930's network radio talent scouts carefully observed stage performances for the purpose of borrowing personalities for the airways. At first Hope declined such offers, noting that he felt "radio would never amount to anything" and hence his entry into the medium was delayed. Bromo Seltzer's *The Intimate Review* and later *Atlantic Family* for Atlantic Oil were Hope's first important radio appearances in 1935, then Jergens-Woodbury allowed him to star in the *Rippling Rhythm Review* in 1936 as the dimwitted Southerner "Honeychile" Wilder. However, Hope's real break came when he went on the air in the fall of 1938 for

Pepsodent, a show he would host for that company for twelve years and continue to lead until television forced him to shift broadcasting gears in the early 1950's. (There were new radio shows until 1954 and repeats continued until 1958).

For all the radio appearances and an outstanding string of funny, money-making movies, that which endeared Bob Hope to countless Americans the most was his unwavering desire to entertain military personnel. The first Bob Hope Show to visit servicemen took place on March 6, 1941, when "Professor" Jerry Colonna (a trombonist who had worked for Arthur Godfrey), announcer Bill Goodwin, and singer Francis Langford disembarked at March Field in Riverside, California for the first of dozens of visits to military locations. Hope later remarked that this

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“remote” began a personal challenge to continue to feed the sincere need of the fighting personnel who reacted to the show’s simple entertainment as if it might be their last taste of home. From this start the cast moved on to more pre-war camps with the hope that there might not be a reason for America’s finest to go to war. But all too soon, some seven months later, the call came, not only for the defenders of freedom, but also for those who keep their morale high, when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

The December 9, 1941 Pepsodent program was pre-empted when Franklin Roosevelt called on all Americans to get in the fight, and the following week shows like Hope’s were challenging the listeners to take part in defeating the Axis. The monologues and even the toothpaste commercials changed tone to reflect the urgency of the hour, while the Treasury Department asked for even more help, the result being the first of many war bond drives. Personalities such as Bing Crosby, Groucho Marx, Pat O’Brien, Betty Grable, Olivia de Havilland, and Jimmy Cagney crossed America and raised a billion dollars for the war effort. After this first trip for Hope and the others ended at the White House with a command performance for Mrs. Roosevelt, the comedian returned to finish his radio season and then left for a perilous trip to Alaska with Colonna and Francis Lanford.

If Supersaver miles had been around in the 1940’s, an entertainer like Hope could have taken a trip to Saturn. In his 9cent book, *Don’t Shoot, It’s Only Me*, Hope recalled his trip to Alaska and the violent weather the troupe encountered. He was scared to death but continued on such visits through the war (and future wars) to sacrifice his own comfort to bring something of home to faraway regions.

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When radio programs took a summer break, it usually provided the writers with a chance to catch up and create plots on returning in the fall or escapades encountered on vacation. Hope’s tour of 1943 provided the comedian with some experiences he would rather forget. The newly formed USO (United Service Organization) sent Hope, Langford, Colonna, and ex-vaudeville performer Jack Pepper by Pan American Clipper to England, North Africa, and Italy. Bob’s apprehensions about going were well-founded, for a few months earlier the same kind of plane hit drift material upon landing near Portugal and among those killed was Hope’s fellow star in *Roberta*, Tamara, the character who sang the song “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” After reassuring Dolores that the trip would be safe, the plane headed northeast for a refueling in Newfoundland and a chance to entertain members of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Then it continued on to England’s war-weary air bases, one of which was home to Clark Gable. It was there that Hope talked about non-Hollywood battle scenes with the movie actor, just before

the troupe departed from some close calls during air raids.

After meeting Winston Churchill, Hope took his party on the real road to Morocco, where entertaining the troops included diving into a sewer during an air raid. (Hope returned to a Moroccan air base in 1957 for another show.) Not to be outdone, after riding a B-17 to follow the soldiers that General Patton and General Montgomery sent to reclaim Italy, more bombs fell, as reported by famed correspondent Ernie Pyle: "The Bob Hope troupe . . . really found out about the war when they were over here . . . I was in two different cities with them during air raids and I will testify that they were horrifying raids . . . and the Hope troupe can now describe the ghastly sound . . ." Before the tour was over in Algiers, another bombing sent the entertainers scurrying, but the chapter describing this in Hope's recent book on his tours ends with an enthusiastic letter from a serviceman in Sicily who shared the feelings of the show with his parents and especially of how Francis Langford's songs sent him and his buddies home to their sweethearts for just a few minutes. So touched was she by her contact with service personnel that she wrote a newspaper column that told of her visiting military camps.

By the end of a three month tour of the Pacific theater in 1944, jungle sicknesses plagued Hope and Langford. One stop included entertaining 15,000 American marines before they left for the bloody battle at Peleliu, just before many of them were lost en route to the final Allied victory in the Pacific theater. The local USO director was legendary Chicago Bears coach George Halas, and it was his job to ask the uncomfortable and tired Hope to fly to an Australian encampment that had not yet been entertained. A tear moving down the check of Papa Bear changed the



JERRY COLONNA and BOB HOPE

minds of Hope and Langford, and the small group (including Colonna, army-enrolled Skinny Ennis's replacement guitarist Tony Romano, and dancer Patti Thomas), instead of leaving for home on a transport plane, boarded eight small Piper Cubs, for the Aussie airstrip that was too small for large aircraft. It was also during this trip that the company was lost in Australia after a crash landing, and news reports portended the worst after two days of no contact with Hope's crew.

Making movies kept Bob Hope busy in the early 1940's, his weekly radio show was a challenge, and guesting for the war effort equally helped fill Bob Hope's calendar, but one more important venture was added in 1942 to stretch his creative juices, the Armed Forces Radio Service programs beamed to those "over there."

The *Command Performance* shows that lasted throughout the war years represented sacrifice from America's entertainment talent in unprecedented numbers (for example, Vick Knight gave up his \$1,000 a week directing job on *The Fred Allen Show* to work for no



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salary). Requests from GI's were sometimes wild, as was the one that had Lana Turner frying a large steak before the microphone in November of 1943. The ultimate show in this series came on February 15, 1945, when Hope, Crosby, Colonna, Cass Daley, Frank Morgan, Jimmy Durante, Judy Garland, and Frank Sinatra cavorted in "Dick Tracy in B Flat," a show typical of both the zany humor often broadcast and the incredible talent shared with the troops. Similar programs that helped with the war effort were *Mail Call*, *Jubilee*, and *G.I. Jill*, all programs directed to keep the men in touch with the United States when they were far away.

For the many awards Bob Hope has won in his decades of entertaining, perhaps he would agree that the greatest came from the faces of those men and women who served in the armed services in World War II, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam, and all other places where the youth of his adopted country were gathered in the defense of freedom.

No statuette of gold nor medal from a President could supersede the smile from an appreciative member of the armed services far from home port.

When he sings "Thanks for the Memory," all those roads in the getting there have been paved with the lives of those who contributed to his memory, one of growth from simple beginnings to America's answer to where there's life, there's Hope. ■

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