


by Steve Groh

October 12, 1967 . . . Two out, bottom of the ninth, seventh game of the 1967 World Series and the Red Sox trail the Cardinals 10-7. Bob Gibson delivers a breaking ball and George "Boomer" Scott strikes out.

The "Impossible Dream" year ended for the Boston Red Sox that day. The dreams were coming to an end for the I.C. Reveries at the same time.

The Immaculate Conception Parish of Revere, MA, had sponsored the Reveries Drum and Bugle Corps since its inception in 1957. Like many other Catholic church parishes throughout the Northeast, a drum and bugle corps was part of their program of service to the youth of the parish.

The Reveries competed in the Catholic Youth Organization circuit against national champions and contenders such as St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, St. Mary's Cardinals and the Boston Crusaders. The strong competition made the Reveries stronger.

By the mid-1960s, the Revere corps was recognized as one that could hold its own in national contests such as the American Legion Nationals, CYO Nationals, World Open and a contest that would prove to be instrumental in the Reveries' fate, the VFW Nationals.

It was August 1966 and the Reveries marched in a quiet formation to the stadium gate

(Top) The 27th Lancers at their first World Open in Lynn, MA, 1968 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); (far right) 27th Lancers in 1972 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); (right) 27th Lancers, in the mid-1970s (photo by Joseph Zepko from the collection of Drum Corps World).

27th Lancers



in Jersey City, NJ. The VFW National Championship contest for 1966 was about to begin. The only thing wrong was that the Reveries did not make the cut for the finals.

They found themselves just out of finals, finishing between the 12th-place Racine Scouts and the 14th-place Madison Scouts. A complicated series of arguments, rule

interpretations and re-interpretations had moved the Madison Scouts into finals, leaving the Racine Scouts in the final show as a 13th-place competing corps and left the Reveries out in the cold.

The Reveries' management, enraged by the VFW's decisions, had the corps dress for the performance of their lives and crash the gate at Roosevelt Stadium

Drum Major Gus Probert led the way through the staging area, but found St. Joseph's of Batavia blocking their entrance on to the field. St. Joe's had a fierce reputation as a tough corps to beat, on or off the field.

Probert sought out St. Joe's drum major, Joe Eduardo, and explained what the Reveries were intending to do. Eduardo ordered his corps to stand aside and allow the Reveries to pass.

Before contest officials knew what had happened, the Reveries had taken the starting line and sat down, demanding to perform. *(See photo on page 132 of "A History of*

Drum & Bugle corps, Volume 1.")

The Reveries performed that night. They weren't judged, but they played to a crowd that both applauded and scorned their actions. The VFW Nationals got under way one and a half hours late and the wheels were set in motion toward the Reveries' demise and the 27th Lancers' birth.

Father Gallagher, the pastor of the Immaculate Conception Parish, had made a tough and unpopular decision during the following summer. The VFW sit-down strike hung over the Reveries and the parish for the entire 1967 season.

The corps had attracted too many members from outside of the small parish, so the church decided it could no longer support the class A corps and would only sponsor the class B Reveries Juniors.

Members were ordered to return their uniforms and instruments at the end of the 1967 season. The Reveries' 10-year history ended in the fall of 1967.

September 1967 . . . In

black and white, with scratchy sound, Errol Flynn entered a sun-drenched room in his white uniform and strode across the floor confidently. In six bold steps, he was across the room and face to face with his commanding officer. He saluted and said with a wry grin, "Captain Vickers, 27th Lancers, reporting for duty."

Sitting in his old reclining chair, George Bonfiglio watched that old 1936 movie, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," pondering what the future would bring for his desire to resurrect the recently deceased drum corps. At that moment, Bonfiglio knew his fledgling drum corps -- with no home, no equipment and no money -- had finally acquired a name: the 27th Lancers.

The 1968 season began for the Lancers at Kelly Field, a tiny stadium in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood. Many drum corps fans witnessed the premier performance, but never made the connection between the old Reveries and the new 27th Lancers. To them it seemed as though the Lancers had come out of nowhere, a theme that would stay with the corps throughout its history.

During that first season, the corps was living hand to mouth. A large number of the horns were rented from the Majestic Knights of Charlestown. That rental agreement ended early in the season, because the Lancers had





27th Lancers, 1971 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

the audacity to consistently beat the Majestic Knights in competition, leaving the Lancers to arrive at a contest site and immediately borrow a dozen or more horns for that performance.

Flags and uniforms were all made on the cheap as well. The Bonfiglio's family room was turned into a seamstress shop with George's wife, Patsy, making flags, skirts, hat bands and a hundred other bits and pieces of the "Lancer look." The first khaki uniforms came from an Army/Navy surplus store. The most expensive piece of the entire uniform -- and the only piece to be custom made for the corps -- was the distinctive Aussie-style hat.

Inspections were an important part of a corps' total score in the 1960s and, with uniforms assembled from bits and pieces, the Lancers found themselves at a disadvantage. Some khaki shirts or pants were a different shade or style from others. Slight variations in uniforms could cause a loss of points.

The solution to the problem was unique. When the corps lined up for inspection, they seemingly lined up at random and not by section. It was not random, though. In fact, each member's place on the inspection line was carefully calculated so that no two horn players, drummers or guard members stood next to each other. The Lancers consistently came out of inspection with high marks.



27th Lancers, 1977 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps by the end of the 1968 season. Audiences came to accept the corps as a favorite underdog by the season's end.

Standing ovations were common at just about any Lancer performance. The corps competed and made the finals in the big shows at year's end. They placed 10th in the World Open and 11th at the VFW Nationals in Detroit. The 27th Lancer penchant for finding themselves in the midst of a



27th Lancers, 1972 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

controversy was something that seemed to carry over from the old Reverie days.

At the 1968 VFW Nationals in Detroit, the corps had a practice site many blocks away from their housing, so they marched in parade formation to and from the rehearsals. Apparently, the Detroit police department was not a Lancer fan (yet) and some staff members were placed under arrest for organizing a parade without the necessary city permits.

It was 1969, the summer of Woodstock. The Lancers still had no money, a fact of life the corps would always live with. What the Lancers did have was a growing popularity.

One of the issues that caused the Immaculate Conception parish to cast off the Reveries senior corps and keep the feeder Reveries Juniors was membership. The Reveries attracted members from outside the church community. Now the 27th Lancers were attracting members from faraway cities and towns in Massachusetts.

They put all their new members to work immediately selling cleaning

The
play
worked . . .
at least
until the
VFW
Nationals
in 1969.

The
Lancers
became a
household
name in
drum

products and eggs by the gross to raise money. Selling ZIF was like an old "Three Stooges" gag -- the corps sold it, but had no idea what it was for.

The egg wholesale business wasn't without its glitches either. Put a few dozen teenagers together with a few gross of fresh eggs and, well, you get the picture.

In 1969, the Lancer staff started to craft the musical and visual identity of the corps. Brass arranger and instructor Jim Wedge started to write music with an unmistakable British sound to it. *Rule Britannia*, *Waltzing Matilda* and other music associated with the British Empire became part of the Lancer identity. The "bugle call" drum solo introduced in 1969 was the idea of percussion arranger and instructor Jim Buckley. He studied the distinctive sounds of Scottish pipe band drummers and adapted those sounds and rhythms to a large drum line, a drum line that was now outfitted in Black Watch kilts.

Wedge and Buckley were responsible for

the musical direction the Lancers would take for the next eight to 10 years, but the visual identity -- the Lancer look -- was the domain of Richard "Ike" Iannessa. Iannessa was also the driving force behind the 27th Lancers' incredible work ethic and discipline. He required each member of the corps to put his heart into every moment on the competition or rehearsal field. Incurring Iannessa's wrath was not a smart move.

On a sweltering rehearsal day on tour, he had been pushing the corps very hard under a blazing sun. Late in the day, 100 pounds of ice cubes were delivered to the rehearsal field. The corps members had visions of the rehearsal ending soon and holding a

cup of ice water or holding a handful of ice to the backs of their necks, but Iannessa had different plans.

The 100 pounds of ice was dumped on the 50-yard line at the front sideline as he screamed his usual, "AGAIN!" command for another run-through. After each run-through, he checked the mound of ice and screamed, "AGAIN!" When the last ice cube melted into the ground, rehearsal ended.

The Lancers gained some respect from the Eastern judging community in 1969. The corps placed second at the CYO Nationals and at the National Dream contest. The judging philosophies from one region of the country to another were very different and, when the Lancers faced judges from the Midwest or West, the outcomes were very different.

The VFW contest director decided to throw out the inspection marks after the prelims were complete. The Lancers' consistently high inspection marks could not help them and the corps dropped from 12th to 15th place at VFW that year, far below corps they had beaten only a week before.

The Lancers' second year in competition had ended with some incredible victories and disappointing defeats, but their reputation

grew and drum corps fans across the country wanted more.

In 1970, the Lancers' show theme became more British with the addition of *The Wee MacGregor* as an opening number. *MacGregor* was actually a medley of English, Irish and Scottish folk tunes arranged by Wedge. He rearranged and expanded this number for the 1971 season with great success.

The 1970 season was the beginning of great changes in the way the Lancers would compete and operate through the summer months. The Revere corps and the Boston Crusaders both stopped participating in the local Eastern Massachusetts Circuit. Both felt their time was better spent making short weekend trips to Connecticut, New York and New Jersey shows. In a way, this was the Massachusetts corps' first step to their participation in the "Combine" and then DCI's formation.

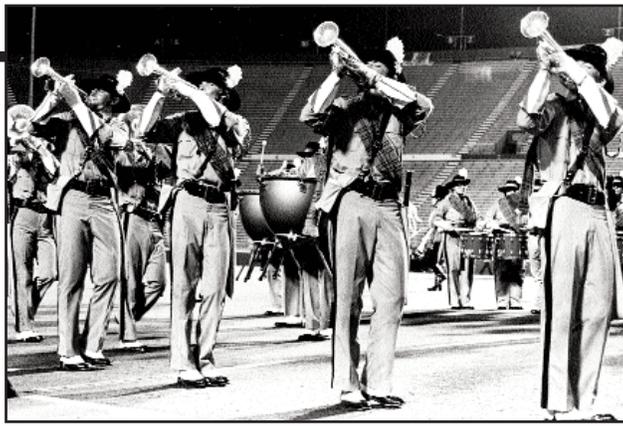
A typical weekend for the two corps was to get on the buses early Saturday morning and drive to Garfield, NJ. The Lancers and Crusaders would find rehearsal sites, practice all afternoon and compete at Garfield High School that evening.

The Lancers would beat the Crusaders by five-tenths or vice versa, both corps losing by two points to the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights. A Lancer and a Crusader would get into a fistfight and both corps would stand around and glare at each before being herded onto their respective buses to be shuttled off to whatever gymnasium floor they were sleeping on that night.

A case of beer would get smuggled into the gym, some guys or girls would get caught drinking and everyone would fall asleep exhausted.

The next morning, the Lancers and Crusaders would get a nutritious breakfast of orange juice and doughnuts at their respective gymnasiums and then equipment and bodies would get loaded onto the bus to head back north for an afternoon show in Bridgeport, CT. The Crusaders would get to the show site early, rehearse and perform. One of the Lancers buses would break down on the Cross-Bronx Expressway, bodies and equipment would pile on to two buses and the corps would get to the stadium with about 10 minutes to spare.

Uniforms would get put on and buttoned up as the corps was running to the starting line, the Crusaders would beat the Lancers by five-tenths or vice versa and both corps would lose to Blue Rock by two points.



27th Lancers, 1980 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

A Lancer and a Crusader would get into a fistfight, the two corps would stand around and glare at each other before the drinking culprits from the night before (remember them?) would be ordered to load all the equipment by themselves. We would all drive home aching, sunburned and laughing that

the Lancers had beaten the Crusaders on the field and off . . . or vice versa.

As the 27th Lancers' British theme developed musically and visually in 1971, the corps became a much sought after addition to contest lineups. The season was so busy that logistics demanded a chartered flight to Dallas for the VFW Nationals

instead of a long, hot bus ride.

The corps was invited to compete in more invitational shows than ever before and the Lancers tailored their travel schedule to participate in the most prestigious shows.

The 1971 season was a special one for



27th Lancers, 1979 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).



27th Lancers, 1979 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

drum corps. There were at least 10 strong corps capable of winning a national championship that year and the season ended without just one dominant corps. You could almost say there were three separate seasons in 1971, with CYO National champion Blue Rock dominating the month of June, the World Open champion 27th Lancers on top through the month of July and the Santa Clara Vanguard winning the coveted VFW Nationals in August in Texas.

The Lancers entered the 1972 season with high hopes and extreme confidence. It was the first year of DCI and the corps had purchased a fleet of three buses for touring the United States and Canada. They were stronger in every category than the champion 1971 corps. The Lancers enjoyed victory after victory over Eastern and Midwestern corps.

It seemed as though the Lancers would take the season, until one humid July evening in their own backyard. The corps was looking forward to continuing its unbeaten streak and finally taking home the CYO National title, and why not? Of all the powerful corps scheduled to compete that night, the Lancers had consistently beaten all of them through the first half of the 1972 season.

They were about to re-learn a lesson they should have remembered from the 1971 season. At the world class level of drum corps competition, any corps and every corps can be a fierce competitor and upsets happen. The stories had filtered back East that the Anaheim Kingsmen were in tough competitive and financial shape and it was a miracle that they could travel east at all. They were rumored to actually be finishing their show while touring.

The Lancers were blindsided by a Kingsmen corps that tore up the field at Boston College. It was a turning point in Lancer history, marking the corps' first long slide down the ladder of DCI prominence. The Lancers did not win an important show for the rest of the season, continually frustrated by the Kingsmen. They finished in fourth place at the first DCI Championships in Whitewater, WI.

The 1973 season still had the Lancers considered to be among the activity's innovators, but the corps was no longer a DCI front-runner. They were still in demand at shows throughout the country, but the standing ovations weren't as long or as loud as they used to be.

The corps introduced an opening number that pleased the crowd, but really didn't shake the earth, at least not in 1973. Brass arranger Jim Wedge had doubts about the piece when he heard the original orchestral rendition of Sir William Walton's *Crown Imperial*. The selection was chosen only for the potential of its "wall of sound" finale and really was not fully appreciated until it was resurrected for the 1975 show.

In 1973, Wedge had also chosen a

beautiful Scottish folk song called *Memmenvien* to replace the *Danny Boy* closer, thinking that using the Irish ballad two years in a row would be enough. *Danny Boy* turned out to be the most retired and the most resurrected tune throughout the Lancers' history.

The summer of 1974 was one of hard tests for the corps and the country. President Nixon resigned in disgrace and it was the turning point for the corps in making a mark among the DCI elite. After the 1973 season, the corps lost more members due to age and other reasons than any time in their history.

The corps started the 1974 season with a full complement of 128 marching members, but a very large number of them were young and inexperienced rookies. To make matters worse, the staff saw no alternative but to design a completely new show. The direction the Lancers had taken for many years no longer matched the types of shows that were becoming successful in DCI.

The 1974 edition worked as hard or harder than any drum corps in North America, but an open class drum corps filled out with 12-year-olds could not compete against the likes of Santa Clara or Madison Scouts. They were



27th Lancers, 1983 (photo by Ed Ferguson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

edged out of the World Open Finals with 13th place. Since their birth in 1968, the Lancers only missed the finals once -- at VFW in 1969.

Despite drastic changes in the show and non-stop rehearsals, the corps finished 20th at DCI Prelims in Ithaca, NY, that year. Many of those directly connected with the corps and many of the corps' close friends doubted it could survive loss of members, status and income resulting from 1974's poor finish.

If 1974 was one of the lowest points in Lancer history, 1975 was one of the greatest. By the time the corps filled all of the holes and polished up the show, the 1975 season was about a month old. *Crown Imperial* was back and so was *Danny Boy*. The 27th Lancers were looking and sounding better than ever.

New staff members Joe Marella on percussion and Ralph Pace designing the visual show gave the corps new life. The caption heads inherited a lot of volunteer alumni to help teach and polish the show. Pace's staff included Peggy Twigg's and Stephen Covitz, two great color guard innovators. A year later Denis Bonfiglio

would round out that guard staff. Together they would create a series of legendary color guards through the 1970s and 1980s.

He also inherited a young teaching novice and budding star by the name of George Zingali. Somehow the Lancers attracted new, talented membership in spite of the previous season's dismal outcome. The corps was back in the elite class, on par with the best of DCI. They finished the season in fourth place at the DCI Championship Finals in Philadelphia that year.

Not all relations with other drum corps were confrontational, as some had been through the earlier years. Through the 1970s, as the Lancers toured and spent more time in the company of their competitors, there were special friendships developed with many other drum corps. Perhaps the strongest of these friendships was with St. Andrew's and later known as the Bayonne Bridgemen. The two corps truly enjoyed competing against each other and there were entire seasons where the two traded placements within one point of each other.

The most notable example of how competitive the two corps were was a weekend of shows in New Jersey in 1973. On Saturday night in Hawthorne, the Lancers and Bridgemen tied. On Sunday afternoon in Garfield, the two corps tied again.

Members of both corps laughed and suggestions were made to have a tug-of-war or arm wrestling contest to break the tie. On the field the competition was intense, but off the field, the corps would be happy to share a laugh and a beer at the Bayside in Revere or the Venice in Bayonne.

The late 1970s were the touring years. The bus fleet, which was now old by any

standards, was driven or pushed 8,000 to 10,000 miles each summer around the United States and Canada. It was a common practice to leave one of the three buses in a remote town for repair while continuing on with the entire corps squashed onto only two buses.

By the late 1970s, air conditioning on those buses was a



27th Lancers, 1975 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

distant memory and toilets? . . . never had them to begin with.

With the extended tours came another problem. Money. It was costing more and more every year to operate the corps and the cash flow had not improved much from the first year's hand-to-mouth existence. The money was spent long before it came in.



27th Lancers, 1976 (photo by Ed Ferguson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

There was a logistical problem developing during those years as well. The Lancers were drawing more of their membership from distant states. This meant that all the spots weren't filled until the very beginning of

the season, sometimes well into the season. The corps would have slow starts during those years, only to come on strong during the last few weeks of the season.

In 1978, the staff seemed to have a significant turnover. In reality, the torches were passed to staff members who had contributed a great deal to the corps over the years. Mike Kumer passed the percussion section on to Charlie Poole.

Poole would go on to have the longest tenure as the Lancers' percussion head and would produce some drum lines that were legendary in the 1980s.



27th Lancers, 1981 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).



27th Lancers, 1984 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

The responsibility for the Lancers' visual presentation was now in the hands of George Zingali. He would make his fame through most of the 1980s with the Cadets and Star of Indiana, but Revere, MA, was his home, where he fine-tuned his genius and creativity.

Of the many talents Zingali possessed, his ability to motivate and spread his enthusiasm was probably his greatest. During the 1979 Drum Corps East Championships at Lynn's Manning Bowl, he learned that the local Wendy's restaurant was offering a free meal to the winning corps. Zingali knew food was always a great motivational tool to be used on the Lancers.

well that night.

In 1979, there was an entertainment producer named Tommy Walker watching the PBS broadcast of the DCI Finals. Walker was contracted by the United States Olympic Committee to develop the opening and closing ceremonies for the upcoming Winter Olympic Games to be held in Lake Placid, NY.

He contacted Bonfiglio and asked that he consider making the mid-winter trip to upstate New York for the event. There was no question, the Lancers were going to the Olympics. The corps was outfitted in uniforms appropriate for performing in sub-freezing weather and had to learn how to

While our cousins in yellow from Jersey marched into the stadium chanting, "Wendy's . . . hot and juicy . . ." to their patented hip arm swing, Zingali could be heard bellowing at the top of his lungs, "The hungriest corps wins!" The 27th Lancers ate

march on ice with speeding figure skaters all around them.

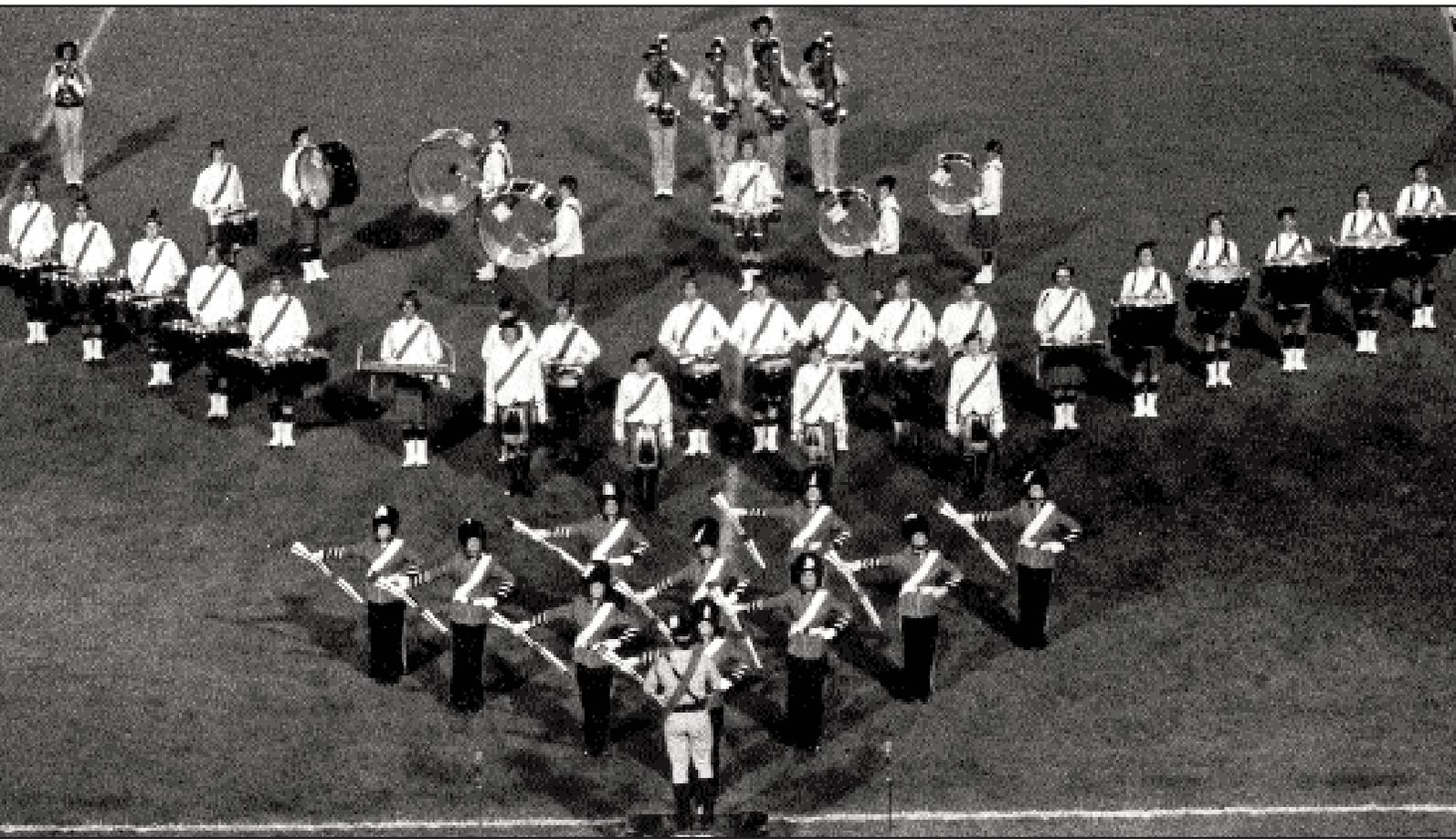
The Lancers enjoyed performing in Lake Placid and entertained an international television audience numbering in the millions. It was the beginning of a great year for the corps.

The staff carried over most of the 1979 show into 1980. By August the Lancers were sharing the top spot of DCI with the Blue Devils. The 1980 27th Lancers were a great drum and bugle corps and made their best run ever to capture the DCI Championship.

Wedge said he didn't know which was harder to take -- dropping down to 20th place in 1974 or losing the championship by tenths of a point in 1980. Regardless, he was proud of the effort and heart displayed by the corps during both seasons.

By 1983, the corps was feeling the backlash of staff turnover. Zingali would move on, as would Wedge. In 1984, the corps was slipping in the DCI standings, with Poole's percussion section holding the corps in the top 12.

Halley's Comet made a rare visit in 1985. In medieval times, the sight of a comet was considered a bad omen. Unrealized by most at the time, it was the beginning of the end for the Lancers. With the exception of the Cadets, the Eastern corps in general were fairly weak in 1985. The Lancers were 10 or more points behind Cadets every outing. Again, poor recruitment and lack of money were taking their toll on the corps. They



27th Lancers, 1981 (photo by Mark Boisclair from the collection of Drum Corps World).



27th Lancers, early 1984 (photo by Joseph Zepko from the collection of Drum Corps World).

dropped out of the top 12 at the DCI Finals for the first time in 11 years, causing even more money problems going into 1986.

The following season was a year that broke a lot of hearts. The "Challenger" disaster in Florida and the Red Sox's bizarre loss in the World Series all had deep impacts on New Englanders. The Lancers had taken great chances for the 1986 season. The entire British theme was thrown out in favor of contemporary Broadway tunes. The uniforms had finally

evolved away from kilts, the busbies and the "Scottish War Maiden" jackets. The Lancers had their usual slow start at the beginning of the season and started to improve as the season wore on. The tenuous financial situation

finally collapsed that summer. The corps lost "Lancer Hall," loans were called in and

Bonfiglio was faced with an important decision -- try to limp through and keep going or go out with pride.

Ironically, failure to make finals for the second consecutive year was not indicated as the determining factor in the corps' demise.

In mid-season the bus breakdowns were rampant. Bill Cook from Star of Indiana borrowed a

bus from his friend Bobby Knight's Indiana University basketball team for the Lancers while one of the Lancer buses was being repaired.

When the Lancers' bus returned, one young woman was afraid to get back on the bus. She told Bonfiglio she feared for her safety and was afraid to travel on the buses. Bonfiglio points to that incident as the moment he decided. He knew, regardless of the corps' placement in Madison, that

they simply could not continue. That young woman's premonition of danger made up his mind. For the second time in as many years, the 27th Lancers finished their season just one place short of finals.

After the 1986 prelims in Madison, the official announcement was made. The 27th Lancers had performed for the last time. At the finals that evening, Lancer fans and

competitors mourned their loss. Members of Star of Indiana had left their shoes on the field forming the numbers "2-7" in honor of the Lancers.

After their last appearance in competition on August 15, 1986, the Lancers left a void in competitive drum corps. They were the last of the "blue collar" drum corps to perish under the strain of touring economics.

They were mercenaries, largely supported by 128 tattered wallets. They were always a crowd-pleaser and were the subject of many stories concerning the history of drum corps.

In a way, the 27th Lancers Alumni's appearance at the 1994 DCI Championships was inevitable. Until 1994, the Lancer story never had an ending. Ironically, 1994 DCI came to Boston during the Lancers' 27th anniversary year.

That exhibition performance to close the 1994 finals will always be considered by the members, friends and foes as the farewell performance and for the 286 people who wore Lancer uniforms that night, the greatest night of their drum corps lives.

The 1994 performance in Foxboro was the 27th Lancers' way of saying, "Thank you and goodbye."



27th Lancers at the 1980 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremonies (photo by the Lake Placid Olympic committee from the collection of Drum Corps World).



27th Lancers, 1985 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Steve Groh is a broadcast television engineer and freelance video producer in Boston. He produced two limited release video documentaries on the 27th Lancers -- "Once more in '94" was an insider's look at the formation and legendary performance of the Lancer's



1994 alumni corps and "Two-Seven" traced the 19-year competitive history of the corps and was produced as part of the Lancers' 35th anniversary in 2002.

He was a member of the 27th Lancers from 1969-1974.

He and his wife Maryhelen (also a Lancer alumnus) travel as often as possible to exotic destinations to participate in their favorite hobby, scuba diving and underwater photography.



The 1994 reunion corps at DCI in Boston, MA (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).