
by Timothy "Ace" Holleran

PAL Cadets

If you happened to be in Bridgeport, CT, on a steamy 1960s summer evening, chances are you could hear a drum corps. If the night was a Saturday, you were probably a few minutes drive from a competition.

Back in the heyday of "The Cradle of Corps," there were actually nine units extant within the city limits, with dozens more in the surrounding area. One of the most storied legends from this era was the Bridgeport PAL Cadets.

Founded in 1957 by detective Rudy Dunn, PAL (as the corps was locally known) was directed by patrolman Chris Ruge Jr. The Ruge family had a huge part in establishing the corps. Chris "Pop" Ruge Sr. instructed the horns, with his son doing the drill. Chris Ruge III served as a stellar soprano player through the years, especially noted for his soloing in the corps' classic concert piece, *Coronet Man*.



PAL Cadets, 1963 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

The influence of Bridgeport's finest was a corps hallmark. Patrolman Jim Sherwood, guard captain of the vaunted Connecticut Yankees, taught the color guard. Detective Ed Wesche was the quartermaster.

Marching in green, white and gold castoffs from St. Vinnie's in Bayonne, the corps hit the streets -- and won three firsts -- in 1958 parades. The corps changed its uniform to black satin blouses and black trousers with red and white trim in 1960; this color scheme stayed true for the remainder of the corps' existence. In 1964, white blouses were added, replaced in 1968 by red military jackets.

The staff roster reads like a "who's who of drum corps greats." The legendary Earl Sturtze taught the drum line for years, with help from Joe Gaudet, Gus Pagnozzi and marching member Andy Lisko. New York's Jack Dobson took over the drill duties in the mid-1960s. In the corps' later years, brass arrangements came courtesy of John Sasso, Pepe Notaro and Hy Dreitzer, all three of whom (as well as Sturtze) are members of the

World Drum Corps Hall of Fame.

In 1959, PAL garnered the Yankee Circuit title. Many state crowns followed. The corps first reached finals in a national event at the initial World Open in Jersey City, NJ, in 1963, repeating this feat the ensuing two years, when the show was held in Bridgeport.

PAL is the only Bridgeport corps to attain finals at VFW Nationals, first in 1965 at the famous indoor event in Chicago's McCormick Place and again in New Orleans in 1967.

Although big-time wins eluded the corps, it managed to be a consistent force in the metro New York area, nipping at the heels of the powerhouses of the day -- and sometimes knocking them off. In fact, the only two national-caliber corps that PAL never defeated were the Cavaliers and Racine Kilties.

The corps espoused a "big city" sound, featuring popular and Broadway favorites, including drum corps standards *Exodus* and *The Lonely Bull*. As was the style of the times, stirring marches were the norm. Bridgeport offered up *Semper Paratus*, the Coast Guard battle song, a tune rarely assayed by other corps. In its later years, PAL played Broadway chestnuts such as *The Usher From the Mezzanine* and *Big Spender*.

The PAL Cadets proved to be a force during the winter season as well. The Thunderbirds color guard, famed for their black boots and stern presence, were always a power in the indoor circuit.

The drum quartet experienced more than a few undefeated seasons, despite a rotating roster that could change at any minute. Baritone player John Donovan also grabbed more than his share of gold in individual events. He went on to a full career in the Bridgeport police department.

On a national level, it was individual play that vaulted PAL into the limelight. Snare drummer standout Gary Pagnozzi won the VFW individual title in a "three-peat" from 1964-1966. Other players such as Lisko, Jimmy Crowley, Ron Findley and Greg Black were also among the best in the activity.

Looking at the numbers from the 1965 VFW Nationals in Chicago, the smallish city of Bridgeport -- and PAL -- certainly made an impact. Pagnozzi won the snare title by 3.5 points; Black (then of the Connecticut Royal Lancers) garnered the tenor championship with a 4.1 margin. Findley placed fourth in tenor and another Lancer, John Bodnar, came in fifth on snare.

Black joined PAL at the end of the season, giving the corps both reigning I&E champs going into the 1966 season. Equally remarkable is that Findley, Black and Bodnar all lived within two blocks of each other on Midland Street in the Black Rock section.

Other PAL alumni have made their mark in the activity, as well. Bill Duquette has been active in drum corps for years, once serving as the director of Spirit of Atlanta. Alumnus Bob Findley is a member of the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame. Lisko went on to play with the New York Skyliners for

many years and is still active in "The Big Red Band's" outstanding alumni corps. Rich Warga marched with the Hawthorne Caballeros and now serves on the corps' support staff. Many former PAL members propelled the Connecticut Hurricanes to greatness in the 1980s.

However, as the 1960s drew to a close, the Vietnam War, college and other paths beckoned PAL members. The corps disbanded following the 1968 season. By 1977, there were no more junior corps in Bridgeport; today, none exist in the entire state. But Kennedy Stadium, lauded by many as one of the top drum corps venues of all time, still stands proud on the campus of Central High School. It plays host to the annual "Champions on Parade," one of the oldest senior shows in existence. If you go there, you might just hear faint echoes of the many local corps who marched on that field -- especially Bridgeport PAL Cadets.

Postscript: Recently, under the auspices of Bill Duquette, the PAL Cadets formed an alumni association. Several events have already taken place, with a reunion slated for September 2003. For more information, visit the alumni Web site at www.palcadets.org.

The PAL Cadets -- A remembrance

It was a heady time to be in Bridgeport, CT, to be a teenager and to be in drum corps. It seemed like there were corps on every street corner. Parishes like St. Ann's in Black Rock and St. Raphael's in The Hollow both sponsored corps. In fact, there were three competing corps (A, feeder and all-girls) under the St. Raphael's aegis.

The World Open was held in Bridgeport in both 1964 (with a senior show as well) and 1965 -- the inaugural year for now-famous Kennedy Stadium. Within a couple of miles of my house I was able to see Blessed Sac, Sky, Lucy's, Garfield, Green Machine, Royal Airs, Kiltis, Casper, Cabs . . . you name it.

But the corps I admired most was the PAL Cadets. Maybe it was the black uniforms, the big-band sound or that fabulous color guard. However, I was a member of the cross-town Connecticut Royal Lancers. Stuff like this happens when your father is the assistant director.

We wore homemade uniforms, which wouldn't have been so gosh-awful if the bottoms hadn't been (gasp!) Bermuda shorts. Worse yet, I was too small to carry a snare or tenor drum, so I was christened "Timmy Timbale" and tried to fit in with a corps that played non-Latin music. I hated every minute of it.

"Look," the fans would say, "aren't they cute? And they have girls in the horn line." I have long been a supporter of the equal-rights movement, but back in those days we didn't have many young women who could coax much sound from a one-valve Getzen.

Our drum line, once I had grown out of my Munchkin phase, saved me from tying the timbales to my legs and jumping into Long Island Sound. We had John Bodnar -- still one of the best I have ever seen -- and Bobby Moravek on snares and Greg Black on tenor.

John Ratzenberger had left the bass drum line; I would watch him years later as Cliff Clavin on "Cheers."

From time to time, we'd place well in the caption, even beating big names like Sac, Garfield and St. Lucy's on occasion. But we never won a show, often slouching into lower placings.

Then, in 1965, the "Miracle of Midland Street" happened at VFW Nationals. You can see from the PAL history how two blocks of a quiet city street produced three amazing drummers, with another on the East Side. When Greg Black left the Lancers for PAL at the end of the 1965 season, I wanted to go, too. I longed for finishes above fourth; I wanted to drum next to legends; I wanted long pants.

"No way," said my father, with all the warmth of a Parris Island D.I. "Those kids are a bunch of thugs. Half of 'em should be in jail."

"Dad," I said, "don't sugarcoat it; tell me how you really feel." This was not a wise tack. It was rumored that if you ran afoul of the law in Bridgeport back in the day, you were given the choice of joining the PAL or three hots and a cot from the state. But my father was exaggerating. Next to the bony-legged waifs in the Lancers, the Norwood Debonnaires seemed tough.

Yes, PAL did have a swagger about them; that's why I loved the corps. Black-clad, stoic, proud and tall, that's how they walked. Even the girls in the fabulous Thunderbirds possessed terminal cool -- the first girls I ever truly feared. Wearing black boots, tons of Aqua Net and a splash of Ambush, they were a combination of the Shangri-Las and girls from "West Side Story." I had crushes on different members of the guard -- these changed weekly. But I was too afraid to even approach their aura, much less talk to them.

The kid who turned the tide was Duane Giannini, a tenor drummer from the PAL. I had gotten to know him when we each played with our respective winter guards. Our love of drum corps and music brought us together, despite competing for rival corps.

I'd hop a bus over to his house on Berkshire Avenue on the East Side; we'd eat meatball grinders at Paul's on East Main and we'd listen to his totally kick-butt stereo, the first I had ever heard. We'd sample bullfight music from Spain; I'd bring my Maynard



PAL Cadets, 1964 (photo from the collection of Carol Olsavsky Longwell).

Ferguson and, of course, drum corps.

I brought Duane home to meet my folks. "He'd better not bring his switchblade," my father said. When my parents experienced how warm and genuine Duane was, they voiced no objections to my joining PAL after the Lancers folded at the end of 1966.

Duane and I played for the Thunderbirds over the winter. Riding down to Jersey on the bus weekend after weekend, I soon lost my stammer, realizing that there was a gentler side to these city girls. Kevin Shanley, another Lancer émigré, and I made the snare line. I got to march next to Andy Lisko. I knew before it began that 1967 was to be a summer of dreams.

I fell in with Duane's buddies, Joey Convertito and Donnie Beach. We practiced, competed, sometimes won and otherwise laughed our summer away. Although I still admired the guard from afar, I was no longer afraid of them; I was one of them.

The highlight of the season was our trip to New Orleans for the VFW Nationals. We rode straight through from Bridgeport; fresh bus drivers joined us in Knoxville. So did a bunch of, shall we say, rustic locals in the bus station. Yes, in those days PAL was one of the few integrated corps in the activity; the rest rooms in Tennessee were not.

One of the Giles brothers (they were twins, so identical that they were both simply addressed as "Giles") stood looking at the men's room that said "Colored." Veteran horn player John Mynyk literally shoved Giles into the "Whites Only" facility. "We're all black, red and white; we're the PAL," said Mynyk in stern tones. "We play together; we (mild expletive) together."

All of us used the "white" restrooms. When the rednecks took exception to this, they were greeted by a stare-down from about 10 of Bridgeport's finest. "Y'awl cain't go in there," said one bystander.

"Oh yeah?" said detective Ed Wesche, red-faced, unblinking, all 6'3" of him right in the hick's face. "Watch us."

The buses left without incident.

Without much prodding, I could write volumes about that summer. It was my last year in drum corps. Two years later, I was in RCA studios in New York, cutting my first record. But I never forgot my drum corps days: the bus rides, the small victories, the huge defeats . . . and Duane Giannini.

Last Christmas, I attended the first meeting of the about-to-be-

formed PAL Alumni Association. I think I hugged Duane for about an hour. At once, the pride, the camaraderie and the love came back, all a result of my magic summer with the Bridgeport PAL Cadets.

You see, I lived on Midland Street, too.



Timothy Patrick Holleran was born and raised in Bridgeport, CT. When a drum corps began in his home parish of St. Ann's, he took drum lessons from Earl Sturtze, considered by many to be one of the finest rudimental teachers of all time.

When St. Ann's fired director Bill Heagney, he formed his own corps, the Connecticut Royal Lancers. Dennis Holleran, Tim's father, became assistant director. Tim played timbales, tenor and snare in the corps from 1961-1966. In 1967, he joined the Bridgeport PAL Cadets, his last year in drum corps. That fall, he matriculated to Villanova University, where he eventually earned a bachelor of arts degree in German and Russian.

In the summer of 1969, Holleran was recruited by a Connecticut band called the New Bronx. A staff producer at RCA records fronted the band to record seven songs in New York. It was at one of these sessions where the drummer made a huge mistake that caused the engineer to stop tape. One of the band members in the control booth pressed the intercom button and said, "Way to go, ace." The band didn't stick, but the nickname did.

Over the next 18 years, Ace Holleran played drums full-time, often as a freelancer. He has played on more than 1,000 albums, singles, movie soundtracks, commercials and demos. He earned a gold record for his work on "Sesame Street in Harmony," playing on songs by Bette Midler and Linda Ronstadt.

In 1985, Holleran appeared on the game show "Sale of the Century," where he won eight straight shows, retiring as an undefeated champion. Two years later, he won the show's Tournament of Champions.

Holleran became a professional writer in 1986. Five years later, after seeing his first DCI show, he wrote an article about Phantom Regiment and submitted it to Drum Corps World. He still writes for the paper, penning his column "Sideline Confidential" and an ongoing fictional series, "The Further Adventures of Our Lady of the Single-Valve Cadets." He has covered DCA Finals for the past six years.

In 1992, Holleran married Laura Houck. Daughter Grace arrived the next year, and twins Dennis and Eleanor followed 21 months later. The family lives in the Black Rock section of Bridgeport, only one block from Midland Street.

Ace specializes in Web design, content and site management. His homepage is www.aceholleran.com.



PAL Cadets, 1958 (photo from the collection of Mike Mycek/www.walk proud.org).