

# World War II on the **Radio**



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The most significant event of the last century was the global conflict referred to as the Second World War. Nearly every nation on Earth participated in or was affected by WWII. Although the Mass Media of the time seems primitive by the modern standards of the Internet and 24-hour Cable News Coverage, old time WWII radio shows brought the war home to the American people in a way that had never been imagined before this time.

## The News and Rumors of War

The rise of the Nazi Party in Germany was followed by the American Press and those with an interest in European Affairs. Some American hobbyists followed reports from Germany and Europe by “Long Distance Listening (DXing)” over their shortwave radio receivers, but most information came from print and radio journalists.

Throughout the 1930s, in spite of the Great Depression, electricity, and with it radio, was coming into most American homes. By 1939 a majority of housewives considered the radio to be more indispensable to their homes than the clothes iron or the refrigerator. Although most radio listening was music and entertainment in the form of comedies and dramas, the various radio networks developed news departments. These began to rival print media, if not in depth of coverage, certainly in immediacy.

CBS sent [Edward R. Murrow](#) to London to head their European Operations. His initial job description did not include “On Air” time; his job was to persuade European figures to broadcast over CBS in competition with NBC. The Anschluss, the Nazi Annexation of Austria, occurred while Murrow was in Poland arranging the broadcast of Polish Children’s Choirs. Murrow immediately sent William Shirer to London to broadcast an uncensored report.

The CBS home office in New York called for a “News Roundup” special to be put together in reaction to the Anschluss. The program was broadcast on March 13, 1938, and became the basis of the [CBS World News Roundup](#), which still broadcasts on CBS Radio.

CBS had sent their leading news analyst to Europe to report on WWII events, and persuaded the likable [Elmer Davis](#) to fill the spot beginning in August 1939. Davis became a trusted and comforting voice during the second world war, and in 1941 he was appointed by [President Roosevelt](#) to head the Office of War Information.

As tensions increased in Europe, American Radio Journalists continued to cover the events. During the [summer of 1940](#) many expected the Germans to attempt an invasion of the British Isles, and CBS had Larry LeSueur in place to report on the Battle of Britain.

While democracy was endangered in Europe, there were still many voices in the US that called for America to stay out of World War II. At the same time, other Americans called for intervention in order to keep the conflict from reaching our shores. This was partially addressed in the intellectual discus-



*Edward R. Murrow in London prior to America’s entry into the war.*

sion program on NBC, [Speaking of Liberty](#) (1941), in the months prior to the [attack on Pearl Harbor](#).

America was finally drawn into the second world war when the Navy Base at [Pearl Harbor was attacked](#). The first notice of the attack came at 2:26pm, Eastern Time, over the Mutual network, interrupting a football game 63 minutes after the first bombs fell.

The press brought WWII back to the home front with radio shows. The United Press Syndicated sponsored [Soldiers of the Press](#) (1942-45) detailing the adventures of correspondents on the front lines. The correspondent’s job was to stay out of the way that the soldiers could do their job, and then send reports back to the States. But it was difficult to stay objective when the people around them, whom they had come to care about, were fighting and dying.

## The G.I.s

During World War II, America had ample reason to be proud of its fighting men, and radio did all it could to show the folks back home the fine job they were doing.

Although they were not in uniform, the men and women of the Civilian Aircraft Warning Service during WWII were vital to the mission of the Army Air Forces 4th Fighter Command. Their story was told by NBC in [Eyes Aloft](#) (1942-43). NBC also carried a four-part report on the Navy fighting in five oceans called [Battle Stations](#) (1943). Thrilling tales of

the Army Air Force were heard on *The Fighting AAF* (1945), produced by the Air Force and presented on ABC.

On weekday afternoons during 1943-45 CBS presented programs from the various Service Bands. *It's Maritime* (1944-45) featured tales of seagoing life along with Swing Music. Even more popular was *Captain Glenn Miller* and the *Band of the AAF Training Command* on *I Sustain the Wings* (1943-45).

True tales of WWII heroes in action were also popular WWII old Time radio shows. *Wings to Victory* (1940-45) gave us dramatized stories of our flying heroes over the Blue Network. Wounded heroes and the Gallant Doctors who worked to save them was the subject of *The Doctor Fights* (1945), featuring A-List Hollywood talent like *Cary Grant*, *Gregory Peck*, Robert Montgomery and Franchot Tone.

*The Man Behind The Gun* (1942-44) featured highly dramatized stories of America's fighting men during the second world war. Brought to us by the Elgin Watch Company, few programs were able to portray the terror of combat contrasted with the numbing boredom that can accompany an overseas posting; perhaps most of all the radio program brings home the comradeship that our fighting men have for one another.

## Radio for the Troops, A Touch of Home

By the end of the First World War the importance of recreation for the troops was becoming recognized. It has been pointed out that the soldier's life is 90% boredom interrupted by periods of sheer terror. If morale was allowed to slip there could be a fatal decline in combat efficiency. Experiments with radio for troop entertainment had been attempted in various overseas locations before the WWII with varying degrees of success. The most important improvement needed to be reliable and desirable content.

The various efforts came together during WWII

and were expanded after May 26, 1942, when the War Department created the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS). The fragile disks and turntables that were being provided in "Buddy Kits" to units deploying overseas were replaced by radio receivers. Programs would be sent to overseas radio stations from the ARFS Hollywood studios. Sometimes

shortwave transmission to the frontline stations was used when the program required immediacy, but the preferred method was by phonographic disk. Transcription to disk was a relatively expensive process, but it guaranteed quality and reliability that shortwave could not.

*Command Performance* (1942-49) was an early hit over AFRS during World War Two. Servicemen were encouraged to write to the show and request their favorite stars, and suggest perform-

ances they would like to hear (Ann Miller tap-dancing wearing Army boots?) As the show gained popularity producers worried over the cost of talent to fill the show. From the beginning Hollywood A-List performers such as Bob Hope, Dinah Shore, Fred Allen, Francis Langford, Spike Jones, Frank Sinatra, Burns and Allen, Vincent Price, Ginger Rogers, Gary Cooper, Tallulah Bankhead, Andrew Sisters, Bette Davis, Judy Garland,

Bing Crosby, and Margaret Whiting all appeared free of charge, allowing AFRS to produce extremely high quality shows for far less than expected. The free performances by celebrities became a tradition, and it has been pointed out on numerous occasions that no career was ever harmed by performing for the Troops for free. In 2009 the Military cable network, The Pentagon Channel, reprised *Command Performance* featuring currently popular acts.



*Popular big-band leader Glenn Miller*



*Betty Hutton, one of many guest performers on Command Performance*



*Aboard ship, U.S. sailors listen to radio programs from home.*

*Mail Call* (1942-49) was another early AFRS WWII radio show. Premiering in Aug 1942, the show drew its title from the military practice of gathering the troops when mail was delivered to the unit. The show also used A-list talent (working for free) and took the form of a love letter from the celebrities to the troops.

*GI Journal* (1943-46) used the celebrities as the guest editors and staff for a weekly newspaper for the WWII troops. Comedy and Pin-up girl talent was featured with a healthy share of popular music.

Music was the emphasis of *GI Jive*, a disc jockey program for WWII soldiers. Several disc jockey's "spun hot wax" for the program, sometimes civilian celebrities while other times servicemen would man the microphone. One of the most popular DJs was "GI Jane", the on-air persona of Martha Wilkerson. GI Jane was thought to be an answer to the *Tokyo Rose* propaganda broadcasts. The plain fact was that the WWII American troops like Ms Wilkerson better.

The *Jubilee Program* (1942-53) was unique because it was directed towards African-American soldiers during World War Two. Modern collectors value the programs as some of the best War-time jazz performances. *MUSIC America Loves Best* was produced and broadcast by NBC, then decommercialized and transcribed for AFRS. The program featured classical as well as popular music.

*Everything for the Boys* (1944-45) was dedicated to raising the morale of our fighting men and sponsored by Autolite. The show featured a play by Arch Oboler and included a call to a serviceman stationed overseas, sometimes allowing a family connection to be made over the radio.

## Radio on the Homefront

Not everyone could go fight or be involved directly in war related industries. Commercial radio was still a business. War related content found its way into regular programming. The day-time Soaps would often lose a character who had joined the military, or add one who had returned home to convalesce from battle injuries.

One type of program that seemed to take WWII in stride was the Situation Comedy. The teenage girl in the family program would become a sucker for anyone in uniform, and the Smart-mouth kid suddenly knew enough Military and War jargon to open a new front in the backyard.

Marjorie from *The Great Gildersleeve* was constantly writing to WWII servicemen, or organizing dinners or shows

for the troops. Early in the show's run, just before America entered the War, the Gildersleeve household organized Thanksgiving dinner for the Troops at the local Army post. Gildy was often involved in War bond drives and even helped to christen a Liberty Ship.

*Fibber McGee and Molly* became a darling of the Office of War Information. Finding spies was a favorite plot device on many programs, including *Fibber* and *Amos 'n Andy*. Fibber writer Don Quinn was well known for subtly incorporating the sponsors message into the fabric of the program, and this same talent was even better showcased in messages for the OWI. *Fibber McGee and Molly* was so good at getting OWI's message out that they were occasionally given exclu-

sives; the day following a program showcasing the need for Merchant Mariners was the single most successful recruiting day for Merchant Mariners.

War time rationing was a common complaint on sitcoms, but *Fibber* managed to get the message across better than others by getting it beat into his own head.

Several episodes dealt with gas rationing and meat rationing, with Fibber chagrined as he learns the necessity of the sacrifices.

One of the most poignant of the lessons came on the Dec 1, 1942 episode. The nation is approaching its second Christmas of the War, and not only does Fibber get a lesson about gas rationing, but he gets it from a beloved member of the company, Mayor LaTrivia played by Gale Gordon, as both the character and the actor are leaving to join the

Coast Guard.

No gathering of more than ten sets of civilian ears would have

been complete without an appeal for War Bonds, and entertainment radio was no exception. Not only were the Treasury Department programs popular, but almost every show had a appeal in the closing dialog. Bob Hope even made "Bye, bye, and buy Bonds" a personal trademark.

## Radio as a Weapon

All of the major combatant nations in the war recognized the power of radio to transmit propaganda, not only to the other side, but also to their own populations.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt began his *Fireside Chats* (1936-45) during the Great Depression, and continued then through the War Years. The chats were thought to be a great



*Bob Hope entertained the troops at home and abroad, a tradition he continued for the rest of his life.*

comfort to the nation during dark and frightening times.

The series *Speaking of Liberty* (1941) was presented by NBC in the months prior to [Pearl Harbor](#). The highly intellectual discussions featured some of the period's best minds discussing the importance of freedom and civil liberties, created by the Council for Democracy. The Institute for Democratic Education presented *Lest We Forget* (1943-48) dramatized morality tales that demonstrated not only the superiority of American ideals, but the dangers if they are lost.

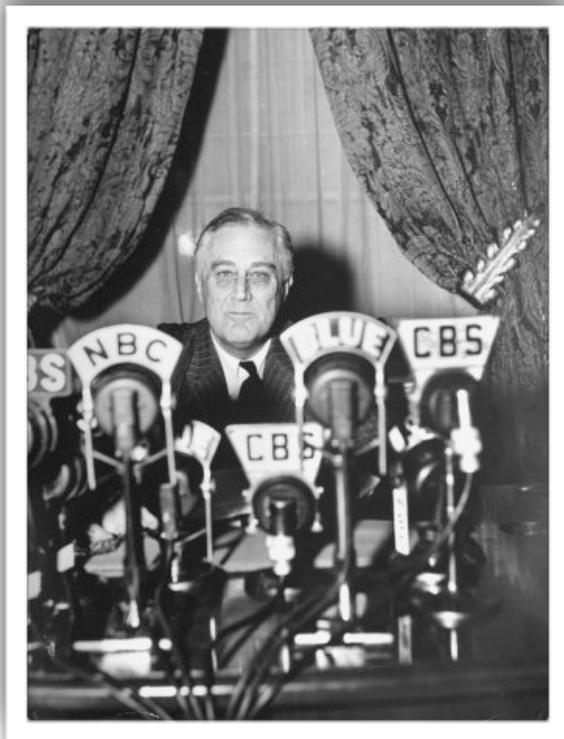
Hitler and his misguided philosophy were confronted directly in *Dear Adolph* (1942) and *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* (1942). The first presented letters from Americans outlining their feelings towards the German regime, while the latter was based on the experiences of an American trade attaché who had worked at the American Embassy in Berlin before the Second World War.

The enemy tried to use propaganda old time radio to disrupt Allied morale using the radio. *Charlie and His Orchestra* played popular American Jazz tunes with the lyrics rewritten with a pro-Nazi message.

The Germans also used *Axis Sally* while the infamous "*Tokyo Rose*" was played by as many as a dozen different English speaking women for Japan. Tokyo Rose's mission was to make the GIs homesick by playing popular American music and telling outlandish tales of girlfriends being unfaithful while their men were at war. The effectiveness of Rose's efforts is in dispute, and tales of her supposed clairvoyance in speaking directly to individual units was largely a fabrication for the movies.

## Paying for a Total War

A global war doesn't come cheap. World War II stimulated the economy, but this in turn had the danger of increasing inflation at a time when shortages could and did occur. Many of the President Roosevelt's advisers advocated increased taxation and enforced saving programs that would raise the funds necessary and control inflation. Roosevelt wisely took the advice of his Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau Jr., and put a voluntary Loan



F.D.R. addressing the nation in one of his frequent radio broadcasts.

program in place as War clouds loomed in the fall of 1940. The War loans, funded by bonds sold to citizens, had several effects. First, they did raise the money needed to fight what would be a very expensive war. Next, that money was taken out of circulation, thereby controlling inflation. And finally it gave the general citizenry a direct feeling of contributing to the WWII effort. Selling the bonds during WWII became part of a truly phenomenal public relations and advertising campaign. Kiosks manned by volunteers began to pop up where ever people would gather, such as shopping areas and theater lobbies. Celebrity and media support for the War Bond Drives almost became a competition to see who could do the most.

Popular singer [Kate Smith](#), well known for her signature rendition of "God Bless America", held a 16 hour marathon broadcast on CBS which sold over \$40 million in bonds. The

sign-off of nearly every popular radio program had a pitch for WWII bonds.

The Treasury Department sponsored a number of popular

radio programs which would remind listeners to buy bonds. *Treasury Star Parade* (1942-44) featured Hollywood Stars in short dramas, many of which would remind listeners to comply with rationing and take seriously the other home front sacrifices the second world war made necessary. *Treasury Star Salute* (1944-46) paid tribute to individuals and organizations that contributed to the American Way of life and the war effort with music and dramatic sketches. *Music for Millions* (1945) didn't seem



to attract the A-list talent of some of the other shows, but featured songs made up just for the bond drive. *Guest Star Radio* (1947-66) ran after WWII, with an even greater selection of Stars, and promoted "Savings Bonds" rather than "Victory Bonds".

## End of the War Looms

President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed away on April 12, 1945 leaving Harry S. Truman in the presidency during the second world war. By the end of the month Mussolini would be killed by Italian Partisans and Adolph Hitler would commit suicide.

On May 8, 1945 the Allied Powers accepted the unconditional surrender of the armed forces of Nazi Germany.

In early August under President Truman's orders, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 15 Emperor Hirohito announced over the radio to the Japanese people that Japan would accept the terms that the Allies had set forth at the Potsdam Conference. The formal surrender took place on September 2 on board the USS Missouri.

## Radio's Place After the War

It was a much different world than it had been at the beginning of WWII, and change was really just beginning.

The economy of Europe was in ruins. The Soviet Union was able to make a rapid and powerful recovery; soon they would be able to rival the US militarily and in a short time they would develop their own atomic weapons. Because the economy of continental Europe was interdependent between nations, when the German economy was aided by the Marshall Plan most of Europe recovered as well. Great Britain, one of the leading Allied Powers, had been to severely drained by World War II and continued to decline for decades.

The US economy had been stimulated by the War, and rode this wave for a number of decades. The post war years were a time of prosperity and baby boom. However there was a growing insecurity as the Soviets gained a degree of world dominance.

*One World Flight* (1947), a program by Norman Corwin, demonstrated how small the world had become as a result of the War. It also highlighted the need for a type of world government to preclude any possibility of future war, especially as the world entered the "Atomic Age."

In many ways post War America was better represented by a favorite Veteran, *Sad Sack* (1946). Sad Sack had been a pantomime cartoon character featured in the Army weekly newspaper Yank. Sad Sack was a lowly private who always wound up at the butt end of the absurdities of military life. He first appeared on the radio, played by Mel Blanc, on *GI*

*Journal*. After WWII he returned to misadventures in his home town. The series was sponsored by Old Gold Cigarettes as a summer replacement for the *Frank Sinatra Show*.

In many ways radio matured as an technical and entertainment medium during the War. Although VE and VJ day came and went, unresolved tensions among the Allies remained, particularly between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers. Although not as universally acknowledged as the World War, the nascent Cold War soon became pervasive through out Radio in reflection of the Nation as a whole. Just as Bad Guys had gone from Gangsters and Rustlers early in WWII, the new boogie men became Reds and Communists. This was in no small degree a reflection of the destructive power released as the Atomic Age dawned. The Red Scare was another important influence on the entertainment industry, and many careers were hampered. Often as the result of unjustified accusations, see the actions of Sen Joseph McCarthy.

Technology had improved in answer to the needs of the Military, and these improvements naturally made their way into the civilian market. Radio broadcasting equipment became easier to operate, civilian receivers cheaper to manufacture, and the sound quality of transmissions improved. Advertisers recognized the improved entertainment value, and began to spend more of their advertising dollars. Unfortunately for Radio, the electronic and manufacturing advances also made possible the rise of Television. Despite the many advantages of the less expensive radio medium, advertisers were drawn by the flashy new kid on the block, and invested their advertising money there. Radio as the dominant entertainment medium was more a victim of post war prosperity than the superiority of TV.

Although radio was relegated to "Little Brother" status by the rise of Television, the solid entertainment value of radio programming from the 30s and 40s is still with us just as much as the many legacies of the Second World War.

Taken from <http://www.otrcat.com/wwii-on-the-radio.html>

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