

A Touch of Home: Entertaining America's Soldiers

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In every twentieth century war the U.S. military relied on organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and United Service Organizations (USO) to send women entertainers and recreation workers to warzones. As the centerpiece of organized recreation programs for soldiers, the women opened canteens where soldiers could find a friendly face, coffee, and donuts, they performed on stage, they played games and engaged in conversation, and when possible they brought a momentary reprieve from the war to the battlefield. Designed to impart a sense of domesticity to the military environment, recreation programs variously sought to combat prostitution, remind soldiers of their mothers or sweethearts, and symbolize a supportive American home-front to which the soldiers would return. This project examines the history of these programs, beginning with their advent in World War I, continuing through World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and ending with an examination of recreation in today's wars in the Middle East.

Recreation programs began as the army mobilized for World War I, growing out of Progressive era fears that military camps and a wartime environment presented young men with corrupting influences and a belief that women could effectively counter such threats. In particular, military and social welfare officials believed that white middle- and upper-class women possessed an innate religiosity and morality that would remind young men of their

mothers and sisters at home and that would inspire soldiers to sexual abstinence during their time abroad. Although by World War II military officials had abandoned their hope that American women would deter soldiers from soliciting foreign prostitutes, they maintained their insistence that women were essential to soldiers' morale and the overall war effort. No longer employed as guardians of soldiers' morality, women served as physical reminders of the home for which men fought and the civilian life to which they would return. Decades later, as the military fought an increasingly controversial war in Vietnam, unit commanders relied even more on American women to remind men of home. Consciously crafting a recreation program that presented eligible young women as war supporters, military and civilian officials clung to conventional notions of women's wartime roles even as women's place in the nation radically transformed. In the years after the Vietnam War, the all-volunteer military led to even more integration of women into the armed forces and the end of sexually exclusive recreation programs, and yet women remain a staple of military recreation even today.

During my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in July 2012, I perused records from several collections that have assisted me in understanding the development of recreation and entertainment programs during World War II. In particular, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s (JDR Jr.) papers contain many records that outline much of the early history of the USO. As the umbrella organization for all domestic social welfare work for the military and the overseeing agency of USO-Camp Shows, Inc., the USO played a defining role in military recreation. The Rockefeller papers describe the rationale, organization, fundraising, activities, and evaluation of the USO (Record Group 2, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Series P-Welfare, Series Q-World Affairs, Series R-Welfare, Youth Interests, Series Z—JDR Jr. Personal Papers). Additionally, the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) archives (Series 13 Oral Histories-Lindsley Kimball) and the

Lindsley F. Kimball papers, 1939-(1974-1979) contain important records and recollections of the USO President. These records are important in describing the competing interests of private organizations such as the USO, and the Red Cross and the military. Each organization approached the task of recreation with its own agendas and perspectives, and these records help to delineate the many interests, perspectives, and agendas that shaped wartime recreation and entertainment. Several reports conducted at the end of the war also offer important analyses of the USO's work and the problems faced by the organization during the war, as well as its transition from wartime to peacetime work.

Organizing Recreation and Entertainment

As the United States veered closer to war in 1940 and 1941, military and civilian officials revived their World War I-era concerns about how soldiers and sailors spent their free time and began organizing an extensive array of recreational activities to capture the men's attention. Civilian organizations (the YMCA, Jewish Welfare Board, the Salvation Army, and the Knights of Columbus) had provided recreational outlets for doughboys during World War I, but after the war, military officials decided that the army and navy should manage their own recreation in the future. Secretary of War Newton Baker insisted that the military provide its own recreation programming both as a way to make military service more appealing to the public and as a way of integrating democratic principles of citizenship into the military. The armed services, he explained, were "not merely a military force organized and kept in readiness for the defense of the nation." Instead, the military was "a great educational institution" and that "mothers and fathers ... will be glad to see their boys" enlist because of their patriotism and the promise that service would provide "democratic fellowship." In providing martial training, education, and

social and recreational opportunities, Baker maintained, the government was merely fulfilling its obligation to young soldiers.¹

With this goal in mind, the army and navy established morale divisions that began to provide for soldiers' and sailors' off-duty entertainment. Throughout World War II, the Army's Special Services Division managed welfare work and the Army Exchange Service (the PX), while the Welfare and Recreation Section of the Training Division of the Bureau of Naval Personnel operated leisure activities on ships and stations.² Morale officers organized athletics, libraries, educational programs, motion pictures, religious services, and service clubs in all theaters of the war.³

However, even as the military's welfare work expanded rapidly in 1940, morale officers knew that they needed assistance from outside agencies to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding ranks. For this help, the military turned to the agencies that had provided assistance during World War I. In January 1941, the YMCA, Young Women's Christian Association, Salvation Army, Jewish Welfare Board, National Catholic Community Service, and the National Travelers Aid Association merged their efforts into a single organization tasked solely with military welfare, the USO. The USO quickly assumed responsibility for providing recreation and entertainment for military personnel in areas near military establishments and began a series of fund raising drives that would fund the organization's work.⁴ Although there was great internal debate about the degree to which cooperation or competition between the constituent agencies guided the USO's efforts on the home-front, as USO Board Member John D. Rockefeller, Jr. noted, combining the six organizations' efforts aimed to avoid the competition and overlapping work that characterized recreation work during World War I.⁵

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, burgeoning recreation and entertainment work grew exponentially. As personnel deployed to overseas theaters, the military charged the Red Cross with providing welfare work in the war zones, first in areas near bases, then, as the war dragged on and needs increased, on military bases themselves. Chartered by Congress to provide civilian assistance to the military during wartime, Red Cross personnel supplied necessary support in hospitals and camps, made small loans to servicemen and women, relayed emergency messages from home, and organized the bulk of the military's recreation program.⁶ From England to India, Guam to Nigeria, China to New Zealand, the Red Cross provided clubs where GIs could find American-style food, magazines, music, and girls. Many even offered sleeping accommodations for soldiers on furlough, so many in fact, that the Red Cross boasted it operated the world's largest hotel chain during the war. Red Cross women also drove Clubmobiles, converted buses and trucks equipped with donut and coffee machines, to reach personnel stationed in more remote locations in Europe and Africa.⁷

The USO's efforts remained concentrated on the home-front, where clubs opened in large and small cities, small towns, and along transportation routes.⁸ According to Meghan K. Winchell, at the height of operations in 1944, the USO ran more than three thousand clubs across the country that served one million patrons daily.⁹ In addition to USO clubs and canteens organized across the United States, the USO opened clubs in Bermuda, Newfoundland, Hawaii, Panama, the Caribbean, and Alaska. With the Red Cross performing recreation work in theaters of war, the USO's primary contribution to overseas soldier entertainment came through its USO-Camp Shows, Inc. program.¹⁰ Organized in October 1941, it began providing professional entertainment for the military and sent its first overseas tour, featuring comedians Laurel and Hardy and Chico Marx, along with Broadway tap dancer and film star Mitzi Mayfair, to entertain

troops stationed in the Caribbean.¹¹ Throughout the war and immediate postwar period, USO-Camp Show, Inc. sent 7,336 entertainers overseas to perform an estimated 253,410 performances.¹²

The Meanings of Recreation and Entertainment

USO officials insisted that keeping a portion of servicemen's recreation in civilian hands was an important task. Arguing against Secretary Baker's conclusion at the end of World War I that the military should perform welfare work, JDR, Jr. insisted that the USO and the Red Cross provided invaluable "bulwarks against the encroachment" of government agencies on private life, even on the military. Some administrative officials, he explained, preferred that morale work among the armed services be provided by government agencies. Fortunately, in JDR Jr.'s mind, President Franklin D. Roosevelt personally directed that private organizations bear responsibility for supplemental recreation work. Thus, the USO's success lay in part in its "protection" against government intrusion in morale work.¹³

USO officials understood their work with soldiers and sailors as a means of providing activities that would help them maintain a civilian influence in their lives. As USO officials noted in the organization's early days of operation, most military men had been drafted, did not consider themselves to be professional soldiers, and wanted to "maintain their identity with civilian life."¹⁴ "The transition from civilian life to camp life will be difficult for many young men," officials warned, and military life might become "so deep-seated that after a year in camp it may be hard for the 'ex-soldier' to take his normal place in his own community." To ease the transition to military life and to ward off permanent militarization, the USO pledged to provide opportunities for servicemen to "share naturally in home and community life, not as soldiers to be coddled, but as citizens." The end result would be good soldiers, "the highest type of

American citizen” who held a “firm faith in the American way of life.”¹⁵ Such fears accounted for the USO’s determination that its clubs be a “home away from home,” places where servicemen could relax outside military discipline and thus preserve their “personality” and “personal integrity.”¹⁶

USO President Lindsley Kimball insisted in a 1980 interview that the organization had to be civilian-run to maintain its effectiveness. “The value of the USO has always been not the sheer entertainment,” he explained. “The military can bring in shows, the military can run canteens, the military can buy doughnuts or make them and sell them. But ... they cannot do without the backing and the interest of the whole population.” In particular, Kimball insisted that men who could think of USO clubs “as a home away from home” were reminded of the people at home who supported them and for whom they were fighting.¹⁷ The men were not “professional soldiers” but “fought on behalf of the population” and needed to be reminded of this civic obligation.¹⁸ Thus, the USO dedicated its efforts to developing “friendly and wholesome contacts between persons in civilian and military life” that would ultimately help servicemen “adjust themselves to their new conditions of life with enthusiasm and high morale.”¹⁹

On July 8, 1941 JDR, Jr. joined other military and civilian officials in a radio fund-raising drive for the USO. In a well-received speech, Rockefeller linked the USO’s efforts to resist complete militarization of servicemen with its complementary goal of providing moral and domestic influences. Appealing to the public as a parent, Rockefeller confessed that he did not want to see his parenting efforts “go for naught” when his son joined the military and, therefore, he relied on the USO to provide “activities that are normal and wholesome.” Although he acknowledged the importance of martial training, JDR, Jr. asserted that he did not want his son

to be made “tough by his military training, nor do you. I do not want my son, just because he is a soldier, to be abandoned by those influences that make for character.” This is where the USO provided critical services. If given the opportunity to engage in proper leisure time activities—specifically, to have “a wholesome atmosphere, the companionship of fine women and girls, recreations that are normal and influences that will keep them clean, and worthy”—Rockefeller insisted that his son would return from war “still a man with ideals, holding duty and honor above life.”²⁰

These concerns for providing wholesome and moral recreation stemmed from revived fears among community leaders that unattended men flooding into training camps and new bases near their cities would spawn an increase in vice, particularly, prostitution. In the wake of the September 1940 Selective Service Act, which mobilized nearly one million men into training camps, officials in the USO’s component organizations, as well as community leaders from across the country, began to dedicate consistent attention to stemming the rise of commercialized prostitution. As the American Social Hygiene Association reported, the USO had been created to provide “wholesome leisure activities” that “will provide these young men something better to do than visit brothels, places of lewd entertainment, or lawless liquor resorts where prostitutes and their agents solicit trade.”²¹

In this way, service clubs, Clubmobile visits, and traveling USO-Camp Shows served a much broader purpose than mere diversion. Commanders believed—as their predecessors had decades earlier in World War I—that American women performed crucial symbolic roles that extended beyond serving coffee and doughnuts to GIs. Army and navy officials maintained that American women boosted the morale of soldiers far from home in ways that no man could. In fact, military officials relied on civilian agencies for assistance in part because only they could

provide American women for the men to interact with and watch on stage.²² As Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall expressed early in the U.S. effort, the army needed civilian organizations to provide recreation services “where the employment of women is practical.”²³ Red Cross and USO women reminded men of the women they missed, but more than that; they stood as surrogate sweethearts, wives, sisters, and mothers. They were familiar, and they were there to listen, entertain, and share the men’s wartime experiences. Women recreation workers reminded men of home, and thus would keep the men from engaging in dangerous sexual relationships. As Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson noted at an April 1942 USO conference, boys stationed “literally in the jungle, in the mud and in the dust” were “ready to fight at the drop of a Jap,” but had a “critical need for social activity . . . companionship and hospitality.” “If American mothers and American families do not see that they get it,” he warned, “those soldiers are going to take it any place they can find it.”²⁴

USO-Camp Shows, Inc. blended the USO’s broader goals of providing wholesome entertainment that would divert servicemen’s attentions from vice and maintain a civilian influence, even as female performers discovered the difficulty of their charge. As JDR, Jr. maintained, “the music, the gaiety, the laughter, the girls” should be “wholly divorced” from military regimentation and discipline to provide a necessary counterpart to the militarization of civilian men.²⁵ Balancing music, gaiety, laughter, and girls with the organization’s other goals of providing moral influences frequently proved difficult for Camp Shows’ officials. According to USO President Lindsley F. Kimball, all performers had to sign a contract pledging they would not divert from an approved performance script. Such regulations derived in part from tensions between “the biblical minded directors . . . and the girls who wanted to give the boys what they wanted to see.” Still, some performances “went sour” when performers became intoxicated or

fought with military officials.²⁶ Other problems stemmed from servicemen's more carnal desires. The USO intended performances to be for the enjoyment of enlisted men, for example, but officers also enjoyed the entertainment. On occasion, tensions developed between the men, because, as Kimball noted, "when you send attractive women over, it's pretty hard to separate the men from the boys."²⁷ Additionally, female performers had to take multiple sets of underwear with them when traveling overseas "because when they'd wash it and hang it out on the line, it was gone. The G.I.'s just plain stole it, every piece of underwear that the female stars ... wore."²⁸

As I continue my work on the subject of military recreation and entertainment, I am grateful for the support of the Rockefeller Archive Center in facilitating my research on World War II. The records I perused have proven invaluable in my understanding of early USO history and its conceptions of welfare work. When integrated into my broader history of similar programs across the 20th century, I hope to demonstrate that women's recreation work formed an essential component of the military's war-making efforts, the extension of American empire, and the construction of appropriate wartime gender norms. Women's wartime entertainment work expands our understanding of the history of gender, sexuality, the military, and empire by investigating the complicated ways the armed forces utilized women as symbols of obligation, longing, domesticity, and normative gender and heterosexual relationships.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Julia M.H. Carson, “The History of USO, Part I,” pp. 8-9; Lindsley F. Kimball papers, 1939-(1974-1979), Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter RAC).

² Both the army and navy changed the name and organization of their morale divisions several times. “Welfare and Recreation of Soldiers and Sailors,” March (or May?) 29, 1941, Chaplain’s folder, General Subject Files, Joint Army Navy Committee on Welfare and Recreation, RG 225 Records of Joint Army and Navy Boards and Committees, 1903-1947, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (NACP); President’s Committee on Religion and Welfare in the Armed Forces, *Free Time in the Armed Forces: A Study of the Armed Forces’ Special Services and Recreation Programs*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Print Office, February 28, 1951, pp. 73-74.

³ On the army’s Special Services, see James J. Cooke, *American Girls, Beer, and Glenn Miller: GI Morale in World War II*. (American Military Experience), Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012.

⁴ Carson, “The History of USO, Part I,” pp. 26-27; Technical Manual No. 21-205, Special Service Officer, Washington, D.C.: War Department, May 12, 1942, pp. 6-12.

⁵ JDR Jr. to Chancellor Carmichael, April 10, 1942, JDR Jr. Correspondence, Series P Welfare-General, Record Group (RG) 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives (RFA), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). A report on USO activities in the United States found little genuine cooperation between agencies in the communities. Constituent agencies—particularly the YMCA, JWB, and NCCS—frequently overlapped in their efforts, the report found, despite the fact that soldiers did not care which agency sponsored their entertainment. See Raymond B. Fosdick, Memorandum on the USO, April 23, 1942, JDR Jr. Correspondence, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC; See also Lindsley F. Kimball, “Recommendation Respecting the Service of National Voluntary Agencies—USO or Equivalent—in the Event of a New Military Emergency,” March 1948, JDR Jr. Correspondence, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

⁶ Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall explained to USO President Harper Silbey that the Red Cross had been selected to provide recreational services in theaters of operation, because of its previous experiences in similar work and its international character. See George C. Marshall to Harper Silbey, March 6, 1942, USO-Overseas, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

⁷ Largest hotel chain: Turner Catledge, “Red Cross Running Huge ‘Hotel Chain,’” *New York Times*, March 16, 1944; other information: “Meeting with Mr. Harvey Gibson, Commissioner from Great Britain,” June 11, 1943, 900.11 ETO Club and Clubmobile Departments, RG 200, Records of the American National Red Cross, NACP.

⁸ Frank Coffey, *Always Home: 50 Years of the USO*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 1991, p. 3. The agreement between the USO and Federal Security Agency is included in RG 2 and outlines the USO’s operation of clubs in the domestic United States. Agreement with Agencies, 1941-1942; Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

⁹ Meghan K. Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses during World War II* (Gender and American Culture), Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, p. 2.

¹⁰ Robert Bremner, Minna Adams Hutcheson, and Lucille Stein Greenberg, *The History of the American National Red Cross*, Volume XIII: American Red Cross Services in the War against the European Axis, Pearl Harbor to 1947. Washington, D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1950, pp. 3-5. Several agreements dictated the terms of which agency, the Red Cross or the USO, operated in specific overseas theaters; See George Marshall to Harper Sibley, December 19, 1941, USO: Agreement with Red Cross, Armed Services United Service Organizations-Related Records, YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota; “Service to the Armed Forces Joint Statement of the American Red Cross and the United Service Organizations, Inc.,” March 2, 1943, USO: Agreement with Red Cross, Armed Services United Service Organizations-Related Records, YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota; War Department Memorandum No. W850-pp. 9-43, “Welfare and Recreational Activities of the Red Cross and USO and United States Army Forces Overseas,” March 15, 1943, American Red Cross General 1943, General Subject Files, Joint Army Navy Committee on Welfare and Recreation, RG 225, Records of Joint Army and Navy Boards and Committees, 1903-1947, NACP; Robert Bremner, Minna Adams Hutcheson, and Lucille Stein Greenberg, *The History of the American National Red Cross*, Volume XIII: American Red Cross Services in the War against the European Axis, Pearl Harbor to 1947. Washington, D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1950, pp. 3-13; Associates of the Historical Division, *The History of the American National Red Cross*, Volume VI: National Headquarters in World War II. Washington, D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1950, vii79-vii-89, vii95-vii96, 494.2 General—History of the ANRC (Monographs), Box 766, RG 200, Records of the American National Red Cross 1935-1946, NACP.

¹¹ “Camp Shows, Inc. a/k/a USO-Camp Shows, Inc. Records, 1941-1957,” Volume 1, xii-xiii, Records of Camp Shows, Inc., 1941-1957, Special Services Division, RG 407, Adjutant General’s Office, NACP.

¹² “Operation USO: Report of the President,” January 9, 1948, p. 33, USO-Printed Material-Press Releases, Series P Welfare-General; RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

¹³ JDR Jr. to Chancellor Carmichael, April 10, 1942, JDR Jr. Correspondence, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC. An October 1941 summary of USO policy notes that General Frederick Osborne, head of army special services, convinced Roosevelt to insist that civilian—not government—agencies would direct welfare work outside of military establishments. “USO Policy and its Relation to the Citizens Committee and Local USO Committees,” October 6, 1941, JDR Jr. Correspondence, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

¹⁴ Harry A. Wann remarks to the Defense Recreation Conference, in *Proceedings of the Defense Recreation Conference, September 29, 1941*. New York: National Recreation Association, 1941, pp. 50, 51.

¹⁵ Carson, “The History of USO, Part I,” p. 69, and pp. 67-68.

¹⁶ Home away from home: Frank Coffey, *Always Home: 50 Years of the USO*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 1991, p. 4; Personality/integrity: “To the Friends of the USO” report, February 1943, p. 3, USO Annual Reports, 1942-1948, Armed Services United Service Organizations-Related Records, YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota.

¹⁷ Lindsley F. Kimball interview by Joseph W. Ernst and J. William Hess, March 10 through April 9, 1980, transcript, pp. 90-91, RG 13, Oral Histories, RF, RAC.

¹⁸ On women as objects of obligation during World War II, see Robert Westbrook’s classic article, “‘I want a girl, just like the girl that married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II.” *American Quarterly* 42: 4 (December 1990), pp. 587-614.

¹⁹ “Statement on Program” (Exhibit B), Agreement with Agencies, 1941-1942, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

²⁰ “To New York City Parents and Neighbors” pamphlet, pp. 4-5, JDR Jr. Address, July 8, 1941, Series P Welfare-General; RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

²¹ “Personal and Strictly Confidential,” May 26, 1941, General-American Social Hygiene Funds, 1941, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

²² Richard F. Allen to Mark Tomas, June 3, 1943, decimal .080, 1943-1945 ARC Policy, General Correspondence, Special Services Section, RG 493, Records of the US Army Forces in the China-Burma-India Theaters of Operations, NACP; Richard F. Allen to Mr. Bondy, Mr. Don Smith, Mr. Wesselius, March 3, 1944, 900.616 All Theaters, Recreation 1944-1945, RG 200, Records of the American National Red Cross, NACP.

²³ George Marshall to United Service Organizations, Chester I. Barnard, May 31, 1942, USO: Agreement with War Department 1942, Armed Services United Service Organizations-Related Records, YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota.

²⁴ “USO War Activities Conference,” April 12, 1942, pp. 3-4, USO War Activities Conference—April 1942, General Records of Recreation Services Section, RG 24, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, NACP.

²⁵ JDR Jr. Speech “USO-Camp Shows,” December 11, 1945, JDR Jr.’s Addresses-December 11, 1945, Series P Welfare-General, RG 2, OMR, RFA, RAC.

²⁶ Kimball interview, p. 87, RG 13, Oral Histories, RF, RAC.

²⁷ Kimball interview, p. 90, RG 13, Oral Histories, RF, RAC.

²⁸ Kimball interview, p. 90, RG 13, Oral Histories, RF, RAC.