

National Museum of American History
Division of Military History and Diplomacy
Associate curator: Kathleen Golden
14th Street and Constitution Avenue
N.W., Washington, D.C.
USA

Kiel, April 5th, 2009

Exhibition: The Price of Freedom – Americans at War

Dear Ms. Golden,

We are two graduate students from Germany having heard of the National Museum's current exhibition named above.

We were being informed about a video display of American entertainers who went abroad to entertain American troops. Although entertainers like Bob Hope, Danny Kaye, Jack Benny, Larry Adler or Red Skelton were being included, it surprised us that the most famous entertainer of the first half of the 20th century was not being included: Al Jolson! He was not only one of the first to go overseas during WW2 and even the first during the Korean War. He also supported war bond campaigns all over the USA, and even paid his own way, when in 1950 the USO said that there was not enough money to send entertainers overseas to support American servicemen during the Korean War. We shortly mention that Al Jolson had already entertained soldiers during WW1, and that he had also functioned as a "singing mascot" during the Spanish-American War in 1898 – still being a child.

In Korea, Al Jolson did 42 shows in 16 days at the age of 64, and he eventually died three weeks after his return from Korea in October of 1950, due to the trip's strain. General Douglas MacArthur, leader of UN forces, gave him a medallion inscribed "To Al Jolson from Special Services in appreciation of entertainment of armed forces personnel – Far East Command".

A few months after his death, Defense Secretary George Marshall posthumously presented the Medal of Merit to Al Jolson, "to whom this country owes a debt which cannot be repaid". The medal, given to Jolson's son, carried a citation noting that Jolson's "contribution to the U.N. action in Korea was made at the expense of his life". Even President Harry Truman declared Al Jolson a "casualty of war".

We – among many other people from Germany, England, Canada, Australia, and the USA – ask ourselves why this significant fact in American War History is being ignored.

Along with some copies of written soldiers' reports, we therefore offer the enclosed DVD (in NTSC format; Runtime: 13 min.), which has been created in consideration of the German Copyright Law, containing news and USO footage as well as self-made material for free use.

For more information, please feel free to contact the President of the Int. Al Jolson Society, Jan Hernstat, in Oceanside, NY (516-678-3524).

Sincerely yours,

Andrea Oberheiden

Jens J. Reinke