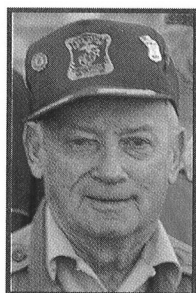


Marine Bands: Making Music and Winning Wars

Story and photos by Joseph R. Chenelly



World War II Marine bandmen and former Japanese POWs Lou Curtis (above, left) and Don Versaw were among those historic leathernecks of previous Marine bands who joined with other members of the Marine Corps Musicians Association at its April 2004 reunion hosted at MCB, Quantico, Va. During the reunion, retired Capt Jessi Sunderland (below) stepped up to lead a combined band rehearsal of today's Marines and veterans of the MCMA.

Having just graduated from boot camp, Private Lou Curtis stood among his fellow newly titled leathernecks on the parade deck at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego.

His drill instructor barked out each private's name along with an assignment. Some were headed for North Carolina; others were sent up the road to Camp Pendleton, and still more went overseas. Many were to be infantry, tankers, artillerymen and so on. Finally his name was called. "Curtis, grab your gear and get across the parade deck. You're in the band!"

Drummers and buglers have been on the battlefield at least as far back as biblical times. The Corps always has had Marine musicians among its ranks. The drummers and buglers are also known as "field musics." They communicate orders, maintain a marching unit's pace and entertain. There was a time not so long ago when the bugle was the Marines' only official form of communication. As Cur-

tis would find out, the band is anything but exempt from combat.

Not even aware that the Corps had bands, Curtis found himself suddenly immersed in the world of military music. He was issued a saxophone and sent "out back" to learn how to play. There, standing just out of earshot of the band house, he met another novice musician, Pvt Donald L. Versaw.

Versaw, a young farm boy from Nebraska, just recently had been issued a French horn and given the same instructions. They practiced for days until deciding they were good enough to join the Depot's ensemble.

Not long after, both men were given a new assignment—4th Marines Band, which was stationed in Shanghai, China. They joined a group that will forever be known as the "Last China Band"—a unit destined to become legendary in the Marine musician community.

Curtis, Versaw and the rest of the band,



Lou Curtis (right) demonstrated his saxophone skills during a combined band rehearsal for a special morning colors performance that was played in front of Lejeune Hall, MCB, Quantico, April 29.



which was then led by Master Technical Sergeant Levis E. Giffin, packed up Nov. 28, 1941, and joined the last of 4th Marines infantry regiment headed for sea. The field musics, who were assigned directly to the infantry battalions, combined with the band to parade through the streets, playing “The Marines’ Hymn” and “Semper Fidelis” all the way down to the piers. According to Versaw, they were the last American troops to leave Shanghai before the beginning of World War II.

The band had been in Shanghai for 14 years.

Before the first Japanese bomb dropped on Pearl Harbor, 4th Marines was ashore in the Philippines—the band’s musical instruments still crated. Within moments of the fateful attack, the 4th Marines Band became 3d Platoon, Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The bandsmen were now riflemen. They never unpacked their instruments.

They eventually moved to Corregidor Island, and after several weeks of constant air bombardments, the Japanese took Corregidor and the American forces there. On May 6, 1942, Versaw was given the order to destroy everything of value except food. Curtis knew a long ordeal was ahead for him and his comrades.

He and Versaw were captured. All of the musicians who survived the previous months became prisoners of war.

“We all knew it would be a long war,” Curtis said, explaining how he mentally survived captivity. “I tried not to get too depressed. We all got a little religious. For some reason, I just took for granted that I’d make it. I would look at the Japanese infantrymen and tell myself there was no way they’d win.”

The POWs spent many months with little food or shelter, working seven days a week in the enemy’s shops, factories and even zinc and lead mines.

Despite the dreadful life they were living, some were able to use music to remain focused. Curtis’ captors allowed him to organize a small band in the infamous prison on Palawan Island. However, it was short-lived as the Japanese decided to vacate in December of 1943, but they didn’t plan to take all of their prisoners along. A lottery of sorts was held un-

knownst to those whose lives hung in the balance. The prisoners who didn’t hear their number called, about half of the 300 there, were killed in gruesome fashion. Two bandsmen were among the massacred.

“I am so lucky they called my number,” Curtis said. “Those of us called piled into the ship’s hull. There were at least 50 of us in one small room.”

The Japanese used ramshackle, unmarked vessels to move American POWs throughout the war. The POWs dubbed

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them “Hell Ships.” Many were torpedoed by American submariners, who assumed the ships were crating supplies for enemy forces.

“Probably 5,000 POWs were killed on these ships,” Curtis said. “Maybe more.”

If torpedoes didn’t get them, disease or malnutrition often did. During one particular near-40-day voyage, at least one POW died per day while underway, he remembered.

If it weren’t bad enough the POWs had to endure cramped, wet and filthy conditions, they also incurred beatings by some of the Japanese guards.

“They would come up and just hit you over and over with their rifles,” he said quietly. “After a while I became numb to the pain.”

Forty-four months after being captured, nearly an entire modern-day enlistment,

the war ended. Curtis had made it, so had Versaw, but many had not. Most of the band endured and survived, Versaw said, but the terror and misery of being a POW for 3½ years had taken its toll.

“There were a lot of suicides once we got home,” Curtis said, “but most pressed on mentally as prisoners. It took a lot of will to survive it, and some just decided they didn’t want to do it anymore.”

Versaw returned to a family in disbelief. He found his father had given up hope.

“I was determined to come home,” he said. “I was just a young kid taking it day by day. I spent four birthdays in prison camps. I remember finding out all at once that the Corps had started to accept women and black people. Even the uniforms and helmets had changed.”

Curtis returned to the United States by ship, coming into San Francisco’s harbor. Not long after a joyous reunion, he was presented with orders to Korea. He left for the new war by ship, through the same waterway.

“It felt weird going back out under that bridge,” he recalled, referring to the Golden Gate Bridge. “I didn’t enjoy that much.”

Curtis had a less eventful tour in Korea and left the Marine Corps shortly after. He went on to become a professional saxophonist, playing for several decades with bands, orchestras and as a soloist. He even jammed alongside Jerry Lee Lewis for a time. At this year’s Marine Corps Musicians Association (MCMA) reunion banquet, held in late April at Marine Corps Base, Quantico, Va., he played and danced throughout the night.

Versaw made the Corps a career, later becoming a combat photographer. He eventually chronicled his experiences in a booklet titled “The Last China Band.”



During a visit to Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., "The Commandant's Own" United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps and the Silent Drill Platoon presented a special morning show for the veteran bandsmen, field musics and their families.

It has been reprinted at least four times.

Of the 52 members of the Last China Band, only six are alive, according to Versaw. Two are field musics and the others are bandsmen. Each are held in awe by members of the MCMA.

At this year's reunion, members from more recent eras flocked around Versaw and Curtis. They were the only two of the six who could make the MCMA's annual get-together.

"I am personally honored by the legacy they left for every Marine musician since," said retired Captain Jessi Sunderland.

Marine bandsmen took part in WW II throughout the Pacific.

The United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps still performs a march titled "Strong to Save," which was written in honor of Sergeant Darrell S. Cole, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. He is the *only* Marine bandsman to be awarded (although posthumously) the Medal of Honor.

During WW II on Iwo Jima in 1945, he was called on to take charge of a machine-gun section with Co B, 1st Bn, 23d Marines, Fourth Marine Division.

On Feb. 19, the award citation states, he faced down a torrent of small-arms, mortar and artillery fire. Advancing with one squad of his section in the initial assault wave, he led his men up the sloping beach toward Airfield Number One. He personally destroyed two hostile emplace-

ments and continued to move forward until fire from three Japanese pillboxes halted the advance.

Instantly placing his one remaining machine gun in action, Cole delivered a shattering fusillade and succeeded in silencing the most threatening emplacement before his weapon jammed and the enemy, reopening fire with knee mortars and grenades, pinned down his unit for a second time.

Gauging the situation, he devised a counterattack. Armed with just a pistol and a single grenade, he advanced alone

to the hostile pillboxes. He threw his grenade at the enemy and then quickly withdrew. He returned to his own lines for additional grenades and again advanced, attacked and withdrew. With enemy guns still active, he braved the slashing fire a third time to complete the total destruction of the Japanese strong point.

Cole was hit and killed instantly by an enemy grenade as he returned to his squad, but not before enabling his company to storm the remaining fortifications and seize its objective.

Of course Marine bands have played



Retired CWO Bartholomew La Rocca, a WW II and Korean War bandsman, was assisted by Major Michael J. Colburn as he laid a wreath at the Washington, D.C., grave of John Philip Sousa, the 17th Director of the United States Marine Band. Maj Colburn was the senior assistant director and executive officer of the Marine Band in April when the wreath was laid. However, he became the 27th Director of the United States Marine Band in July.

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—Ray Priest, President, Marine Corps Musicians Association

their musical part in operations over the years as well. In the summer of 1962, a detachment from the 3dMarDiv Band was deployed to take part in the official formation of the Republic of Malaysia.

The bandleader was Master Gunnery Sergeant William H. "Bill" Tosh, who took 25 musicians from Okinawa and reported to the American consulate general in Singapore.

They played intercontinental tunes for hundreds of sultans, statesmen and international businessmen. The leathernecks' main mission was to throw a massive Independence Day celebration on the Fourth of July to demonstrate nationalism to the new country's citizens, according to Tosh.

They played everything—waltzes, American Broadway show tunes, several countries' marches and of course John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever." Some of the concerts were broadcast over Radio Singapore.

"It was a great honor," Tosh said. "Not many people get to witness first-hand the birth of a nation."

The American consul general for Singapore was quoted in USS *Eldorado's* (AGC-11) plan of the day, referring to the "magnificent band" and stating, "During my tenure in Singapore, nothing has done more for the prestige of the United States than our Fourth of July observance. ..."

The Marine bands have evolved, but their mission hasn't changed much, according to Marine veteran Ray Priest, MCMA's president.

"Everyone in the Marine Corps music program is proud of its past," Priest said. "Today's Marines are keeping up the traditions and representing those who preceded them well."

Leatherneck bands have been active in the war in Iraq. The 1stMarDiv Band is in the midst of its second combat tour in as many years. The Third Marine Aircraft Wing Band was there last year. Both bands have played shows around Iraq and Kuwait for troops, coalition contractors and Iraqi civilians alike. Moreover, they have often picked up their rifles to take part in security details and patrols.

The 1stMarDiv Band also deployed to the Middle East and guarded the division command post during Operation Desert Storm.

During the MCMA's latest reunion,

the members met up with some active-duty bandsmen. They created a special ensemble with the Marine Corps Base, Quantico Band. The mixed group rehearsed and played a morning colors ceremony at Lejeune Hall.

Sunderland, a Vietnam veteran, served as a guest conductor.

"It brought on a flood of memories," he said. A day earlier, he laid a wreath at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in honor of a friend and fellow bandmate who was killed in action while guarding a radar base in Vietnam.

Corporal Terrence J. Brownlee is an active-duty saxophonist with the Quantico Band. He played alongside Curtis during the colors ceremony and rehearsal.

"I felt strange at first," he said. "I really respect them, but I wondered if some had lost their chops. That certainly has not happened. I learned a lot."

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Robert A. Sabo, the director of Quantico's band, saw the association's visit as a unique opportunity for his Marines.

"Its members laid the foundation on which we are now working to build," he said. "I hope it touches every [active-duty band member]. Unfortunately, it won't reach everybody, but I am sure some will realize the significance. I hope they'll be in the same spot visiting and teaching the active-duty guys in 40 years."

Curtis was most impressed with the younger bandsmen.

"The Marine Corps music program has improved so much," Curtis said. "You don't even need to hear them play to know that. Yes, I can really hear the difference. Marine musicians have to audition to get in now. But I can tell by meeting them that they all love what they are doing. Wisely, the Corps doesn't just randomly send a couple of boots across the parade deck anymore."

Editor's note: The Marine Corps Musicians Association's next reunion will be April 26-29, 2005, in San Diego. For more info., contact Richard Oldenburg, PMB 42, 25101 Bear Valley Rd., Tehachapi, CA 93561-8311, (661) 821-1683, jazjoc@sierratel.com.

Former Leatherneck staff writer Joe Chenelly is now deputy news editor at Army Times.

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