

It's Time Marines Took Another Look at the ...



Story by R. R. Keene • Photos courtesy of USO

Here's a trivia question: What does USO stand for? Answer: It stands for United Service Organizations—service, morale support and entertainment for more than five million U.S. military men and women each year, who visit the 115 USO facilities throughout the world.

It used to be that Marines seldom boasted of patronizing the USO. It didn't fit their "image." If questioned, they would admit to grabbing a cup of hot, strong "joe," using free movie and theater passes, and taking advantage of the USO's various means to contact home. Most, however, had no "image" problems with watching Bob "You remember World War II—it was in all the papers" Hope as he and others performed in nearly every clime and place Marines had been sent to fight.

While Bob Hope, who at 97, isn't quite up to COD (carrier onboard delivery) landings in the Persian Gulf, the USO still provides all the aforementioned, plus a lot more.

Meet John H. Tilelli Jr. (pronounced Ta-lilly). You may not recognize him in his civvies, but if, as a Marine, you ever



John H. Tilelli Jr.
President and CEO
USO

worked with the United Nations Command, Republic of Korea/United States Combined Forces Command and United States Forces Korea in the mid-to-late 1990s, you may recall seeing his picture at the top of the chain-of-command photos. He was the four-star general wearing the Combat Infantryman's Badge, jump wings, three Distinguished Service Medals and an Army green uniform covered with

combat and combat-related awards.

Gen Tilelli remembers his first contact with the USO in 1968 at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. He was a captain then and sat somewhere in a sea of Army green watching who else but Bob Hope courtesy of the USO.

After 37 years as a soldier, Gen Tilelli transitioned to civilian life when he retired in January and, little more than a month later, became president and chief executive officer of the USO.

"One of our goals for the 21st century is to let people know that the USO is out there, alive and well," said Gen Tilelli in his Washington, D.C., Navy Yard office. Believe it or not, some civilians don't know that the USO still exists during

times of relative peace. This soldier is there to say that the USO is still on the job.

"We have USOs in 10 countries and 22 states, who utilize the services of some 12,000 volunteers," said the general.

He explained that there are 42 airport centers to help military travelers with connections, foreign language translation, long layovers and missing luggage. At 27 locations in the Mediterranean, Pacific, Atlantic and Caribbean, USO fleet centers offer a range of services which includes providing information on hotels, affordable shopping and currency exchange.

Leathernecks should appreciate the emphasis on USO fleet centers. USO fleet support is especially vital in places without American bases such as Haifa, Israel; and Paris, France; where the USO acts as a liaison between host communities and visiting ships. It provides military men and women with the traditional services most people associate with the USO, but also has fine-tuned its role of providing concierge services that one normally finds only at the best hotels.

Gen Tilelli is quick to point out, "We are not stuck in the past. We can't afford to be stagnant. We think about the information-age technology and how it affects the USO over time. All our men and women [in the military] are very computer-literate. Consequently, we've added new services such as Internet access and e-mail."

He also cites examples of USO initiatives in areas and places where Marines can be found. At San Diego International Airport at Lindbergh Field, right next door to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, 6,000 Marines and sailors pass through the USO center each month. The USO at the airport has long been an information and transportation coordination hub, but it was apparent that a larger and better facility was needed.

To meet the need, the USO moved to an upgraded "first-class facility" within the airport, dubbed the C. Neil Ash USO Center, in March. It houses a new lounge, Internet access, a coffee bar and snack area, a nursery for families, a reading room, rest rooms, showers, flight information monitors, luggage storage areas



TSGT EFRAIN GONZALEZ, USAF

The Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders have become regulars on the USO tours. Here, a cheerleader sings with a Marine deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina during a July 3 performance in Butmir, Sarajevo.



Left: Bob Hope entertained Marines on Oct. 26, 1950, at Wonsan, North Korea, just prior to the Chosin Reservoir Campaign.

Below: Fifty years later the USO is still going strong. These Marines visited the new, improved facility at San Diego International Airport.

and improved travel assistance.

San Diego is only one gateway overseas. On Okinawa, a destination known to all leathernecks, the USO has opened a "cybercafe," one of several around the world allowing deployed Marines to send e-mail to friends and family, surf the Internet, play games or shop online stores. The Connect Kafe, which recently opened in USO centers on Okinawa, boasts the best computers and fastest Internet connections at lower prices than similar facilities elsewhere on the island.

"These services are all offered in clean, wholesome, smoke- and alcohol-free environments," Gen Tilelli said. On the other side of the world, he touted Gilla Gerzon, director of the USO Center in Haifa.

Called the "Mother of the Sixth Fleet," Gerzon has received praise and accolades for her efforts with the USO since 1981. Marines and sailors spot her easy

enough. She's the woman who greets ships of the amphibious ready groups arriving in Haifa with bouquets of red roses. Her USO Center on Mount Carmel high above the Mediterranean has served as a beacon to untold numbers of Marines and sailors who, once inside, enjoy a panoramic view of Lebanon. Her staff of 200 volunteers works almost around the clock to assist Marines using the phone banks to make calls home, arrange tours, secure hotel reservations and coordinate visits to local families willing to "adopt" them for a day.

Providing everything from a new cen-



ter at a Marine base to driving the mobile canteen familiar to troops along Korea's demilitarized zone, to providing board games, Nintendo and TV football parties to American forces in the Balkans, it is still the organization's mantra to bring a "touch of home" to military men and women abroad.

Easily the most recognized and remembered service provided by the USO abroad is the celebrity entertainment. Over the years it has brought the best to Marines and other Americans serving in the South Pacific; on the beach at Wonsan, Korea; in Beirut, Lebanon; at Chu

Lai and Da Nang, Vietnam; and in Southwest Asia. On the road, there was Bob Hope of course, with Bing, Marilyn and three sisters named Maxine, Laverne and Patty. Later there was Joey Heatherton, Raquel Welch and Carol Baker. More recently, there's been Hootie & the Blowfish in Bosnia, Ricky Skaggs in the Balkans, and Blues Traveler in Japan and the Persian Gulf not to mention others such as Salma Hayek, DCC and Reba McEntire who toured for the USO. While Bob Hope is missed, his absence, according to many, is ably filled by the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders, who

One Saturday afternoon in 1947 two young Marines training at 2d Infantry Training Battalion, Camp Geiger, N.C., ventured out into Jacksonville on weekend liberty.

After crossing the bridge that led from the camp into the small country town, the leathernecks stumbled across a large white building. Upon entering the structure, the young men were immediately thrilled to discover the many activities and events the facility offered, which included roller-skating and live bands.

It was on that day that Matthew B. "Matt" Hardiman was first introduced to the United Service Organizations, a relationship that has blossomed and remains intact today.

"The USO really took care of me back then," he reminisced. "It gave me a positive outlook and kept me out of trouble."

During the remainder of his 30-year military career, Hardiman made it a point to frequent USO establishments wherever the Marine Corps took him, eventually performing volunteer work for the USO in 1972.

In 1982, a few years after retiring from the Marines, the Allston, Mass., native left his banking job and accepted the offer to become the director of the same Jacksonville USO he had enjoyed so much 35 years prior.

Today, the former Marine boxer and prominent member of the local community has become a beloved icon and is known in Jacksonville as "Mr. USO."

"I had worked for other community organizations," said the retired sergeant major, "but my main love was always the USO."

May 18 marked the final time Hardiman would preside over a USO meeting as director of the Jacksonville chapter. Many local military leaders attended the farewell meeting and luncheon to commemorate Mr. USO's retirement. The next day, during a ceremony at Camp Geiger, the School of Infantry awarded the former infantryman the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal, as well as a Certificate of Commendation.

In appreciation of his dedicated support of the local Marines and sailors over the years, Hardiman also received artwork from the unit.

"One thing I will always remember Sergeant Major Hardiman for is the fresh doughnuts he always brought the

Marines here," said the SOI commanding officer, Colonel William R. Kellner, in reference to the pastries Mr. USO was known to deliver during his weekly visits to area units.

Hardiman also was responsible for a host of USO programs, including the annual road races and body-building competitions he organized.

Another hallmark of the feisty Marine was his "I Got Ya" program.

"I would call up a command and ask if there were any deserving single Marines or sailors [E-5 and below] celebrating a birthday. As soon as I came over to deliver the cake, I would arrange a 'setup' where I would hide the cake in the corner and the recipient would be brought before the company or battalion commander, while I stood in the background like a member of CID [Criminal Investigation Division]. The company commander would pretend to be upset and ask them what they had done wrong, telling them that I needed to speak with them. That's when I would walk up, introduce myself as agent Matt Hardiman, see the looks on their faces and then surprise them with the birthday cake," he explained, laughing.

One thing is for sure—the tough-as-nails leatherneck with the vibrant personality has made a lasting impact on virtually everyone he has come into contact with and vice versa.

"He's a man with an Irish temper and heart of gold," said C. C. "Whitey" Welborne, a second junior vice president at the USO, who became friends with Hardiman back in 1953 when both served as drill instructors at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego.

"His determination and willpower is the reason the USO has remained open to provide a place for the servicemembers, retirees and dependents to go and enjoy themselves."

Looking back over his distinguished career, it appears that Hardiman is living life to the fullest and has no regrets.

"I never dreamed I would have the opportunity to meet and be photographed with generals and Commandants in my lifetime, or have parades in my honor. It feels great to receive the kind of honors I have as a USO director," he said. "With all the fantastic friends and family I've had the pleasure of being around, my life has been one happy, wild, wonderful ride."

—Sgt Houston F. White Jr.
CPAO, MCB, Camp Lejeune, N.C.

have become regulars on the USO Celebrity Entertainment tours.

"The celebrities volunteer their time and talent to go and visit our troops around the world," said Gen Tilelli. "The USO pays their expenses. We focus on our troops only overseas because they don't have the same opportunities as men and women serving at home."

It all costs money. The USO has an annual operating budget of \$20 million. It receives \$6 million from about 350,000 individual donations. The USO is also supported by World Partners AT&T, USAA, Nicorette/NicoDerm CQ and Yahoo! and by corporate donors such as Northwest Airlines, General Dynamics, Anheuser-Busch, the United Way and Combined Federal Campaign (CFC-0600).

"We are a nonprofit organization," said Gen Tilelli, "and about 85 cents of every dollar brought in goes to support USO programs and services."

"We are the only civilian organization whose sole purpose is to support and improve the morale and welfare of our servicemembers. We're doing it for the young men and women and their families around the world."

There's probably a lot of things a man like John Tilelli could be doing to make a lot more money with less effort. However, the general is still a soldier, and to him this is an affair of the heart.

"The men and women of the U.S. military are selfless in their service to the nation. They are truly a national resource. We as citizens and retired mili-

tary have a responsibility to those who serve. I thought I could continue to live up to that responsibility by serving with the USO."

Editor's note: If you still aren't convinced the USO is worth supporting, remember that these are your Marines, your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters serving in places such as Naples, Italy; Keflavik, Iceland; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Seoul, Korea; Camp Fuji and Sasebo, Japan; as well as camps and facilities on Okinawa. Be sure to visit the USO Web site at <www.uso.org>, or call (800) 876-7469, and consider the USO when making your CFC contribution.

