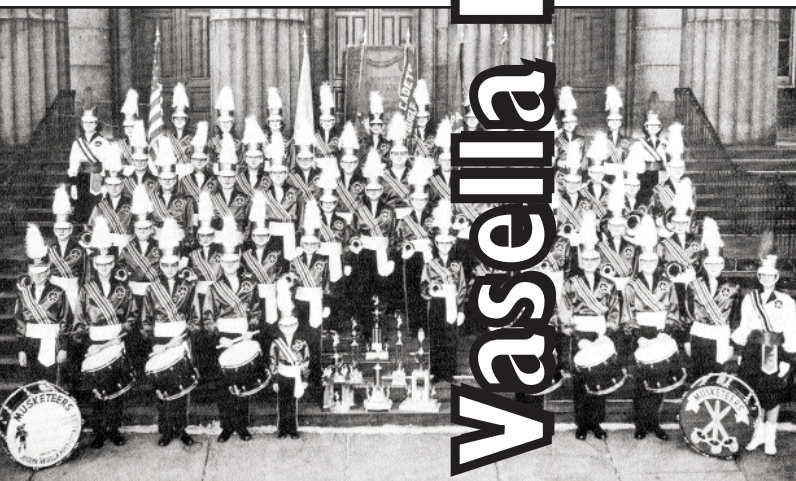

by Joe Marrella

Isn't it amazing how you can always remember the moments in your life that change it forever? For me, it was Memorial Day 1955 and I was at the Holy Cross Cemetery in Yeadon, PA.

Every year the Vasella American Legion Post No. 277 would pay its respects to the fallen soldiers who had been members of the organization. My brother Richard and I were there because my father, Victor, was the Vasella American Legion Post Commander.

When we returned to the post for lunch that day, a woman I didn't know said, "Next year we need to put a drum on Joseph and have him march us into the cemetery." It seems that years earlier the Vasella post had a drum and bugle corps. As a result, there was still equipment stored in

Vasella Musketeers



Vasella Musketeers, 1960, on Broad Street in Philadelphia (photo from the collection of Joe Marrella).

various rooms.

So in 1956, Nick Michelli and Jack Travis, former members of the Vasella drum and bugle corps, and Vic Marrella began the Vasella Cadets Junior Drum and Bugle Corps. I wasn't sure what it was or exactly where it was going, but, it was a chance to play the drums and be with friends. Soon every neighborhood person in South Philadelphia would learn about this thing called "drum corps."

I vividly remember the first practice. "Right face, left face, about face," over and over again. Later, we were given instruments and the incredible journey began. At that time, no one in the corps had any idea where the remarkable journey would lead. Certainly not to state titles, national prominence, creative innovations (mutes and trap drum sets) or producing the next generation of national-caliber instructors.

My uniform number was B-1 because I was the first person to be measured since I was the very first person to join the corps.

The Vasella Cadets started in 1956 with absolutely nothing, but the dream of its director, Victor J. Marrella, and a group of his associates. Those adults included Michelli as the corps' first bugle instructor; Peter Bogge, its first drum instructor; and Travis on drill. Joe DiPiero was the corps' treasurer, with a group of dedicated quartermasters: Dominic Michelli, Johnny Salerno and Alex DeVirgilio.

In almost no time, Vasella was uniformed in maroon satin shirts with a white and maroon ambassador stripe, a white elastic cummerbund, gray trousers with a maroon stripe, white shakos with maroon plumes and white shoes. My first Vasella uniform consisted of gray pants with a maroon blouse. The corps' equipment was old but serviceable enough and, incredibly, in its first state American Legion parade, Vasella won the

state parade corps title.

Progress was made quickly as new instructors were brought in. Lenny Slade came to teach bugles, along with Don Mihok on drums. At the same time, Tony DeMarco would join the new instructor group to teach drill. All of these men were associated with one of the most popular and successful senior units in the United States, the Archer-Epler Musketeers Senior Drum and Bugle Corps of Upper Darby, PA.

As we have looked back over the years and evaluated Vasella's progress, it was clear that the instructors and management made a strategic decision that would stand out. They decided to set a deliberate course regarding competition. They had decided to wait. They decided to be patient. They decided not to rush the corps into competition. They wanted them to be ready and they waited for the right time.

Vasella entered its first standstill competition February 3, 1959 at St. James Church, home of the St. James Cadets of Baltimore, MD. We did remarkably well for the first time in competition. We placed eighth out of 12 competing organizations.

Believe it or not, I can still remember seeing the curtain open that day in Baltimore as we embarked into drum corps history. Years later, my brother Richard gave me a gold paperweight with the February date inscribed on it when I was elected to the DCI Hall of Fame.

In 1959, Vasella competed for the first time on the field and shocked the local drum



Vasella Musketeers, July 25, 1964 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps community. They beat corps that had been around for awhile and everyone wanted to know "who are those guys?" The decision to wait paid off. We came out prepared and it showed.

The 1959 season culminated with the Pennsylvania American Legion State

Championship held in South Philadelphia at Municipal Stadium. Vasella placed third. In their first year, they beat every single corps in Pennsylvania but the two (Bracken and Tri-Community) that were the most experienced. This, too, was about to change.

Change came in a big way in 1960, with the blessing and consent of the senior corps, Archer-Epler, the junior corps became the Vasella Musketeers. During this year, the corps received new uniforms -- red satin shirts with a red, black and white stripe, white cummerbund and sash, white lace ascots, black trousers with a red stripe and white piping, black mother-of-pearl shakos with a silver eagle and white plume and black shoes.

The corps acquired red sparkle W.F. Ludwig drums, new cymbals and a number of new Getzen bugles. The corps' reputation for its drumming and musical excellence was growing as it went on to win numerous VFW and American Legion state contests over the next few years.

Over the years, the renowned Lee Wolf succeeded Len Slade on horns and Jack Keeley became the drill instructor. The corps' repertoire included *Stars and Stripes Forever*, *Conquest* from "Captain of Castille," *Like a God*, a number of other tunes from the musical "Flower Drum Song" and, of course, *The Musketeers March* ("We Are the Musketeers").

The corps' local arch-rival during those years was the Bracken Cavaliers of Bristol, PA. Vasella opened the 1960 season being beaten handily by seven full points in Lancaster, PA, in a driving rain. Yet, with changes in music and personnel, and no rain, the corps rebounded two weeks later for a win over Bracken by two-tenths of a point.

The taste of victory coupled with that enormous shot of confidence, and Vasella never looked back under Drum Major Linda Tauro and Guard Captain Jeanette Olsen.

Another major event for Vasella occurred during the summer of 1961. The corps went to the VFW national competition in Miami, FL. While having to go on and perform third out of 41, they just missed making the finals by placing 13th.

This was a hard pill to swallow, especially since there was an error in the sheets that wasn't picked up until the corps was in

Florida. The Musketeers would have qualified for finals.

A high point was in 1962 at Bader Field in Atlantic City, NJ, when the corps defeated the Audubon Bon Bons for the first time. Despite a large turnover in personnel in 1963, Vasella was to go on to great heights from 1963 to 1965. They also competed in the famous National Dream competition at Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City, NJ.

By 1963, Vince Deegan was teaching horns along with the legendary John Dowlan on drums and Howard "Whitey" Roberts doing the drill. Under Dowlan, Vasella's drum line was recognized as one of the finest in the country, outscoring every major drum line they faced during that period. Their virtuoso soprano soloists would "tear the house down" with such tunes as *Hello Dolly*, *American Patrol*, *Alabama Bound* and *Waitin' for the Robert E. Lee*.

Before the corps ceased operations in 1966, it had earned a reputation as being one of the truly top-flight, entertaining junior drum and bugle corps in the country.

Vasella's drummers thrived under the expert direction of the nationally-known percussion instructor, judge, creator and author of the book on backsticking, John Dowlan. Vasella produced the most successful and superior drum quartet yet. The highly acclaimed quartet consisted of Joe Gibbons on rudimental bass, and snares Ed Gibbons, Dennis Marta and Joe Marrella.

John Flowers, a renowned drum judge, wrote on their quartet sheet, "The most exciting climax I have ever seen in a drum quartet." The four went on to beat every quartet in the country in 1963 and 1964 and won many high drumming awards as a drum section.

Unknown to most people in the activity and because of their unique appeal, the quartet was offered a contract to appear at Disneyland for the entire summer of 1963 with performances scheduled daily. Their reputation and expertise were appreciated by all that witnessed their incredible dexterity and proficiency. They had become a national attraction.

The 1964 season marked their acceptance on the national scene. Under drum major Jerry Powel, the corps made VFW Finals in Cleveland, OH, as well as tying for first in drums at prelims. Along the way, they beat



Vasella Musketeers, July 18, 1964 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

legends such as Garfield Cadets, Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights and St. Lucy's Cadets. Their entertaining, high-energy style was always a crowd favorite and found them in great demand.

Vasella's color guard, instructed by Ted Locker, a nationally known judge and instructor, epitomized the word "class." Their contribution and presence topped off the style and the look of this great corps. Led by captains Winnie Stanley and Amy DeMarco, the guard augmented the corps' desire to entertain and became the focal point for fans.

In addition to producing interesting, entertaining and creative productions, Vasella also produced great alumni. Among them was Ralph Pace, a member of the DCI and DCA halls of fame. Pace would go on to create and instruct the most innovative drill designs in the activity during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, while, at the same time, influencing future designers.

Pace was engaged to help the top corps in the country achieve their goals and that's exactly what he accomplished. During his tenure at Blue Rock, 27th Lancers and Reading Buccaneers, each one of the corps he instructed beat every corps in the country at least once. It was a particularly incredible feat for the 27th Lancers, since they finished 20th at the DCI Championships the year before. It might have even set a record for the most improvement in a single year in drum corps history.

The team of Pace and Joe Marrella combined to elevate those corps as well as mentor upcoming instructors in the activity such as George Zingali on drill and Thom Hannum on percussion.

There was no doubt the Vasella Musketeers and the entire drum corps experience changed people's lives. Whenever you hear from a former member, the message is always the same: "The Vasella drum corps experience helped me become what I am today."

forged friendships for life; it enriched lives and opened the door to the appreciation of music and entertainment.

Often we would sit around and talk about those times. We would then shudder to think about our lives without the Vasella experience -- without the competition, without the camaraderie, without the thrill of accomplishing our goals. We were fortunate indeed. We did grow together and learned together and won together. No doubt we will "walk together forever."

From the basics of left face and right face, to facing thousands of cheering and adoring fans, Vasella's performers made their mark on the drum corps landscape in their brief 10-year existence; a presence, I might add, that is still honored and emulated today.



Vasella Musketeers, July 18, 1964, at Bridgeport, CT (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Joe Marrella).



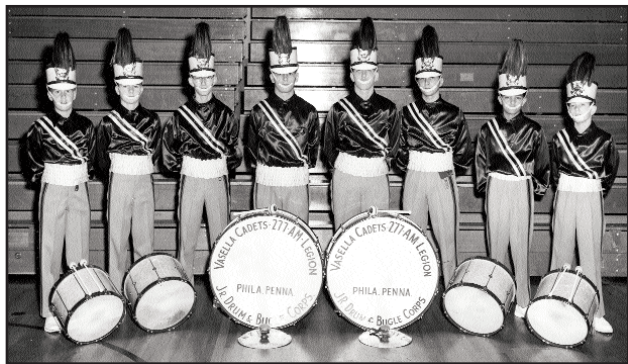
Joe Marrella was the first official member of the Vasella Musketeers and also was a member of their nationally recognized drum quartet. After Vasella, he went on to instruct two dozen drum corps. Among them were the Troopers, Blue Rock, 27th Lancers, Bayonne Bridgemen, Hawthorne Muchachos, North Star, Audubon Bon Bons, Belles of St. Mary and Reading Buccaneers. as well as consulting with other drum corps across the country.

Being a judge and clinician for various judging associations, he has been selected to adjudicate numerous championship shows in the United States and Canada.

Marrella is a member of both the DCI and DCA halls of fame.

Motivated by his drum corps experiences, he fulfilled a dream. He has directed a dozen musical productions for regional theater and has recently become qualified as a reviewer and nominator for the Barrymore Awards in greater Philadelphia while continuing to be a reviewer for the Perry Awards in the state of New Jersey.

Marrella also created an award-winning musical concept titled "This is the Moment" that was produced by NFL Films, was broadcast on the 75th anniversary of the NFL and has appeared on Super Bowl Sunday for the past few years.



Vasella Musketeers, 1958 (photo from the collection of Joe Marrella).