
by Ed Cagney

Pittsburgh Rockets

In Pittsburgh during early 1947, 12 men from Homewood American Legion Post organized the senior corps that was to become the Pittsburgh Rockets. Post 351 had sponsored a senior corps since World War I ended, and then sponsored a Sons of the American Legion junior drum and bugle corps in the 1930s.

When World War II ended, 18 returning veterans from the post marched with the cross-town Duquesne Post Senior Corps for the 1946 season before Homewood Post reorganized as a senior corps.



Pittsburgh Rockets, 1963 (photo from the collection of Ed Cagney).

By the summer of 1947, the Rockets began marching again.

The Rockets name was chosen when managing director Joseph Capone set up an appointment to meet with the owner of the nearby Rockwell Manufacturing Company. Capone's presentation was for a \$10,000 request for Col. Rockwell to fund the corps. If the company would underwrite this new corps, they would name it the Rockwell Rockets from Pittsburgh American Legion Posts.

The colonel actually liked the idea and wanted to do it, but in the interim labor strikes began at all the Rockwell plants. As a result, plans for the Rockwell Rockets were canceled. Homewood Post then decided to keep the name Rockets for their new corps.

The first uniforms were black cadet-style outfits with red trim. These were replaced in the early 1950s by the well-known two-tone satin blouses -- black with one red sleeve. During these early years, the Rockets were steadily gaining valuable experience and

gradually started to climb the ladder of success.

The corps evolved from the small unit into one of the largest and most famous senior corps in the country in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Under the capable direction and guidance of Joe and Val Capone, the Rockets established many firsts in the bugle corps field, both musically and equipment-wise for 26 years.

The Central Penn Circuit of drum and bugle corps was organized in 1952 and the Rockets rose to the top with continuous victories. The West Penn Circuit came into being in 1953 and the Rockets quickly became the top corps in this association also.

In 1953, Homewood Post decided to send its top-flight corps to the American Legion National Championships in St. Louis. The Rockets made the top 10 in their first try and gained a spot in the finals every year they attended the Legion's national contests.

With national prominence beckoning, the Rockets continued to win throughout 1954 and capped the year with their first division finish in the top 10 at the Legion Nationals. Steadily the corps gained the polish and the assuredness of a true national contender. Leading contests throughout the East and Midwest extended invitations to the Rockets for the first time.

In 1954, the Rockets' color guard began competing in American Legion state and national contests. The guard won 14 state titles between 1954 and 1971 and finished in the top five in 1954-1955 and 1957-1959 on a national level.

They were the Philadelphia Circuit senior champions from 1955-1958, West Penn senior champions from 1967-1971, 1971

Midwest senior champions and, proudest of all, 1971 DCA color guard champions. Their contributions to the use of new and difficult equipment work were at the forefront of the senior activity.

In 1957, the corps purchased new uniforms consisting of white satin blouses with red diagonal stripe, black trousers with red and white stripes and what became their famous trademark, West German police helmets. These were imported from West Berlin especially for the Rockets. Their successful 1957 contest year was topped with another top-10 placement at the Legion National Championship.

Corps director Joe Capone saw the six kinds of German headgear in a catalog and with huge help from the former mayor of Pittsburgh and then Gov. David L. Lawrence (the same man who would spearhead Pittsburgh's Renaissance a year later), Joe contacted the German Consulate to expedite an order. He got four or five types of headgear sent from Germany and he, his

brother Val and Riggle Laus selected the West German police helmets.

Lawrence and the Berlin government donated the first 50 shakos to the corps. Fifty more were purchased by the corps at a cost of \$3.95 each. Since there were no plumes on the West German helmets, Joe had a set of 4-to 5-inch plumes made special to fit. These shakos were ventilated, making them easy to wear.

The winter of 1957-1958 was extraordinary in many ways. The night before Thanksgiving, Homewood Post burned in a spectacular fire that threatened to snuff out the life of the Rockets. Much of the corps' equipment was lost. The famous spirit of the corps pulled together like never before.

A national fund-raising drive successfully lifted the Rockets back to a steady financial foundation. Thousands of drum corps fans all over the country contributed and became part owners of the Rockets.

In 1958, the corps was much larger. In terms of success, this was the start of a new era at the rebuilt Homewood Post. The Rockets competed in many top contests, defeating many corps they had not been able to beat before. The best performances of the year came at the Legion Nationals in Chicago where the corps placed fifth out of 34 corps and at the famed National Dream contest where they won the hearts of the crowd for a spirited comeback from the disastrous fire.

In 1959 and 1960, the Rockets continued to win and place with the best in the country. They journeyed to Minneapolis for the 1959 Legion Nationals, placing fourth in the finals with a very strong performance that had onlookers wondering if they had actually won their first national title.

The summer of 1961 was a year of experimentation with new instructors and a "Space" theme. New blouses of blue, red and white were added to the uniform in an attempt to present something new. After a fair season, including another trip to the Dream contest, it was decided the "Space" theme had to go.

Returning to the semi-classical and show tunes they were famous for, the Rockets in 1962 also returned to the familiar white blouses with a red stripe and the corps began to move up nationally once again.

In colorful ceremonies at Pittsburgh's Mellon Square on May 16, 1963, the Pittsburgh Rockets drum and bugle corps of American Legion Post No. 351 were presented with a specially made 3x5 foot STEELMARK flag to carry in competition.

Presentation of the flag, symbolic of the steel industry and having a special significance in the Steel City, was made by top officials of six major Pittsburgh area steel companies on behalf of the American Iron & Steel Institute.

The Steelmark "Spectacle of Music" championship trophy was also presented to the Pittsburgh Rockets for their annual senior contest by six basic steel producers headquartered in Pittsburgh who were members of the institute.

Only two organizations outside of Steel Corporations ever got permission to use the STEELMARK emblem that is still widely used in the steel industry today: the Pittsburgh Rockets drum and bugle corps and the Pittsburgh Steelers pro football team. The Rockets always treated with reverence their full-color STEELMARK flag.

The 1963 Rockets competed with a 68-man field corps and for the first time had many men as reserves on the sideline. A high level of achievement was maintained in competition and the corps sponsored its first contest, the "Steel City Spectacle of Music."

The climax of the 1963 season came when the Rockets placed fifth in finals at the World Open Championships in their first attempt.

The 1964 edition of the Rockets was highlighted by an entirely new music and drill show (unheard of in that era when music and drill frequently stayed the same for years). The Rockets caught the fans by surprise with powerful marches such as *El Capitan* and Armed Forces songs combined with lilting Broadway showstoppers from "Gigi" and "Flower Drum Song."

In 1965, Drum Corps Associates rearranged the senior corps map with nine members the first season who were brave enough to stand up for a strong organization of seniors to coordinate show schedules, rules, prize money and judging. The Rockets were charter members and placed sixth at the first DCA Championships.

Spirits were high all season for the nine member corps, often jeered by non-members. However, members made their own noise by spirited cheering of "D-C-A" when their corps entered a stadium. It was a special and fun time to be in a senior corps.

By the 1966 season, DCA had grown to many members and never looked back. The Rockets again made the top 10 at Legion Nationals in Washington, D.C. They also made DCA Finals for the second year when it was held in Connecticut.

A.J. "Riggie" Laus was the Rockets' perennial field soloist and U.S national soprano bugle champion. His record of 10



Pittsburgh Rockets, 1965 (photo from the collection of Ed Cagney).

major solo championships from 1957-1966 against stiff competition has never been matched. He was also Pennsylvania state senior soprano soloist champion for 10 years and in 1961 was part of the U.S national senior brass quartet champion.

In 1967, the Rockets won both the American Legion and VFW Pennsylvania State Senior Corps Championships in the same year for the first time. Overall, they were state champions of the veterans groups 10 times in history. Their music was a riot of Broadway show tunes during the late 1960s, making the corps popular with the fans.

For 1968, the corps grew stronger after a slow start, with new music and drill that didn't really attain strength until the end of the season. Even so, fans loved the music from "Mame"; the great march *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*; and *What Now My Love*.

The Rockets joined the new Red Carpet Association when it was formed in 1969 (named after the motel where it was founded). The corps placed third in RCA at Allentown, PA, then got to work and made DCA Finals two weeks later, placing 10th at Rochester, NY, and setting a strong move forward for the next season.

All elements of the Rockets were strong in 1970 as the corps won the RCA Championship over 13 corps, but missed making DCA Finals. They featured music from "Hair" and other Broadway shows.

The Rockets won the 1971 RCA Championships over 11 corps. Each section of the corps was strong and the Rocket color guard was dazzling with its new four-girl saber section working with the four-man bayonet rifle squad and the huge flag corps to show off strong visual effects that surprised the senior world.

The theme from "Patton," complete with live cannon fire and aggressive drill, had fans going wild. Although the Rockets did not make finals at DCA, their innovative guard won DCA Best Color Guard for 1971. (The award was given at prelims so all guards were eligible).

Behind the scenes in 1971, the dissent caused by the addition of four female corps members (who were chaperoned and never traveled with the corps) to this traditional all-male corps polarized the corps

into two factions: "for" and "against." "Against" included many wives and girlfriends of the members who were the most negative.

Even though the Rocket show was being well-received, many corps members were

just marking time until the season ended so they could get away from the uproar.

Within a few years, most senior corps began accepting female members as both musicians and guard members.

In 1972, the Rockets had one more good season. "Patton" and many of the 1971 elements were back, but the girls were not. The corps went to the American Legion Nationals in 1972, placing fourth in finals with their popular show that included "Patton," *Prince Igor* and *Day by Day*, among others. The Rockets also won their third consecutive RCA Championship by nearly four points. The corps then made DCA Finals for the last time that year.

In 1973, a lot of major instructors and other people did not return and a lot of new people came in. They tried but couldn't match the previous corps' accomplishments. The Rockets placed third in RCA and did not make the DCA Finals.

There were a couple of other attempts to restart the corps in the next few years, but none worked, and the colorful and innovative Pittsburgh Rockets became history after 26 years of spirited and exciting performances.



Ed Cagney is a native of Pittsburgh and has been active in drum corps his entire life. In 2002, he was named to the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame in recognition of his contributions to the activity.

He has been a staff writer for many years for Drum Corps World, Eastern Review, WGI, DCI and DCA. As a performer, he marched 16 years with the Pittsburgh Rockets in the guard and later as guard captain, instructor and drum major. He also performed with the Parma, OH, Lake Erie Commodores.

As an instructor, he has taught Steel City Ambassadors, Meadville Thunderbirds, General Butler Vagabonds, Catholic Daughters of America, Sharpsburg Cadets, Derry Patriots, Sundowners, St. Mary's Cadets, Loris Marching Lions and Norwin and Greensburg-Salem high school bands.

Cagney is currently a regional coordinator for Tournament of Bands and judges with the National Judges Association. As an administrator, he founded or co-founded circuits in eight states.

He has a bachelor of science degree in English from Cleveland State and a masters degree in social work/psychology from West Virginia University. He is currently a clinical social worker with his own practice.

He has raised two sons.



Pittsburgh Rockets, 1964 (photo from the collection of Ed Cagney).