

Bob Hope's nephew helps reopen expanded USO lounge at Cleveland Hopkins Airport

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Photo by Thomas Ondrey | The Plain Dealer

Bob Hope, of Chagrin Falls, is flanked by a photo of his famous uncle as he waits to be introduced to speak at a "grand reopening" Friday of the Bob Hope USO Airport Lounge at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

"Hi, this is Bob 'Cleveland Hopkins' Hope, here for the grand re-opening of the newly renovated and expanded Bob Hope USO Airport Lounge. And wow, what a difference, if you'd seen it before. Small? It was so small they wallpapered the place with a book of postage stamps (pa-dum-dum-dum)."

OK, maybe the late comedian, renowned for visiting U.S. troops worldwide, wasn't actually at the ribbon-cutting Friday for the refurbished United Service Organizations (USO) lounge, located in the baggage claim area of Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

But Bob Hope was there in the form of the comic's nephew, Bob Hope, 57, of Chagrin Falls, who is also president of the board of directors for the USO of Northern Ohio.

Hope wore a jacket similar to his uncle's coat-of-many-military-patches, familiar to any GI who ever saw the comedian perform in USO shows at home and abroad for more than 50 years.

The only thing missing was Hope's trademark golf-club prop, as his nephew welcomed a small group of about 50 USO volunteers, military service members and public officials to the "grand re-opening" event which also celebrated the USO's 70th anniversary.

About six months of work by volunteer laborers, using materials donated by local firms, went into enlarging and improving the lounge which is used by some 9,000 traveling service members a year. Walls were moved and rebuilt in the lounge area (which is provided by the airport), wheelchair access added, and new flooring and furniture installed.

The lounge, staffed by USO volunteers, provides service members with a place to rest during layovers, grab a snack, meet family, find out about local hotels and attractions, and resolve any traveling problems.

It recently served as a haven for more than 40 soldiers stranded at Hopkins when their flights were cancelled by a winter storm in December. The USO found hotel rooms for some, and 19 others spent the night in the lounge on Red Cross cots.

"It's what we call a home away from home," said Tanya Karabanovs, USO volunteer leader.

Amenities include a wide-screen TV, computer, a small kitchen and now, "the new couches are awesome," USO volunteer Jane Hutchison, of Elyria, raved. Very nap-able, as she noted.

This lounge and the USO facility at the Los Angeles airport are the only two in the country with permission to Bob Hope's name, according to his nephew.

He also said that his uncle once told him that of all the awards and honors he'd received, he was proudest of his designation as the nation's only "honorary veteran" by an act of Congress.

"That was his favorite because he thought so much of the military," Hope said.

The feeling is mutual, insofar as his namesake lounge. "This is really, really beautiful. I'm impressed, it's a big change" said Army 1st Sgt. Clifford Thomas, who works at the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Station in Cleveland.

"To a lot of us in our travels, it means a lot to be able to come to a place like this, kick your boots off, so to speak, and get that 'home' feeling, even if only for a few moments," he added.

Airport Director Ricky Smith, noting the number of troops served by the lounge, told the assembled guests, "I can't imagine the airport without this kind of facility. It is not an insignificant facility by any stretch of the imagination."

Then, the red ribbon and celebratory cake were cut, and a musical medley of military anthems provided by bagpiper Robert Durrach, of Avon, a USO volunteer with fond thoughts of his USO visits when he served in the Air Force.

And if you've ever heard the "Marines' Hymn" or "Anchors Aweigh" with the limitations of a bagpipe, you'll know it's the thought that counts.

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