

---

---

---

by Charlie Groh

There we were, a dozen or so 11-year-old boys. A dad had us lined up behind some triangular (to get the angle of the slinged drum), homemade practice pads, drum sticks akimbo. "Momma-daddy, momma-daddy, momma-daddy, paradiddle, momma-daddy, momma-daddy, paradiddle," he chanted along with us. Man, that was a BIG deal -- and when the new red drums (with calf-skin heads . . . where was PETA!?) . . . arrived, well, the end of the world as we knew it was upon us. Wow, what a sound.

What we were sure of was that we were the Troop 72 Drum and Bugle Corps. What we didn't know, without a crystal ball or an H.G. Wells machine, was that our group would go on to become the Anaheim Scouts and later morph into two of the most renowned corps of the 20th century: the Kingsmen of Anaheim and the Velvet Knights of Outerspace.



Anaheim Scouts at a local parade, 1963 (photo from the collection of Charlie Groh).

It was the Velvet Knights that split from the scout organization. Led by John Walters, Zig Kanstul, Joe Lintz and Bill Cadek, VK was formed and incorporated in the winter of 1963. Thirteen charter members signed on the dotted line and I was one of them. That was a good day for sure.

Little did I know that I would become a drum corps junky (and sometimes-marching instructor) and end up in and out of my alma

mater for the next three decades. (The in and out part is notable only in the human sense --



Velvet Knights, approximately 1972 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).

# Velvet Knights

you know -- do it, burn out, recover and do it again!).

From the outset, VK was "quirky," consistently producing quality drum corps with the latest in "gear." Zig Kanstul (founder/owner of Kanstul Musical Instruments) and horn instructor Joe Lintz, both worked for F.E. Olds and Sons band instrument manufacturers and were "instrumental" in this regard. With Kanstul as head of research and development and Lintz bossing machine



Anaheim Boy Scouts at a Los Angeles area parade, 1958 (photo from the collection of Charlie Groh).

production, custom horns found their way into the hands of eager young VK members -- mostly sopranos and French horns at first, but gradually moving into the larger bore horns as time went by.

The corps had horns ranging from "Dizzy Gillespie" sopranos to a French horn with a joint that allowed the performer to march off the field with the corps while his bell was pointing at the audience as he played his solo (a wonderful idea that would've worked if our boy hadn't lost his mouthpiece halfway through the show).

The contras had ball-bearing handles that fit to the piping of the horns so they could be spun like a rifle ("Ooh, look at the size of those fingers!") and an American flag pole that was spring-loaded to allow it to shoot up on the big last note of

color presentation (another great effect that worked well, without the human factor to screw it up, of course).

Eventually, with Olds entering the bugle market with their "Ultratone" line, VK sported the first matched set on the planet (debuted at the

1968 *Drum Corps Digest*-sponsored winter concert at the Civic Opera House in Chicago).

The original uniform was a white satin blouse, black pants, a red cummerbund and white buck shoes -- the "look" for the first 10 years. In 1974, after a merger with the Vaqueros from Lynwood, a new set of cadet-style outfits was acquired along with



Velvet Knights at their 1964 debut (photo from the collection of Charlie Groh).

new management. Interestingly, Don Porter Sr. (yes, folks, he of Kingsmen fame) came on as director to help the new merger along. However, the end of that season saw another leadership

change and Jack Bevins took over as director of the corps. Things would never be the same; fuel was loaded into the rocket.

The remainder of the 1970s saw the corps break into the Drum Corps International top 25 for the first time in 1977 (24th), followed by a 25th placement in 1978. The trend reversed,

however, and a dismal 33rd in 1979 was trailed by an inactive year in 1980 -- dark days in VK-land.

There was a bright light, though: a steady and successful bingo game, plus a whole lot of people who wouldn't give up. Bevins smiled and hired some good help. The latest "rebuild" was never in doubt. The rocket was moved to the gantry and countdown initiated.

The 1981 season brought a smallish and



Velvet Knights, 1976, at the Drum Corps West Championships in Renton, WA (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

very young Velvet Knight drum corps to Montreal for DCI Championships, where they earned 33rd place (only this time it felt better). The countdown reached "three" and the solid-fuel boosters were lit.

The 1982 season started as most do, handling staffing and then planning the show during the winter, etc. The staff was young and creative: Roger Olson, Micky McCool, Greg Clarke, Chris Nalls, Greg Woll, Sandy Turner, Paul Zubroad, Robbie Carson, Ty Tyler, Bill Hassing, Bernie Reyes, Billy Park and yours truly (as the guy with the scooper following the parade). We had one thing in common, other than the obvious drum corps addiction -- we knew there was something special here.

Old-style uniforms went out and Hawaiian shirts, straw hats and khakis were in. Add red deck shoes and the wand was waved. The new look not only transformed the visual nature of the corps, but the visceral as well.

(The countdown went to "two," the main engines were started and fun become the ethos of the Velvet Knights).

The 1983 season moved the corps into DCI's top 20 (17th) and more and more, VK was perceived as a corps on the rise... "one"... "zero"... and liftoff!

I would be remiss in not mentioning the inevitable comparisons drawn between VK and the Bayonne Bridgemen -- and for good reason. The Bridgemen style was considered in formative meetings, of course, but the creative team figured, rightly, that there was enough room in the activity for both and, as it panned out, VK simply took the torch forward as the Bridgemen faded from the scene in succeeding years, but not without humility and reverence for their predecessors.

The 1984 seasib marked the Velvet Knights' entry into DCI Finals. Twenty-one seasons from the beginning, the shuttle had attained high orbit!

The remainder of the 1980s saw VK in



Velvet Knights, August 10, 1983, at Bayonne, NJ (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

finals every year. From "James Bond" with the corps in tuxedos, to "Magical Mystery Tour" (with legendary Bobby Hoffman pulling the strings), complete with an outrageous pegged black pants, Converse red high-top sneakers, tux-jacket-and-red-baseball-cap

look, the adoring crowds were thoroughly, totally entertained.

The early 1990s brought more chaos, with "Schools Out" and "A Knight at the Apollo" and the nuclear 1992 season that reprised "Magical Mystery Tour" with a Camp Randall- field-rocking, shark-eating-the-fat-lady finals performance that you had to be there to believe.

The Velvet Knights had become chameleon-like, changing identity on a year-to-year basis. Crowds never knew what to expect and never knew what hit them.

And through it all, Bevins just stood there grinning. Finally, in 1993, he decided to retire and management changed again. The corps did, too.

VK had some good corps from 1994-1996, but it just seemed like something was missing. Who knows?

The end came while staff and corps were preparing

A famous icon of the entertaining Velvet Knights (photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World).



for the 1997 season. Legal problems, low membership and the IRS all added up to the corps folding after its 33rd entertaining season. VK had run its course, from being special to only a few, to being a favorite "I wish they'd come back" topic on drum corps computer news groups and in the print media.

For me, the corps is still circling in permanent orbit and for all of us -- the Zorb Southens, Dave Meades, Darla Balls, Henry Chesters, Steve Abrams, Roxanne Narachis, Ron Zeilingers, Sandy Turners,

Gary Lees, Ralph Hardimons, Garry Parkers, John Whitlocks, Greg Clarkes, Jim Blansetts, Scotty Walters and Jack Kanstuls of this slice of life -- VK will never die.



(Top to bottom) Velvet Knights, July 10, 1993, Concord, CA (photo by Steve Rodgers); 1994 (photo by Ron Walloch); 1996 (photo by Ron Walloch, all three photos from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Charlie Groh says he was born "sometime in the past, the day before dirt was created, long, long ago."

Between 1958 and 1969, he marched in the Anaheim Scouts, Lakewood Ambassadors and Velvet Knights.

He graduated from Fullerton College with an associate degree of arts in business in 1968, English in 1969 and a bachelor of arts in communications/journalism from California State University in 1978.

He served in the U.S. Army from 1969-1971 as a helicopter pilot. He lives in Southern California and has been on the board of Impulse since 1998.

Over the years he has taught Velvet Knights, Anaheim Kingsmen, Muchachos, West Coast Express, Westcoast Sound, Impulse and the Royal Cavaliers Youth Band.



(Top to bottom) Velvet Knights, 1988, at the DCI Championships in Kansas City, MO (photo by Orlin Wagner); 1990 (photo by Dan Scafidi); 1991 (photo by Orlin Wagner, all three from the collection of Drum Corps World).

