

18th Army Band

By Allen Lawless

I reported to the SOM in October, driving down solo in my 1973 Chevy Nova. Since I was relatively senior as basic music students go (I was a SP5), I was given the additional task of supervising general cleanup of the Scott Hall, the student company barracks. Oh joy. I had two other roommates – one was a guitar player named Grigsby and the other was a piano player named Ronald Haley.

In school I worked hard, putting in my minimum of 20 practice hours per week. Ear training, theory, harmony, concert band, drill band. Field night (weekly cleaning of the barracks and school). The Navy way of doing things. Staircases were “ladders”. Floors were “decks”. Windows were “portholes”. (The Army Element at the SOM was just that – the school itself was run by the Navy, even though the Army had far more students in the population.)

In February, 1978, I learned my sister was going to get married in April. Unless I did something to change my situation, I'd still be at the SOM on her wedding day. So I went to the Army Element Sergeant Major, a crusty old guy by the name of Hap Honaker, and asked if I could accelerate through the rest of the program and offered my explanation why. He readily agreed, seeming not to be fazed by my request. I had the very distinct and somewhat uneasy feeling he already knew why I wanted to leave early. I wondered if he was clairvoyant or if I'd mentioned anything to anyone. I didn't recall doing so, which continued to mystify me. This Sergeant Major was someone to watch, I thought, very carefully. He knows everything.

I found myself completely buried by theory, harmony, ear training assignments and tests. I took them, passed them, and took my F2 (final) audition, performing a 2.85 on a 4.0 scale. One needs a 2.7 to pass the course. (I found this exceptionally strange since just a month before, I had played a 2.65 on my F1 audition. How can one improve that dramatically in one month? I figured they wanted to get rid of me as much as I wanted to leave, so they made sure it happened.)

After my sister's wedding back in Michigan, it was time to return to Ft. Devens, but this time I was going to report to the 18th Army Band. This had been arranged at the time of my reenlistment and at the time, it was plausible. There were no other euphoniumists at the 18th at the time. But by the time I arrived back at Devens with

the 18th, there were two euphoniumists who had magically appeared while I was gone.

One of them, Specialist 5 John Keller, was famous throughout the band world. “Big” John could play euphonium or tuba and accompany himself on piano at the same time. John was rather odd, but he was a fine person. He never really connected with adults very well, but he got along famously with kids. A story I'd heard later about John involved him being stationed at the 1st Armored Division Band in Ansbach, Germany. (This was John's previous assignment before coming to Ft. Devens.) John was tasked to be the sponsor of SP5 Chris Burnett, a young saxophone player. It was necessary to drive Chris to various facilities to in-process into the command. When the passenger of John's beat-up VW bug didn't open, John grew irritated enough to rip the door off the hinges. This illustrated that John didn't think like normal people, nor did he have the strength of normal people. But John was generous with his time and money, investing both in a local “Kinderheim” in Ansbach. Since John had originally come from Holland and spoke fluent Dutch, German, and English, he was a big hit with the kids.

John was approaching the end of his career. If he was to be eligible to retire at 20 years (everybody wanted him to be able to retire since he'd worked hard through the years), John would have to get promoted to Staff Sergeant. This was a problem, because while John was a good man, most everyone felt that John would not make a good NCO. But I later learned that they sent John in front of the promotion board, he was promoted, and not long afterward retired from the Army. I've often wondered what became of him. He was one of those people you just don't forget.

The other euphoniumist was a guy a few years younger than I, but more advanced on the euphonium. He was a good player, but not very mature. I later learned that he had deliberately played the National Anthem in the key of A major during a performance. (The Department of Defense official version of the National Anthem, one that is required to be played by all military bands unless there is special dispensation to play something different, is in the key of B-flat major. This discrepancy in keys results in horrific dissonances which are neither correct nor desired.) This act of sabotage earned him a measure of non-judicial punishment, I heard. I'm quite certain he left the Army afterwards.

By the time I arrived back at Ft. Devens, the 18th Army Band was conducted by WO1 John Dunlap, a very fine conductor. The first sergeant was SFC Fred G. Jones, a trumpet player. Arlin G. Scott, the previous First Ser-

geant, was legendary within the band field and had retired. He died just a few short years after retirement.

Duty with the band was every bit as easy as I had imagined, in comparison with the dining facility. I'd be at work by 0730; there would be some cleanup activity, particularly in the dayroom and other common areas, and we'd then rehearse at 0900 until about 1130. About mid-way through the rehearsal, we'd take a break and I once again discovered the oddities of cannabis. After a lunch



either in the dining facility where I'd once worked (most of the old crew was there, but I wasn't getting sentimental about it) or in the cafeteria, we went back to work at about 1300 until about 1600. If we had had a gig over a weekend (this was the era of Yankee towns celebrating their 200th anniversary and they loved long, arduous parades), we'd always take compensatory time on the following Monday or whenever the schedule permitted.

There is much to be said for Yankee hospitality. While there is no doubt that New Englanders are generally a friendly bunch, they weren't quite as forthcoming with a meal as I had hoped. After a fairly lengthy parade, I distinctly remember retiring to the local VFW hall for a cup of warm Kool-Aid and a stale baloney sandwich. While I certainly didn't expect chateaubriande, I certainly had hoped for something a bit more substantial.

The 18th Army Band was located alongside Jackson Road, the main drag which led out to Route 2, the expressway which led toward Boston to the east and Leominster and Fitchburg to the west. The rehearsal hall the band used had been converted from an old WWII-era chapel, a wooden "temporary" structure that was still serving the active-duty Army 35 years later. The rehearsal hall was located on one side of Jackson Road while the other buildings were on the other side. The other buildings consisted of two WWII-era barracks, two-story "temporary" structures which were still serving the active-duty Army 35 years later, and a former mess hall which had been converted into the supply room and offices for the bandmaster, enlisted bandleader, administration, operations, and training. There was also a separate building that housed the dayroom and the CQ area. The general condition of all buildings was pretty much as you'd expect from 35-year-old wooden structures – they were worn down, dilapidated, and they were dry as tinder. One thing about being out there on Jackson Road – we weren't bothered by a lot of people. We were relatively isolated and separated from the main post area, and that may explain why I felt it might be okay to indulge occasionally in cannabis. I certainly

didn't need to leave urine samples in cups anymore – I was no longer associated with the Army Security Agency, being privy to state secrets while I burned food and hobnobbed with the Keepers of the Secrets.

It didn't take long before I became involved with a few things – I was new in the Army band program, but I wasn't a new soldier. I was 21 years old, practically a seasoned veteran within the Army, and I was grateful to have a job which didn't require being subjected to pieces of equipment which threatened to burn me, scald me, or freeze me. I could take my euphonium or trombone or trumpet and play it without fearing physical damage to my person. Even though I now had to wear my stiffly-starched cotton fatigues every day (laundered at my own expense, whereas my cook whites were provided to me free, laundered and pressed), I counted my blessings and looked forward to a duty day which promised to be slightly different most every day.

I wasn't wrong. I became involved in some wonderful efforts like police call, raking leaves in the fall, mopping floors, pulling CQ (more on that later), and other menial, brain-dead chores. In addition to our own company-sized outdoor area to maintain, the band was also tasked to keep a fairly good-sized area alongside the road which led out to the Ayer gate.

I learned that the Army band program, as an enticement and incentive for young musicians to fill up the Army band program in preparation for the Nation's Bicentennial in 1976, featured a program entitled "Stripes for Skills." In essence, this meant that those aspiring Army musicians who enlisted and made it through basic training and the SOM would automatically be promoted to Specialist 5 – the same rank that I held. I had gotten my rank not through this method, but rather the hard way, making one stripe at a time by keeping my nose relatively clean and working hard. Nevertheless, there was an abundance of musicians with the same rank I had and that led to the quite normal and expected system of keeping enough Indians on hand, rather than having a glut of chiefs. So I was essentially a dog's body again, subject to doing the menial labor that I thought I'd once worked through. It wasn't necessarily bad, just different. I was still accustomed to hard, physical work and I certainly wasn't afraid of it. And with that, I'd grab the mop and bucket and get to it.

I remember a stage band gig up in Concord, New Hampshire. I drove the 4-ton truck up there, accompanied by the drummer Danny. We left awfully early and arrived to set things up for the band. I did not perform, merely drove the truck and attempted to help in setting up a tower-of-power sound system which seemed like over-

kill to me. I remember a parade up in Swanton, Vermont, just south of the Canadian border and alongside beautiful Lake Champlain. It had been a long trip on the bus and when we arrived, we found that somebody had dropped the ball. Our motel could take only a few of us and not the whole band. So SFC Jones, the enlisted bandleader, took it upon himself to take himself and his entourage and billet overnight at Plattsburgh Air Force Base, just on the other side of Lake Champlain in New York. The next morning, SFC Jones and his entourage were late in getting back to the hotel. This fostered a fair amount of bitching and grumbling, a situation that was not helped by SFC Leo Vitali, a trumpet player. There were other jobs on post, relatively benign change-of-command ceremonies and the monthly Post Review. During the winter, most of these took place in the post gymnasium. All in all, it was pretty easy duty.

Arnetta and I married in May, 1978, in a simple ceremony in our apartment, witnessed by Howard and Judy Surette, good friends of mine. Arnetta and I eventually moved out of the apartment and into government quarters, just outside the Ayer gate. This apartment would have been otherwise suitable were it not for a severe cockroach infestation problem. The problem was eventually traced to the family at the far end of our row house, whose apartment was a pigsty. I later heard that a 50-lb. bag of dog food contained thousands of cockroaches. The entire building was treated for cockroaches and the problem eventually went away, as did the clown on the end who didn't know how to live without his little guests.

Things got desperate in the trumpet section – the band had only three players and bugle jobs came in constantly, which put an enormous burden on the section. So I signed out a trumpet and began practicing. I wanted only to try and play enough trumpet to play a credible “Taps” and not much else. Being a low brass player, I simply didn't have trumpet chops. But I stuck it out and played two bugle jobs over the band's blanket leave at Christmas 1978. The first “dead gig” was a veteran who had passed. The second was much more tragic – an active duty soldier who was killed in a traffic accident. This service took place in the post chapel because the weather was so abominable. My trumpet playing was so loud, due to the amount of air I customarily used in low brass instruments, that I had to stick the bell of the instrument out of the door so that I didn't knock any walls down, plus use a straight mute. The weather was freezing, but it was better to perform in the chapel than outdoors.

We played an old folks home one afternoon. This was a full-band job in which I played third trumpet. My play-

ing was so bad that Rick Shaw complained to Mr. Dunlap. (Even I thought it was awful.) Mr. Dunlap realized I wasn't doing very well, but didn't pull me out. Rick wasn't happy about it, but he did stop complaining.

There was the usual Ft. Devens retirement ceremony, a job played every month. I was to learn that this job was essentially the same throughout the various Army posts throughout the States and was not performed in Germany.

Some people I remember: SP4 George Baker, clarinet and saxophone; SP5 Reuben Mayfield, saxophone; SP5 Tom Harper, trombone (and someone I followed in two more assignments to the 1st Armored Division in Germany and the 2nd Armored Division at Ft. Hood, Texas); SP4 Rick Shaw, a very fine trumpeter; SP5 Tom Thomas, tuba; SP5 Fred Nunes, trumpet; SP5 Rick Medlar, trumpet (soon to join the Old Guard Drum and Bugle Corps in D.C.); SP5 Guy Myette, trumpet; SSG Paul Hazlip, flute; SP4 Mark Scott, saxophone; SP5 Keith Wilson, saxophone; SP5 James Johnson, percussion and the original gab artist. Jim later became a quite successful DJ. (Some ranks may be incorrect, for that I apologize in advance.)

My second tour at Fort Devens – two different assignments – lasted less than a year. In the late summer of 1978, the Army saw fit to issue me reassignment orders to the 1st Armored Division Band, located in Ansbach, Germany, reporting in March, 1979. (SP5 Tom Harper, of whom I've already spoken, had been issued reassignment orders to the 1st AD Band a month or so before me, leaving before me. We would serve together again in Germany.) Arnetta dropped me off at Kennedy Airport in New York City in early March, 1979. I traveled alone to Germany since the Army would not grant Arnetta and Angela concurrent travel due to the housing shortage in Ansbach.