

The Toronto Signals Band

*Adapted from an article by E. (Ted) Blight.
Ted joined the Signals Band in 1984 and served on
the executive committee for many years*

Background

The military used both drums and bugles for centuries to sound various calls, both in camp and during battle. It was a convenient and effective method of sending identifiable messages (i.e., Signals) to large groups of troops over an effective range. Today, bugle calls are mostly ceremonial, including General Salute, Last Post, Reveille, etc.

The Early Years

The 2nd Divisional Signals Trumpet Band began in 1926, but there are no photos from that time. The first known photograph of the Band is from November 1932. Other than that, little information is available. The earliest history is mostly word of mouth, passed down by the family of Harvey

Longstreet, whose family includes four generations of members.

Two 2nd Divisional Signals Bands actually existed in 1932, the Trumpet Band and a Brass Band. The Brass Band, however, included unionized musicians who also paraded as the Army & Navy Veterans Band. In 1934, the Commanding Officer, Col.



Conover, questioned the Brass Band's allegiance to the unit and held a special parade to inspect both bands. Following the parade, the Brass Band was dismissed from the Unit and the Trumpet Band continued as the Unit's only band.



2nd Signals Band (1934)

Instrumentation

Musical arrangements were simple because the only notes that one can play on a trumpet with no valves are Low C, G, C, E, G, and again C (High). Arrangements of the day would have included tunes such as “The Legion Drummer” and “Here They Come”. To get a sense of the type of sound and limitation of the musicality, many people would still be familiar with the American tune “You’re in the Army Now”. The march “There’s Something About A Soldier” was the most popular tune and was the keynote of the 1930’s era band.

During the 1930’s, aside from typical military duties, the Band was famous for its outside performances, most notably at the Waterloo Band Festival Contest, annually attended by upwards of 55 Bands and over 25,000 spectators. The band won first place in its category at least five years in a row and the Parade March Past Trophy for at least four years in a row. Following a performance at Waterloo on July 18th, 1936, the band received a congratulatory letter from Dr. Frank Simon, the President of the American Bandmasters’ Association that stated in part, “Few men in the United States have travelled as extensively as I have judging at all types of musical events, and I can sincerely and without equivocation say that your Corps far excels anything I have seen in its field.”



Sergeant Major Roy Manning and Drum Major Harvey Longstreet accept a First Place Trophy (1935)



2nd Signals (Coronation of King George VI, 1937)

The Band’s notable historical participation of this era included the City of Toronto’s centennial celebrations in 1934 and the coronation celebration ceremony for King George VI in Ottawa in 1937.

The War Years

The second-world war had broken out. According, in part, to a newspaper article, “The Band was participating in the Labour Day parade. Band members knew they were making their last march as a non-permanent unit. Approaching Ossington Avenue on Queen, a khaki-clad dispatch rider from the unit sped up. The Band stopped and orders were handed to Drum-Major Harvey Longstreet. The orders read: ‘On completing the march, return immediately to the Armoury.’” After the Labour Day parade, the band held a final parade at Spadina Armoury.

Following the last inspection, Lt. Col. Kyle made the following speech: “As a band, you are no more. There is no 2nd Divisional Sigs. As a military band, you won outstanding honours and my only regret, although we have tried hard enough, is that we cannot keep you together as a band. From now on, we are embodied in the Canadian Field Force and the serious business of forming a fighting machine. We need truck drivers, dispatch riders, and a score

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of other classifications for the personnel of the new force, and the way is open to you men to get the first chance. I only hope you can see your way to stay and enable us to form the nucleus of a band in the new force.”

The news article went on to report: “A toast to the Colonel was immediately drunk and Drum Major Harvey Longstreet and Staff Sergeant Kay Mathers immediately offered their services to the new force. Twenty-seven of the band members announced they would stand with their officers and offer their services.” Members of the band reportedly served overseas as batmen, drivers, linemen and other classifications but, most importantly, they wanted “to remain together and supply band music for the Corps.”

According to historical accounts, the 2nd Divisional Signals, led by the Band, paraded down Bay Street to Union Station where they disembarked on the first troop train out of Toronto to Barriefield Camp, in Kingston.

The band travelled overseas in a convoy lead by the British battleship HMS Revenge. According to Signalman W. Bowes, the band formed on the aft deck of their transport ship twice a day to



HMS Revenge (1930)

rehearse. The second day out to sea, a Canadian destroyer was signaled to lead the convoy while the Revenge swung off into a circle to close in behind the transport carrying the band. The Revenge held its position while the band lined the aft deck and played its entire repertoire. The Revenge commander then sent a message that reportedly read, “Thanks, finest trumpet band music I’ve ever heard,” after which the battleship swung back out to lead the convoy. For the remainder of the crossing, Revenge could always be found back in position behind the transport when the band was out to rehearse. As a final gesture, the Revenge



The Band at Barriefield Camp (Kingston) on July 27, 1940 awaiting deployment overseas

commander requested the band trumpeters to play Last Post and Reveille for one of his crew who had passed away during the crossing at his burial at sea.



Only known photo of Signals Band overseas (Alton, England)

In January of 1942, members of the pre-war band that did not go overseas with the cooperation of Major O. N. Dean met to reform the 2nd Divisional Signals Band. The reforming of the band took a twist. The band needed instruments, as the original inventory was overseas. In lieu of the open trumpets, the band fund raised and purchased piston valve trumpets, allowing them to play more harmonious musical arrangements. Baritones were also incorporated. In addition, bell lyres were introduced. These added a distinctive sound and could be used for solo parts and arrangements. It

has been suggested that the Signals Band was the first trumpet band in Canada to introduce this style of instrumentation.

Post WW II

It's 1945, and the Second World War is finally over. Historic reports, from between 1939 and 1945, show that 58 members of the band served with the Canadian Armed Forces all over the world. Two band members served with the United States Forces in the Pacific theatre. Several veterans of the war that were members of the pre-war band returned and strengthened the ranks of the reformed band.

In June 1946, the Band won three first place awards at the Waterloo Music Festival. In September 1947, Toronto Mayor Robert Saunders honoured the band with a civic reception, recognizing seven First Place awards that year at contests in Waterloo, Guelph, Fort Erie and Niagara Falls, New York.

In 1948, the band led a parade from Union Station to City Hall Square (Old) where Toronto Mayor Hiram McCallum read a proclamation announcing the first national observance of "Signals Day".

The Signals Band had become truly famous, both across Canada and in the United States. In a news



2nd Signals Band (Ottawa, Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, 1953)



Returning members included Canadian Army Sergeant Sam Falks and Sergeant Al Stinson, Royal Canadian Air Force Flight Officer Alf Smith and Bruce Adams of the Royal Canadian Navy.

item from Ottawa dated April 26, 1949, Major Al L. Streeter, Inspector of Canadian Militia Bands, described them as the finest Trumpet Band in the Canadian Reserve Army. Circa 1949/50, the RCAF flew the band from the de Havilland Airport in Toronto (now, Downsview Park) to the Camp Borden air station to participate in the Air Force Day celebrations. The RCAF also flew the Band to the Chicago Tribune Music Festival where it performed for an estimated audience of 95,000. During this period, Toronto Mayor McCallum was invited to open the Calgary Stampede. With a contingent of about 500 Torontonians including numerous well-known individuals, the Signals Band led the contingent in a parade down to Union Station to board the city's "Goodwill Train" bound for Calgary. Apparently, this mode of travel was

now beneath the band as a few days later the RCAF flew them to Calgary where they met the train for a welcoming reception.

In 1949, there was a refitting of the Bands Scarlet Uniforms. Of particular note was the introduction of the now recognizable flat top bearskin busbies with a hackle and plumb in the tradition of the Royal Corps of Signals. During this era, the band was often simply announced as "2nd Sigs" or affectionately simply as "Sigs".

Canada's Marching Ambassadors

During the early 1950's, the band travelled extensively for events throughout Ontario and the north-eastern United States. Extremely popular appearances in the United States included the Jersey City Dream Contest (New Jersey), the Syracuse Cavalcade of Champions (New York), the Hilton Pageant of the Drums (New York), as well as in Batavia, New York; Milton, Pennsylvania; York, Pennsylvania; and the Michigan State Fair. Following the first visit to the Jersey City Dream Contest in 1952 the local Associated Press



L-R: Bert Nours, Audi Searle, Fred Searle and Bill Bass pose with an airline stewardess at LaGuardia Airport in New York City after their performance at the 1953 Dream Contest

reported in part "Call them ambassadors, diplomats, or bearers of Goodwill, the Canadians stole the show - and the hearts of the people - at Jersey City last night". After the band's appearance at the Hilton Pageant of Drums, it was tagged by the Hilton Record as "Canada's Marching Ambassadors". The Record further reported, "Their spectacular

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performance was unexcelled in the history of Hilton bugle corps programs. Canada may well be proud of her boys in scarlet and black”.

1953 marked the year of the Coronation of HRM Queen Elizabeth II. The Toronto Signals Band performed a prominent role at the Ceremonies including playing three concerts and two massed band concerts.

In 1954, the Band won the senior band competition at the annual Canadian National Exhibition Warriors' Day parade. This win was special inasmuch as the first-place trophy was personally presented by HRH Princess Alexandra (cousin of HRM Queen Elizabeth II) and her mother, the Duchess of Kent. Incidentally, the Signals Band and, subsequently, the Colour Guard are the most prolific award winners at the Toronto CNE Warriors Day Parade. The band has won the Elwood Hughes Trophy for Best Brass, Trumpet or Bugle Band on 37 occasions since being introduced in 1954 and the Frank Jamieson Memorial Trophy as Parade Champions on 23 occasions since being introduced in 1969. The colour guard has won the John Labatt Limited Trophy for Best Colour Guard on eight occasions and the Frank Jamieson Memorial Trophy as Parade Champions on one occasion since being formed in 2000.

In 1955, the Band participated in the visit of our then Colonel-In-Chief, HRH Princess Mary, during her visit to Vimy Barracks in



The Band sits for a photo after rehearsal outside the Parliament Buildings in preparation for the Coronation celebrations for HRM Queen Elizabeth II in 1953

Kingston. Also in 1955, the City of Toronto honoured the Band with a civic reception parade and ceremony to celebrate the band's 30th anniversary.

The Band won the 1957 Canadian Championship for the 16th time in 25 years; however, it was the start of some unrest between the band and the Military. Instead of their heavy scarlet tunics, the

Band had changed their uniform for the Canadian Trumpet and Bugle Band Championships. The dress of the day included the traditional trousers with the red strip and busby with hackle and plumb; however, they added a red cummerbund and sash with a white blouse, replacing the scarlet tunic.

Later, the Band replaced the traditional black sock of the busby with a white one and changed the red horsehair plumb to a white feather plumb. Eventually, the Band abandoned the busby and pearl "shako" caps with white feather plumbs; however, the Band only used this uniform for non-military functions. With much controversy, the band competed formally under the name of "Canada's Marching Ambassadors" sometimes referred to simply as "The Ambassadors". In 1958, the band

broke away from the Signals Corps to march as an independent unit. Apparently, this was in reaction to the Corps' insistence that the band return to full military uniform, play only approved regimental marches, and stay out of competition.



Civic reception at Toronto City Hall

Obviously, the band continued; however, it had assumed a dual identity. Some members played only with the Signals Band, some with Canada's Marching Ambassadors, and some with both.

Toronto Signals Trumpet Band

During the 60s and 70s, the band continued to perform at many parades, shows, and other events. In 1965, the band was the duty band for the grand opening of the new Toronto City Hall.

In 1965, the 2nd and 8th Signal Regiments amalgamated, creating "The Toronto Signal Regiment". The regiment moved to its present location at Fort York Armoury on Fleet Street in Toronto in 1966. With the unification of the Canadian Armed Forces in 1970, it became part of the Canadian Forces Communication Command. The Toronto Signal Regiment became the 709 (Toronto) Communications Regiment. During this period, the Band became simply known as the "Toronto Signals Trumpet Band". More significantly, the Band was "struck off strength" and was no longer an official part of the Regiment. Nevertheless, members of the band continued, on a volunteer basis, to represent the interest of the Regiment and the Canadian Forces as duty band. Military functions that the Band supported

(and continues to support to this day) included Commanding Officer Parades, Change of Command Parades, Change of RSM Parades, Church Parades, Remembrance Day Parades, and many, many special functions.

Two popular stories from the tour are associated with prominent individuals with the band of the era and continuing into the 80s: Dick Yorke and Stan Butler. Dick Yorke was always a comedian. At breakfast one morning during the tour, a waitress was taking the tables' order when Dick asked if she had frog's legs. The waitress replied that she believed she did. Dick quickly requested that she "hop down to the kitchen and get me a bowl of cornflakes". Stan Butler was the statesman and always a prankster. He was one of those people who had a gift. He wasn't a particularly good musician, but was part of the lifeblood of the organization. During Tour '67, Stan purchased a watermelon. He named it "Corporal Alphonse" and dutifully carried and cared for it. One day in Sudbury, Stan insisted that Corporal Alphonse muster for Pay Parade; however, the paymaster denied his request explaining that Alphonse was a "green recruit". Later during the tour, Stan could not find Alphonse. When he arrived at the bus, he found several band members eating a slice of watermelon. He quickly accused them all of murder. Stan kept



Canada's Marching Ambassadors (Nationals, Waterloo, 1961)

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his pranks going until his passing. After missing several practices after weeks of cancer treatments, Stan arrived at the Armouries with his mellophone in one hand and a suitcase in the other and sat down with practice already underway. In obvious distress, patches of lost hair, etc., he jumped up and expressed, “Okay, anyone who’s wondering, I didn’t know what was going to fall off next, so I brought extra parts,” at which time he opened the suitcase to reveal manikin parts.



In the late 60s and into the 70s, many Drum Corps folded and with them, Canada’s Marching Ambassadors. Lack of funding and growing expenses are two of the reasons for the decline of Drum Corps in Canada. The Toronto Signals Band, however, continued to thrive thanks, in part, to the Regiments’ willingness to provide practice space in exchange for the bands’ continued participation at Regimental functions. Formal competitions went by the wayside, except for more casual “Best Band” trophies at parades and other events.

In 1976, the band received a Citation by the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in recognition of its 50th anniversary. The Citation, accepted by the Band President, Stan Butler, stated, in part, “A bond of affection and friendship has developed and encircles the townspeople and the Signals Band, which has resulted in a better atmosphere of understanding between two great nations, the United States of America and Canada.” This citation was also in confirmation of a bond between the band and its almost annual appearance at the Town of Sharpville during Veteran’s Day celebrations. The band was traditionally greeted on the outskirts of the Town and escorted by local police to a reception. Also in 1976, Toronto Mayor David Crombie held a Civic reception parade and ceremony for the band on October 5th in honour of its 50th anniversary. During the ceremony, Mayor Crombie declared October 4th to 9th as “Signals Week” in the city of Toronto. Later, on October 22nd in 1978, the band, as part of the 709 Toronto Communications Regiment, received the “Freedom of the City of Toronto”. Sandwiching the Freedom of the City, the band participated at two more Royal visits including a Tattoo celebrating the Silver Jubilee with HRM Queen Elizabeth II



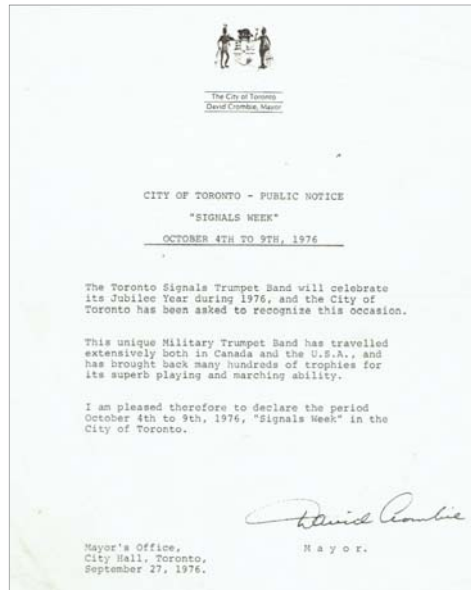
Toronto Signals Band at For York Armouries

in attendance, and the Queen Mother Elizabeth's presentation of the Queen's Colours to the Canadian Forces Maritime Command in Halifax in June 1979.

The Toronto Signals Band

Through the 60s, 70s, and into the 80s, the instrumentation expanded to first include a valve / rotor combination, French horns, mellophones, euphoniums, and contrabasses. As instrumentation required replacement, the band gradually replaced the valve / rotor horns with two-valved horns. In the mid 80s, the band recognized that it was now almost completely chromatic (i.e., could play most musical notes including sharps and flats) thus the true meaning of a "Trumpet Band" was not valid and the moniker "Trumpet" was dropped from its name. Presently, the band carries horns with three valves that are fully chromatic (i.e., can play all musical notes) but are still in the musical key of G.

Through the 80s and 90s, the Band remained extremely popular and was frequently asked to participate in tattoos, community events and parades. These performances were very important as appearance fees and honorariums provided the funds necessary to maintain uniforms and equipment. The Band typically upstaged other performing groups as it continued its Drum Corps style show matching its music with a choreographic drill sequence. Through this era, the Band



1976 "Freedom of the City of Toronto" proclamation from Mayor David Crombie

performed almost annually at the Niagara Regional Police Pipes and Drums Tattoo and made regular appearances at the Fergus Highland Games and the Fort Henry Tattoo in Kingston. In 1986, the Band received the Communication Command Commander's Commendation "In recognition of steadfast support to 709 (Toronto) Communication Regiment."

In 1988, the Band participated at the opening of the Royal Ontario Winter Fair at Exhibition Place in Toronto. HRH Princess Anne attended the opening, reportedly her first official visit with

representatives of the Signals Corps in attendance since her appointment as Colonel in Chief.

The Band came close to folding in 1993. The band needed to replace aging instruments and uniforms so, in cooperation with the Legion's Ontario Command, they organized their own tattoo touted "A Salute to the Royal Canadian Legion." The Legion promised a huge turnout for afternoon and evening shows to be held at Varsity Arena on May 27th; however, that did not happen. Unfortunately, there was a hockey playoff game that night and



The Band performs its musical drill program at the Niagara Regional Police Tattoo.

attendance was very low. It left the Band almost bankrupt. Thanks to the help and generosity of others, the Band survived.

Starting in the 90s, many of the long-term members began retiring and the Band, once again, struggled with low membership. Many of the “old guard” would have preferred to preserve its past glory and disband the organization; however, a small but strong group of dedicated younger members was determined to keep the band alive. The Band needed to rebuild while preserving its reputation. This involved a temporary withdrawal from public performances. The Band did, however, continue to perform its regimental duties during this time.

Moving to the Twenty-first Century

The first significant step to rebuild the Band was opening up membership to female participants (it had been all male). For the first time, the Band welcomed persons 16 years old up to the age of majority, subject to the sponsorship of an existing member who was a parent or someone willing to act as a responsible guardian. The resurgence of the Band was almost immediate. Not only was there an infusion of female members, with several couples uniting in the band as a family activity. The first female members of the Band were June Beaumont and Laura Moffatt (both mellophone players) who participated in the 1999 Oktoberfest parade in Kitchener-Waterloo. In a period of just over one year, the Band’s membership swelled by an addition of over 20 members. Many of these new members came from a complimentary

organization known as the DCAT Chorus (Drum Corps Alumni Toronto) including several that had been past members of the Band and/or Canada’s Marching Ambassadors.

The Band traditionally marched with two or more “Lancers” carrying RCCS pennants and were affectionately nicknamed the “pig stabbers”



by the Bandsmen. The band had never included a formal Colour Guard in its membership; however, several of the new members did not have musical experience. In 2000, the Band created a Colour Guard. With the expanded membership, busbies were in short supply and scarlet tunics were ill-fitting. The solution was to dress guard in the traditional red-striped trousers with black blouses



HRH Princess Anne presides over the 100th anniversary celebrations during the music and drill show presentation of the Toronto Signals Band (2003)



The Toronto Signals Colour Guard present their recently finalized uniforms at the Freedom of the City Parade in Kingston during HRH Anne's visit on the occasion of the 100th anniversary celebrations (2003)

and black shako caps with a white feather plumb. Through several modifications and tweaking, the guard is presently in scarlet tunics with white belts and lanyards (the musicians wear black belts and lanyards) while wearing white pith helmets.

The early 2000s saw a resurgence in Drum Corps activity in southern Ontario, specifically through the formation of various Alumni Corps. This resulted in the Toronto Signals Band's participation in Alumni Drum Corps shows in New York and Pennsylvania. Many Alumni Corps organized shows in southern Ontario and the Band performed at many of these, including performances in Hamilton, Oshawa, Simcoe, Kitchener, and Toronto. Unfortunately, while this era carried on for about ten years, it is now fading as people become older and have difficulty marching. Some of these organizations are surviving, but not all as marching units.

The year 2003 marked the 100th anniversary of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. In celebration, a weekend of events was scheduled to occur in Kingston, Ontario with HRH Princess Anne, Colonel-in-Chief of the Communications and



*Toronto Signals (Alumni Show, Oshawa, 2012)
Gord Moffat, soloist,*

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Electronics Branch of the Canadian Armed Forces in attendance. Controversy arose because the Toronto Signals Band had not been invited to attend the celebrations. The duty band for the celebrations was to be the Royal Signals Band from the United Kingdom. The 709 Toronto Communications Regiment was outraged at this lack of recognition of the Band's history and continuing volunteer efforts. Both Honorary Colonels of that time, Sally Horsfall and Jack Lee, petitioned for the Band's involvement with the celebrations. After considerable effort, the Band was invited to attend to perform a demonstration following the official celebration parade. On the Thursday preceding the weekend events, Ted Blight, the Band President of the time, attended a plenary session to discuss transportation and logistics. During this session, the officers of the Royal Signals Band mentioned their concern about

being able to attend multiple events in a brief time span. The Toronto Signals Band President addressed this by responding, "we'll do it". As a result, the Band performed fanfare duties at the Royal Gala Dinner, led as the duty Band at the Freedom of the City Parade in Kingston, and performed as Duty Band at HRH Anne's departure parade from Kingston to her visit to Ottawa.

In 2013, a celebration was held in Kingston marking Signals 110th anniversary in Canada. The event was a celebration parade followed by an afternoon reception. The most memorable experience during this celebration was that HRH Princess Anne, following the parade, took the time to speak with every individual willing to seek her audience. She was more than Royal that day as she genuinely spoke from the heart and was very personable to everyone that approached her.



HRH Princess Anne addresses Drum Major Wilf Roblin and Assistant Music Director Charlie Wakelin following her arrival Fanfare to the Royal Gala Dinner (2013)



Members of the band with Bonnie Crombie, the Mayor of Mississauga (Port Credit, 2016)

Starting around 2015, membership in the Toronto Signals Band, and alumni corps, started dropping. While still performing regimental duties and providing professional performances at parades and other community events, the rate of attrition exceeded new membership. Regardless, the Toronto Signals Band strives to continue and maintain its tradition into the future.

On October 5th, 2016, the Band, once again, received a Canadian Army Communications and Electronic Branch Commendation in celebration of the band's 90th Anniversary.

After about 45 years as the Band's Music Director, Barry Bell has recently resigned. This is an enormous loss for the Band; however, Jon Roblin, the new Music Director, is doing an excellent job!

The Band continues to strengthen as it approaches its 100th anniversary. A recruiting drive is helping, attract new members.



Barry Bell conducting the Band (Waterloo, 2007)



Many thanks to Doug Johns for helping out with the Feature Article – Toronto Signal Band.

Doug has been a member of "Sigs" for 55 years and has extensive knowledge of the Band's history.

He supplied us with the history together with all of the historical photos, as well as many of the newer ones.

Recent photos of the Toronto Signals Band

(taken during the last 10 years)



Toronto Signals Band



L-R: Barbara Roberts (Toronto Optimists Alumni), Connie Casciato, Rosemary Self, Ellie Cameron (DCA, Rochester, 2008)



RIGHT: Barbara Roberts, Optimists Alumni, with Sigs members Connie Casciato, Rosemary Self and Ellie Cameron who helped the Optimists Alumni at the 2008 DCA Alumni Spectacular in Rochester, NY

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Signals Band (continued)



Bill Kellas and his son, Drew, in a Santa Claus parade (Guelph, 2017)



John O'Leary and Kate Gerhardt (Guelph, 2013)



Barry Bell conducts Toronto Signals Band during a drill show (Waterloo, 2007)

Join the “Sigs”

*Experience The Thrill, The Drill
and The Sound of Brass.*



Weekly rehearsal time and location

Every Tuesday night

7:30 – 10:30 pm.

Fort York Armoury

660 Fleet Street West

Second floor, Room 301

Toronto, Ontario M5V 1A9

Contact Information

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Note: The website for Toronto Signals is currently under construction. Until it is ready, please contact Doug Johns at (647) 233-6237



Toronto Signals Band (Woodstock, 2013)



Santa Claus Parade (Guelph, 2013)



Toronto Signals (Sudbury, 2011)