
by Art Kellerman

"This corps is made of giants, we will never die. For we are Crusaders, true blue Crusaders, We are Crusaders, the corps we love!"

These are the words to *Giant*, the corps song that has been sung by many generations of Boston Crusaders over the past 64 years. The fact that the corps has not died, but has thrived, even though it faced difficulties, is an amazing story in itself.

The corps was organized in 1940 as the Most Precious Blood Crusaders, a parish corps from the Hyde Park section of Boston. MPB experienced success in local VFW

Boston Crusaders



Most Precious Blood Crusaders, 1950 (photo from the collection of Karl Jorgensen).

and American Legion events and made its mark upon the national scene as well.

A disagreement about recruiting members outside of the parish led to a break with the church, and the corps, in 1956, with no uniforms or instruments, became known as the Hyde Park Crusaders. Several fathers took out second mortgages and the Crusaders, with borrowed instruments and rented tuxedos, took to the field.

One story had the corps ready to compete in Lt. Norman Prince's "Drumfest," an annual indoor show held in the old Boston Arena during mid-April. Told that tuxedos did not constitute a "real" uniform because a hat was required, the corps appeared wearing tuxedos and turbans.

As the Hyde Park Crusaders, the corps developed into a powerhouse, winning the Eastern Massachusetts Circuit Championship in 1957 and 1958, the New England and Northeastern States Circuit junior titles and capturing fourth place at the Atlantic City, NJ, American Legion Nationals in 1957.

At the conclusion of the 1958 season, the corps severed its Hyde Park sponsorship to become the Boston Crusaders. Again they were without uniforms and instruments. Other corps offered drums and bugles, and the girls in the color guard supplied their own uniforms. Sen. John F. Kennedy (yes, the future president) arranged for the corps to buy West Point uniforms from the U.S.



Most Precious Blood Crusaders, 1954 (photo from the collection of Karl Jorgensen).

Military Academy at a fraction of their cost, and the Crusaders were back in business.

J.F.K. was even made an honorary member of the corps. Eventually, the corps was able to buy back its old Hyde Park uniforms and found a stable

Johnson's inaugural parade, and that was considered a great honor as well as a historical landmark for the corps.

It would be impossible to discuss the history of the Crusaders without touching on

the legend of "BAC." One must remember the drum corps of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s consisted of inner city street kids, not the polished high school and college musicians of today.

Director Joe Dowling was a second father to many of these youth and he gave them the discipline they needed in their lives. Still, the Crusaders of that era had the reputation of being able to beat you on the field or in the parking lot.

Being a Crusader meant having a certain swagger, a certain attitude. To friends, it was confidence. To enemies, it was arrogance. Drum corps fans were never neutral about the Crusaders. They were either loved or

hated, but everyone always respected them.

The acronym "BAC" (Bad Ass Crusaders) stuck, much to the detriment of future generations of Crusaders, who were certainly of a different ilk than their predecessors.

For a number of years in the modern era, Crusader management dreaded to see



Boston Crusaders, 1960, in West Point uniforms (photo from the collection of Karl Jorgensen).

home at the Lower Mills Memorial Post No. 8699 of the VFW.

The Crusaders, had history been different, would have thanked J.F.K. by marching in his inaugural parade to begin his second term in the oval office, but that fateful day in Dallas changed everything.

The corps did march in Lyndon B.

stories (to some, legends) of the BAC days dug up, because they felt it created a stigma that hurt the corps in the eyes of the judges.

One of my favorites (I think the corps' recent success indicates that we are beyond stigmatization) took place in the early 1970s. The Boston Bruins, long the doormat of the NHL, finally won the Stanley Cup. The

Boston Crusaders were hired to march in the victory parade. Some local toughs decided to mock and throw trash at members of the "band." Bad mistake. One line of baritones marched into the crowd and "re-educated" the youth.

The 1960s brought great success to the Crusaders as they were three-time CYO Nationals Champions (1964, 1966 and 1967) and won the World Open, "Shriner's International," "North American Invitational," "East-West Spectacular" and many other local shows. During that time, Hall of Fame instructors Ed Dennon and Gerry Shellmer developed the in-your-face style of music that personified the Crusaders.

Soon the sound of *Conquest* and the sight of "Waldo," the split-tailed lion, became among the most recognizable icons in the world of drum corps. *Conquest*, from the film "Captain of Castile," was composed by



Boston Crusaders, 1965, at the Princemen's "Drumfest" (photo from the collection of Karl Jorgensen).

today, those who knew him will imitate his voice in chiding one for some indiscretion. It took lots of courage to challenge him, but once you got him on your side, you had a loyal friend for life.

Crusader alumni Eric Rosen relates that it was sometime in the late 1960s when Jimmy Centorino and a few other found out it was

Paul Palange was the no-nonsense drill instructor who complemented Dennon and Shellmer. Discipline and firmness were needed and the Crusaders got no respite, even while out of the domain of the music room. Palange set a high standard that was upheld when he left and Hank O'Donnell joined the staff.

O'Donnell had been a national champion drum major and was a motivator and role model for the Crusaders' late, great James Stockinger.

Still, the drum corps experience is not simply what happens on the field,

and drum corps Hall of Famer Centorino, who marched with the Crusaders from 1967-1971, relates this story in Crusader lore.

"One of the most memorable trips we took was to Toronto (1967-1969) and stopping at Niagara Falls," he said. "The corps had about three hours to spend and we descended like locusts upon unsuspecting tourist attractions.



Boston Crusaders, August 30, 1964, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Hollywood composer Alfred Newman and has become a signature song for the Crusaders over the years. The corps has played it in competition at least 16 times since 1969. Dennon first taught the number to the Princemen of Boston as a 1961 off-the-line.

Other traditional Crusader sounds include Sousa's *El Capitan March* (at least seven years in competition) and *Hava Nagila* (at least 13 years), which Dennon claimed was a tribute to "my Jewish grandmother."

Dennon became an institution on the local drum corps scene and his arrangements have stood the test of time as they are now played by the Crusaders Alumni corps before thousands of appreciative fans.

Known for his girth and low, booming voice that was laced with a distinctive Boston accent, Dennon personified the Crusaders as much as any human being possibly could. Even

Dennon's birthday. They chipped in their money and bought a carved wooden Buddha -- the one with the big belly -- thinking it was appropriate to present to the rotund instructor.

Dennon had not wanted his birthday acknowledged and wouldn't open the gift. The horn line refused to play until he did. There was a standoff until Dennon conceded. The tension was broken as booming guffaws issued from the man.

Shellmer revolutionized percussion for drum corps by introducing new instruments and techniques and raising the

musicality of the artform. Percussion sections were now featured and no longer relegated to merely accompanying the brass or keeping the beat. A whole new palette of colors was introduced and Shellmer's innovations were emulated throughout the drum corps world.



Boston Crusaders, August 13, 1967, at the National Dream (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Madame Toussaud's Wax Museum found many of the Crusaders heightening the frightful effects of several of the more bizarre and gory exhibits. As part of the initiation process, selected rookies (including me in 1967) were directed by veterans to sneak into either the Mummy exhibit or the

Frankenstein exhibit and not to move until told to do so.

"I chose the Frankenstein venue, since it had more space. I put a plastic chain that dangled from the monster's hand around my neck and lay at his feet, motionless for about five minutes.

"When the next crowd of patrons had swelled to maximum number (about 30), the sign came and I quickly sat up, emitting a

Boston Crusaders, June 13, 1970 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).





Boston Crusaders, 1978 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

blood-curdling groan.

“The ensuing screams from petrified tourists resulted in our being asked to leave at once. Soon after, when all corps members had boarded the buses, a Canadian customs agent stepped onto our bus and asked whether we had anything to declare.

city. The Crusaders always seemed to enjoy visiting Canada.”

Dennon left the corps at the end of 1971, and as DCI was getting off the ground, it seemed to many to be the beginning of the end for the Crusaders. As a charter member

The Crusaders, once the innovators, were now a step behind. A devastating fire almost ended all hope in the early 1970s. Still the corps persisted.

The success of local national contenders like North Star and the 27th Lancers saw the membership of the Crusaders drop to as low as 15. Despite changes in leadership and approach, the Crusaders hung tough and competed against corps that greatly outnumbered them. Some corps had larger instructional staffs than the Crusaders' horn line.

Rosen took over the horn line at the end of 1975 and for a while it looked like the corps was back on the right track. As part of his master's thesis, Rosen arranged Chick Corea's *Celebration Suite* for the corps. This was a new direction for the corps, but it yielded positive results. The corps moved from 27th place to 20th, 17th and then 15th in 1978, before internal politics caused Rosen to leave.

In 1982, the corps went on a two-week tour of Holland, but ran out of money and



Boston Crusaders, 1979, in Allentown, PA (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

“When nobody spoke up, the officer calmly walked up the aisle, looked around, turned and was about to leave, when his hand bumped into a paper bag up on the luggage rack, causing the bag to lean toward the officer. Suddenly the bag lurched and to our collective horror, out fell a rather large assortment of pyrotechnic paraphernalia -- firecrackers, cherry bombs, M-80s, sparklers and other such products.

“Before he left, the customs officer had collected about four shopping bags full of explosives. He quipped, as he stepped off the bus, that this was enough to detonate a small

of the new organization, the Crusaders were one of three corps that formed DCI that did not travel to Whitewater, WI.

In 1973, the corps was ranked 39th and scored in the 50s. Although the Crusaders fell on tough times, they refused to die. Drum corps itself had changed from the urban-based, military-styled units of earlier days, to a mostly suburban activity featuring “entertainment extravaganzas.”



(Above) Boston Crusaders, 1982, at DCI in Montreal, QUE (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Boston Crusaders, 1983, at DCI in Miami, FL (photo by Paul Rodino from the collection of Drum Corps World); (inset) Boston Crusaders, 1987 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).



returned (barely) to Boston, severely in debt.

With no funds, the corps filed for bankruptcy in 1983. In order to field a corps at all, a new corporation was formed, called "Boston Drum and Bugle Corps."

It took three years to recover from debt enough to buy back their name and to be able to compete again officially as the Boston Crusaders.

Centorino noted, "The corps has persevered due to a combination of the 'Crusader attitude,' the will to disappoint others who would cheer the corps' demise, and many people who, like myself, took no pay, but taught the corps out of Crusader pride." Centorino worked as a brass arranger/instructor from 1972-1975.

"It is easy to be part of a huge, respected, financially sound group when things are going well, but it takes a special kind of dedication to take on the responsibility of



(Above) Boston Crusaders, 1984 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World); (right) Boston Crusaders, 1985, during *Axel's Theme* when the corps took a penalty for using electronics (photo by Ed Ferguson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

continuing a tradition when the group is low in numbers, has no money and has been written off as bound for

stepping stones to the corps' successes and, if one digs just a few inches below the topsoil, those stepping stones are weather-beaten and worn, but like the monoliths at Stonehenge, still there."

The Crusaders worked and pushed, and made it to 14th in DCI in 1987. Although 1989 was a good year, 1990 was the year of the corps' 50th anniversary, and hopes and



extinction," Centorino continued. "The Crusaders of today owe a great deal of their success to the fact that there still is a Boston Crusaders at all, having gone through at least a decade of misfortunes so harsh that when it seemed that the corps could sink no lower, there was a new crisis to overcome.

"In retrospect, those crises have become

expectations were for finally cracking DCI's top 12. The bubble was popped with a 14th place in semifinals. The corps was still strong and going in the right direction.

There was another great chance in 1994, with the DCI Championships were being held in Boston and, although they finished in the top 12 in quarterfinals, the corps was edged

into 13th place in the semifinals.

The Crusaders hovered near the finalist position for the rest of the decade, trying to find the winning musical approach. They tried Russian music. They tried jazz. They tried Americana.

Finally, in 1999, the combination of a talented staff, a dedicated and skilled membership and the right program, "Symphonic Dances," saw



(Above) Boston Crusaders, 1986, at DCI East in Allentown, PA (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World); (right) Boston Crusaders, 1990 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).



the corps improve at each show and finish in ninth place, cracking DCI's elite top 12 for the first time.

Critics called it a fluke, but director Howard Weinstein proved them wrong by leading the corps into "Saturday Night Live" on PBS with a fifth-place finish in 2000. The program, "Red," captivated new and traditional fans alike.

In 2001, the corps featured a challenging show, "Harmonium." They made adjustments throughout the season but found the program a little too challenging and perhaps not as crowd-friendly as that of the previous season. The ninth place finish, quite acceptable only two years earlier, was now not enough to satisfy staff and membership.

The corps peaked at just the right time in 2002 and, with its exciting and yet poignant show, "You Are My Star," regained the coveted fifth-place position on finals night.

The 2003 Crusaders program, "Bravo!," features fresh arrangements and original interpretations of some of drum corps' traditional favorite Latin pieces such as *Bolero*, *Malagueña* and *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

Boston Crusaders Senior Corps

In 1988, twin brothers Neil and Terry Connolly, Crusaders alumni, began helping the corps in some of its fund-raising endeavors. They missed the old days of their "Saderhood" and thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get some of the guys together and play a few of the old tunes like *California Dreamin'* or *Man of La Mancha*?"

Through their efforts helping the Crusaders, they came in contact with more interested



Boston Crusaders, 1992, in Allentown, PA (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).



(Above) Boston Crusaders, August 13, 1994, at DCI in Foxboro, MA (photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Boston Crusaders, July 12, 1997, in Hershey, PA (photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World).



alumni, and then Dennon and Paul Bush offered their instructional services to teach brass and percussion.

In 1991, Neil took \$1,000 of his own money and bought a "garage full" of equipment from a defunct corps. Gene O'Brien was able to obtain use of a practice facility from the city of Waltham and the corps became a reality.

Terry Connolly, as cofounder, was the original director of the corps. Rich Gobbi was elected corps president in 1993 and Jim Hughes assumed the reins of leadership in 1999. Barbara Gobbi was elected president in 2002, with Rich Gobbi being re-elected in 2003.

In the beginning, the corps was named, The Saders to avoid confusion with the junior corps, but the name was later changed to the Crusaders Senior Corps of Boston. The corps is independent of the Boston Crusaders junior corps, but is supportive. Rehearsals are now held at the Notre Dame Education Center in South Boston.

The corps' members, who range from ages in the 20s to the 60s, include, along with Crusader alumni, former members of North Star, Beverly Cardinals, Cambridge Caballeros, St. Kevin's Emerald Knights, Majestic

Knights, Braintree Warriors, Norwood Debonnaires, I.C. Reveries, 27th Lancers, Peabody Musketeers, Framingham Sharpshooters, St. William's band, St. Agnes band, St. Anthony's band, University of Maine band, Haverhill Shoemakers, Atlantic Brassmen,

Citations, Bridgemen, Pembroke Imperials, St. Francis Sancians, Springfield Marksmen, Lt. Norman Princemen, St. John's Misslemen, I.C. Queensmen, I.C. Rockettes and the P.A.L. Cadets of Philadelphia.

Presently, the corps fields 42 brass, 24 percussion and 20 in the guard.

Jack LaSelva has been the drum major since the corps' inception and has missed only one performance in nine years. (He was on his honeymoon with his wife, Kathy, also a corps member.) Patti Gobbi is the color guard captain and has, likewise, been a stabilizing force over the years.

This corps has an active schedule, performing approximately 20 times a year in parades, concerts and exhibitions, and has traveled to Upstate New York, New Jersey, Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania

challenging but crowd-appealing music to a high degree of excellence, while maintaining that in-your-face tradition.

Although Dennon has passed away, his arrangements are very much alive. Centorino, Rosen, George Kintz, John Maxner and Ray Fallon have collaborated to capture the essence of Dennon in



(Above) Boston Crusaders, 1999 (photo by Karen Sunmark from the collection of Drum Corps World); (left) Boston Crusaders Senior Corps, 2001 (photo by Fon Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World); (inset) Ed Dennon (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



and Wisconsin, as well as locally -- wherever crowds love drum corps.

The corps has featured many Crusader classics in its repertoire. Some of the numbers that stir up old memories are *El Capitan*, *Yankee Doodle*, *California Dreamin'*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Mondo Cane*, *Vikings*, *Artsa Alenu/Hava Nagilah*, *Don't Cry*, *Celebration Suite*, *Captain of Castile* and *Conquest*.

The corps takes pride in playing

Gaffney and Patti Bonfiglio have created a visual program that traditional drum corps fans can really appreciate.

Formal ensemble rehearsals are held once or twice a month, but weekly optional rehearsals are scheduled for new members or for those that just can't get enough of drum corps. The drill is learned in three sessions just prior to the first field exhibition.

Although it has a penchant for hard work and on occasion has seen rehearsals

that get intense, the corps also loves to party. There is often a cookout, a dance, or just an informal gathering where corps members can enjoy each other's company. Ann Hughes, the wife of the former corps director Jim Hughes, dubbed the group, "The corps that never goes home."



Art Kellerman was first initiated into the world of drum corps in 1959 at the age of 14 when a friend recruited him to join the Peabody Musketeers of Peabody, MA. In 1965, he marched with the Majestic Knights of Charlestown,

another Boston area corps, and then moved on to the senior Lt. Norman Princemen in 1966 where he competed in DCA during its second year.

He graduated from Salem State College in 1967 and, since Prince had become inactive, moved to Long Island to teach school and to make plans to join either the Skyliners or the Sunrisers. He joined neither and it looked like his drum corps days were behind him.

In 1969, he moved back to Massachusetts, married Mary Leet and began teaching sixth grade in Lynnfield. He bought a second-hand trumpet, took a few music lessons and sat in with the sixth grade band. Since teachers can't "age out," he played in the sixth grade band for four years and eventually improved enough to perform with the middle school band and two adult community bands.

After seeing the Springfield Marksmen alumni corps perform in a parade in early 1991, the flame was rekindled and, when he heard the Boston Crusaders were starting their own unit, he joined and is now performing for the 12th consecutive year. Kellerman has also performed with the St. Kevin's Emerald Knights Alumni and with the Massachusetts "Legends" corps.

He has taught sixth grade for 36 years and will retire at the end of the 2003 year.

Boston Crusaders, July 2002 (photo by Richard Wersinger from the collection of Drum Corps World).

