

The Bob Hope Show Christmas Day - 1964 Vinh Long, Vietnam

Bob Hope entertained US troops in Vietnam every Christmas season from 1964 through 1972. Some shows were extremely small, with only a few hundred troops being treated to his unique style of humor and his sincere feelings for the American fighting man. Other shows brought in over 10,000 troops at such places as Long Binh, but with the same casual format and rapport with the American and other nation's fighting forces.

However, his very first scheduled show in Vietnam took place at the tiny, rice-paddy-surrounded Army airfield at Vinh Long in the hot, humid Mekong Delta on Christmas day, 1964.

On 11 December 1964, MACV J1 (BG Ben Sternberg) had alerted the I V Corps Senior US Advisor, Colonel George Barton, by letter order, of the scheduled visit of the Bob Hope Christmas Show to the Mekong Delta. Initially the show was slated to be held in Can Tho, headquarters of the 13th Aviation Bn. However, the 13th Battalion Commander, LTC Jack V. Mackmull, recommended that the show be held in Vinh Long which had a larger number of US troops and, because it was isolated in the rice paddies of the Delta, could be better secured. Colonel Barton approved the change.

On 17 December, 13th Battalion headquarters notified Major Tom Anderson, Commanding Officer of the 62d Aviation Company "Outlaws" as well as Vinh Long Installation Commander, that Hope would make his very first scheduled Vietnam show at Vinh Long at noon on Christmas Day. The notification was classified as "Close Hold" because of Hope's celebrity and the visibility his visit would have when it became known.

Elaborate, SECRET, security plans and logistical arrangements were developed between the 13th Battalion and the units at Vinh Long. Only the two US Army air mobile company commanders at Vinh Long, and a few other "need-to-know" personnel, participated in drawing up plans for arrival security, perimeter security, airborne gunship protection and other such measures to ensure the safety of the troupe while it was on the ground in Vinh Long.

Detailed guidelines, covering every facet of the support necessary to bring the Hope troupe into Vinh Long, were published by MACV. Troops were only informed that a USO show would be at Vinh Long on Christmas and maximum attendance was encouraged. No other details were released regarding who the USO show would feature.

At Vinh Long, Captain Al Iller, XO of the "Outlaws" made arrangements for a low-boy stage for the show. The stage was decorated with a camouflage parachute backdrop; unit insignias and other local-color items were hung on the stage. Nearby American personnel stationed in the Delta, which included Navy Riverine force personnel, Air Force weather station people, a few Special Forces teams, etc. were notified of an upcoming USO show. Extra MP's were detailed from Saigon to assist in security checks. All was ready.

Right on schedule, Bob Hope's troupe landed in Vietnam on Christmas Eve, 1964. As the performers deplaned at Tan Son Nhut airbase near Saigon, Hope put on a short, impromptu show on the tarmac for the welcoming group, then headed for the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon for the night. His welcome to Saigon unexpectedly featured a VC sapper attack on the Brinks hotel, a US military-occupied hotel in downtown Saigon. Hope heard the explosions as he was arriving in downtown Saigon. Hope later quipped to the press that, as he was heading for his hotel in Saigon, his hotel passed him heading the other way!

However, back at Vinh Long, about 1700 hours on Christmas Eve, all flight crews from the 62d Aviation Company "Outlaws" and the 114th Aviation Company "Knights", had been placed on alert in preparation for a maximum-support airlift and gunship effort for the 145th Aviation Battalion, before sun-up, in the Saigon area on Christmas morning. By 1830, all available slicks and gun ships from both the Outlaws and Knights, as well as the Tigers from the 121st Aviation Company in Soc Trang, were enroute to Ton Son Nhut airfield in Saigon, arriving after dark.

The operation would prove to be one of the largest helicopter airlifts that had ever been conducted up to that time. Approximately 165 helicopters, from seven Air Mobile companies, were involved in the (at that time) highly-classified mission. Detailed, multi-level mission briefings were held during the next several hours and aircraft commanders were finally able to brief their crews about 2300 hours.

At 0430, with no more than 2-3 hours sleep at the most, crews boarded their aircraft and lifted off from Ton Son Nhut airfield and headed for a forward staging area airfield about 20 minutes away. At 0500, still in pitch darkness, with no moon, several battalions of ARVN troops were loaded at the small assembly area airfield.

After all aircraft were airborne, they formed a miles-long column of air-mobile company formations through the darkened skies. At first-light, after an approximately 50 minute flight, still in formation column, the aircraft made their initial assault landings in two pre-designated LZs in the Golden Triangle area. More ARVN troops were then picked up at nearby staging areas and several more lifts were subsequently made before all aircraft were required to land at pre-selected refueling points north of the Michelin rubber plantations near the Cambodian border.

Because the operation was being conducted at a remote forward area, fuel trucks were not able to be used for refueling. Instead, JP-4 fuel had to be trucked through hostile territory to the refuel areas in 2½ Ton trucks and pumped from 55 gallon drums. This necessitated the refueling to be accomplished by hand-crank pumps, from the back of the trucks, into each helicopter, a slow and lengthy process.

Knowing that the Bob Hope show was due to begin at 1300 at Vinh Long, still approximately 130 miles away, Outlaw and Knight aircraft were ordered to depart in two-ship formations as soon as each pair of helicopters was refueled, rather than waiting until all company aircraft had been refueled. The two-ship requirement formation minimized the risk of an engine failure by a single ship flying over the formidable rubber tree forests of the Michelin plantations during the 1 hour 20 minute flight back to Vinh Long.

The last two Vinh Long aircraft were finally refueled and airborne by 1100. While enroute back to Vinh Long, the UH-1 crews monitored the two C-123 VIP aircraft carrying Bob Hope and troupe as they contacted Tan Son Nhut tower for departure for Vinh Long. The helicopters accelerated to max allowable speed.

Hope's aircraft landed at Vinh Long 10 minutes ahead of the last two Outlaw aircraft. These aircraft had pre-rigged red and green smoke grenades on the skids. Just as Hope and his troupe were deplaning, the two-ship helicopter formation made low-pass, welcoming circles over the parking ramp, trailing the appropriately-colored smoke.

Major Tom Anderson recalls that Bob Hope visited with him in his quarters at Vinh Long prior to the show. Hope remarked to Anderson that he had forgotten to bring his trademark golf club with him and asked Anderson if there might be a golf club available at Vinh Long! Unfortunately, the Vinh Long Airfield Country Club was closed and no golf club could be found.

Hope's show began at 1300. A reduced-size traveling troupe for the Vinh Long show consisted of Hope's side-kick comedian Jerry Colona, guitarist Bob Jones, comedian John Bubbles, England's Miss World Ann Sidney, singer/actresses Anita Bryant, Jill St. John, Janis Paige and Annamaria Alberghetti. At the time the show began, temperatures under the blue-skied Delta sun were approximately 100 degrees.

The performance, of course, included Bob Hope's inimitable form of humor, music, singing and dancing, acting, and lots of interplay with the approximately 400 assembled troops. The show was memorable by any standards. Some tape recordings were made of the show but most in attendance could not remember the contents of the show.

Majors Tom Anderson and George Derrick presented Bob Hope with a plaque, the first of thousands of pieces of military memorabilia he would receive over the next 7-8 years as he made his annual Christmas tours back to Viet Nam.

Toward the close of the show, Anita Bryant sang "Silent Night" solo, then asked the audience to join with her and the other performers in singing a repeat chorus. It was an extremely emotional moment! Very few dry eyes were seen either in the troops or in the faces of the performers on stage as well. Plus, every woman in the show troupe was in tears and had heavy mascara running down both cheeks.

Although the flight crew members had had very little sleep during the previous 24 hours, the show was a memory that everyone who was in Vinh Long, Vietnam on that Christmas day, 1964, will always remember.

Bob Hope made eight more trips to Vietnam in later years, often playing to as many as 12,000 troops in one outdoor amphitheater. However, no performance would ever be more memorable than his very first Vietnam show, on Christmas Day, in a tiny little Delta airfield with about 400 US troops assembled on the Company street in the Vinh Long compound.

Bob Hope was a true friend of the American serviceman. His memory will be forever treasured by over 70 years of servicemen and women who, while serving their country under the most trying circumstances, were entertained by this great American.

Thank you Bob Hope, for bringing a little bit of "home" to the Mekong Delta! The men of Vinh Long, 1964, salute you!