



CHRISTMAS

Away From Home

By BOB HOPE

Editors' Note: No personality in show business has spent more time, energy, and talent entertaining our GIs overseas than Bob Hope. For the morale-boosting effect of these many visits, which date back to World War II, Hope will be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President Kennedy sometime during 1963. He will thus be among the very few Americans ever to be accorded this high national honor. In the following story, Bob tells about his annual Christmas trips overseas, which have become an eagerly awaited tradition by GIs everywhere.

THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT just telephoned to remind me: It's that time of year again—time for me to be on my way to meet old Father Christmas somewhere in Japan, Korea, Okinawa, South Vietnam, or Thailand.

When people ask me why I have been going on these trips for more than a dozen years, I can tell them only what a gift it is to see the light of laughter shining in thousands of homesick eyes. Everyone who has made these trips feels the same way; he wants to climb on a plane and go again. Maybe we're hooked on the box lunches, but I feel we are privileged citizens.

So forgive me if I, who am usually blessed with glibness, find it hard to share my feelings about the 5,000 Marines in Korea who spent five hours huddled for warmth in the biting cold, waiting for us to arrive. Or about Thule, Greenland—probably the most desolate spot on earth—where we found ourselves on New Year's, a time of the year when it is dark around the clock.

Bill Holden and his wife Brenda Marshall, Anita Ekberg, Jerry Colonna, Margaret Whiting, Bob Strauss, and Les Brown and his orchestra were there with me. We saw the New Year in with several hundred soldiers who were so tightly packed into a tiny gymnasium that some actually were hanging from the equipment on the ceiling.

At midnight the band broke into "Auld Lang Syne," and then came dead silence. Seconds later, there was one loud yell from hundreds of throats, a roar of anguish born of loneliness and pent-up emotion that seemed to need a united outlet. It ended as suddenly as it began, and then everyone in that bleak auditorium marched onto the stage to say "Happy New Year." By coincidence, they were all huddled around Anita Ekberg.

I saw a lot of our servicemen during World War II, but my first real Christmas overseas was in 1948, when Tex McCrary told me that Stuart Symington, then Secretary of the Air Force, had asked him to get together a group to fly to Berlin during the airlift.

A few months later I ran into Stu at a party at Romanoff's following a film premiere. He casually remarked: "By the way, Bob, how about going to Alaska next Christmas to put on a show?"

I didn't think much of the idea. During the war I tried to visit a number of nearby hospitals at Christmas time. But being away during the holiday season was another story, and I told him so.

"Think it over," he insisted. "I'll call you in the morning."

When he called the house, I was still unsure. "I don't like the idea of leaving Dolores," I told him.

"Bring her along."

"But the kids expect . . ."

"Bring them, too."

When I heard the voices of Linda and Tony yell through the receiver, "Let's go, Daddy," I realized everyone in the family had picked up an extension phone to listen in on my decision. So we took everyone but Nora and Kelly, who were too young. But to make sure they had a Christmas, we celebrated ours on Jan. 1, a custom that has continued in our family ever since.

After that first one, my family only went along on a few more trips. By now they have grown so accustomed to my absence at Christmas that they no longer ask if I'm going but merely where I'm going. The only thing that bothers me is the story a friend told me about Dolores. He was standing next to her when we took off last year, and no sooner had our plane left the ground when all the wives who stayed behind began crying—all but Dolores, that is. She turned to our friends with a warm, wonderful smile and said: "I'd cry if he weren't going." Maybe I should stay home next year!

The Junkets Are Not Taken Lightly

But seriously, my family realizes what these trips mean to me and everyone involved. When they tease me about them, they do it gently. After I returned from one junket, they presented me with a huge globe with Los Angeles circled on it. Underneath it was printed: "Make this your next trip, Dad."

These trips aren't all hardship on our part. In fact, there is very little physical discomfort, except for the cold—and I have no right to complain when you consider that Jayne Mansfield peels off her mink coat and stands for hours in a low-cut dress, posing for pictures with the boys. All those flash bulbs going off must produce a special kind of heat therapy.

We've been cold, sure; but by now I'm getting pretty good at turning blue. I suppose our coldest Christmas was spent in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, shortly after MacArthur took it