

THERE WAS ALWAYS HOPE

Motivated by his dedication to those in uniform, Bob Hope has proven that entertainment can be a potent leadership tool.

BY TODD LONGWELL

Christmas Eve, 1964. Bob Hope and his troupe fly into Saigon on their annual holiday mission to entertain U.S. troops stationed abroad. But they run into trouble unloading the cue cards from the plane. There are several thousand pounds of them, with jokes tailored to each stop on their itinerary. Without them, there's no show. The delay causes Hope and company to arrive at their hotel 20 minutes late, which is 20 minutes after Viet Cong terrorists detonated a car bomb across the street, killing 17 Vietnamese and three Americans and wounding 65.

It was later discovered that the bomb was meant to kill the entertainers. But Hope insisted they go on with the show. "I want to thank you for your welcome to Saigon," he said, greeting the crowd. "As I came into town, I saw a hotel go the other way." He later quipped, "I have critics everywhere."

Hope's hitch entertaining America's troops began in spring 1941, when he took his NBC radio show to California's March Field. And after the United States entered World War II that December, all but a handful of his shows were broadcast from military bases. In 1948, Sen. Stuart Symington asked him to travel to Germany with other stars to boost morale among the troops who were working around-the-clock during the Berlin airlift. That marked the beginning of his annual Christmas tours, which, in the ensuing decades, took him to Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East and other global hot spots.

"It became an addiction," says Johnny Grant, longtime honorary mayor of Hollywood, who has done 55 overseas USO tours himself. "There seems to be a ring in GI laughter and applause that you don't find anywhere else."

Hope's troupe usually consisted

of about 75 people: Les Brown's Band of Renown, dancers, writers, production personnel and a military attaché, along with a lineup of co-headliners that over the years included everyone from Ann-Margret and Anita Bryant to Neil Armstrong and Steve McQueen.

"We'd do a show at a base, then hop a bus or plane and go to the next base and do a night show," recalls Tony Hope, who worked on his father's tours from 1956 to 1964. "On Christmas Day, we'd usually do three shows."

"These were huge," says Bill Faith, who was Hope's publicist from 1964 to 1973. "Some of these audiences stretched all across a hillside in a big amphitheater."

Mort Lachman, who worked for Hope as a writer, director and producer, says his former boss was at his best and bravest offstage, entertaining injured soldiers in hospital wards. "Guys would be lying there with their arms and legs missing," says Lachman, "and they cheered when they saw him. He had a joke for every bed."

Much of Hope's rallying work was behind the scenes. "He was always calling, saying, 'Please come with us,'" remembers Connie Stevens, who signed on for several tours. "I'd say, 'I can't get away this weekend,' and he'd say, 'Yeah, you can.' And I'd end up going."

With the Vietnam War winding down in 1972, Hope mounted what he called "The Last Christmas Show," but over the next decade, he continued to perform holiday shows at veterans hospitals and military bases. In the wake of the 1983 U.S. Embassy bombing in Beirut, he traveled to Lebanon with a full-scale Christmas show, and in 1987, he flew around the world in eight days, entertaining troops with another all-star troupe. In 1990, he mounted his final Christmas tour, during Operation: Desert Shield.

Earlier this year, Hope passed the baton to Wayne Newton, when the latter was appointed chairman of the USO Celebrity Circle and entrusted with the task of organizing his own all-star troupes to entertain military personnel at home and abroad. "He called me and asked if I would be interested, and I told him that of course I would," says Newton. "He's given us legacy that will never be matched."

Though Hope has thousands of awards to his credit, including several honorary Oscars, the most cherished is probably the 1997 act of Congress that made him an honorary veteran — the first in U.S. history.

"My father had a symbiotic love-love relationship with the soldiers," says Tony Hope. "He liked it that they were there fighting for their country, and they liked it that he was there making them laugh."

And, if possible, Old Ski Nose would surely be onstage in the Middle East right now, tossing out one-liners to the troops.

"Without a war," the 98-year-old Hope says from his home in Toluca Lake, "I'd love to do it all again."

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ALWAYS ON THE ROAD:

Bob Hope relentlessly toured the globe with such comedic comrades as actor Jerry Colonna, the great Bing Crosby and actress Frances Langford.