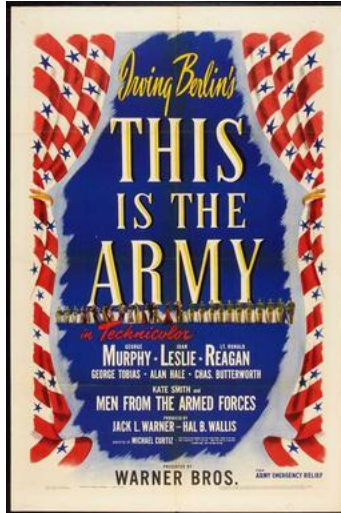


'This Is The Army'



But....

'Oh I hate to get up in the morning'

By Jim Stebbings

Anyone who has experienced the initial introduction to an armed-services life will no doubt recall with some pain the experience of the early morning reveille, traditionally delivered by the bugle but in the case of the writer's early experience during army basic training, by a series of crashes delivered by means of the drill sergeant's pacing stick on metal lockers up and down the corridors of the new recruits' billets.

Such was the experience of songwriter Irving Berlin when he was drafted into the US Army in 1918 shortly after having been granted naturalisation in the USA. Reveille was a particularly painful wake-up for the slim young man who, prior to army life, had been used to the working day of a songwriter and entertainer. This normally started in the second half of the day, the night hours being the time when he would compose his songs, just as the night-time had been his working hours in the bars of the Lower East side of Manhattan, New York where he had learned his trade from the age of thirteen following the death of his immigrant Jewish father, Moses Baline. Moses, wife and six children, had emigrated from Russia to New York in 1893 to escape further anti-Semitic persecution, as did some two million other Jews during the latter part of the 19th century. Israel Baline, as was Irving's original name, was the youngest member of the Baline family who lived in the crowded, squalid tenements of the Manhattan Lower East Side. Thirteen year old Israel left home in order to help provide for his widowed mother, finding work as a paper seller and then working in the notorious bars in the district, first as a singing waiter and later as a 'song-plugger' for established songwriters of the age who earned their money from the sale of the sheet music they published. Later he advanced to a songwriter in his own right and in 1911 had his first major hit with Alexander's Ragtime Band.

Irving Berlin, as he somewhat accidentally became known, was not suited to conventional military life. However, he soon carved himself out a niche at Camp Upton, Long Island when he persuaded the Camp Commander to let him produce an army show to entertain around other camps in order to raise moral in preparation for impending war, but also to raise funds for a badly needed community centre at Camp Upton. He titled his show 'Yip! Yip! Yaphank', Yaphank being the name of the town nearest to Camp Upton. Having been first performed at Camp Upton, his review, with a male cast entirely composed of serving soldiers, soon came to the attention of military chiefs with the result that it was performed more widely in leading New York theatres. In addition to an all-male blacked minstrel show and a chorus line of 'beauties' portrayed by army personnel, the show included Berlin himself being dragged from a tent onstage to his composition 'Oh How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning'. The show ended with the cast making a marching exit to another

Berlin composition, 'We're On Our Way to France'. The show made \$150,000 for the camp facilities – though for some reason these were never apparently built.



Fast forward through Berlin's next successful twenty years in which he became internationally famous for his contributions to Tin Pan Alley, Broadway and Hollywood, (the latter in particular for the music of the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film musicals), to the entry of the USA in the Second World War in 1942. With the backing of General George Marshall, Berlin planned a new, larger show, this time called 'This Is The Army'. Though this also included personnel from the Navy and the Air Corps, the army was at its heart. Berlin wrote more than twenty new songs for the show which consisted of a cast of 300 servicemen who acted under the military code of conduct, and who could be seen daily marching to the theatre through the streets of New York where the show transferred after its initial out of town review. Berlin insisted that, for the first time, both white and black Americans should be integrated and live together in one unit.

'This Is The Army', was taken from Broadway to Washington DC where President Franklin D Roosevelt attended. Berlin himself appeared in the review with his own rendering of 'Oh How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning' for which he received a ten minute standing ovation on opening night.

After an extensive tour of the USA, the review, with a reduced cast of 150, moved to London in 1944 for a three week run at The London Palladium, during which time Berlin was presented to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. For the London production Berlin wrote an additional song, 'My British Buddy', the royalties for which he donated to British service charities. After London the show toured military bases and theatres throughout the UK and thereafter around the world including North Africa, Italy, The Middle East and the Pacific military zones, sometimes in venues only short distances from the military front itself.



The show kept Berlin away from his home for more than three years and was reckoned to have been performed to audiences totalling over 2.5 million. Berlin was paid no salary or expenses and all profits went to the Army Emergency Relief Fund and are reckoned to have reached a sum in the region of \$10 million.

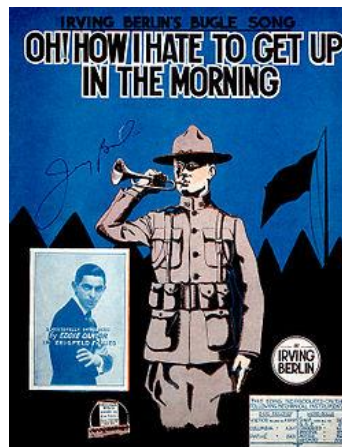
In 1943 'This Is The Army' was made into a film featuring a handsome young army lieutenant named Ronald Reagan;..... whatever became of him??

By then in his late fifties, the overseas tours left Berlin exhausted, though shortly after his return he was to write probably his best score for the hit musical 'Annie Get Your Gun'.

In a life which was to reach 101 years, Berlin described it as 'the most thrilling time of my life'. After the war Berlin, alongside General Eisenhower and other World War 2 heroes, received the Army's Medal of Merit from President Harry Truman, the first of a number of decorations he was to receive from a succession of US Presidents.

Berlin's unique contribution to US military history is just part of the legend that has become Irving Berlin, the immigrant who never forgot the opportunity that America gave him. He became a great patriot, reflected in much of his music and in particular in his composition 'God Bless America' which stands alongside 'The Stars and Stripes' as America's national anthem. His enduring legacy is without parallel, both as a songwriter who succeeded across the spectrum of popular music for sixty years, but also as a patriot and a war hero.

Berlin's hate for an early morning however never left him, and insomnia during the night-time hours blighted his later life until his death at the age of 101 in 1989.



J W Stebbings