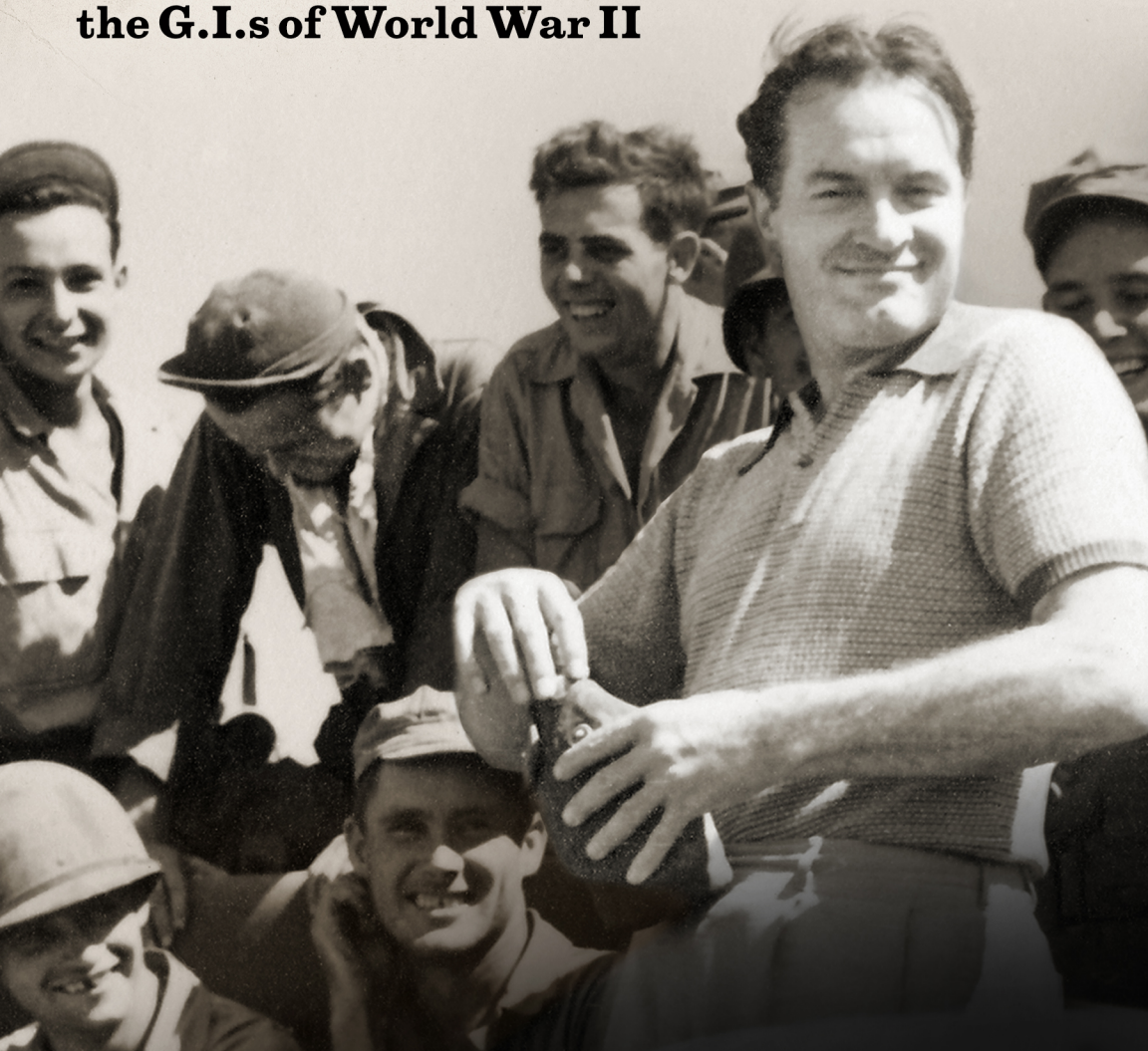




DEAR BOB...

**Bob Hope's Wartime
Correspondence with
the G.I.s of World War II**



Written and compiled by

Martha Bolton with Linda Hope



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University Press of Mississippi ★ Jackson

**DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF BOB HOPE,
WHO GAVE SO MUCH TO THE TROOPS,
TO THE TROOPS
WHO GAVE SO MUCH FOR PEACE,
AND TO THOSE BRAVE SOLDIERS
WHO GAVE THEIR ALL**

CONTENTS

Foreword by Linda Hope [ix]

Preface by Martha Bolton [xiii]

Introduction [3]

DEAR BOB ... We Got Drafted. How'd You Get Here? [6]

DEAR BOB ... Drop Me a Few Lines, Will Ya? [23]

DEAR BOB ... We Can Dream, Can't We? [41]

DEAR BOB ... Thanks for Having Our Backs! [49]

DEAR BOB ... Did I Really Sign Up for This? [53]

DEAR BOB ... Here's What's Shakin' [58]

DEAR BOB ... Greetings from the Foxhole [68]

DEAR BOB ... Tell My Mom I Miss Her [74]

DEAR BOB ... Just Had to Send It [81]

DEAR BOB ... I'm Missing My Sweetheart [100]

DEAR BOB ... How 'Bout It? [106]

DEAR BOB ... Words Aren't Enough [115]

DEAR BOB ... The Beaches Looked Better in the Brochure [135]

DEAR BOB ... Remind the Folks Back Home to Do Their Part ...
and We'll Do Ours [153]

DEAR BOB ... War Is Real [164]

DEAR BOB ... Here's a Memory for You [179]

DEAR BOB ... Where the Heck Are You? [189]

DEAR BOB ... Nice of You to Drop In [201]

DEAR BOB ... We Won't Be Home for Christmas [214]

DEAR BOB ... Thanks for Being There [225]

DEAR BOB ... V-E Day at Last! [246]

DEAR BOB ... V-J Day ... War's End [252]

DEAR BOB ... Going Home [255]

Bob Hope's World War II Appearances [293]

Acknowledgments [296]

FOREWORD

Linda Hope

MARTHA AND I HAVE WANTED TO DO THIS BOOK FOR MANY YEARS. THROUGHOUT my life, these letters have meant a lot to me in different ways. My first memory was seeing them in their special boxes in my dad's home office. Their orange spines and black-and-white-speckled sides stood neatly in a row on a high shelf, and I was intrigued as a child. Time passed and I watched that orange row grow, one, then two, then three rows, and on and on. Years later, as a freshman in high school I remember having an assignment in my English class, "Write about something that intrigues you."

I thought awhile and remembered those "mystery boxes" in my dad's office. I set about getting to the bottom of it. My first stop was Miss Hughes; yes, "Miss Hughes" (not politically correct, but that's what everyone called her and remember this was the 1940s). She was my dad's longtime secretary who had been with him since I was a baby. I told her I was doing a report for my English class on the contents of the orange boxes. "What's in them?" I asked. "It's history . . . your dad's and our country's," she replied. "May I take a look?" She went on to explain, "All of those boxes are filled with letters from our fighting men and women who served at home and overseas, their family members back home along with as many of your father's responses as he had the time to write, and there were more letters than you can imagine. I'm amazed how he was able to do all that he did and travel to as many places." She told me to come back later and she would get down a couple of boxes for me to go through.

I wasn't at all surprised that Miss Hughes had organized all this correspondence, as she always carefully managed and kept meticulous records of all his travel, show dates, and locations. Clearly, she was devoted to my dad and his quest and did all she could to support his mission to bring laughter and a bit of home to those men and women protecting this adopted country of his. Years later, I grew to appreciate all she did to preserve my dad's legacy.

Each box contained a hundred or more letters, many with carbon copy (it was the '40s), responses from my dad, which Miss Hughes somehow thoughtfully attached, knowing they would be an important part of the story of WW2.

As I was going through them, I was struck then, as I am now, that these letters really told the human side of what these men were going through and what Bob Hope and the laughter he brought meant to their morale and, not surprisingly, what these trips and the contact with the individuals serving meant to my dad.

Reading through these letters, which now reside at the Library of Congress, I was struck by how different our world was without the electronics and transportation we have today. In the forties, we had no computers, no e-mail, no instant communications, and travel that was done in much smaller, slower planes was far from the jet service of today. Even having lived through those challenging times I often forget what those days were like without our “modern conveniences.” But it was also a time when everyone felt a commitment to work together and do their part. My dad was a great example of that. He had a gift for being able to make people laugh, and he shared it, willingly and without concern for his own well-being, and he enlisted others to do the same with their own gifts.

He always took a small troupe of fellow entertainers, who endured the endless hours of travel with many scary incidents, but who felt as he did about bringing a brief respite to those in great need (e.g., Frances Langford, a very popular movie star and singer; Patti Thomas, a young attractive tap dancer; Jerry Colonna, comedian; Tony Romano, a one-man band/guitarist; and Barney Dean, writer). They all traveled across the world together and faced all kinds of hell in order to do what they felt they had an obligation to do . . . entertain.

I remember as a child seeing them off as they boarded their plane for a very long flight. No flight attendants, no reclining seats, only semi-stale box lunches, many stops for fuel, and seemingly endless hours of uncomfortable flying ahead of them. We children waved good-bye while the adults faced fear and uncertainty, just like those serving.

I questioned my mother about why our dad had to leave us. She said, “Your dad is doing his part, and you and your brother must do yours. After all, he is only going to be gone for a few weeks, think of all the boys and girls who won’t see their fathers for months or years, or ever.” Throughout the war we were reminded of this each time my brother Tony and I grumbled that we missed our dad and wondered why he had to be away so much. He was so much fun when he was around, almost like having another playmate, and his absence left a hole in our lives.

We kept busy at home during those war years with all kinds of drives, collecting newspapers, tinfoil, Green Stamps, victory gardens, war bond drives, all in the effort to do what we could to help. Though I was quite young, I remember my mother signing up to serve in the AWVS (American Women’s Voluntary Service). She wore a military-style uniform and took food to men stationed

along the California coast, not too far from where we lived. She also helped establish other women's groups aimed at supporting those men far from home and the families they left behind. Another thing that was a part of life then were the blackouts and the fear they triggered, especially to those cities and towns situated along the coast who were constantly anxious about an invasion. There were curfews and we had to lower all the shades and pull the curtains so that our house wouldn't present a target.

One of the great joys back then were Dad's homecomings. It was a great relief to welcome him and his fellow performers. There was always a crowd of well-wishers and press wanting to get news from the various war zones, and a loved one hoping for a note or letter that my dad was given to deliver back in the states. G.I. mail often took weeks and even months to reach those waiting anxiously at home. On most of his trips, Dad would bring back trophies that had been given to him by the troops, different weapons and souvenirs of the war. One time he was up in his bedroom showing off his collection to us and giving my mother, my brother, and me small remembrances of where he had been. He picked up a gun that had been given to him, and my mother cautioned him to point it away from us, which he did as he pulled the trigger and said, "Don't worry, it's not loaded." With that there was a loud bang. My mother later had a picture of the gun painted on the cabinet pointing toward the bullet hole, with the words "And he said it wasn't loaded." He kept that reminder in his rooms as long as he lived.

Another reminder of those challenging days was the disease he called jungle rot that he picked up in the South Pacific. It was a nasty-looking infection that reoccurred on his feet and as a result he wore white socks as well as some kind of antifungal medicine. When I asked him about it one time he said he didn't mind, it made him think of all the diseases that our guys went through on those jungle-filled islands in the Pacific. That war and the horrors of it and mostly the sacrifice and determination of everyone during those times, especially our fighting men far away, were always with him.

Many years later, when he was in his eighties and in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of WW2, I produced a video, *Bob Hope: Memories of World War 2*. I was anxious to preserve those memories for posterity. We covered a lot of them, and I turned once again to those orange-spined, speckled boxes for inspiration, for a feeling of the times.

Dad had slowed down a bit by then and I was a little concerned how much he would remember, but as we were shooting, I was constantly surprised how vividly WW2 came back to him, especially when he told the story of he and my mother on board the *Queen Mary*, a very crowded ship bringing them back from England where the war had just escalated and Americans were urged to

return home. He recalled word for word the special lyrics, a parody, he wrote to his theme song “Thanks for the Memory.”

*Thanks for the memory
Of this great ocean trip
On England's finest ship.
Tho' they packed them to the rafters
They never made a slip.
Ah! Thank you so much.
Thanks for the memory
Some folks slept on the floor,
Some in the corridor;
But I was more exclusive,
My room had “Gentlemen” above the door,
Ah! Thank you so much.*

The ship's captain requested him to do a show that night to quiet the fears of the passengers who were anxious because of news that there were German subs lurking nearby waiting for orders to sink them . . . and he sang his song.

These and other memories, of sights he saw, of men and women he met and shared experiences with, the wounded he comforted, all remained a constant reminder to him throughout the hundred years of his life, of that special time when our country witnessed its “finest hour.” These letters bear witness.

DEAR BOB . . .

THANKS FOR HAVING OUR BACKS!

ONE THING THE TROOPS KNEW BEYOND ANY DOUBT WAS THAT BOB HOPE HAD their backs. In training camps, on the battlefield, and most importantly, after they returned home, Bob Hope championed their cause.

If a soldier needed something, *anything*, Bob did his best to get it to them. If the request required the help of the American people to make it happen, he would make an appeal on his radio broadcasts. If he needed to go even higher, he wouldn't hesitate to bring the matter to the attention of generals, Congress, and even the president of the United States, if need be.

Both in print and over the airwaves, Bob paid meaningful tribute to each branch of the military, from the oft-celebrated to the oft-overlooked, he knew the important role that each of these brave men and women played.

After the war, Bob continued his commitment to making sure our GIs would never be forgotten in war . . . or in peace.



Bob with Tuskegee Airman, USO Tour, 1943, England.

England

May 8, 1944

Dear Mr. Hope,

This letter is in appreciation of last week's "Command Performance" and the tribute you paid us, the Army nurses—God's forgotten children. Really, sometimes we do feel that we're forgotten and our work unappreciated, but your "Thanks for the Memories" at the close of last week's program was a terrific boost for our morale.

I think that you've done more for our boys in the service than any other star in Hollywood, and you're certainly tops with all the nurses—It's between you and Jimmy Cagney—Mr. Cagney was here to see us recently and we like him even better in person.

Thanks again for a swell tribute to our honest efforts. Good luck in the splendid work you're doing.

Lt. Mary Rogers and "The Gals in Hut 109"

June 7, 1944

Dear "Gals in Hut 109":

That was a nice letter you sent me some weeks ago . . .

Perhaps you don't get much publicity, but I guess we all know what a wonderful job you Army Nurses are doing. You're a vital cog in this great war machine of ours . . . the war couldn't be won without you. So just remember, we know you're in there pitching . . . and we'll not forget you.

So it's between Jimmy and me, is it? Well, perhaps at that, I'm better off than Crosby. You know, over here, it's between him and Sinatra. It's made Bing quite moody . . .

I'd like to drop in on you girls in England, but this summer I'm heading for the South Pacific, and Burma and China . . . if possible. I'm going to try to bring a little entertainment to the jungles . . . if the mosquitoes will let me in. Hear they have really big ones down there.

My best wishes to you girls over there. And keep up the good work . . . America really needs you.

Sincerely,

Bob Hope

Tuesday, 22 January 1945

Dear Mr. Hope:

My buddies and I wish to sincerely thank you for the wonderful work you are doing on your "Command Performance" broadcasts. There is nothing which makes a man happier than good music from his favorites and a heap of laughs. My morale goes up forty points whenever I hear one of your programs. And what is more, they are the only programs which provoke laughs after laughs.

We are very grateful.

Sincerely,

Ensign Ward Baxter

In a way that defied all celebrity boundaries before or since, Bob Hope, one of the box office sensations of his time, had become a literal pen pal to millions of military men and women. These are no ordinary fan letters. The link was on a personal level. You can tell that by the familiar tone in their correspondence. It was like they were writing to an old friend. They joked with him and he gave it right back. Even when he threw in a plug for his latest film, it was done in a newsy way with a healthy dose of self-deprecation:

"I'm pretty busy right now . . . making a new picture. It's one of those 'escapism' themes . . . the guy who's putting up the money keeps trying to escape."

. . . Bob Hope

Nov. 19, 1943

Sgt. T. J. Martin

Co. "C" 2nd Command Base

Hello Bob,

Well, here I am again writing to you and this time it's from a hospital somewhere in Italy. It really isn't too bad, though, just a few pieces of shrapnel in my left side and a gunshot wound in my left leg. Have been in the hospital now about two weeks and am ready to go back to the front lines again. This has been the first real rest I've had in a long time.

. . . I hate to bother you with my troubles because I know you are a very busy person, but gee, it sure does get plenty lonesome over here when you don't get any mail.

Wishing you and yours a Merry Christmas and a very Happy New Year, and please write soon.

*Sincerely,
T. J. Martin*

*The Philippines
April 29, 1945
Keegan V. Day M.MM3/c
N. R. U. Navy 3149 Box E-5*

*Dear Bob,
Knowing your ability to delve into and solve problems, I thought you might do me a little favor by explaining the methods your cowboy friends use when fighting it out with their guns. They never have to reload as the lead just pours from their six-shooters. We certainly would like the low down as we could put it to good use out here against the [enemy] . . . It would be very much appreciated, as we are connected with a P.T. outfit and would certainly benefit by it . . .*

Keegan V. Day

"I think the He-men in the movies belong in the Army, Marines, Navy or Air Corps. All of these He-men in the movies realize that right now is the right time to get into the service. Every movie cowboy ought to devote time to the Army winning, or helping to win, until the war is over—the same as with any other American citizen. The Army needs all the young men it can get, and if I can set a good example for the young men, I'll be mighty proud."

—GENE AUTRY, joined US Army Air Corps 1942