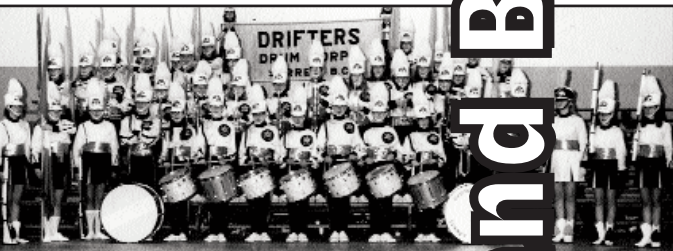

by Daniel Buteau

A most interesting press release was published in the August 8, 1986, edition of *Drum Corps World*. It heralded the founding of *DC West-Can*, an organization devoted to promoting the drum corps activity in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

The sun can get so bright in the Saskatchewan prairie that tired drivers sometimes have visions. *DC West-Can* seemed to have been one such vision. It has barely been heard about ever since. Even though corps from Alberta and British Columbia have regularly appeared in drum corps contests since the mid-1970s, it goes without saying that the Yukon and the Northwest Territories have remained bare drum corps lands. The same is also true for Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Drum corps organizations in this corner of North America have to fight both the absence of a solid drum corps tradition and the disadvantages brought by considerable distances from the hotbeds of North American drum



Drifters, Surrey, BC, approximately 1974 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps. Alberta units have had to travel for at least two days, whichever direction, to participate in drum corps contests. Corps from British Columbia faced the same geographic challenges that kept 1982 Drum Corps International associate Seattle Imperials from going to the 1983 DCI Championships in Miami, FL.

The few signs of continued drum corps presence in Western Canada are testimony to the considerable efforts on the part of individuals intent to transplant the activity in a complete void. The history of the drum and bugle corps activity in Western Canada appears divided between two periods, with 1985 marking a clear shift.

The early 1970s saw drum corps emerging in the only three Western Canadian cities to have ever fielded competing drum and bugle



Alberta Girls, Edmonton, ALB, 1975 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps: Edmonton, ALB; Calgary, ALB; and Surrey, BC.

Edmonton was home to no less than three drum and bugle corps in the 1970s: the Alberta Girls; the Edmonton Strutters, who later became First Canadian Regiment and then reverted back to their original name in 1988; as well as the Edmonton Klondike that later became the Canadian Royalaires.

The quintessential Alberta drum corps story is that of the Alberta Girls from Edmonton. The corps, started by money, made a big splash before disappearing from drum corps circles as quickly as it had appeared.

The group, started by Bob and Pat Nagel in the early 1970s, had a goal of providing an enjoyable marching music experience to the members of an entertaining group. The seasons of 1972 and 1974 found the Alberta Girls touring Germany and appearing at halftime football games in Seattle, San Francisco and Detroit.

The group became competition-oriented in 1975 and hired some of the activity's most prominent instructors. With the help of people like Ralph Hardiman, Fred Sanford, Michael Duffy and Bobby Hoffman, the Alberta Girls were ready to take the DCI All-Girl scene by storm.

August 10, 1975, found them at the first Girls Corps International contest in Brantford, ONT. The corps scored a respectable 55.45 for fifth place, two points away from perennial all-girl finalist Fire-ettes of Norwich, CT. They also placed a mere one point away from finals at the first DCI All-Girl preliminary competition that year.

Despite considerable investment in making the Alberta Girls a drum corps power, the experiment did not last long. The distance and skyrocketing expenses needed to keep the corps on DCI tours led the organization to quickly change orientation.

Competing in the DCI All-Girl Class did not provide appearance fees and the budget required to keep the corps on the field could be used for other types of activities. The corps went back to a showband approach by 1977 and became the Canadian All-Girls.

The Edmonton Strutters, Western Canada's longest surviving drum corps, was first established in 1963. They became a competitive drum and bugle corps in the early 1970s. The Strutters' most memorable early-1970s achievements were participation at the 1975 DCI West Regional in Boise, ID, as well as an appearance at the 1976 Canadian National Championships in Ontario.

In 1977, the Strutters, in an attempt to establish a more serious image, became the First Canadian Regiment. The image was

carried through the use of new uniforms, a replica from a British regiment complete with medals. The corps placed ninth at the 1977 DCI Class A Championships with a score of 56.45, only eight-tenths of a point away from a finalist spot.

The corps then switched to open class competition, where they achieved dubious



First Canadian Regiment, Calgary, ALB, 1991, at the Tournament of Roses Parade (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

success -- 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1981 saw the First Canadian Regiment consistently scoring in the upper 50s and placing 41st in 1978, 38th in 1979, 41st in 1980 and 42nd in 1981.

The 1981 First Canadian Regiment won the open class award at the Canadian National Championship, thanks to the absence of Arcs-en-Ciel of Montréal-Nord, QUE, and Eclipses of Longueuil, QUE, who had both topped the Edmonton corps by 10 points at DCI Prelims.

Edmonton was also home to a third competitive drum and bugle corps, the Edmonton Klondike, that turned into the Canadian Royalaires in 1976. The corps wanted to switch names to the Royal Canadians, but Queen Elizabeth II herself refused to give such recognition to the group.

As the Klondike, the corps appeared at the 1975 DCI Midwest Regional, where they placed 17th and scored 47.25. They appeared at the same contest the following year as the Royal Canadians, before the royal admonition, and scored 46.90 for 29th place. As the Royalaires, the corps never appeared at the DCI Championships, limiting appearances to California and the Pacific Northwest.

The early 1970s also saw the first signs of drum corps in Calgary. The all-girl Red and White Aires, established in 1971, limited their activities to traditional parades and marching band events.

In a bid to attract more members, the corps became coed in 1973 and switched its name to the Calgary Cavaliers. The corps appeared at contests in Washington state.

The Cavaliers of the 1970s seem to be the only Alberta corps that did not extend its



Cavaliers, Calgary, ALB, 1987 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Alberta and British Columbia

travel to the Midwest or the DCI scene during that decade. The corps still continued its activities for an uninterrupted period until 1981.

The mid-1970s also saw the appearance of the first competitive drum and bugle corps in the province of British Columbia. The Drifters from Surrey, a suburb of Vancouver, turned into Pacific Blue in 1979. The Drifters took advantage of a relatively close staging of DCI in Denver to compete at the 1977 and 1978 championships.

Their competitive status is well-illustrated by their 1977 score of 27.05 for 26th place in class A and 26.65 for an 18th out of 19 placement in 1978.

As Pacific Blue, the corps made the trek to DCI in 1980 and scored 24.90 for 21st place, beating only the Iron Cross, a short-lived feeder for the Crossmen. The corps also traveled to Montreal for the 1981 DCI Championships, where they scored 33.85 for 44th place in the combined class A and all-girl prelims. The corps then did not appear at a DCI Championships until 1985.

Perhaps the best example of the competitive abilities of the 1970s Western Canadian corps was a series of California contests in late July 1979. On July 27 in Modesto, the Calgary Cavaliers competed in class A, with Pacific Blue and the Royales competing in class B. The Cavaliers scored 36.20 for fifth place, with class B honors going to Pacific Blue with 43.95 and the Royales third with 36.85.

No corps from Western Canada competed during the 1983 and 1984 seasons. The 1984 Royales underwent a dramatic transformation. They followed a path similar to that of many other competitive drum and bugle corps that switched their operations to a winter guard and became the first Canadian unit to make the top-15 at the WGI Olympics.

The 1985 season witnessed efforts at reviving both the First Canadian Regiment and the Calgary Cavaliers. There even was a short-lived merger of the two corps, with a unit named First Canadian Cavaliers appearing at the 1985 DCI Championships.

British Columbia, more accurately the city of Surrey, outdid itself that year by fielding two corps, Pacific Blue and Pacificaires, which both participated in the DCI Class A-60 Championships. The British Columbia drum corps experiment nevertheless ended with the Pacificaires making their last DCI appearance



Allegiance Elite, 2002 (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).

in 1986, where they placed 10th in class A.

Since 1985, only corps from Alberta have represented Western Canada at the DCI Championships. The Edmonton Strutters, Calgary Cavaliers, Allegiance and Allegiance Elite have been regular participants in class A/A-60 and division II and III championships.

There also were attempts at making Western Canadian locations parts of the Drum Corps West tour. In 1989, contests were held both in Edmonton and Calgary, featuring the Spartans and Spartan Cadets from Vancouver, WA, along with the Alberta corps. In 1990, both the Freelancers and Santa Clara Vanguard crossed the border for a contest in Vancouver, BC. These were the last two corps contests held in the region.

Since 1985, the Strutters have fielded small units demonstrating the efforts of dedicated staff and volunteers. The corps, revived in 1986, became noticed throughout the 1990s for its highly entertaining presentations. Their 1997 interpretation of *Walk Like an Egyptian* was a crowd favorite, demonstrating rather risky originality for an inconsistent class A-60 contender. It was also a far cry from the days when the 1982 First Canadian Regiment integrated Canada's national anthem in their repertoire.

The corps experienced recruiting difficulties and remained rather inconsistent. Despite achieving a peak in 1990 by placing ninth -- only three points from DCI Class A-60 Finals -- the Edmonton Strutters have not been able to gain the sustained growth that could lead to more competitive success.

Western Canada gained its strongest competitive drum and bugle corps in 1990, when Allegiance of Calgary, established in 1987, merged with Alberta Elite, a short-lived revival of the Calgary Cavaliers.

Throughout the early 1990s, Allegiance Elite fielded some of the largest units in division II. Under the helm of Director Gerry Hemsley, the corps attempted to build the most stable drum corps organization in Western Canada.

They conducted recruiting campaigns by presenting the group as a marching brass ensemble. Allegiance Elite also established links with professional football by becoming the official "band" of the Canadian Football League Calgary Stampeders in 1991. The corps attempted to establish visibility in the Canadian city that has the strongest marching band activity in the country.

On the competitive side of its operations, Allegiance Elite peaked in the early 1990s with a string of near-DCI Division II finalist placements from 1991 to 1994. The corps,

nearly full for all of these years, presented highly innovative shows of *Brigadoon* in 1991 and *Oliver* in 1992.

The corps won the 1993 Canadian National Division II title with an innovative show based on the ballets of Spanish composer Manuel de Falla. Members struggled with a complex show and finished a disheartening 11th at DCI Division II Prelims.

Despite enjoying many organizational and financial advantages, in the early 1990s Allegiance Elite suffered from its disadvantageous geographic location. It just proved impossible for a division II corps that entered the DCI tour in late-July to achieve significant competitive breaks that could have led to sustained competitive growth.

The corps was forced to perform its first competitive outings at major Western division I contests such as "Drums Along the Rockies." As a result, Allegiance Elite established negative competitive impressions judges would not shake off by seasons' ends.

The corps' inconsistent competitive results further exacerbated its recruiting challenges. Throughout the 1990s, Allegiance Elite had great difficulty in keeping most of its members for more than one or two years. Despite fielding relatively large units for most of the decade, the corps had to continuously cope with young and inexperienced members.

In 1995, the corps was so out of balance in terms of its members' talents that it was forced to ground a percussion contingent of 24 members in the pit. The drummers were simply too inexperienced to play and march at the same time.

For the 2001 and 2002 seasons, Allegiance Elite remained in division II with membership numbers that would have allowed them to switch to division III. Many youth interested in marching music activities use the experience gained as a springboard to join the world famous Calgary Stampede Showband. The corps also suffered from a change in bingo regulations that hampered its fund-raising efforts. The 2002 Allegiance Elite still was the top Canadian entry at the DCI Division II Championships that year.

Both Allegiance Elite and the Edmonton Strutters continue to operate through the efforts of dedicated volunteers who try to consolidate the drum and bugle corps activity in a region where it remains mostly unknown despite a 30-year history. As the scope of the activity continues its steady decline all over Canada, Alberta appeared, on the verge of the 2003 season, to have become the prime drum corps hotbed in the country.

For a photo and bio of Daniel Buteau, turn to page 217.

Pacific Blue, Surrey, B.C., 1985 (photo by Donald Mathis from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Strutters, Edmonton, ALB, 2002 (photo by Harry Heidelmark from the collection of Drum Corps World).