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Miss Dietrich finds her best audience

By Otis L. Guernsey Jr.



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Danny Thomas (standing in the middle) with Marlene playing the musical saw on „stage“ at Caserta, Italy, in June 1944

The life of the boys in the American 5th Army hasn't been entirely devoid of glamour lately. Part of the general issue in Italy during the past three months has been Marlene Dietrich - the slim, blonde, husky-voiced, real-life Marlene who has been appearing in person on the Rome-Naples circuit. She is in town now, awaiting the premiere of her new Metro - Goldwyn - Mayer picture, "Kismet", at the Astor, on Aug. 22, but she's going abroad on another U.S.O. tour very soon.

Miss Dietrich donned the U. S. O. uniform a little over three months ago and arrived in Italy after a short stop-over in Africa. Her group, which included the comedian Danny Thomas, was based in Naples and traveled by jeep to the various units of the 5th Army, giving two shows a day. Miss Dietrich's part in the show might at first seem obvious; but it needs just a word of elaboration. She exercised a talent she learned long ago in Vienna - she played

two numbers on the musical saw. "We followed the army after it began to advance", Miss Dietrich told this reporter, "playing to concentrations of troops everywhere. Our audiences ranged in size from 15 to 22,000 soldiers, and I've never encountered such enthusiasm anywhere before. There's nothing like it in the life of a performer. It's more glorious even than in the old days on the continent when the public favorites were given such extravagant attention.

"Once on the Anzio beachhead we heard a soldier remark, 'This is just like a New York night club.' You can imagine how much satisfaction that gave us.

"We talked to the soldiers after each show, and their most frequent questions were 'How is it at home?' or 'Who's coming next?' or, when they'd read about the strikes they'd say 'It's a tough war back home, isn't it?'

Appreciative Audiences

"They were always so grateful to us for being there." Miss Dietrich shook her head, still wondering at the soldier attitude. "They can hardly believe we'd come all that way just to entertain them. One boy exclaimed, 'Gee! I had to come all the way to Italy to see Marlene Dietrich!'"



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Performing in Anzio, Italy in June 1944 she remarked "No love - no nothing .. Sinatra never had an audience like this!"

"They never seem to realize that they've made the long trip themselves, and for much grimmer reasons. They seem to think that we film people just sit around in milk and Champagne baths and shouldn't be able to survive the ordeal of traveling."

The troupe's variety show was given outdoors with amplifiers to raise the voices above the constant din of aeroplanes. There were no lights to attract the attention; shows couldn't be given after dark, because of the danger of air raids.

"We'd be asked if such-and-such a group had seen us yet - over there every one is always thinking of the other fellow," said Miss Dietrich. "Each unit wanted to be sure that all the others had a share of the entertainment. They painted signs themselves advertising our appearances."

Identification Was Easy

It was only natural that a good many of the soldiers who happened to be placed along the roads traveled by the actress would be somewhat skeptical as to her identity. It was often difficult to maintain an appearance riding in a wind-blown jeep along a dusty battle road dressed in a grimy U. S. O. uniform.



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January 1945 near Stolberg, Germany

"Lots of them wanted proof that I was myself," she said. "They'd yell 'If you're Marlene Dietrich, show us your legs!' My right leg got sunburned from being exposed to the air over the side of the jeep.

"After a while the Canadians, who wear shorts, gave me a pair, and they were more comfortable than the regular uniform, so I wore them. There was a lot of joking about a vote of thanks from the other units."

Among other persons who were somewhat incredulous as to Miss Dietrich's identity were the wounded German prisoners. The actress is German by birth and talked to some of them in their own tongue. At first they wouldn't believe her, but then they would gradually recognize her and say, "Why-why, you're the real Lili Marlene!"

It seems that the name Marlene (pronounced in three syllables) is an uncommon one in Germany - actually it was a pet name, a contraction of the actress's real name, which is Marie Madelene: Mar (ie Made) le ne Dietrich. In her early pictures in Germany she was the Lili Marlene type-lounging under lampposts at midnight, etc. These pictures have not been banned by the Nazis and are still being shown in Germany, and it is generally supposed that the song refers to these characterizations of hers.

"All the Germans admitted that they were glad to be captured by the Americans instead of the Russians. They didn't make any remarks about my nationality; but the German-controlled radio blasted at me for entertaining Allied soldiers."

Miss Dietrich was particularly impressed with the Allied efficiency and attention to detail. She would arrive in a town some hours after its capture and find a PX already set up, fully supplied with soap, chewing gum, razor blades, cigarettes and other necessities. Once she took a long detour in order to cross a river; on the way back, two hours later, there was a beautiful bridge where before there had been nothing.

Often they would find such incredible items as butter, steak, salad or beer - all imported from the United States - among the more general food rations. Certain items of food, though, are beginning to breed a touch of contempt by their familiarity on the daily menu. One of Danny Thomas's greatest laugh-getting lines was the punch in the following routine:

Danny: "Marlene, what are you going to do for them now?"

Marlene: "What do you think the boys want, Danny?"

Danny: "Well, it ain't Spam, sister!"



DANNY THOMAS
AND I

© Filmmuseum Berlin – MDCB

June 1944 in Caserta, Italy

In summing up her impressions of Italy Miss Dietrich remarked that it reminded her a good deal of a Hollywood set, with the many national types and varied uniforms milling about in a constant stream of humanity.



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May 1945: Marlene Dietrich in Teplitz, today Teplice in the Czech Republic

She closed with the following:

"At every corner and in every town the signs are printed in duplicate languages for the various fighting men - English, Polish, French, Czechoslovakian, and many other nationalities. When I looked at those signs I think I really felt for the first time the truth of the phrase 'United Nations'."

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