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by Jay McGuffin

For almost the entire decade of the 1960s, the Vanguard was a finalist in the VFW National Championships and, in the later half of the decade, was consistently a serious (if not favored) corps to win those nationals.

Later in the 1960s, the corps consistently finished near the top in the VFW National Finals after powerful performances in preliminary competitions. In fact, at the 1968 VFW Nationals preliminary contest, battling extremely tough competition from such top corps as the Cavaliers, Troopers, Kilties, Royal Airs, Blue Rock and others, the Vanguard won the prelims with a score of 90.40.

Although the Vanguard never officially won the VFW title, throughout the second half of the 1960s they routinely conquered every major titleholder and contender and defeated them either before, or in some cases after, they had won the national championship.

Some of the Vanguard's more significant titles include: the 1967 U.S. National Championship, the 1968 Illinois VFW State Championship (the 1968 VFW State Championship was the first time in the previous 13 years that the defending champions had been dethroned) and the 1968 World Open Championship.

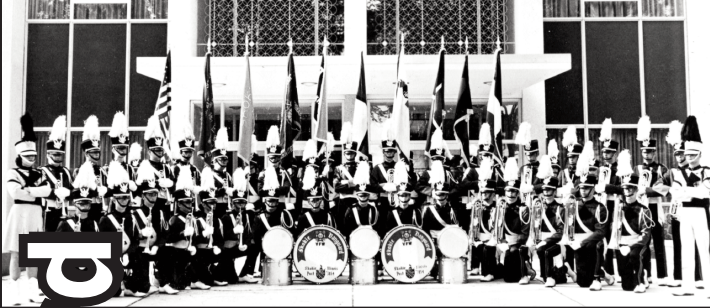
The Vanguard continued to be an extremely talented and top performing drum corps into the early 1970s and placed seventh at the first DCI Championship in Whitewater, WI, in 1972. The Vanguard's performance was considered one of the best "total shows" that season and it set a new standard for total design.

The highlight of this show was their performance of Holst's "The Planets," complete with an on-field battle scene; during *Mars, Bringer of War*, the "combat battle zone" had "bodies" strewn across the field.

Frank Pamper, one of the most

innovative drill designers and instructors of all time, designed this impressive program,

Vanguard, 1965 (photo from the collection of Jay McGuffin).



Skokie Vanguard, 1962 (photo from the collection of Jay McGuffin).

# Des Plaines Vanguard

which was way ahead of its time.

Some of the Vanguard's most significant non-contest accomplishments were actually "non-drum corps" appearances. First, they performed as the opening musical act for the Chicagoland Music Festival at the Arie Crown Theater in Chicago's McCormick Place in 1965 -- the Chicagoland Music Festival was a general showcase for music of all types and included top recording artists from pop, folk and R&B.

A second, perhaps even more impressive, appearance, was a masterful and powerful 1968 performance at the prestigious Chicago Civic Opera House, with an incredible rendition of the *1812 Overture*, complete with simulated cannon fire and chimes.

The Vanguard is remembered for powerful horn lines, great marching designs and execution, and for having one of the top drum lines in the nation every year.

Throughout those years, the Vanguard's horn

arrangements were written by a succession of great arrangers, including Hy Dreitzer (the writer and horn instructor for the New York Skyliners), Ed Morrisey, Jim Unrath, Dave Richards and Dave Hill.

In what turned out to be one of the major keys in the success of the Vanguard horn line, Hy Dreitzer began arranging for the Vanguard at the end of the 1963 season, in preparation for 1964. Dreitzer's East Coast, rip-roaring, high-energy, in-your-face style (complete with trills, rips and soprano shakes) turned into a Vanguard horn line trademark.

Over the next few seasons, songs like *Luck Be A Lady*, *Bill Bailey*, *Chicago*, *When the Saints Go Marching In*, *Over There* and the flag presentation of *Fanfare for the Common Man* ("Appalachian Spring" were some of the most remembered Dreitzer/Vanguard collaborations.

The *Bill Bailey* number would be featured

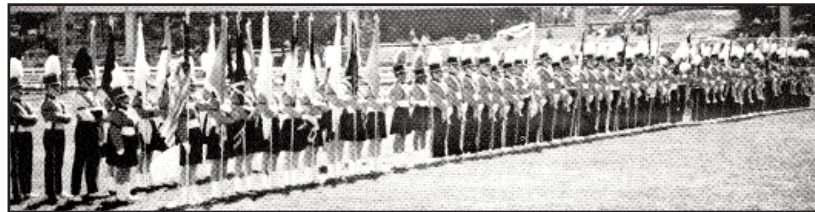
as the closing number for the Vanguard in six out of the next eight seasons. The Vanguard horn shows were incredibly powerful in 1965 and 1966 and showed a definite East Coast musical influence,

to the point where the Vanguard reminded many people more of an East Coast sound than a Midwest sound. In 1967 and 1968, the Vanguard horn line became even more impressive by adding finesse to its already powerhouse sound.

The Dreitzer musical scores, integrated with Pamper's innovative and aesthetically pleasing drills, both combined with the always-spectacular Vanguard drum line to create the power shows for which the Vanguard became known.

Frank Pamper was a genius, but this was not limited just to marching. His vision and foresightedness was not only instrumental in acquiring the extremely talented Dreitzer, but just as importantly, Pamper was the person mostly responsible for bringing in new and talented personnel, including former members of The Brigade, Morton Grove Spartans and the Phantom Regiment, and adding them to the Vanguard's already formidable talent pool.

Simply put, Pamper had the "make things



Des Plaines Vanguard, 1967 (photo from the collection of Jay McGuffin).

happen" attitude and approach, making him the individual that most people regard as being the classic founder of the modern day Vanguard.

Another major innovation that became a Vanguard trademark was their use of what was considered (at that time) to be "gigantic" color guards, which were not only large in size, but which were also (for one of the first times in drum corps history) a combination of both female and male sections, fully integrated into one top performing unit.

In 1969, the combined color guard had 40 members. Combined with the 1969 corps' 56-member horn line and the 30-member drum line, this totaled 126 members on the field. This huge corps size was often perceived to offer an unfair advantage over smaller corps

Of a social and historical note, the Vanguard should also be remembered for its ethnic diversity, being one of the first major Midwest corps to become fully integrated in the turbulent 1960s. Along with this ethnic diversity, the Vanguard also took great pride and benefited immensely by also integrating all facets of society and its socio-economic groups into the membership.

The Vanguard uniforms were extremely striking and were considered one of the most impressive in their day. The corps even innovated with the use of their own uniform design, when they were one of the first corps to use multiple color schemes among the

horn line, drum line and color guard, as well as the drum major and color guard captain uniforms.

The innovative attitude of the Vanguard was also carried off the field, as Vanguard staff alumni -- Don Pesceone and Jim Unrath -- were instrumental in the early stages of the development of DCI.

The corps always had, and to this day still has, legions of loyal fans. An interesting note concerning this overwhelming fan loyalty and admiration was how, in the mid-1980s, the Vanguard senior corps was formed -- but strangely, this organization was not really made up of former Vanguard junior corps members or alumni, but primarily of fans of the corps -- less than a handful of Vanguard junior corps alumni even participated.

However, this fans' senior corps version of the Vanguard was extremely popular for long-time Vanguard nostalgia-hungry fans. Unfortunately, this was a short-lived resurgence and Vanguard senior was no longer performing after the mid-1990s.

While the Vanguard does not currently have an active, official alumni organization, there is a multitude of former members from all of the previous years of the Vanguard's existence who are still in contact with one another. Although it is extremely hard to measure, the long-term fraternity of families and friends who, to this day, are still a close-knit group, continues to amaze.

This fraternity is best illustrated by the many former Vanguard members who still wear their Vanguard rings, for which they were rewarded after seven years of membership and service to the corps.

Personnel and staff were always committed to adaptation, growth, commitment and loyalty. The Vanguard will always be known for setting new standards and, above all, as a corps that always took chances -- chances in musical presentations, marching, percussion, arrangements, visuals and even in personnel.

However, as the corps moved beyond the 1972 season, this willingness to take chances and risks failed when it came to the



Skokie Vanguard, July 27, 1963 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

succession of management, which should have been transferred to the former Vanguard members of the 1950s and 1960s. This would very likely have brought the corps very successfully through the 1970s and into the 1980s and beyond, but because there was no such succession plan, the Vanguard ended operations in the mid-1970s as a junior corps.

### Corps chronology

The Vanguard was originally formed in 1935 as a community group of the International Order of the Svithiod. In 1939, Logan Square Post No. 405 in Chicago became sponsor and the corps had a period when it won 101 straight competitions.

In 1951, sponsorship was taken over by the Mel Tierney Post of the American Legion. Later in the 1950s and into the 1960s, the sponsorship changed again, this time to the Skokie Valley VFW Post No. 3854 and thus, the corps became known as the Skokie Vanguard for a time.

In the 1950s, the Vanguard established itself as a solid and consistent Midwest corps and generally finished in the top 20 in national championship contests.

In the early 1960s, the Vanguard continued to be a solid and consistent corps and still generally finished in the top 20 at national championships. At the 1960 VFW Nationals in Detroit, the corps finished eighth. At the 1961 VFW National Convention in Miami, the Vanguard finished 12th. At the 1964 VFW Nationals in Cleveland, the Vanguard finished 18th.

### 1965 -- big changes

The Vanguard had many good years in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the overall performances and rankings were less than hoped for and needed to be improved. In late 1964 and early 1965, fortune turned in favor of the Vanguard and immediately brought big results.

First, in late 1964, a small suburban corps (The Brigade, previously known as Custer's Brigade) ceased operating and a large number of the former members joined the Vanguard. This added to both the horn line and drum line.

In early 1965, the Morton Grove Spartans, another suburban corps that just two years earlier was result of a merger of two small Chicago area corps (St. Michael's Chi-Angels and the Morton Grove Cougars) also ceased operating. This resulted in even more valuable members joining the Vanguard.

Another northern Illinois corps, the

Phantom Regiment, could not field a corps in 1965 due to a fire at their corps hall, which took the corps' home, uniforms and instruments. The Phantom Regiment's terrible luck provided additional talented members to the Vanguard.

Adding all of this new personnel to an already talented nucleus, along with a great

instructional staff, set the stage for the Vanguard to become one of the most powerful supercorps of the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Many of these performances are still remembered today.

The 1965 VFW Nationals in Chicago has long been recognized by many as one of the greatest competitions ever held. The finals were also one of the only nationals ever held indoors (the finals were at Chicago's McCormick Place due to torrential rains). All the major Midwestern and Eastern corps in the United States were present.

The Vanguard finished fifth in the nation. This was the best national finish up to that point in the history of the Vanguard and this performance, along with other strong performances all season long, made fans (and other competing corps) in the Midwest take notice.

The Vanguard made believers of even more fans and competing corps on the East Coast with a very successful tour when they once again took on the best in the East and



Des Plaines Vanguard, 1968, at VFW Nationals, Detroit, MI (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

performed extremely well.

The Vanguard was now in the national spotlight and a serious contender.

The 1965 repertoire was *Luck Be A Lady* from "Guys and Dolls," *Over There, When the Saints Go Marching In, Tonight, Somewhere* and *Maria* from "West Side Story," *Chicago* and *Bill Bailey*.

### 1966 -- continuing to build

The Vanguard made incredible progress during the 1965 season and had, for the first time, moved into the national spotlight. In 1966, the corps continued to build its reputation and improve the show with some major improvements.

First, the show was given an update. The Vanguard's popular rendition of *Chicago* was chosen to be the new opening number in place of their two-year opener, *Luck Be A*



Vanguard, 1966, at American Legion Nationals in Washington, D.C. (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Lady.

Second, as had happened during the previous year, in 1966 an additional influx of talent strengthened the corps even further as more new and highly talented members from Chicago's inner city, as well as from the suburban areas, joined the ranks.

At the 1966 VFW Nationals in New York City, the Vanguard finished fourth.

The 1966 repertoire was *Chicago, Over There, When the Saints Go Marching In, Maria, Tonight, Somewhere, Why Don't You Do Right By Me* and *Bill Bailey*.

### 1967 – the move to Des Plaines

In 1967, the corps actually moved away from its original roots in Chicago, including the immortal Vanguard Hall on Irving Park Road, and relocated to the northern suburb of Des Plaines.

The Vanguard always seemed to have an affiliation with a major labor union; while based in Chicago, the Vanguard had for many years been affiliated with the powerful Teamsters Union Local No. 705.

Now, with the move to Des Plaines, the Vanguard began an affiliation and sponsorship with a new union. This time it was Lodge No. 1487 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.

The corps is remembered by many keen-eyed observers as one of the few corps that carried the flags of a union sponsor, as contrasted with corps that carried only flags of veteran's organization sponsors.

For the 1967 show, a major musical change replaced the opener with a great rendition of *Man of La Mancha*, a song that would figure prominently not only in the 1967 show, but even more so in the 1968 production.

At the 1967 VFW Nationals in New Orleans, the Vanguard finished third, one point behind the Cavaliers and Troopers, but continued forward with its assault on a national championship.

At the 1967 U.S. Championship in Pennsylvania, the Vanguard beat the best in the East, including Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights, Boston Crusaders and St. Kevin's Emerald Knights.

The 1967 repertoire was *Man of La Mancha, Over There, So In Love, Spellbound, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy* and *Bill Bailey*.

### 1968 – the national championship

In 1968, everything was in place for the Vanguard to make its strongest run ever at the elusive VFW National Championship. Members of the corps who had been brought



Des Plaines Vanguard, August 20, 1969, VFW Nationals, Philadelphia, PA (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

together from other corps in 1964 and early 1965 were now seasoned veterans and an extremely cohesive unit. To help assure even more success in 1968, the Vanguard made several extremely important improvements and changes.

An already strong instructional staff was improved even more with the addition of John Thirion as percussion instructor. By adding Thirion to write for and instruct the drum line, and combining his talent with the great horn arrangements and ever-present master of marching, Frank Pamper, the staff created what has been recognized by many as one of the most powerful, solid and memorable shows ever.

For the 1968 season, Thirion also added the highly innovative use of tuned tympani, triple-drums (timp-toms), finger cymbals and extra, specialized mallets, which were carried in holsters by the snare and tenor drummers for use throughout the show.

In 1968, adversity also brought the corps closer together. In the previous year, a key and beloved member was lost in a tragic accident just prior to a show in the Chicago area. The same year there were more very traumatic events that had a definite impact on the corps.

During indoor music practices at the new Vanguard Hall, due to space constraints, the color guard was required to hold practices at O'Hare Field, inside a large aircraft hangar of one of the major airlines, a short distance from the hall.

As fate would have it, during color guard practice one evening, an airliner crashed into the hangar while taxiing in dense fog. Although an alert member quickly found an emergency exit and saved many lives that night, some lives were lost.

In a separate incident, two guard members who were walking home after an evening practice were hit by car and both were killed. Even with all this adversity, and although it was very sad year for the

Vanguard, the corps came together as a unit and went on.

As the 1968 season unfolded, the corps easily won

its first nine shows and went on to win 19 out of 32 total shows that summer.

At the 1968 VFW Nationals in Detroit, with more than 60 corps competing, the Vanguard won the preliminary competition. Then, in the highly anticipated finals, the corps finished a disappointing (and as many have described it, "mysterious") fourth place, behind the Racine Kilties, Chicago Cavaliers and the Casper Troopers. To this day, there are many fans and even more corps members who are still wondering "What happened?" and "What might have been?"

After the disappointing finish in Detroit, it was on to the East Coast tour. At the 1968 CYO Nationals in Lawrence, MA, the Vanguard finished fifth. But at the 1968 World Open, the Vanguard finally had its day, not only bringing down the house with a great performance, but storming its way to the 1968 World Open Championship.

The 1968 repertoire was *Man of La Mancha, Fanfare for the Common Man*/"Appalachian Spring," *Bali Hi, Spellbound, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy* and *Bill Bailey*.

### 1969 -- innovations

With the successes of the previous season and with the 1968 World Open Championship in hand, the Vanguard continued to make even more major show improvements and innovations.

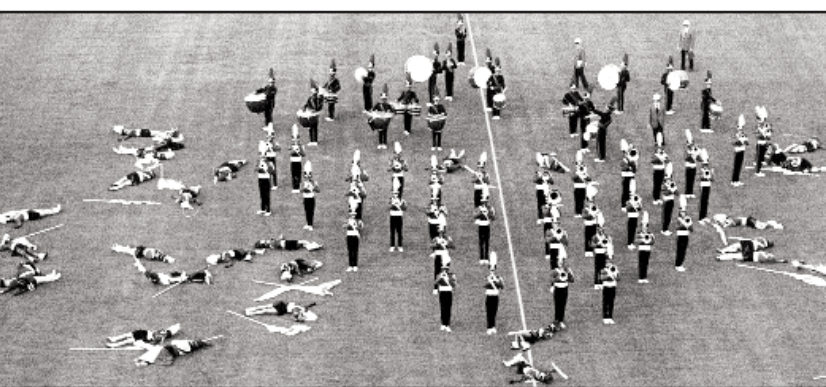
First, a more modernistic, avant-garde musical show was developed, with emphasis on music from the tribal love rock opera "Hair." The siren-like strains of the mellophone during the opening number, *Aquarius* actually developed a cult following and was an incredible crowd-pleaser.

The drum line also made several more additions for the 1969 season, one being that the Vanguard was one of the very first drum lines of a major corps to eliminate the entire tenor drum section and replace them with triple drums or timp-toms.

They were also one of the first to feature the lower voice drums (tympani and timp-toms) exclusively as focal points rather than just the higher voice snares in particular parts of the show, especially in the drum solos of the concert number, *Bali Hi*, and in *Let the Sunshine In*.

At the 1969 VFW Nationals in Philadelphia, the Vanguard finished sixth.

The 1969 repertoire was *Aquarius, Fanfare for the Common Man*/"Appalachian Spring," *Bali Hi, Let The Sunshine In/Flesh Failures* (from "Hair"), *Spellbound* and



Des Plaines Vanguard, 1972, Lexington, KY, Bluegrass Nationals -- the famous "War and Peace" production (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

*Where Do I Go?* (also from "Hair").

### 1970 -- rebuilding

Due to numerous age-outs, as well as other factors, the 1970 version of the Vanguard was somewhat of a shadow of the previous five years.

At the 1970 CYO Nationals in Lawrence, MA, the Vanguard finished ninth and at the World Open, the corps finished seventh.

The 1970 repertoire was *Paint Your Wagon*, *Pilgrim's Chorus*, *The Oracle Speaks*, *Fever* and *Where Do I Go?*

### 1971 -- more innovations

The Vanguard built its reputation on commitment, growth and the ability to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. Rebounding from a relatively down season in 1970, the corps developed another new and innovative show and again also added more members.

Two talented horn players -- Dave Hill, well-known for his excellent mellophone solo work, and Bill McClellan, likewise for his French horn work -- both wrote and contributed songs to the repertoire. The 1971 show was not only more artistic than the previous year's, but also more powerful.

The 1971 repertoire was *Mars*, *Bringer of War* (from Holst's "The Planets"), *Fanfare for the Common Man*, "Appalachian Spring," selections from "West Side Story," *Oh Happy Day* and *Bill Bailey*.

### 1972 -- 'War and Peace'

Building on the success of the 1971 season, the 1972 show was "1968 all over again" -- another highwater mark for the Vanguard. Even more changes and innovations were made for the 1972 show.

Dave Hill took over writing for the horn portion of the show, known by its "War and Peace" theme, as musical selections were based on Holst's "The Planets" -- *Mars* and *Jupiter* (war and peace), "West Side Story" and more music was added from "Hair."

This concept was a milestone for show design in drum corps; it was one of the first (if not THE first) "story" show, wherein corps members actually acted out corresponding parts on the field. Many corps followed the Vanguard's lead after that.

This production, at the time, was classified by some observers as being a bit too self-indulgent and over the top. But looking back, the show was clearly a precursor to many of today's more artistic drum corps presentations.

It was also a milestone year for drum corps in general, with 1972 being the first year of DCI. In the first DCI Championship, the Vanguard was among the first top 12 group of finalists.

The 1972 repertoire was selections from Holst's "The Planets," selections from "West Side Story" and selections from "Hair."

### 1973, 1974, 1975 and the end

After the successful 1972 season, the Vanguard went into what most drum corps fans and observers consider a general and rapid decline. This was due to a combination of several factors: personnel changes,

declining membership due to age-outs and changes in philosophy and direction of the corps' leadership.

The Vanguard went on to finish 20th in 1973, 41st in 1975 and 31st in 1976 nationally at the DCI Championships.

After the 1976 season, the Vanguard stopped performing.

### The senior corps

In the mid-1980s, nostalgia fueled desire to bring the Vanguard back to the field. But due to difficult logistics and the lack of interest in reviving the original junior corps, a senior corps version was started instead.

The senior corps was made up primarily of fans of the original Vanguard and members of other senior corps in the area; less than a handful of the original Vanguard junior corps alumni actually participated.

The Vanguard senior corps even went to the trouble of reproducing the original Vanguard junior corps uniforms and purchasing new equipment. This senior corps version was well-received and popular for many long-time, nostalgia-hungry Vanguard fans.

The Vanguard's base of operations varied from year to year and eventually relocated from Des Plaines back to Chicago. But in 1996, lack of funding caused this corps to end and Vanguard senior did not perform after the mid-1990s.

From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, the Vanguard possessed one of the best overall cumulative competitive rankings ever.

The corps will long be remembered as a major icon and as a huge influence on what is now considered modern drum corps. The highly talented and powerful horn line, the skilled and innovative drum line, the inspiring marching shows, the colorful and highly regarded color guard were all



(Top) Vanguard Senior Corps, 1988; (above) 1987, DCA Championships, Allentown, PA (photos by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

trademarks of one of the best junior corps of their era.

The Vanguard corps is gone, left now to photographs, recordings and discussion groups for those old enough to remember. But the Vanguard has instilled great memories for those fortunate to have seen them, admired them and even for those who competed against them.

The greatest and fondest memories of all will always reside in the hearts and souls of those who were fortunate enough to have had the opportunity and the experience of putting on that colorful red, black and white uniform and to be called a "Vanguard."



Jay McGuffin attended the College of Lake County, IL, and the University of Illinois at Chicago, majoring in business administration.

He marched in the drum line for *The Brigade* (1961-1964) and then the *Des Plaines Vanguard* (1965-1970). He was also assistant drum instructor for the Vanguard during the 1970 season.

McGuffin works for a large pharmaceutical company in the northern Chicago suburbs as a senior editor and is involved in the layout, publishing and printing of graphics and copy for all types of pharmaceutical product packaging.

He and his wife, Debi, live in Lindenhurst, IL, 40 miles north of Chicago. He is also a volunteer for the United Way of Lake County, IL. His hobbies include music, films and sports.

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He wishes to acknowledge and thank his good friends and fellow Vanguard alumni for their contributions to this article: William Agnello, Sam Agnello and Jay Knebl (always known by Vanguard members as "Squad One"), Tom Barrett and Dave Hill.

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