

Samantha Quigley, “Thanks for the Memories: Fred Astaire,” *On Patrol*, December 17, 2015

United Service Organizations



[thanks for the memories]

VIRGINIA ★ SAMANTHA L. QUIGLEY

‘I Just Dance’

He conquered Vaudeville and Broadway with his sister, jumped on the bandwagon with Cyd Charisse, flew to Rio with Ginger Rogers, and thought Rita Hayworth couldn't be lovelier. He danced on walls, tables—even ceilings.

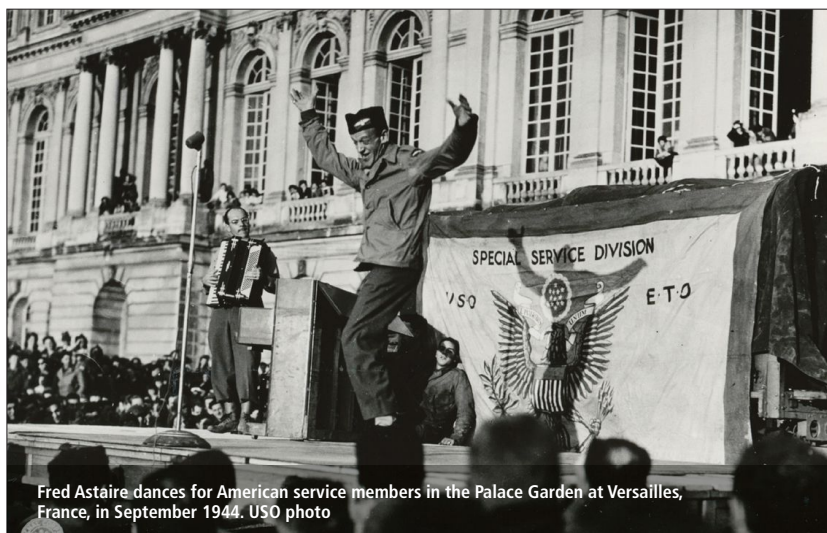
Fred Astaire's list of accomplishments is especially amazing considering a movie studio reportedly dismissed him early in his career with a footnote of “Can't act. Can't sing. Balding. Can dance a little,” after a screen test.

Even more remarkable is that for decades before and after his death on June 22, 1987, the dapper gentleman, born Frederick Emanuel Austerlitz, had the respect of industry professionals. Acclaimed choreographer George Balanchine declared him “the greatest dancer in the world.” Fellow dancer Gene Kelly went so far as to say, “The history of dance on film begins with Astaire.”

It wasn't always that way. As a young man, his sister, Adele, was decidedly the bigger talent. But when she retired from show business to marry in 1932, Astaire dug in and made a name for himself, appearing in nearly 50 films between 1933 and his death.

When the United States got involved in World War II, Astaire—whose age, combined with the fact he had children, exempted him from the draft—lent his support by entertaining at stateside military bases and participating in war bond rallies. This was all a prelude to his overseas USO tour that began in August 1944. After a stop in London, where he performed a few shows, including one with members of Glenn Miller's band, Astaire headed to France with crooner Bing Crosby.

His group performed in France, Belgium and the Netherlands—when they could find an audience. “The Army was traveling so fast we couldn't catch up to them at first,” he wrote in his autobiogra-



Fred Astaire dances for American service members in the Palace Garden at Versailles, France, in September 1944. USO photo

phy, *Steps in Time*.

They found a grateful audience of 5,000 at the Palace of Versailles. The stage overlooked the palace's famous gardens and fountains. The fountains, not in use at the time, provided seating for the GIs watching the show.

In his book, Astaire wrote that he always danced in his GI combat boots. “The fellows got a kick out of it,” he said.

When the group visited the Dutch town of Maastricht, it found the Palace Theater shuttered. The manager recognized Astaire and opened so the dancer and his cohorts could entertain a group of Army engineers. At night, the stage also served as the entertainers' sleeping quarters. Not even a German air raid could wake them.

On the way home to New York, he and Crosby extended their tour, entertaining troops aboard the *Queen Mary*. Once in New York, at the original USO headquarters, Astaire talked to reporters about the

troops he entertained in Europe.

“The way they go right back in there time and again to hit the Germans is something,” he said. “It's impossible to forget.

“They make wonderful audiences, too. After the show, they'd swarm around me and shout, ‘Gee whiz! You're the lucky guy who danced with the girls! How does it feel to hold Ginger Rogers and Rita Hayworth in your arms?’”

With his typical flair, he'd answer, “Fine, they're beautiful dancers!”

Astaire approached his craft with the same humility.

“I have no desire to prove anything by [dancing]. I never used it as an outlet or as a means of expressing myself. I just dance.”

Fred Astaire was 88 when he died. He's buried alongside his first wife, Phyllis, and his sister. His second wife, Robyn Smith Astaire, is 71. ★

—Samantha L. Quigley is the editor in chief of *On★Patrol*.