Tonight at the Beachhead Bijou

By PETE MARTIN

They butt down trees to make room for a theater, sit up half the night to watch their favorite pin-ups flicker on a screen.

LAST year, at an advance base on New Guinea, a soldier audience of 5000 saw Jean Arthur in A Lady Takes a Chance. The smallest audience to witness her chance-taking was a technical sergeant hospitalized at an isolated spot on the India-Burma border. He couldn’t sit up to see Jean’s deep-dish curves, but an ingenious special-service officer worked out a way of projecting the picture on the ceiling above his head, so he could take his entertainment lying down—a position in which he had never taken dap bullets.

Movies have been shown a few hundred yards from the Jap foxholes in Bougainville and within cannon range of the battle that raged at Cassino. A sixteen-mm. film of Cover Girl was shown to our troops on the same condition would exist in the United States if large segments of the population in each city were continuously on the move, or if large cities themselves moved overnight without previously notifying the film exchanges. The men stationed in muddy clearings hacked out of the jungle have forgotten they ever heard of a forty-four-hour work week, and a twenty-four-hour work day is not uncommon for them. Under such conditions, there is no one-showing-a-day routine for their hard-won films. Pictures are shown twice during an evening, and, to catch the G.I. swing shifters, a late matinee in the afternoon is tossed in.

In a transportation believe-it-or-not, the same set of films of Claudia was shown to three audiences at one time. A buck-jumping jeep linked the three groups.

Screen may be made of plywood, tin or parachute silk, may be hung from an airplane propeller or, as at this advanced base in the Mediterranean area, in a truck.
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retired to a foyer of slit trenches and foxholes. During one particularly devastating concussion, however, the projection machine bounded into the air, and when it struck the ground it was definitely not rugged any more. But regardless of the alapping around it had taken, the equipment was repaired the following day, and that night the picture was viewed in the same location, beginning where it had left off.

Showings are often given under primitive conditions, but the projectionists operating the sixteen-mm. projectors take enormous pride in the maintenance and safeguarding of their machines. In a pinch, they have manufactured parts from every imaginable piece of steel and insulating material. One sergeant made two Mallory plugs from the tips of automobile spark plugs coupled together with insulating material from a G.I. shoe.

In the sodden climate of the tropic islands, projectionists sometimes construct warming boxes made from plywood and heated with electric bulbs for storing their machines between showings. When hurricanes are on their way, projection machines are picked up and deposited in places prepared for such emergencies. A movie operator stationed in a hospital once wrapped his machine in two G.I. blankets and placed it inside a waterproof ambulance when a hurricane warning was posted.

One projectionist wrote in a recent letter: "Until you have heard one of the sixteen-mm. machines give out with audible and perfect speech over a chunk of outdoors housing 5000 and 6000 men, you wouldn't believe it could be done. The men out here have built baffle boards which reflect and disperse sound over large areas, although they know the speaker unit must be removed after each showing. Speakers must be protected from the weather, and some of the boys have devised enclosed speakers with sliding doors in front, but the majority just take the equipment to bed with them."

Everything is used in the construction of screens, from plywood to tin and from parachute silk to canvas. Screens have been made with hinges, so that they can be lowered in time of high winds, for it is as easy to lose a screen in a gale as a tent. The screen may hang between two shat-tered, shell-battered tree trunks or stretch from an airplane propeller, or it may be a tarpaulin hung from the side of a truck.

Theaters are made of almost anything available. One projection booth has a floor made of two table tops supported by small, fat and homely, but I can dream. the size of a barrage balloon."

The Cockatoo staff called for all hands to sound off when their names were called to tell "their girl" what they thought of her. Sgt. Robert J. Brown contributed the following comment: "Olivia, if a mosquito had bitten me while I was watching your performance, that mosquito would have been cremated."

Cpl. Wilford W. Garding added a wistful note. "Dear Olivia," he said, "I am small, fat and homely, but I can dream. May I?"

The editors of The Cockatoo added a postscript to the letter defining a new "Freedom": "We are not only fighting for the Four Freedoms, we are fighting also for the priceless privilege of making love to American women. We assure you that we will win that fight."

As critical as the coconut-pitching native was, a G.I. audience is even more exacting. The G.I. has his likes and dislikes, and he is not shy about expressing them. Princess O'Rourke, featuring Olivia De Havilland, was a picture the G.I. liked. On March 5, 1944, The Cockatoo, the official news medium of an infantry division, got out a special Olivia De Havilland edition. Highlighted was an open letter to Olivia under a date line "Somewhere in New Guinea."

"Dear Olivia," it began, "Last night our open-air theater was packed to the rafters. Officers and men sat on the good earth, enthralled by your performance. That day we had received a new generator, projector and screen. The acoustics of Sid Grauman's Chinese Theater could not have reproduced your voice more faithfully; and, most amazing of all, we did not have to huddle in raincoats to protect our torsos from the condensed vapor which usually falls in drops the size of a barrage balloon."

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