


by Jeff Helgeson

"The glide," a "brassy swing sound," the only drum corps to ever win three national championships within a single year -- the story of The Chicago Royal Airs is really more one of an *esprit de corps* or what might be termed an organizational culture than it is one of a style of

Ray Kelly and Ed Roberts, the first drum instructors, and, most notably, Larry Kaczmarek, the drill instructor who developed the corps' signature style of marching. Then, in 1963, Col. Truman Crawford became music arranger and instructor and, in 1965, three-time individual snare national champion Mitch Markovich became percussion arranger and instructor.

It would be too easy to try to explain the character of the Royal Airs as being a result of the contributions of these particular individuals alone, however, and the truth is far more subtle and involved than anything that could merely be attributed to the fact that a uniquely qualified group of highly motivated people came together and a kind of alchemy occurred.

To make at least a good faith effort at capturing some sense of the influences that produced the Royal Airs, it is probably necessary to start with an historical overview of the evolution of the organization and go on from there.

According to Ken Nolan, the corps member generally acknowledged as an *accidental*

catalyst for the formation of the Royal Airs, the story begins in 1954 when a notice was circulated throughout Ryerson School in Chicago stating that local American Legion Post 885, which occupied what had formerly been "The Famous" motion picture theater, was forming a drum and bugle corps and anyone interested could "come to the post for free pop and hot dogs."

The initial gathering had been organized by Glen Smith ("Smithy" of Smith Music Sales, who had founded the Grenadiers seven years earlier) and a member from the sponsoring Alamo Post named Bill Cerone became the first corps manager.

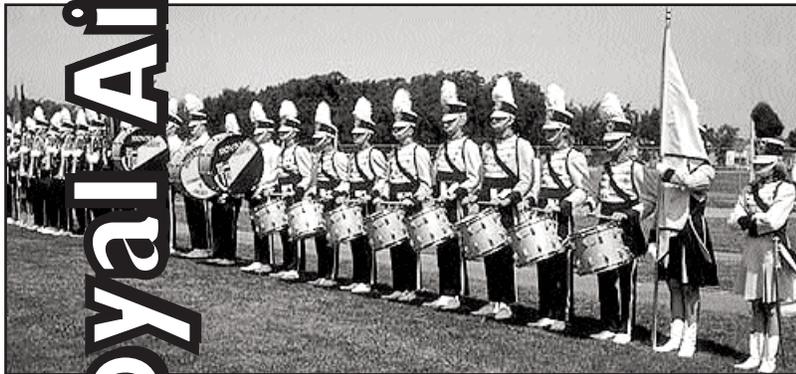
According to Nolan, "There was something that kept members together" -- something that came from the encouragement of a whole series of men and women whose names -- Szadowski, Cacioppo, Laskowski, Marcucci, Ferrara, Naples, Procanin, Ramelli and, later, Lurye -- reflected the mix of Chicago's west side at the time.

"What mattered," Nolan has said, was that "after an initial shake out, the balance of the remaining members became the nucleus of the Royal Airs." To that nucleus, of course, many others were added, first from the surrounding neighborhood and later from throughout the city, the Midwest and ultimately the entire United States.

Rehearsing once a week from eight in the morning until one in the afternoon on Saturdays and then parading through the streets surrounding the post, the Alamo Rangers wore dark blue overseas caps, light blue shirts with "Alamo Post 885 Drum and Bugle Corps" stitched on their backs and dark blue pants.

New uniforms -- brown overseas caps and white satin shirts with a diagonal brown

Chicago Royal Airs



(Top to bottom) The Royal Airs, 1960; on the starting line at the 1966 VFW National prelims in Jersey City, NJ; on the starting line at an Illinois show in 1965; the indoor finals of the 1965 VFW Nationals at McCormick Place in Chicago, IL; 1966 parade on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, IL (photos from the collection of the Royal Airs).

performance or a mere list of accomplishments.

Although "The Big Blue" has frequently been described as having been "the greatest corps of all time," for its members, the Royal Airs experience was always one of belonging and participating in something that was much larger than the contributions of its individual members, something that was far greater than the sum total of its parts.

The origin of this sense of involvement within greatness is probably something that cannot be fully characterized. If the essence of that experience could be captured, many one-time Royal Airs would have repackaged the commodity, franchised it and made it widely available. That has not happened.

Instead, although the style and the innovations of the Chicago Royal Airs have become almost ubiquitous within modern drum corps, the spirit of the Royal Airs has remained unique.

Of course, much of the character of the Royal Airs was a direct result of the personality of the corps' founder and president, Sie Lurye, a former professional prize fighter, an 82nd Airborne veteran of D-Day, a one-time nightclub owner, 1st Ward precinct captain and businessman with numerous parking lots in downtown Chicago.

Although he embodied the heart of the organization, many others contributed to the internal climate of the corps. Principal among them was the corps' business manager, Bill Evans, a former Belmont Grenadier who many have felt personified "the brains of the outfit," but also extremely significant were Glen Smith and Richard Tarsitano, the corps' first music instructors, Norm "Puffy" Vitellaro, an early marching instructor;



stripe and brown pants -- came in 1957, along with white bucks, purchased in mass from a Red Cross Shoe Store, but the truly significant event to take place that summer was the attendance of the staff and several corps members at the American Legion State Championship.

Watching performances of the Belleville Black Knights, Norwood Park Imperials and Chicago Cavaliers, Nolan has claimed, "changed" Lurye and that served to change the Alamo Rangers in a way that, within the next year, would produce the Royal Airs.

By the following summer, what had been a female baton twirling team was transformed into a color guard, the members of a male color guard being merged into the corps. When the original corps manager resigned, Lurye was appointed to the position. The process of becoming had begun.

Tarsitano came to the corps as a bugle instructor and Kaczmarek began teaching marching. A tradition of late spring rehearsal weekend camps was introduced and,



Long-time director Sie Lurye makes a point at a reunion picnic (photo from the Royal Airs).

that summer, the Rangers entered three shows.

"The corps formed our lives," early member Pete Gennuso has observed, saying that it created a great work ethic and it provided an opportunity

for inner-city kids to travel throughout the country. Even parents who had never taken an interest in other activities got involved.

That autumn, Tarsitano and Lurye arranged for the Humboldt Park boathouse to be used for rehearsals and, the following spring, an incident occurred which ignited a series of events that created the Royal Airs.

One afternoon, Nolan, who was known to frequently get himself into various kinds of trouble, was being reprimanded by Lurye,



The Royal-Airs at the 1963 American Legion Nationals in Miami Beach, FL (photo from the Royal Airs).



The Royal Airs at the 1968 VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo from the Royal Airs).

never a casual experience, and some members of the Women's Auxiliary took exception to the way the exchange had been conducted.

At about the same time, there was a meeting concerning whether the corps should attend the VFW State Championships or appear at a function sponsored by the post at which Mayor Richard Daley had been scheduled to appear.

The corps voted to compete at VFW State and a heated discussion of the two issues led to Lurye's dismissal, which then was followed, as described by Carm LoGalbo for an article in the *Bourbonnais Herald*, by members Mike Sulka, Chuck Ferrara, Barbara Procanin and Bonnie Krupinski, along with drum major Marlene Gamberale and Ken Nolan, leading corps members outside to burn their Alamo Ranger membership cards.

One week later, June 28, 1958, on the lawn in front of the Humboldt Park boathouse, all but two of the former members met with Lurye and a new drum corps was formed. Names were drawn from a hat.

At Friday rehearsals and after-practice gatherings for pizza and beer, Bill Evans and Larry Kaczmarek worked out the drill on member Amatore Menley's dining room table and, on Tuesday evenings, Rich Tarsitano came over to write the music, Ronnie Rendek taking notation, while Ami pumped air into the accordion used for a keyboard.

Loans were secured by the businesses of Lurye and Angelo Naples (father of future drum major Judy Naples), along with sponsorships obtained from Cicero American Legion Post No. 96 and, somewhat later, the Patrick T. Hallinan VFW Post.

Following a 25th-place finish at the American Legion Nationals that summer in Chicago, the corps continued to practice in rehearsal space acquired in a pair of store fronts at Division Street and Monticello Avenue, although Nolan left to play baritone for the Cavaliers after having been thrown out of the corps for starting a group of members tossing cigarettes into an aquarium that killed \$300 worth of tropical fish.

Then, in December, an event took place that would forever affect the Royal Airs and greatly contribute to the organization's spirit and deep sense of commitment.

At 2:00 PM on December 1, 1958, a small fire began beneath a stairwell at Our Lady of the Angels Catholic School. As described in *The Chicago Tribune*, "After smoldering for several minutes, the blaze shot up like a cannonball into a crawl space above the

second floor and then burned its way through to the classrooms beneath." The fire department was called as parish priests and neighboring residents helped evacuate the structure.

Approximately one hour later, the blaze was brought under control. Three nuns and 87

children perished that day and, during the following months, five more children died. Among the dead were three founding members of the corps: Frances Guzaldo, Roger Ramlow and Valerie Thoma. Survivors of the fire included two eventual drum majors, Mike Ramelli and Surge Uccetta.

The effect of the Our Lady of the Angels fire on the corps was profound. On the first Sunday of December, for as long as the Royal Airs existed, including its reunion years, members of the corps assembled at the shrine of Our Lady of the Angels to hold a commemorative service and place a wreath at the monument in Queen of Heaven Cemetery.

In further commemoration, a memorial flag was made that has been carried during every appearance of the Royal Airs and a moment of silence was observed prior to every on-field appearance.

The corps' motto, "Faith, Honor and Humility," was also reflective of the sense of remembrance that grew from this loss.

Responding to the OLA tragedy with intensified resolve, the Royal Airs won the 1959 Winter Carnival championship in St. Paul, MN. The following day, the corps served as escort to the carnival's parade marshal, Texas John Slaughter from Walt Disney Productions, marching before an estimated 200,000 spectators.

The true significance of this event, however, was attention it gained from a group of future Minnesota members, including Joe "Caesar" Swierczek, the 1961 VFW National Champion soprano soloist; Jack Rosner; Ron Selby; Tom Hicks; Dick "Mouse" Geis; Wally Marx; Noel Mertz; and 1966 VFW National Champion solo soprano John Aslakson.

Among the contributions made by this group to the spirit of the corps, both on and off the field, was the commission of a painting by Ron Van Gilder depicting the 1965 Royal Airs' color presentation as it would have looked at Chicago's Soldier Field had the competition not been moved to McCormick Place because of rain.

However, surrounded as the corps hall was by an urban environment in which each intersection had its own gang with names that identified its "turf," like "Chi-Saints" for Chicago and St. Louis Avenues, and "Chi-Cens" for Chicago and Central Park, recruitment for Lurye was not restricted to those already introduced to drum corps.

Rather, as his daughter, Jackie Lurye-Borrelli, has remarked, he would go up to teens and bring them in from the streets.

For example, former member Phil Abraham was quoted in a newspaper article as asserting that Lurye had pulled him out of jail to get him into the corps, saying, "He told me I wasn't going to mess up my life and Sie was a person you didn't argue with."

In this spirit of active community involvement and striving for excellence, the corps sought to build a reputation through individual and full-corps competitions as well as appearances at Chicago's Riverview amusement park, the opening of the 1959 World's Series, a televised performance at a John F. Kennedy election rally and closing of the Pan-American Games.

Another notable incident was an anonymous "disturbing the peace" complaint that resulted, following the members' vote to continue rehearsing, in the threatened arrest of the entire corps. Informed that 15 paddy wagons were needed to take everyone to jail, but weren't available, the police took Lurye and six "ring leaders," aged 11 to 17, into custody.

Later, in court, charges were dropped when a newspaper article pointing out the value of the corps in reducing juvenile delinquency was introduced into evidence.

Also, as described by Bob Doran on the Royal Airs' Web site, the corps changed its look from former Grenadiers uniforms to the "uniforms that were to become its trademark -- slanted blue and white shakos, blue pants with a white stripe and white battle jackets with a blue sash and red accents" which were literally "unveiled" at the Skokie Indian's "Music In Motion" show when the corps took the starting line in "white butcher coats that were removed just prior to step-off," dramatically revealing the new look.

Placing last, in a gesture that Nolan (there that evening as a Cavalier) has said made him proud, the "Big Blue" returned to the starting line and, as a demonstration of the character within the corps, repeated its full show. A new sound and a new marching style, as well as a new attitude toward performance, had also begun to emerge.

Tarsitano provided a repertoire of loud, brassy pieces that ranged from such top 40 songs as *Venus* and *Diana* to classical melodies by Chopin, Broadway tunes and even original compositions.

At the same time, Kaczmarek had been perfecting a marching style that caused the corps to almost seem to glide across the grass, threading an imagined line with each step and smoothing out the appearance of the corps in motion.

Added to this was a notion, or more specifically a *philosophy*, presented by Evans, termed "the con." It was an assumed attitude of confidence intended to mask potential errors rather than allow attention to be drawn to them.

Taken altogether, it was these three factors, in addition to a number of traditions that were initiated by the members themselves (along with the influence of such



A cartoon about the Royal Airs (from the collection of Jeff Helgeson).

internal sub-groups as "The Riot Squad," led by Ferrara -- the guy who struck the match to begin burning the Alamo Ranger membership cards; "The Malka Club," a group of "souvenir"-gathering percussionists with a severed deer's leg as a talisman; "The Union 13," a collective bargaining block established within the 1965 corps; and the rival "sects" of "The Saint" and "The Blue Bear," which evolved during 1967), which served to comprise the spirit that contributed to the "mystique" of the Royal Airs.

Among the specific "practices" established by the Royal Airs membership, in addition to carrying a secret, cased flag which was only unfurled after winning their first show and two blue battle axes acquired by The Malka Club, was an extended process of fraternity-style pledgship that began after the first of any given year and ended with an evening-long initiation, followed by a unifying, late night bonfire ritual of togetherness and mutual commitment.



The Royal-Airs at the 1968 VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo from the collection of the Royal Airs).

It was during the period of pledging to the corps that new members were taught the Royal Airs' style of close order drill and developed a deepened sense of resolve to both gain personal acceptance and rise to a high standard of accomplishment.

Then, after three months of near servitude to a previously initiated "master," on the second evening of spring camp, three hours of cold, wet hazing and an extended

individual integration led to a committee-determined acceptance, followed by the opportunity to shower before attending the bonfire gathering.

Into that late night blaze, effigies of competitors, as well as negative attitudes, were regularly thrown and, when the flames were extinguished, each year, a newly-unified corps would move away from the ashes and a renewed "Big Blue" would be born.

The 1961 Royal Airs, in addition to building upon previous accomplishments, experienced two remarkable things in a single day that served to both create a recurring phenomenon for the corps and teach a great lesson that was never forgotten.

Re-experienced in Boston during the late spring of 1965, with some frequency throughout 1966 and then again almost 34 years later in Osewgo, IL, there was a kind of unexplained convergence of factors in performance that many people have described in terms like those used by Ken Kosmoski (the corps' tallest-ever member who was the only pledgie to ever confront the initiation committee in the interrogation room) in an interview on ABC-TV about the 2002 reunion corps: "It was truly magical . . . everything was damn-near perfect."

The first time that "magical" sense occurred was during the 1961 VFW Nationals in Miami, FL. As founding members Amatore Menley and Tony Laskowski have each said, "It felt like a dream; we couldn't believe how things came together."

In Kosmoski's description for the television reporter, "audience members started screaming and they were actually pounding on the stands; it sounded like thunder when we were on the starting line

and, once we stepped off, it was just like it had been 30 or 40 years ago -- magical."

That day in 1961, a virtually unknown Royal Airs converted this sense of magic into a third-place finish in the preliminaries competition and then the great lesson was learned when the corps placed seventh at the evening competition.

As a result of that experience, the Royal Airs would never again allow a mistake

in pacing to “leave” the performance on the practice field or in the preliminary competition. Instead, each appearance of the “Big Blue” would become a full-out challenge to exceed expectations.

At American Legion Nationals that same year, following a train ride on the Zephyr to Denver, CO, the Royal Airs finished in second place, just one and a half points behind the Garfield Cadets and almost four points ahead of the third-place corps.

The corps began 1962 by decisively winning the Mid-Winter Standstill held in Chicago, scoring a full 12 points higher than the closest competitor. Then, ending the primary competition’s prolonged winning streak and unwrapping the previously encased Grenadier flag for the first time, Bob Wenderski observed in an article titled “The Cavalier Story”:

“A somewhat new corps had begun to give the Cavaliers some serious competition. The Royal Airs of Chicago, although taken lightly at first, soon proved that this was a hasty miscalculation by being the first corps in eight years to beat the Cavaliers four times in one season and secondly, by taking away the American Legion State title from them, a title they had held for seven years previously.

“They also proved to the powers of the East at the VFW convention in Minneapolis, MN, that they were not to be taken lightly there either. The Cavaliers came in first, defeating the 12 best corps in the country, and the Royal Airs came in a solid second, giving the two top spots to Midwestern corps, something never heard of before.”

Of course, the closeness of the final scores caused the outcome, for some, to remain a matter of intense debate: drums tied at 16.20; marching won by the Royal Airs by .05; bugles won by the Cavaliers by 1.30; and general effect split, with one judge giving the caption to the Royal Airs by .05 and the other judge giving the Cavaliers a perfect 10.00, creating a one-point difference between the first- and second-place scores.

A further “interesting” incident occurred that night when the Cavaliers members affixed pre-made national championship patches to their uniforms before the scores were announced and, in response, the Royal Airs refused to pass in review, later moving into concert formation and playing a final encore for those still in the stands.

For American Legion Nationals in Las Vegas, NV, in 1962, Lurye chartered a plane so the trip wouldn’t cause unnecessary days out of school. As related by founding member snare drummer Sam DiPrima, the 3.967 point loss to the Garfield Cadets, who had taken third in Minneapolis, 1.25 behind the Royal Airs, was the result of a percussion score for a drum section which had consistently “gone back and forth with the Cavaliers for top drums in the country.”

Following the announcement of that outcome, as a suggestion of the level of significance attached to the corps’ performance, snare drummer Pete Gennuso gave his sticks to a stranger in the stands and

never played again in more than 40 years, twice declining the opportunity to participate within the reunion seasons, even while being a regular at the biannual reunions.

After the 1962 season, a number of new developments were undertaken. Among them, as a way of maintaining the corps’ out-reach tradition, was establishment of a training corps under the direction of former New York Skyliners member and long-time *Drum Corps World* writer Dan Feldstein.

Most immediately significant, however, was the affiliation of then-Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps music arranger Truman Crawford with the corps. As described in a *DCW* interview published in 2002, Crawford explained, “I’d been impressed by the Royal Airs’ method of marching and studied it closely. Sie Lurye knew about my interest and started talking to me. He was a very effective talker . . . so I came to Chicago.”

Initially, the intention had been for Tarsitano to continue as the horn instructor, with musical arrangements being provided by Crawford. However, feeling that he would prefer to continue writing and teaching his own arrangements, Tarsitano chose to assume those duties with the Chi-Angels and the Morton Grove Cougars and resigned from the Royal Airs.

As subsequent solo squad member Tom DiPrima has observed, “If there was a transition year, it was 1963.” In addition to the change of instructors from Tarsitano to Crawford, a large number of founding members aged out and were replaced by a new group from the city’s south side, with younger members from the previous years being promoted to leadership positions.

The repertoire for 1963 opened with a bold arrangement of the theme from the recently-released motion picture “Mutiny on the Bounty.” This was followed by a flag presentation to *I Walk With God*, a concert from the Broadway production of “Gypsy,” *Saint Louie/Wabash Blues*, *Baby Elephant Walk* and *What Kind of Fool Am I* as a closer.

On another level, following early traditions, the “B” corps assumed parade duties within the neighborhood and that summer, DiPrima also recalls, “Snow was spotted coming from the 22nd floor of a Jersey City hotel” when he had gotten into a pillow fight and lost, a first instinct being “to toss the evidence out a window.”

In 1964, after purchasing a new set of Ludwig horns -- with rotaries -- according to Crawford, the feeling among the instructional staff had been, “Ah, what the hell, let’s go for it.” Having promised Lurye a national championship within three years, Crawford has observed, “We almost made it in two,” further stating, “It



The Royal Airs at the 1966 American Legion Nationals in Washington, D.C. (photo from the Royal Airs).

took time for the judges to start to understand what the hell we were playing. At first, they just went bananas!

“One of the biggest transitions was utilizing all of the voices and not just the sopranos. Most of the drum corps of that era just had their lead sopranos play 90 percent of the melody and the lower choir simply filled in chords. I didn’t write block harmonies and it took awhile for the judges to begin to recognize what we were doing.”

Although upsetting the Cavaliers in the first standstill of the season and later winning the World’s Fair competition in New York City, throughout 1964, the Royal Airs, playing *Ballyhoo March* (specifically intended to show off the capacities of the new horns), *The House We Live In*, *Harlem Nocturne*, *What Kind of Fool Am I*, an extended Dixieland melody titled “The South Shall Rise Again” and *Where Are You*, consistently placing second to the Cavaliers.

Then, at VFW Nationals in Cleveland, OH, when the Cavaliers were announced in third place, the entire corps had the same “thrill of victory and agony of defeat” when the Royal Airs were announced in second place once again, this time due to an upset victory by the Racine Kilties.

As in Las Vegas, the loss resulted from one drum judge not putting the Royal Airs first. The “B” corps also entered competition for the first time that summer, winning in its category, ironically playing *Scotland the Brave* as an opener, and then the season ended with a competition in Maywood, IL, that saw another transition when drum major Judy Naples blew her final round of kisses to the horn line following the *Harlem Nocturne* concert and retired from her leadership role until the 2002 reunion corps.



The Royal Airs in an Illinois parade, 1968 (photo from the Royal Airs).

The 1965 RoyalAirs, of course, earned a place in drum corps history that is well-documented. "*The greatest drum corps -- ever*" and other such descriptions have created a mystique that has clearly served to define the corps in the minds of many.

With the intention of helping to address any further concerns regarding the percussion caption, Markovich was brought in. The corps moved from its store fronts to the former Conley American Legion post at North Avenue and Central Park and mellophones were introduced to a horn line that initially consisted of just over two dozen returning members and a few who had been promoted from the B corps.

Then, one Friday evening, the door opened from the hallway leading toward the street and a line of guys with horn cases walked in. The Spartans were coming. The corps Tarsitano put together by combining the Morton Grove Cougars and the Chi-Angels had disbanded, a majority of its members taking the bus down North Avenue to join the Royal Airs. In that one evening, the corps' size doubled and the primary chapter in its history began to unfold.

Although only performed once at *Drum Corps World's* Chicago Civic Opera House show and replaced by *Watermelon Man*, the first piece of music to be passed out was *Don't Rain on My Parade*, featuring a mellophone sectional solo. *Chicago*, from the motion picture "Robin and the Seven Hoods," was introduced as an opening fanfare, clearly as a result of the location of that year's VFW convention, and then a new flag presentation was begun.

As Crawford has explained, "Sie Lurye kept bugging me about getting an arrangement of *Battle Hymn*, so one day I said to him, 'Listen, I'll tell you what we're going to do. We are going to play *John Brown's Body* and he starts yelling, 'What the hell is *John Brown's Body*?' I told him that the Royal Airs couldn't play *Battle Hymn of the Republic* because the Cavaliers had been playing it forever and ever.

"Then, when he heard the swing arrangement during the first half of the tune, I really didn't know what he was going to say, but he liked it."

The concert for that year became *Birth of the Blues*, with a long opening soprano solo played by Jimmy Angarola, accompanied by Steve Fagiano on percussion. Then, the arrangement of "The South Shall Rise Again" was shortened to just *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, with an opening mellophone solo played by Lou Klozik, accompanied by a quartet made up of national champion soprano soloist Scott Brockman, 1963 and 1964 Illinois State solo soprano champions Jim Angarola and Tom Devitt, and Chris Ferrara, who would also provide the bridge as a quartet at the center of the piece.

Then *Watermelon Man* and *Where Are You* finished out the program, along with what have become the classic percussion section solos of *The Coffin* before *John Brown's Body* and *The Seed* before

Watermelon Man.

In addition to the Civic Opera House appearance, the pre-season included standstill competitions at which the results were far short of expectations. However, the feeling in the corps remained optimistic. At camp, Jim Angarola approached the bonfire flames with a black plume that he had intended to wear when aging out at the end of that year, but instead quietly asserted that he would always be a part of "this corps" and then threw the plume into the fire.

The field competitions began with defeats from both the Cavaliers and the Des Plaines Vanguard, although that was to change and a sense of inevitability was to take over.

In June, the Royal Airs boarded the corps' two 25-year-old former Greyhound buses on a Friday afternoon and began a non-stop, overnight drive to Boston for CYO Nationals. As Crawford recalled, upon arrival there was just time to get dressed and tune the horns before going on the field, but then a convergence of factors took place and, in Crawford's words, "That was a *great* show! After the CYO Nationals, we expected that we would win and we did."

The record for the rest of that year is perhaps best captured in articles written about the corps at the time. After June 19 in Park Ridge, IL, at the Cavalier show, a *Drum Corps World* writer observed: "The Royal Airs walked away with the whole show." In Dixon, IL, on July 3, "The Royal Airs topped four others by some five points." On the race track at the Illinois State Fair, in Delevan and Kenosha and Burlington, WI, in Des Plaines and Blue Island, IL, and at Illinois American Legion State where the corps was described as "the FAAAAAABULOUS Royal Airs, fielding the greatest horn line in the country," the "Big Blue" remained undefeated after returning from Boston.

Following a day of constant rain, with the VFW Nationals moved indoors to McCormick Place and former members like LoGalbo, Ferrara and Nolan looking on, the *DCW* reporter wrote, "It was no surprise when the Royal Airs were announced No. 1; they again took high horns in the show and the 'Big Blue' had won every contest they entered since July."

As Al Karls described that evening in an article in which he termed the Royal Airs "the greatest corps of all time." Everyone knew that the Royal Airs would win. When it was their turn to compete, people stood on tables, chairs and the shoulders of others to catch a glimpse. Some climbed on scaffolding. There was a frenzy of pushing and shoving. People swayed to the sound of the music. Some sang along. Some cried."

The next day, the corps began a non-stop bus ride to Portland, OR, defeated the Garfield Cadets by more than two points (the Beatles were playing down the street), then started back to Chicago.

Returning to Illinois, the winning streak continued throughout the rest of the summer. Meanwhile, in Washington D.C., President Lyndon Johnson announced that

forces in Vietnam would be increased from 75,000 to 125,000 and that the draft would be doubled from 17,000 to 35,000 a month to support the war in Indochina, proclaiming, "We will not surrender and we will not retreat." By September, the draft notices for members of the corps had begun to arrive.

During the pre-season for 1966, a majority of the previous year's members had either aged out or entered military service. Autumn brought the promotion of the entire B corps and the integration of such former members of the Giles Yellow Jackets as Roger Warden and brothers Kirkland and Reginald "Sonny" Burke (four Platinum and two Gold album winner and music director for Broadway's "Dream Girls" and motion pictures "Saturday Night Fever" and "Ferris Bueller's Day Off").

Ramelli returned to the baritone line from the drum major position, changing roles with Klozik. Contra basses were also introduced and a work ethic, born of necessity, was established, consisting of almost nightly sectional rehearsals, intensive weekend percussion camps under the direction of snare drummer Adam Szlagowski and marathon drill practices that often began at dawn and continued until nightfall.

Without depth of talent, the 1966 corps worked hard and often performed well beyond expectations. Playing *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*, *John Brown's Body*, a Count Basie-style arrangement of *April In Paris* and *What Kind of Fool Am I* as a concert, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, *Watermelon Man* and *The Shadow of Your Smile*, the 36 horns, 15-member percussion section and 20-member color guard amazingly came within one and a half points of retaining the CYO Nationals title and then placed inside a respectable five-point range of the winning corps at both the VFW and American Legion Nationals.

The following year was very different. To begin, the young corps remained intact and was joined by 10 former members of the McHenry Viscounts at the beginning of 1967. A revised version of *Ballyhoo March* was provided by Crawford after the corps members began playing the piece, complete with a triple-tonguing trio, on their own one evening following rehearsal.

An arrangement of *Of Thee I Sing*, featuring an extended solo by Chris Ferrara, was brought in as flag presentation; concert, once more in response to the location of the VFW Nationals, became *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?*, followed by *Casino Royale*, *Voodoo Moon* and *The Shadow of Your Smile* again as a closer.

An amusing exchange between Lurye and Don Warren took place during the pre-season Civic Opera House show when the founder of the Cavaliers turned to his Royal Airs counterpart and pointed to the soprano soloist during *Of Thee I Sing*, saying, "I know that's Jimmy Angarola and he's over age," to which Lurye responded, "No, that's Chris Ferrara," adding "Jimmy's over there."

The spirited culture of the corps was clearly evident during a sudden downpour at

camp later that spring when Kosmoski led a continuation of the drill rehearsal, in spite of the rain, proclaiming, "Ah, we're wet already," and all 120 members went right along.

That year, a winning streak began in Plainfield, IL, during late June and continued throughout the summer all the way to August in New Orleans. With the Des Plaines Vanguard -- as the Royal Airs' closest rivals -- and a small plastic blue bear that contra bass Don Sonne had won at a carnival in Plainfield as a good luck charm and unofficial mascot, it seemed that a national title was once again within reach.

However, a superstition-busting practical joke in which the bear was carved into pieces and distributed "for luck," like Communion Host by mellophone Jeff Helgeson, the leader of the rival sect of "The Saint" -- along with some unexpected penalties from trying to save execution tics by getting off the field as soon as possible without allowing for enthusiasm increased tempos -- brought about a fourth-place finish.

Then, after the long trip from New Orleans to Boston and checking into a Catholic retreat house where a lay-brother named John inadvertently inspired a 57-piece brass rendition of "Frère-Jacques," a dispute about charging participants to see the show after having performed caused Lurye to withdraw the corps from American Legion Nationals, instead having its members, in uniform, watch from the stands.

What turned out to be the final competitive season for the Royal Airs in 1968 began with more changes. Crawford became the director of the U.S. Marine Corps Drum and Bugle Corps and, although continuing to serve as music arranger, turned the instruction of the horn line over to Ed Cosalino.

Also, in the marching category, Kaczmarek's responsibilities were assumed by Keith Stolberg and John Van Tessel.

The majority of the corps members, however, remained. A Spanish flavor was established for the year's show with tunes like *Vaquero* for the opener and *Latina* as a concert. *It Was A Very Good Year* was introduced as a closing number with *Of Thee I Sing*, *Casino Royale* and *Voodoo Moon* being retained from 1967.

Markovich, who had introduced pitched bass drums to drum corps in 1965, added double-headed drums in 1967, then introduced on-field timpani in 1968. The Royal Airs again accumulated a number of victories (including American Legion State and both the Illinois and



The Royal Airs perform at the annual ceremony remembering the victims of the Our Lady of the Angels fire in 1958 (photo by Bob Scholl from the collection of Drum Corps World)

Wisconsin State Fair competitions) that, to many, suggested another record-making year. It ended, however, with a fifth-place finish at the Detroit VFW National Convention.

Once again, it was a timing penalty and that prompted the VFW contest director to announce, had it not been for the penalty, the Royal Airs would have won the competition.

The final chapter -- at least until the reunion corps' formation in 2002 -- emerged quickly during the fall of the last competitive year. Funding from sponsors had been greatly reduced as a result of a state of Illinois prohibition on bingo and the corps' efforts to raise its own funding through a substitute game called "ducky" resulted in a police raid and the arrest of Lurye and seven others, each being released after posting \$25 bucks.

Unlike in 1961, however, this time there would be no bench decision in favor of the corps. In a *Chicago Tribune* article, Lurye said it "would cost \$40,000 a year to get the Royal Airs back in national competition" and the sponsors "can't support their own posts

since bingo was outlawed."

On the first Sunday of December 1968, for the last time until 34 years later, the members of the Royal-Airs assembled at Queen of Heaven Cemetery and *Taps* was sounded for the victims of the Our Lady of the Angels fire, as well as for the existence of the corps itself.

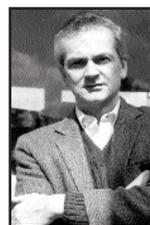
Not until the year of Lurye's posthumous entry into the Legends of the Drum Corps International Hall of Fame in 2002 would another Royal Air corps be seen, but that year, with members from throughout the history of the "Big Blue" from 1958 to 1968, along with a large group of first-time members, the Royal Airs did

appear again and the record of that summer's accomplishment was clearly documented in such terms as those used in a *Drum Corps World* article titled "And Still Champions."



The Chicago Royal Airs Reunion corps at the 2002 Drum Corps Associates "Alumni Spectacular," Labor Day weekend in Scranton, PA (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of DCW).

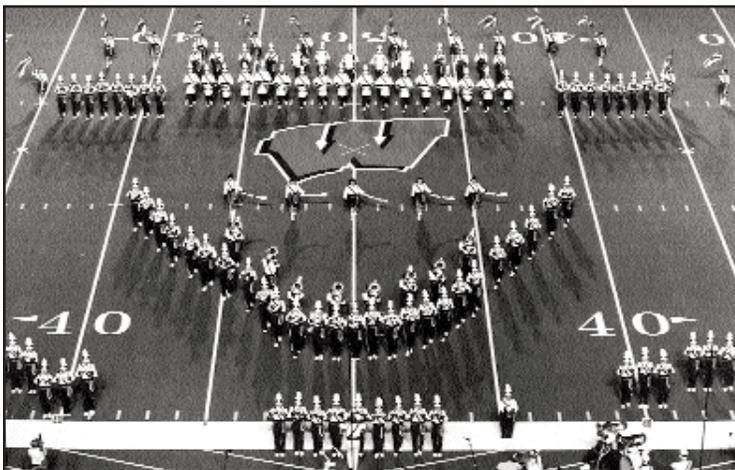
Jeff Helgeson was a member of the Chicago Royal Airs from 1963 through 1968. A graduate of the University of Chicago, he is the author of a novel titled "Thresholds," numerous articles and short stories, and more than 15 plays which have been



produced in Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis and New York.

Director of The Learning Resource Center and a lecturer in the liberal studies department at Roosevelt University, he has also taught in the creative writing program at Columbia College, at the school of the Art Institute of Chicago and at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture in Spring Green, WI.

He has additionally produced a number of theatrical works, including "Urban Voices," a showcase of performance poetry, and he has twice served as an organizer for the National Poetry Slam when it has been in Chicago.



DCI exhibition, August 10, 2002 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).