An accordion is the largest piece of property the troupe carries. The evening dresses, crushed in suitcases, must be pressed and kept pretty. Spirits must be high. This is troup ing the really hard way.

Austerity at war is expected. But creature comforts—even in the farthest reaches of war zones—have advanced a little since John Steinbeck wrote those words on a ship off the English coast on June 24, 1943.

Steinbeck made his name with his novels. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1940 for The Grapes of Wrath and the Nobel Prize in literature in 1962 for a career that included Of Mice and Men, The Red Pony and East of Eden. But roughly 18 months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Steinbeck set off on a starkly different literary adventure: that of war correspondent.

His early summer dispatch for the New York Herald Tribune about experiencing a USO show from the mess hall and deck of a military ship—and the different ways the American service men on that ship were experiencing the show—paint a clear, indelible picture of not only what those USO trouper s did, but what their performances meant.

And his July 26, 1943, report brought the actions of one Bob Hope, the USO’s one-man morale machine, into clearer focus.

“When the time for recognition of service to the nation in wartime comes to be considered, Bob Hope should be high on the list. This man drives himself and is driven. It is impossible to see how he can do so much, can cover so much ground, can work so hard, and can be so effective. He works month after month at a pace that would kill most people.”

Nearly 75 years after the USO’s creation, Hope is still legendary, thanks to the USO shows he started performing during World War II at a time when international phone calls home were impossible and Internet access wasn’t even a concept.

Hope played his first massive show for troops at March Air Reserve Base in California on March 6, 1941, as a favor to his radio producer Albert Capstaff. According to America in WWII Magazine, Hope asked Capstaff why the troops couldn’t come to the studio. Capstaff—who really wanted Hope to play a show for his brother who was stationed at March—explained that there’d be hundreds of service members there.

Capstaff was right. The troops laughed. And Hope was hooked. After that, only nine of Hope’s 144 radio shows during World War II were broadcast from NBC studios.
The Words, Emotions and Hard Realities of the Greatest Entertainment Mobilization the World has Ever Seen

By Eric Brandner

Bob Hope performs for service men at Munda Airstrip in the Solomon Islands in October 1944. Army Signal Corps photo
“They know weeks in advance that he is coming. It would be rather a terrible thing if he did not show up. Perhaps that is some of his drive. He has made some kind of contract with himself and with the men that nobody, least of all Hope, could break. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this thing and the responsibility involved. ... It has been interesting to see how he has become a symbol.”

Comedy in wartime requires deftness. Hope’s USO shows usually employed the same tenor, though the scripts changed often so as to not duplicate the material the troops had heard on his previous week’s radio show. Still, 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.

Hope and his band of entertainers and crew did their first extensive run of USO shows for American troops in the combat zones of North Africa and Italy in 1943. They had an incredibly close call during a tour stop in Palermo, Italy, where German bombers destroyed the docks and buildings in the area around their hotel.

“[Returning to the United States] was something of a letdown,” Hope said, according to the America in WWII story. “Hollywood was tinsel and make-believe and happy endings. Where we had been was mud and reality and horror.”

The close call didn’t deter him. Hope took a USO circuit out to the Pacific theater the following year.

“Of course, Hope wasn’t the only entertainer putting smiles on muddy, forlorn American faces in two different theaters of war. In fact, the USO’s entertainment operation grew so big so fast that it spun off into its own nonprofit—USO Camp Shows, Inc.—in late 1941, just eight months after the USO was formed.

There were plenty of big names—Bing Crosby, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich and dozens more stars. But there were roughly 7,000 other performers who weren’t coming home to fame and fortune when the war was over.

All together, they performed more than 425,000 USO shows around the world between 1941 and 1947.

Rarely were those shows described in more vivid detail than Steinbeck’s June 1943 New York Herald Tribune dispatch.

There was the pained smile and tense muscles of the female acrobat who tried in vain, over and over, to pull off a feat of balance on the listing ship.

There was a blues singer doing her best to overcome a busted speaker system, the quality of her voice eroding the louder she tried to sing. And there was the master of ceremonies whose jokes weren’t quite relating to the whole audience—even though the audience was more than willing to help him—until he finally struck gold with a line about military police. “Everybody likes a joke about MPs,” Steinbeck wrote.

All the performers were good enough to make it into the troupe. They were brave enough to make it across the ocean and onto that boat. They were likely even drawing a small wage for their efforts. And by the end of each performance—including a heavy dose of audience participation, coaxing and goodwill—they’d brought a piece of home to a place full of fear.

“A small USO unit is aboard this troopship, girls and men who are going out to entertain troops wherever they may be sent. These are not the big names who go out with blasts of publicity and maintain their radio contracts. These are girls who can sing and dance and look pretty and men who can do magic and pantomimists and tellers of jokes. They have few properties and none of the tricks of light and color which dress up the theater. But there is something very gallant about them.”

“The audience helps all it can because it wants the show to be good. And out of the little acts, which are not quite convincing, and the big audience which wants literally to be convinced, something whole and good comes, so that when it is over there has been a show.”

—Eric Brandner is the USO’s director of story development.