

## Entertaining The Armed Forces in World War Two

At the beginning of the war the government recognised that in order to keep up the morale of military personnel fighting the enemy they would benefit from being entertained when not in combat. This would be achieved using a variety of performers, either in venues designed for the purpose or in makeshift venues often very near war zones.

Two organisations were set up to achieve this, both with government support. Stars in Battledress (SIB) was set up as part of the War Department, whilst the Entertainment National Services Association (ENSA) was organised 'privately'. Both organisations were given access throughout the war to a variety of venues, both in Britain and abroad, in order to entertain the troops.

The Entertainments National Service Association was set up in 1939 by Basil Dean, an actor, writer and film producer, and Leslie Henson, a comedian, actor, producer and director. The organisation operated as part of the Army, Navy and Air Force Institutes. ENSA's remit was slightly wider than that of Stars in Battledress in that it also went into factories in order to keep up the morale of workers undertaking essential war production. Stars in Battledress concentrated on entertaining military personnel, but since all of its artistes were part of the military they could go to areas where fighting was occurring, so performing in areas of danger. ENSA on the other hand was largely made up of civilian artistes unable to go too close to battle fronts. However they were still sometimes expected to perform in areas prone to danger, notably in the height of the Blitz. Later on in the war ENSA performers became commissioned officers. Performers were paid £10 per week but those in the chorus were paid only £4 weekly. Even so they were still generous wages for the time.

Unlike SIB, ENSA was a civilian organisation, but it still had to operate under military rules and regulations. It also faced opposition from the BBC for trying to poach many of the Corporation's stars to perform on stage in front of troops. Moreover Basil Dean was a rather abrasive personality often causing resentment in those organisations he was dependent on for support and help. Operationally ENSA was often criticised for a lack of organisation and the overall quality of the performers it employed. Indeed it became known in some circles as

'Every Night Something Awful', an acronym coined by Tommy Trinder a comedian of the time. ENSA came to be derided in the press and by politicians. It also became mired in class conflict, since regular troops generally wanted pretty girls and comedians, unlike the officers who preferred more 'high minded' acts such as opera and ballet. It was arguably ramshackle in its organisation and erratic in its execution.

Yet the Entertainments National Service Association lasted for seven years. Despite the poor quality of many of the acts employed, these were often more than made up for by frequent appearances of performers such as George Formby, Gracie Fields, Vera Lynn, Eric Sykes, Tommy Cooper, Arthur Askey and Joyce Grenfell. More 'highbrow' tastes were satisfied by performances from John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, and Ralph Richardson.

George Formby was considered one of the most hard working stars in ENSA, particularly during 1940/41. His application to join the organisation was initially refused by Basil Dean for five months before eventually being allowed to join in February 1940. George Formby undertook his first ENSA tour to France in March of that year to entertain troops of the British Expeditionary Force.

The first trial performance organised by ENSA was on September 10th 1939, but its first major event was a concert led by Sir Seymour Hicks and broadcast by the BBC to the Empire and local radio networks from RAF Hendon in North London on October 17th 1939. Amongst those entertaining were Adelaide Hall, the Western Brothers and Mantovani. The final ENSA performance was in India on August 18th 1945.

Stars in Battledress (SIB) or, to give it its official title, the War Office Central Pool of Artistes, was formed to utilise performing talent already existing among armed service members and ATS personnel. Based in Upper Grosvenor Street, London, it was an umbrella organisation co-ordinating the work of separate performing companies based in all three armed services. It was directed by Frank Chacksfield, a musician, composer and band leader, who joined the Royal Army Service Corps in 1939. This was the first war in which an official military entertainments unit had been established.

SIB shows were rehearsed at studios nearby with trial runs of productions at auxiliary army venues in the London area before going on to more extensive tours in the UK or abroad. Officers were not allowed to be in the cast with other lower ranks; instead they had to be producers.

Comedian Sergeant Charlie Chester was a major performer and put in charge of the script writing department. Close on the heels of the Allied troops crossing the English Channel on D Day, Charlie Chester did a double act with Arthur Haines who was serving with the Royal Engineers not far from the Normandy beaches. After the war both comedians starred in a BBC radio show 'Stand Easy' which ran from 1946 to 1949.

As it became evident that the war against Nazi Germany was being won other Stars in Battledress units were formed. Among these was a troupe called Going Places led by Desmond Llewellyn who played Q in the early James Bond films. Going Places had eight soldiers and two ATS members. The troupe was managed on the road by Sergeant Wally Huntley who as an amateur ventriloquist pre-war had acquired a full size ventriloquist's dummy. On joining up Huntley's dummy also joined up with him and as the Army had very few ventriloquists he was soon employed full time with SIB. His dummy Jimmy Green had a battle dress made for him by the Army and he developed his own persona in military circles. Jimmy is now on display in the Imperial War Museum in London.

Other SIB artists who became well known after the war included Janet Brown, Ian Carmichael, Dick Emery, Bryan Forbes, Tony Hancock, Frankie Howerd, Spike Milligan, Jon Pertwee, Harry Secombe, and Terry Thomas.

Undoubtedly both SIB and ENSA played a major part in keeping up morale both on the front line and at home in the factories. Performers from both organisations, no matter how mediocre they were, often displayed great courage in going on stage in times of danger to themselves and to their audiences. Both organisations proved to be excellent training grounds for those performers who were able to continue their careers in television and radio after the war. Perhaps without ENSA or SIB we would not have been entertained so well by the Goons, the Ealing comedies of the 1950s, or the bringing of 'serious theatre' to the rank and file by Laurence Olivier or John Gielgud. To say that ENSA and SIB won the war is an exaggeration but they certainly helped.