

# Thanks for the Memories

Story and Photos by SP5 Andrew McCullough



Rose Ann Sturdevant, imitating Bob Hope, begins the show at one of the many Firebases the team visited. Below, a GI enjoys a dance with Sally Edwards.

A feeling of being forgotten isn't an uncommon one for the men who have to live at the remote fire bases deep in the jungles of Vietnam. Many men are out there, and, in comparison, very few get a chance to see live entertainment which plays at the bigger and safer fire bases.

But for 1,800 such GIs, the Christmas season did not pass without a Christmas show. Six Red Cross girls from II Field Force and two men from the 1st Signal Brigade's Southeast Asia Pictorial Center (SEAPC) took it upon themselves to spread some holiday spirit to these otherwise forgotten men of the war...the men who do the fighting.

For eight days prior to Christmas, the team of tireless entertainers took their "miniature Bob Hope Christmas Show" to some 43 locations throughout III and IV Corps. At each base, bronze-tanned, dust-covered men emerged from underground, out of the bushes and down from trees to swarm around the visitors like Indians on cowboys. Sitting on everything from steel pots to howitzer barrels and tracks with quad-50's, they sweltered in the 100 degree temperatures while

the "round-eyes" gave them a rousing 30 minutes of holiday cheer.

The guys loved every minute of it. They whistled, howled, applauded, stomped their feet and laughed like only the field GIs know how. They even sang "Joy To The World," as ironic as it seems, and only American girls could get men in such a situation to do that. To see tired, sweaty, war weary GIs sing songs as they look with melting looks into the eyes of the Red Cross girls...this was proof enough to the motion picture team and the girls that their 15 hour work days were not in vain. They entertained where entertainment was appreciated most.

When the men from SEAPC do something, they usually do it in a big way. The entire show was shot on movie film and all the dialogue and audience sounds were recorded to accompany it. After approximately an hour of film was shot of several shows, it was sent to the three national television networks for a three minute showing across the United States on the December 24th and 25th evening news.

But the results of their efforts are only a part of the story. How it all came about and what it





Evelyn Safford (front) and Sally Edwards (rear) get to meet the troops after a show. Above, SEAPC's SP5 Dennis Tanner introduces the show to members of Firebase Bolen.

took to put the show on is a story in itself.

1Lt. Robert Demchuk, the motion picture team leader at SEAPC, directed the show and co-produced it with SP5 Dennis Tanner, a SEAPC correspondent, who wrote the entire script the Red Cross girls used. The two men also made all the stage props and taped the music for the production. SP4 Vance Barnes did all the still and motion picture photography for them.

The complete show was put together in two weeks, and actual rehearsal time was only 30 hours. "When we began the first show" said Lt. Demchuk, "the (paint on the) backdrop was still wet."

During the tour, each day began at 5:30 a.m. and lasted late into each night, sometimes into early morning of the following day. Each morning, the sleepy-eyed troupe of 9 would load their equipment onto two "Huey Slicks" of the 120th Aviation Company, and they would be on their way to the fire bases when the clouds hadn't even lifted above tree level. It was a whirlwind tour, to say the

least, which included some 50 fire base stops during seven days of travel into the boonies. At 43 bases, shows were given; and at seven other bases, due to the tight schedule, a show wasn't given but stops were made so the girls could say hello to the guys. On Christmas day—the eighth day of the tour—three shows were given at hospitals, one at Long Binh and two in Saigon.

At most of the stops forward, the entertainers were met at the fire base perimeters by dozens of shirtless, tousle-haired men who helped to carry the stage equipment, speakers, camera and tape recorder to the show site inside the base. At other bases, the GIs simply stood around their hootches and stared in curiosity and disbelief at all the femininity walking into their "AO". Since communication is limited to the most remote locations and messages to them have to be brief, they only expected a couple of "Do-nut Dollies" to come around for an hour visit. After the initial shock wore off, they made up for lost time by double-timing to get the equipment hauled in.

Putting on a parody of the Bob Hope Show, the six girls literally turned the guys on. Rose Ann Sturdevant came out first. Decked out in beribboned, camouflage jungle fatigues and posing as Bob Hope, she went through a soft-shoe routine, golf club in hand, telling one line jokes which ribbed officers and EMs, front and rear-echelon troops alike. "I see you have a lot of young lieutenants around here," 'Hope' said: "Just saw one who had trouble saluting and sucking his thumb at the same time." Referring to the men in the rear, "Hope" continued, "The guys at Long Binh are the only GIs in country who have to be treated for frostbite. Too much air conditioning. Yeah, they really got it made. Incoming to them means the round-eyes are coming."

Diane Aceveto and Mary Ann Dixon came bouncing out in miniskirts. Diane posed as a state beauty queen and Mary Ann was the "Miss National Photogenic On-A-Cloudy Day" queen. They were challenged to a dance contest by Shela Shanehan, Evelyn Safford and



Sally Edwards who were posing as members of a hard core Women's Lib group. Every movement made by the cavorting contestants was recorded on film by the "captured" audience of GIs who, at the end of the dances, determined the winning team with their applause.

Afterwards, the girls went into the audience and met the guys personally. Then, they asked various guys to dance with them, a part of the show that got a mixed response. Some of the GIs were shy and backed away, but there were always plenty of men more than eager to participate. Some of the volunteer dancers seemed to melt in the girls' arms, while others did some serious dancing that would put James Brown to shame.

All the while the audience jibed the dancing soldiers. One PFC yelled out to his (understandably) "left-footed" executive officer, saying, "Hey sir...watch out for them toes!"

The show ended as the girls led everyone in singing Christmas carols, following up with a spirited dance-sing along rendition of "Aquarius" as they made their exit.

Sunburned and out of breath, the girls changed clothes in a bunker-turned-dressing room while the equally sunburned and dusty crew dismantled their gear. Once out of the bunker, the girls stopped to pose for a few last minute pictures with the GIs as the crew lugged the equipment back to the chopper; then, off for another fire base where they

see if they wanted to see the show.

Meals were missed because the group would arrive too early or too late. Caught up in a race against time so all the scheduled shows could be given, the crew left equipment behind which had to be retrieved.

Just before arriving at one base near the Cambodian border, the chopper pilots got word that the base was being mortared. With no inclination to stop, they flew on to the next one. During the performance, an alert came. Most of the ad-libs were cut out of that show. And before coming into a coastal fire base, the pilots had to do an about face and make a quick landing at a nearby engineers' compound. The prospective audience was on a fire mission and no one aboard was up to sharing the airways with uncharted howitzer rounds. When they finally landed at the fire base, SP5 Tanner slowly got out of the chopper and with a bewildered look on his face, he said, "for awhile there, I thought we were flying reconnaissance for the artillery. Wooow!"

But the show must go on, as it were, so on it went. Somehow, in spite of themselves and the situational hazards, the scheduled number of shows were given.

Exactly what kept them going at such a hectic pace is easy to understand. Despite all the hypertensive moments brought on by mid-air rescheduling and mid-show power failures, loss of sleep and, consequently, frazzled nerves, there was always an incentive; the guys in the field.

Shela gave her reason for doing the show, explaining that most of the guys in the field get little (entertainment-wise) for Christmas. "This is the best Christmas I've ever spent," she said. Doing the show for the guys was her way of saying thanks. In so saying, she expressed the feelings of the entire group.

Speaking about incentive, SP5 Tanner added, "When those guys came up to me and shook my hand and said, 'We sure do appreciate you doing the show for us,' I got all choked up. They're a great bunch of guys out there...what more can I say?"



The girls put on their skit, above, while three of the girls, Mary Ann Dixon, Diane Aceveto and Shela Shanehan pose with a happy member of the 11th ACR.



would go through the whole routine again. Not until each girl was strapped in her seat was anyone sure they'd leave with all six girls. The girls loved the guys at those lonesome outposts as much as the guys loved them.

No traveling show group is exempt from problems, and the SEAPC-Red Cross entourage was no exception. There were fire bases on the itinerary which had to be dropped because the unit had moved out just prior to showtime; therefore, other nearby bases were contacted to