

The Jolly Jesters: A corps Ahead of Its Time

By Bob Carell

Gathering information and photos for an article about a drum corps that ceased to exist 60 years ago has proven to be a challenge. For example, I have received identical photos that show different years. I have also discovered that memories of the same event often differ. After 60 years, none of this is surprising; however, it makes it difficult to ensure that the details are accurate. I have done my best to ensure that the information is correct and I hope you will enjoy reading this article about an important part of Canadian Drum Corps history.

THE JOLLY JESTERS were from Toronto, Ontario. Like many of the early drum and bugle corps, they began as a military band. A group of men in the Army Reserve created a band which became the trumpet and marching unit for the 5th Column, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC).



5th Column, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. (Waterloo, 1956)

The band's uniform was army dress blues worn with white pith helmets or flat-top hats. They disbanded during the Second World War because band members were on active duty; however, they reformed the band in about 1947 or 1948. The band performed as a parade corps until entering and winning the Canadian Drum Corps Championships (Senior Novice Class) in 1952.

In 1955 the army, responding to a protest by the musicians' union, forbade the band from performing at a civilian function in Toronto. In response, the band rented clown costumes and performed as a civilian unit. They called themselves "The Jolly Jesters Drum and Bugle Corps." How did this come about?

The transition began around 1954 after Ted Reilly, the band's director, attended a contest in Batavia, NY. Ted recognized the potential of a drum corps and began putting his efforts into creating the corps' first full M&M show.

Around 1955 or 1956, band members used their own money to purchase a second uniform. They replaced the dark blue military jacket with a sky-blue satin blouse having royal blue cuffs and a royal blue cummerbund. Flat top military hats replaced the pith helmets.



Jolly Jesters original jacket patch



5th Column Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. (1955 or 1956)

RCASC and the band got along well with RCASC rarely interfering with the band. The photo shows the band in their new silk tops. They are wearing pith helmets because their new hats were not ready. Ted Reilly, the conductor, is wearing a dark blue top and a sample of the new hat.

RCASC treated the band differently from the militia unit. Their expectations of the band were simply to provide a duty bugler, take part in the occasional military parade and march the unit around the armoury floor one night a week.

In 1955, as an experiment, the Toronto Argonauts Football Club replaced three of their usual half-time shows with a drum corps competition. Three corps, each corps performing at a different half-time show, would compete for a first-place prize of \$1,200. The Argos invited the 5th Column, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) to take part in the competition. Accepting that invitation created problems with both the American

Federation of Musicians Union (AFM) and the military.

The Toronto Argonauts had already encountered problems with the AFM when, in 1954, they had invited the Second Signals Band (the precursor to the Ambassadors) to perform at two Argo games. The AFM had lodged a protest with Army Command which forbade Second Signals from performing. Another story says that the 48th Highlanders, who had performed at Argonaut half time shows for a long time, complained to the union about the money they were losing.

Either way, the AFM was not happy. The Argo competition re-ignited the battle. A newspaper reporter wrote “Walter Murdoch (of the Musicians Union) accusing the Argonaut football club of being ‘plain cheap’, charged the \$1,200 prize money was only a fraction of what the club would have to pay for professional musicians”.

The AFM responded to the Argo competition by blacklisting all trumpet and bugle bands in Ontario (both Junior and Senior). A newspaper report from 1957 stated that the union and bands had reached a resolution; however, the blacklisting of drum corps was still active in the mid-1960s. In 1965 the organizers of the Easter Seals Telethon, a cross-Canada televised fund-raiser, invited the Toronto Optimists to perform. When the corps agreed, the response from the union was swift and clear. The union said that, if the Optimists performed, they would ban union musicians from performing in the

BAND MUST WEAR CIVVIES TO ARGO FOOTBALL GAME

(This article was published in the Toronto Star, October 28, 1955)

The blue uniforms and white pith helmets of the 45 piece RCASC trumpet band will be exchanged for colourful "surprise civilian costumes" for the band's appearance at the Argo football game tomorrow.

The change was forced by an interpretation of an army rule by the Toronto Musicians' association.

Army Central Command and the Argonaut football executive have been informed by the union that the band "is not authorized to perform as an army unit" because of an army order stating a militia band cannot replace a union band on a job, "insofar as depriving them of their livelihood is concerned," said Lt.-Col. G. W. Carnegie, RCASC commanding officer.

He said the rule also stipulates militia bands cannot participate in competitions for a fee.

Involves Competitions

The Union's ruling came over the Football Invitation Trumpet Band Competition involving two Army bands and the Merritton Trumpet Band in which the three bands were invited to compete for a trophy and about \$1,200.

The Musicians' Union

brought the army ruling to the attention of the army authorities after the Second Signals Regiment Trumpet Band appeared as the first entry in the competition at an Argo game Thanksgiving weekend.

At last week's game, the RCASC band appearance was cancelled at the last minute and the Merritton Band was placed on the program.

Lt.-Col. Carnegie said the Army ruling also states that a unit "may participate in a music festival by paying the prescribed fee and it was under this that we allow the Army bands to enter the competition. Apparently the union interpreted the rules otherwise," he said.

Hire Own Suits

However, he said, "the boys are going to play anyway, and have gone out and hired their own costumes at their own expense. They wouldn't even tell me what kind of costume they were going to wear. They told me to come out to the game and I would see them," Lt.-Col. Carnegie said. They have a wonderful "esprit de corps," he added.

An Argo official said the band would not be excluded from the competition. "It doesn't matter to us whether they are in uniform or not," he said.

telethon. The Optimist chose the only reasonable option and withdrew from performing during the telethon.

The union was not the only problem facing the band. Army regulations prohibited active service and militia bands from replacing union bands or taking part in competitions for fees. The RCASC said that Army Central Command had issued an order prohibiting the band from participating in the Argos competition as an army unit; however, the band members very much wanted to compete. The clause "as an army unit" was their loophole. Band members rented circus clown costumes then competed under the name "The Jolly Jesters".

DRESSED AS JESTERS, ARMY MEN TAKE THE TITLE

(This article was published in the Toronto Globe and Mail on October 31, 1955)

The RCASC band pulled a new name and multicolored clown costumes out of its bag of tricks Saturday in answer to a ban by Toronto's Musicians Association on the appearance of the band as an army unit at the Argo football game.

The band placed first in the Football Invitation Trumpet Band competition.

Officially the 45-piece band was known as the Jolly Jesters but there was no mistaking the fact that the faces hidden under the clown costumes and the performances were those of the RCASC.

RCASC officials refused to comment on the move. Musicians said the band and its men were afraid to say anything. They said the unit's Colonel would get into trouble if any statement was made.

A four-man judging team gave it five more points than its closest competitor. The Second Signals Regiment Trumpet Band placed second and the Merritton Grenadiers were rated third. The three bands competed for a trophy and

about \$1,200.

The RCASC band was originally scheduled to appear at the October 22 Argo home game. The appearance was cancelled and the Merritton Grenadiers, a community-sponsored band, substituted on the program. The RCASC said it was ordered not to appear by Army Central Command.

Lt. Col. G. W. Carnegie, RCASC commanding officer, said the Toronto Musicians' Association objected to the appearance as being contrary to an army order stating that the militia band cannot replace a union band on a job and cannot participate in competitions for a fee.

Central Command said the union brought the ruling to its attention after the Second Signals Regiment Trumpet Band appeared as the first entry in the competition at the Argo game on Thanksgiving weekend.

Colonel Carnegie claimed that the band had entered the contest under the provisions of the ruling that permits participation in a music festival by paying the prescribed fee. He said the union did not agree with the band's interpretation.



The Jolly Jesters wearing rented clown costumes in their first competition. (Argo Contest, Varsity Stadium, October 29, 1955)

You might wonder why they chose clown costumes. The corps needed to rent 45 similar costumes and the only suitable option that was available at Malabar, Toronto's costume emporium, was clown costumes. On the surface they were an unknown band; however, the bodies under those clown costumes were the members of the RCASC band. So, how did they do?

In third place was the Merritton Grenadiers, preceded by the Second Signals while the Jolly Jesters won. They marched home with the top prize money in their very first competition! Their performance was a big hit with both spectators and band members.

The next year, in 1956, the corps received its first invitation to a major American contest. Dave

Wood remembers: "While everyone agreed with the clown costume at the Argo game to do it for an American audience at a regular Drum Corps show took a hard sell by Ted". With all members on board the corps, for the second and final time, rented clown costumes. In August 1956 the Jolly Jesters performed at the Mardi Gras of Champions in Albany, NY and drew tremendous applause.

THE OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE response to the clown costumes made it easy to keep the Jester theme so band members opted to continue competing under the name "The Jolly Jesters". The drum corps world had gained a new competitor!

For those with more of a military persuasion, corps members were still in the army and had army dress



The Jolly Jesters in their rented clown costumes at their first performance in the USA. (Albany, NY, 1956).

blues. Over the winter Ted designed new uniforms, chose new theme music and created a new show. In 1957 the corps performed in matching Red and White clown costumes designed by Ted and made for them by Malabar. The left side of these new costumes was red and the right side was white. With the new uniforms, the corps would flash red and white in sequence as they marched and turned.

On the field Ted Reilly, the corps director, wore a tramp costume complete with tails, patches and a top



Jolly Jesters performing at Honest Ed's. (Toronto, circa 1957)

hat. The corps' drum major, Ted Higgins, dressed as a Court Jester. In later years Ted Reilly wore the Court Jester costume.

Dave Wood remembers the corps on the starting line playing a fanfare, "I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air", before releasing coloured helium-filled balloons then stepping off to "Be A Clown." The crowd thought it was a great way to open their show!



Jolly Jesters performing in their red and white clown costumes. Ted Higgins, in his Court Jester costume, is conducting while Ted Reilly, the corps director, is on the right wearing a top hat and tails. (probably 1957)



Ted Reilly, Jolly Jesters Drum Major. (1959)

Tom Mellors wrote this: “I tell people that the clown outfits were ideal for coping with weather. For performances in the hot summer, we only needed underpants under the clown suits. In cold weather, heavy coats and long johns ruled the day. We all looked the same in the clown suits and no-one ever noticed any difference. In looking at today’s modern

drum corps, I think the Jolly Jesters, with their show and ‘costumes’, were ahead of their time.”

Dave Shano recollects his part in the show: “I wasn’t good enough to play. My only appearance was to wave my hand anxiously at Ted Reilly - I had to go to the bathroom BAD. He waved me off the field; and the Corps started the show. After an appropriate time, I came back on and squatted on the field until Ted chased me to two or three different spots so that I didn’t impede the show. That was my claim to fame. Of course the kids got a laugh.”

In terms of repertoire the Jolly Jesters selection of music was eclectic, ranging from circus-related songs such as “Pagliacci”, “Man On The Flying Trapeze”, “Be A Clown” and “Another Opening, Another Show” to marches like “Semper Fidelis” all the way to jazz numbers which included “Sophisticated Lady” and “Take the ‘A’ Train”. The DCX Museum website (dcxmuseum.org) contains the Jolly Jesters’ complete repertoire from 1957 through 1960.

Dave Shano remembers a Judge saying “you’ll never win as clowns”. Other people had made



Jolly Jesters on the starting line at Roosevelt Stadium for the Preview of Champions. (Jersey City, NJ, 1957 or 1958)



The Jolly Jesters in their rented clown costumes at their first performance in the USA. (Albany, NY, 1956)



The Jolly Jesters. (Port Dalhousie, ON, 1957)

FEATURE ARTICLE: The Jolly Jesters (continued)

similar comments. Corps members began wondering whether they would get higher scores in competition if they looked more like a “traditional” drum corps. Many corps members felt that a change in both their uniform and style was the path to take.

During 1960, the corps usually performed in their clown costumes but they sometimes wore the light blue silk tops that they had purchased years earlier. The Jolly Jesters disbanded at the end of the 1960 season.

OVER THE COURSE of its existence the Jolly Jesters performed in 24 contests, 17 of them in the United States. When the corps disbanded, many members followed Ted Riley to the Ambassadors, a few went to the Guelph Royalaires while some left the drum



*Jolly Jester, Gord Irvine, on cymbals.
(New York - Canadian Championships, Rochester, August, 1960)*



Jolly Jesters releasing balloons on the starting line. (New York - Canadian Championships, Rochester, 1960)



Jolly Jesters with wraps around their drums. (1955)

corps activity altogether. The remaining members created a new corps called “The Jesters”. Band members had accumulated their “Army Pay” and used that money to purchase uniforms and instruments. The Jesters inherited this equipment since the Jolly Jesters, not the military, had purchased it. Dave Wood said “with the blue shirts we wore the dark blue army pants with the double white stripe. Never gave them back.”

By the time the Jolly Jesters disbanded, the mystique surrounding them had entered drum corps history. With their colourful costumes and crowd pleasing performances, the Jolly Jesters, by preceding a similar non-military trend of today’s drum corps, were ahead of their time.

When competing during 1961, the Jesters wore the sky-blue silk tops that the Jolly Jesters had purchased. In 1962 the Jesters purchased new, dark blue uniforms. At the end of the 1963 season the Jesters merged with the Hamilton Viscounts to create a new drum corps, the Commanders.

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Jolly Jesters red jacket patch



Joe “Radar” Watson wearing his Jolly Jesters costume at a G.A.S. convention

FEATURE ARTICLE: The Jolly Jesters (continued)



Jesters wore the Jolly Jesters light blue uniforms in their first year. (Rochester, 1961)



Jesters in their new, dark blue uniforms (Canadian Nationals, Waterloo, 1962)



Commanders. (Hamilton, 1964)