

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 6, 2017

**The United Service Organizations:** USOs were related to wartime. The organization was founded in 1941 as an independent non-profit with the encouragement of the U. S. Government to entertain the expanding number of American troops as the country was heating up for World War II. Incorporating the services of the Salvation Army, the YMCA, the YWCA, and others, it was not long until the movie industry in Hollywood got on board and developed what were then called "Camp Shows." Governor Thomas E. Dewey was the first national campaign chairman; the second was Prescott Bush, later a senator from Connecticut and father of President George H. W. Bush. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the honorary chairman.

Irving Berlin's "This is the Army" was one of the greatest musical shows of World War II, copied somewhat from his World War I show "Yip Yip Yaphank." Berlin himself performed in both of them, surrounded by talented showmen who were in the service. Although "God Bless America" had been written in 1917, "This Is the Army" made it famous. The show was made into a 1943 movie starring Ronald Reagan, George Murphy, Joan Leslie, Rosemary DeCamp, and Alan Hale. I saw the stage show three times when it came through Guam just as the war ended in 1945. Bob Hope's "Camp Show," which he took to troops all over the world, may have been the most popular and certainly the longest-lasting, of all the U.S.O. shows.

From the largest U.S. cities to the most distant battle areas of World War II, there were U.S.O. centers, large and small. When I was in Providence in 1943, the U.S.O. was in a building along Waterman Street as it climbed from the downtown section to the Brown University campus. Centers such as this were intended make non-commissioned service men feel happy and appreciated for their service far from home. Entertainment was amateur and often nonexistent, but pretty local girls would volunteer their time to entertain the boys under strict rules. Home-cooked meals were also big attractions. Not many commissioned officers visited USOs, as all bases had officers' clubs with good food and sporadic entertainment.

In Wilmington, the U.S.O. was in an old home on West Street between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. Ruth and I just uncovered some certificates awarded to my mother for her service to the U.S.O. there in 1943-1945. At the time, I didn't realize her dedication to this effort, as I was away. My father always had enough fuel (gasoline was severely rationed) to take her to the U.S.O. nearly every Sunday, where she would take cookies, cakes, and other goodies. Most of the beneficiaries were servicemen stationed at New Castle Army Air Field. Sometimes, about two men at a time would be invited to come to Auburn Heights for Sunday dinner. In addition to a good meal, my father could show them his Stanley "steamers" and other things of mechanical interest. I think Saturday night dances were held at the center in Wilmington, but there was seldom any professional entertainment.

Few indeed were the Hollywood personalities who did not participate in USO shows. Many big name bands with female singers were also involved. When Bob Hope made a swing of air bases in Texas and New Mexico in July 1944, I was entertained at Roswell (NM) by Hope, Jerry Colona, Frances Langford, Virginia Mayo, and Skinnay Ennis and his orchestra. They did something like four shows in two days and then returned to the Hollywood Palladium for a gala performance.

The USO closed down in 1947, only to be called into action again at the onset of the Korean War in 1950. When peace came to end that conflict early in 1953, the organization continued on a very limited basis until the Vietnam War brought in a new generation of entertainers (except for the perennial Hope, who performed for several years in harm's way in the jungles of Southeast Asia). A large USO center was opened in Saigon in 1963.

Being active in all the succeeding American wars, the USO is going strong today, with centers in Iraq and Afghanistan and hundreds of other places. Its annual budget is over \$3 million. It is estimated that it has served over 35 million servicemen since its inception in 1941.