

The USO, Through the Years

By Tara Puckey

In response to a rapidly growing military in the early 1940s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for private organizations to handle activities for service members on leave. The USO incorporated under the laws of the State of New York on Feb. 4, 1941, setting into motion what would become more than six decades of service and support.



A community backbone for the war, the USO opened more than 3,000 centers in unlikely places including churches, museums and even railway cars. The centers offered free coffee and doughnuts or a quiet place to reflect—a little something for everyone.

Unlike any war before it, World War II united the entire country, and before long, even entertainers wanted to contribute to the effort. USO Camp Shows sent more than 7,000 entertainers overseas and, in 1945, more than 700 shows were played daily all around the world.

As the war ended, the USO slowly faded into nonexistence, but not without impacting an entire nation. More than 1.5 million volunteers had given their time throughout the war and, at the end of 1947, President Harry S. Truman gave the organization an honorable discharge, closing all offices and clubs.

At the start of the Korean War, the USO reappeared, opening 24 clubs worldwide. USO Camp

Shows continued, providing entertainment overseas and in hospitals for wounded GIs. During 1952, different entertainers performed every day to boost the morale of tired and weary troops.

Keith Balfour, a Marine veteran who served in Korea, remembered breaking from guard duty to catch a show.

“We had one show at an air strip near a town called Po Hong,” Balfour said. “The guys at the air strip had built a kind of outdoor movie theatre, with a stage and screen, and used rocket boxes for seats. It really meant a lot to the guys that the entertainers were there.”

The 1960s and the war in Vietnam took the USO to their first combat zone, opening a club in Saigon and 17 others throughout the war. In 1972, as troops withdrew, the USO closed up shop in Vietnam, but not before Bob Hope could bring his Christmas show overseas for the first time.

Controversy over the Vietnam War brought protestors in full force to USO centers all over the country. Returning troops shied away from the clubs, trying to disassociate themselves with the military.

“I would have gone to the USO at the airport when I returned,” said Larry Miller, an Army veteran who served over a year in Vietnam in 1968, “but there were so many people outside. They were screaming and spitting, so I just kept going.”

As the country recovered from dissension, the peacetime era of the 1970s helped the USO launch several



USO volunteer Angela Hines extends her arms to hug a Soldier from the 30th Heavy Brigade Combat Team at Hunter Army Airfield, Savannah, Ga. U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Brian E. Christiansen

new programs. For the first time, the USO helped military personnel transition into civilian life. In 1975, the headquarters moved from New York to Washington, D.C., solidifying the organization as a central military support center.

Superstar entertainers signed on with the USO during the 1980s, performing shows both domestic and abroad. Legends like the Doobie Brothers and Cheap Trick along with movie stars Brooke Shields and Chuck Norris, to name a few, all became involved with the USO's celebrity entertainment program.

The Persian Gulf War brought about new and different needs for the USO. Clubs were opened in the Middle East and the USO Mobile Canteen program was created—mobile centers that provide books, magazines, videos and refreshments to troops in outlying areas. Back in the United States, the USO established the Desert Storm Education Fund and Family Support Fund, programs to help families who struggle financially because of deployments and the death of a service member.

Today, the USO currently operates more than 130 centers in nine countries. Thousands of troops pass through airport centers that offer foreign language translation, assistance with flight connections and help locating missing luggage.

Operation USO Care Package and USO Operation Phone Home have been created for Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. In addition, the USO also operates Family and Community Centers to help military families with childcare, parenting, recreational programs and employment services.

As the USO approaches 70, there is no denying the significant impact they have had on generations of military service members. Through entertainment, family services, and a simple pat on the back, the USO has evolved to create a true support system for the United States military. ●

Photos from the top: Musician Billy Ray Cyrus greets troops in Al Asad, Iraq. Cyrus, former tennis player Anna Kournikova, comedian Dave Attell and tennis coach Nicholas Bollettieri participated in the 2009 USO Holiday Troop visit hosted by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Adm. Mike Mullen and his wife Deborah. DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley, U.S. Navy

Walter Cronkite stands by USO plane. Photo courtesy USO

Treach of the hip-hop group Naughty by Nature performs for and with U.S. Soldiers at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq, during the last stop of their USO-sponsored Iraq and Kuwait tour. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Steven King

"Sign where?" "Anywhere!" The iconic Marilyn Monroe entertains the troops. Photo courtesy USO

