
by Michael Carlson

One of the division II powerhouses to emerge in the new millennium is the Spartans from Nashua, NH. Founded in 1955, the corps has always been a symbol of power and tenacity. Whether it's being at the forefront of presidential parades or recovering from the catastrophic loss of its equipment and uniform inventory, the Spartans are leaders that bring new standards of determination to an activity rich in "can do" attitude.

Albert "Berdie" LaFlamme founded the corps as the Milford Spartans. His goal was for a small organization to help develop local youth into responsible adults; "To teach them and give them direction," he explained. "We were just a small town corps with the intention to help locally celebrate the holidays."

LaFlamme is an accomplished percussionist who, while in the Navy, studied under George L. Stone -- best known to drummers and percussionists in the drum corps activity for his "Stick Control" instruction book.

Although an accomplished

Spartans



Spartans, 1990 (photo by the Kingsleys from the collection of Drum Corps World).

musician who had the talent to pursue a professional career, his focus has always been musical education of young men and women.

1950s

With the help of business managers Winnie and Millie Bowler and an initial budget of \$500, the new corps bought uniforms from a community band in Rockland, ME. A handful of mothers handled the alterations, allowing the original 30 performers to step out into the world in 1955 as the Spartans.

In the early days, LaFlamme doubled as the corps' director and only instructor.

"Drumming, horns, music arrangements and marching -- I did it all," he said. "It was challenging for them and it was challenging for me, too."

During this time, the corps' rehearsals were held at a Milford music store and performances were limited to local parades and a few nearby contests.

Their first year in competition was in class C of the local circuit. However, their

popularity with community youth elevated them to class A the following year.

"In those days, we did the old standards mostly," said LaFlamme, who put together and taught all the early musical arrangements. "The music varied from *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* to *When You're Smiling*. I really enjoyed putting the popular standards on the field."

1960s

By the 1960s, the Spartans was a family effort for the LaFlammes. Oldest son Philip was on the percussion staff and oldest daughter Patti was the color guard captain (and later the drum major in 1970).

In addition, daughters Celeste and Joan were both marching in the color guard, while sons Peter, Paul and Jeff added their talents to the horn line. Now, more than 40 years later, the LaFlamme family continues to carry the Spartan spirit and vision to future generations.

In the early 1960s, the corps participated in its first Miss America Parade in Atlantic City, NJ. "This was a shot in the dark," noted Berdie LaFlamme. "Back then, they did not allow drum corps in the parade. According to the officials, they had had a bad experience with some senior corps in previous years and wanted nothing to do with us."

Berdie managed to persuade the pageant officials to give them a chance to prove the entertainment value and professionalism of a drum and bugle corps in their musical line up.

In 1964, the Spartans loaded up their buses and headed south for the big event. Consequently, this American icon became a standard for the New Hampshire corps during the next two decades.

The early 1960s also started another Spartan tradition that continues today.

Beginning with a standstill performance for President John F. Kennedy and later President Lyndon B. Johnson, the corps has performed either as an entry in the official Presidential Inaugural Parade or as part of a special presidential event.

"Originally, the governor's office called and asked us to perform as representatives of New Hampshire. We were gaining a lot of recognition with performances at the Orange Bowl and Disney World. And besides," chuckled Berdie, "we probably voted for the right people."

The Spartans made their only VFW Nationals appearance in 1963 at the convention in Seattle, WA. The New Hampshire corps placed sixth at the prelim show and jumped up to fifth the following night at finals.

After more than 10 years in Milford, the Spartans moved 11 miles southeast to their current home in Nashua. Berdie explained, "The (Milford) community could no longer support us. We went to the Nashua council for help. There was little money they could



Spartans, July 26, 1998, at Montclair, NJ (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

give, but there were other ways they could help, like a break with a new rehearsal hall, for instance."

The Spartans and the Nashua Lodge of Elks worked together in 1966 to form the Elks Trojans corps, which served as the Spartans' feeder corps for a number of years.

In 1967, the corps made its first of two appearances at the World

Open Championships. With a score of 61.866, they tied for the 27th position with the ND-ettes All-Girl from Bridgeport, CT.

1970s

With few exceptions, the Spartans continued to limit their competitive performances to regional circuits and the Eastern Massachusetts Circuit. In 1979, the Nashua group returned to the World Open for the second time, where they placed 24th in class A prelims.

Starting with the inauguration for President Richard Nixon's second term, this was a busy decade for the Spartans' participation in presidential activities. In October 1975, the corps made a special trip to the nation's capital to perform for President Gerald Ford. In 1977, they returned to Washington, D.C., for the inaugural parade to welcome the presidency of former Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter.

By the mid-1970s, the corps began to get away from the Spartan theme music that had dominated their productions for the previous two decades. This allowed the corps to explore a vast assortment of music, ranging from the classical "Firebird Suite" to the modern jazz of *Hill Where the Lord Hides* and from the movie soundtrack of "Hang 'em High" to driving swing of *Sing, Sing, Sing*.

1980s

The 1980s brought a time of dramatic change. In 1980, Berdie's son Peter became the new director. Peter has been involved in the Spartan organization for most of his life, starting in the horn line at the age of 10 in their feeder corps and continuing as a member of the staff after his age-out year.

Unfortunately, the latter years of the 1970s saw the beginnings of a sharp decline in active drums corps.

"Kids were leaving a number of the corps for the upper division corps. They were leaving in large numbers for what they felt was something better," Peter said.

The Spartans were not spared the dramatic attrition experienced throughout the activity. Before the start of the 1980 season, only the Spartan name was still alive and the drum corps had ceased to exist. From 1980 to 1983 the organization was reorganized as a community band.

"With 100-plus kids for membership, we had a concert band, a stage band and even put together a marching band for weekend parades. Hey, the activity was changing and

the kids were changing. The Spartans wanted to meet the needs of the changing age," Peter explained.

Fortunately, the glimmer of drum corps was still alive in Nashua. Peter, his staff and the Spartan alumni spent the next three years planning and working toward the corps' comeback.

The city of Nashua helped the corps locate its current home and assisted in obtaining the funding through a federal grant program. Other sponsors stepped forward to make considerable contributions to the corps' return.

The Spartans returned in 1983, focusing on local shows for the next two years. During this time the staff kept the instruction at the basic levels of marching and playing.

"We were helping the kids to learn about drum corps before we made any attempt at the national level," Peter said.

Finally, in 1985, the Spartans made their first appearance at the DCI Championships, placing ninth in class A-60 -- DCI's original division III -- at the prelims in Madison, WI. That same year, Gov. John Sununu presented the corps with a written commendation for their commitment to youth and positive representation of New Hampshire.

The New England corps marched the familiar parade route of inaugural processions to welcome in the presidencies of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and George Bush in 1989. A little more than a decade later, with the help of local schools, the Spartans marched their largest performance unit ever to welcome the presidency of Bush's son, George W. Bush.

1990s

In the 1990s, the Spartans received consistent national exposure inside and outside the activity. Furthermore, they stormed into the 1990s determined to be champions. By 1991, they were four-time Eastern Massachusetts Circuit Class A Champions and were refining the program to take this trend to national levels.

Early in the decade, the inklings of the dark, rich sound that would later take them to the top of the division could be heard in

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheharazade*.¹

The organization was well-represented in DCI's entry to the 1991 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. This was an enormous marching unit made up of representatives from corps from each of DCI's three divisions.

In addition,



Spartans, August 25, 1967, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

the Spartans continued to participate in the Miss America parades. In 1996, the corps provided a special performance in Nashua to honor the Olympic torch as it passed through New England on its way to Atlanta, GA.

In 1995 came the most monumental change for the Spartan organization. "We needed an identity," Peter said. "We asked, 'How can we sell ourselves? What will work for us?' We needed to be identified with a sound and a look -- something that everyone can point to as the Spartans."

For the corps, the dark, rich, low-end sound was going to be a vital ingredient of their formula for success. The corps had seen a sampling of their potential with their previous productions of *Scheharazade*. And after the success of the 1994 production from Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Piano Concerto* and its bottom-rich, brassy sound, the dye was cast. With it came the newest contender for championship titles.

The 1997 season did not provide an easy year for a division title. From a pure statistical analysis, it took a special corps for the Spartans to overcome the odds.

Going into August and the final stretch toward DCI Championships in Orlando, FL, the Nashua corps had only eight contests under its belt. Furthermore, their first win didn't come until August 1 in Batavia, NY. This was one of only two wins prior to championships.

More importantly, the season's first match-up with their most serious contender, the Blue Stars, didn't occur until the prelim contest in Orlando. In the end, the Spartans swept both prelims and finals, to include the caption awards for best general effect and best visual production.

The following year, the Spartans returned with every intent to retain the division title. After a hard-fought summer with East Coast Jazz, the two titans tied for the division II title.

In the fall of 1998, the worst happened. During the early morning hours of late September, an arson fire swept through the corps' equipment and food trucks. Both vehicles were completely destroyed and with them went "years of memories and several hundred thousand dollars worth of musical equipment,"² as well as the complete uniform inventory used the past summer.

Despite the nay-sayers, there was never any doubt within the organization that the Spartans would be back. One of the first goals was to be ready to perform a full show by June 1999.

Within days after the disaster, donations came pouring in to help get the New England corps back on its feet. Offers of equipment loans for winter rehearsals came from around the drum corps community and manufacturers worked in earnest to ensure timely deliveries to the corps.

Within 60 days after the fire, the first of the new equipment filled Spartan Hall with packing crates, bubble wrap and the excitement of a corps reborn. In the end, determination brought a Spartan team to the field by the June 1, ready for battle.

2000s

The Spartans continued to be the corps of concern for any division II hopefuls. The corps' forté in the new millennium is its visual production. The creativity and innovations of the design team not only bring in the visual caption awards, but also have been instrumental to ensure the Spartans' domination of the new color guard caption.

The corps applied its dark sound to the music of Hans Zimmer and Alan Silvestri and soundtrack scores of "The Gladiator" and "The Mummy Returns." The symphonic power and early Middle Eastern rhythms made these productions some of the most memorable music of the past couple of years.

The future

Now called Apollo, the Spartans' feeder corps has been helping to prepare future Spartans since 2001. This educational, non-competing group provides members exposure to the exciting world of drum corps.³ The activity is open to all young people of junior high school and high school ages who have an interest in the marching arts and local performances.

Berdie still occupies an office at the corps hall in Nashua, working the Spartan Bus Lines, and can be found spending time at Spartan rehearsals and weekend camps.

"I had no idea back in the beginning things would turn out as they did," Berdie said. "I really like the kids today. The music is not my music, but these kids do it very, very well. I am really proud of them."

In the entranceway to the corps hall, sitting in the forefront of their championship plaques and community flags, are two statues of Spartan warriors. These granite figures represent the determination and steadfastness that has long symbolized the Spartan organization.

Not only has this spirit allowed them to embrace the challenges and changes of years past, it has given them the flexibility and passion to use these moments from which to build and grow.

For a photograph and bio on Michael Carlson, turn to page 185.

¹ Mason, Ken. "Spartans tops at 41st E-MASS." *Drum Corps World*. 9 Aug. 1991: 11.

² Peabody, Richard. *The Spartans 1999 Season - Tour Director's Report*. Sept. 1999: 1.

³ Hodgkins, Mark. "The Cadets." *The Spartans*. 28 Sep. 2002: 5.



Spartans, 2002, at the DCI Championships in Madison, WI (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).