


(Above) The Jersey Joes leave the field at the 1947 American Legion Nationals held in New York City; (next page) a patch from the corps' uniform (items from the collection of Ed Mannion).

Jersey Joes

by Ed Mannion

In March 1946, John Simpson, just discharged from Gen. Patton's U.S. Army tank corps, assembled a group of former junior drum and bugle corps members at the Riverside American Legion Post. His purpose was to organize a local drum and bugle corps to march in the Memorial Day parade.

Most World War II veterans in the group had belonged to either the Post 146 Sons of the American Legion, St. Peter's Cadets or the Palmyra junior corps. Later, several veterans who had not had previous drum corps experience joined to form a color guard.

From 1946 to 1951, the corps was composed of 100 percent veterans of World War II, most of whom had served in combat. Of our three snare drummers, one was a former member of Patton's tank corps that fought through France and Germany.

His brother was an infantryman who was with the group that captured, intact, the Bridge at Ramagen, which allowed the first GIs to cross the Rhine River into Germany in early 1945. The third snare drummer parachuted into France behind enemy lines the third day after D-Day.

Almost half the corps members were destroyer sailors in the Navy. One of the color guard was on a Coast Guard cutter that sank a German U-boat off the U.S. coast.

Playing musical numbers remembered from junior corps days and dressed in their service uniforms, this group of veterans led the Memorial Day parade on May 30, 1946. The war had been over less than a year. The group was given a hero's ovation by the people of the town.

Later that year, we were invited to play in several nearby towns. We decided to represent Post 146 and parade in Wildwood for the New Jersey State Legion Convention, wearing a uniform consisting of U.S. Army suntans and khaki ties, U.S. Navy white belts with a brass buckles, white leggings, white enameled helmet liners and white gloves and using the drums and bugles from the Sons of the American Legion. We carried the post and national colors and M1 rifles. We won

first place and a nice trophy.

After the convention, Simpson called a meeting of the guys to see if they would like to form a competing corps. He went to North Philadelphia and talked to Bob Cotter Sr., who had been a member of the Frankford corps and the former instructor of the Palmyra junior corps.

Cotter said he had commitments that would interfere, but that his son, Bob Jr., had just graduated from Temple University and might be interested. The younger Cotter was interested and said he would go to Riverside and take a look.

The first night he showed up, he wondered if he had made a mistake. Our group consisted of about 15 drummers and about the same number of buglers. He had the group play a number and said he almost walked out after we were through. He addressed the group and, without comment on the performance, told us what he could do if we could get more buglers.

He said he would be drum major, would select the music, teach the buglers and instruct the corps in drill. He grabbed the present drum major, a bass drummer and two flag bearers and made them baritone buglers. Most of the present soprano buglers who did not drop out after the first few practices, he made either solo or first horns.

Keeping two sopranos, he added new, inexperienced buglers to fill up the second horn section and then he started on our new music. Simpson was made drum sergeant and drum instructor.

After practicing all winter and learning about six numbers, we started on the drill at the high school football field. The 1947 corps consisted of 21 buglers, nine drummers and a five-man color guard. Cotter Jr. was our leader. He accepted no excuses for being late or absence from practice.

He was an all-seeing demon at drill practice. Nothing escaped his watchful eye. One missed step or hesitation sent the whole corps back to the starting line. We were lucky to get one break during those sessions.

That the Jersey Joes became a great marching group was owed to Cotter's center-dress in ranks. The center man dressed on the center man in the rank in front and we all marched shoulder to shoulder. The center man had the responsibility for interval between the ranks.

We made very few marching errors. The Jersey Joes could march.

Cotter started out as a bugler in the Olney Post American Legion junior corps of North Philly in 1935. After a year, he became their drum major. He was the drum major until 1940 when he resigned to study music at Temple University. Before he left Olney, during 1940, he won state and national honors as an individual bugler. Also in 1940, he and three other Philadelphia boys teamed up to become the national champion drum quartette. During that time he aided his father teaching Palmyra's junior corps.

Young Cotter enlisted in the U.S. Army from Temple in 1942. He graduated from

Engineering OCS in 1944, served in Europe in the 3rd Army until 1945 and was shipped to the Pacific as a 1st lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. After the war, he married his childhood sweetheart and went back to Temple to finish his degree in music.

Cotter joined the Jersey Joes in the late fall of 1946 and stayed with us until the end of 1949. He left us for a year because his high school teaching career took him to North Jersey. He came back and took charge again in 1951 and left after the American Legion Nationals in October 1951.

Our first outing with Cotter took place at the Washington Day Parade in Alexandria, VA, on February 22, 1947. We could play only three numbers at the time. We were in awe of the other established corps at the parade.

Because the Washington area had a blizzard the day before, there was a delay while the parade route was cleared. To keep warm, the other corps played. Reilly Raiders, Archer-Epler Musketeers, Imhoff, Olney and Baltimore senior corps were all there, as well as several first-rate junior corps. Most gave impromptu concerts before the parade. We were impressed.

Surprise of all surprises, Riverside Post 146, playing one of the three marches we knew, *There's Gonna be a Great Day*, and marching as only we could march won first-place honors and received a giant trophy. We were elated. We went home on a cold bus (the heater had broken), but nothing could dampen our spirit.

Then we practiced twice a week to finish our drill and learn the rest of our music in preparation for our first competition at the New Jersey state convention. Our uniform was the same, except we added brown paratrooper's jump boots in place of leggings.

Cotter said he didn't think we would finish in the top five, but he felt we had to start somewhere. We surprised a lot of people that day, including Cotter. We came in second to the defending champion, Hackensack. Many of the established corps were amazed.

In October 1947, we competed at the American Legion National Convention in New York City. There were 43 corps scheduled to compete in the preliminaries. We did not have a short preliminary program, so Cotter eliminated the concert number and the final march and we just marched off the field from the 50-yard line. We came in second.

We were the smallest corps in the contest, with nine baritone bugles and 12 sopranos. Two of the horns were stuffed with cotton and carried by tenor drummers, who did an outstanding job of faking.

A humorous event took place at the preliminary competition. The corps' business manager, a Post 146 Legionnaire, was sitting in the sparsely-seated stands next to another Legionnaire from out of state, discussing various corps. When Post 146 stepped up to the line, our business manager's companion said, "They look like a National Guard outfit; I'm going to go for a smoke." When Post 146 hit the first note of *Daybreak*, he was stunned at the volume coming from those 19 horns.

In 1948, Cotter gave us new music, including *St. Louis Blues March*, *The Woody Woodpecker Song*, *Old Comrades* and our great concert number, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*.

We added six more bugles. We now had six baritones playing baritone parts and six playing bass. The sopranos had six playing solo parts, with six playing second tenor and three playing the high parts.

The Jersey Joes' strength was in our marching and our horn line, and also our penchant for perfect inspections. Although our drummers did not play many rudiments, what they played they played well together.

In 1948, the corps joined the Philadelphia Senior Circuit along with the Reilly Raiders, Archer-Epler, Imhoff and Olney. At first Reilly and Archer-Epler went back and forth, taking first and second, and then we started to come on. In July, the Jersey Joes came in third in Hershey, PA, on Saturday night and the corps won it all the next day in West Chester, PA. It was the first of several wins in succession. We were on a roll approaching the state competition in Asbury Park and American Legion nationals in Miami.

At the time, we were known only as Riverside Post 146. A contest was held among the corps members to design a new uniform and a corps name. Several entries were submitted, but Ted Kessler's submission of a forest green, GI-type uniform, similar to what we were wearing, won hands down. The Sad Sack of World War II fame with an added



Jersey Joes became our logo.

We came in first in Ashbury Park and then returned to Riverside to practice 14 consecutive days. Cotter Sr. came over at least five times and helped out. Those corps members who could not get off work to go to Miami acted as judges. We kept getting sharper all the time.

On the way to Miami, when the bus stopped to refuel, Cotter Jr. spotted an area that somewhat resembled a football field. We had a one-hour practice, much to the delight of the rural South Carolina community.

The Jersey Joes placed first in both the prelims and the finals. What a thrill it was to lead the parade down Biscayne Boulevard.

I'll never forget October 18, 1948. At 8:00 AM, we had a couple walk-throughs of the drill in the small lot next to the hotel. The

equipment had been polished and stored away the previous night.

Our reporting time was around 10:00 AM for the preliminaries. About 9:00 AM, we put on our uniforms and boarded buses for the 20-minute trip to the Orange Bowl. The huge parking lot was full of activity.

The Jersey Joes got off the buses and lined up for inspection by our quartermaster group who checked each man for correctness of our uniform. Then we got our equipment and got another inspection by our QM group. We lined up on the ready line, 10 yards behind the inspection line.

The inspection judge, a Marine Corps Colonel, checked us out twice and then again, and to his amazement found no demerits. Score another victory to our great QMs. After the corps on the starting line stepped off, Cotter directed the color guard to post on the starting line and the rest of the corps lined up in six three-man ranks on each side of the color guard.

Upon the arrival of the judges, Cotter said, "Riverside Post 146 is ready." The judges gave him the OK. He turned to the corps, wished us luck, called us to attention, did an about-face and marched out to the 20-yard line. At the 20, he stopped and performed his special about-face. When his boot struck the ground, 36 bugles and five flags simultaneously came up into marching position. On the downbeat, buglers blasted out *Daybreak* and on the first note of *Great Day*, the eight-man color guard stepped off toward the 20-yard line.

Every second beat, the ranks on both sides of the guard stepped off, forming a "V." Eight minutes later we stepped over the finish line, knowing all the practice had paid off. We felt we had made the finals. We went back to our hotel on Miami Beach and had a short practice with instruments. We learned at dinner we had taken first place in prelims.

At about 7:30 PM, we went back to the Orange Bowl for finals. What a surprise! During the day at prelims, there were perhaps 200 to 300 people in the stands. Under the lights there was an estimated crowd of 40,000. We won the finals!

I'll always remember the thrill I had when the Harvey Seeds Post delegation presented the special American Legion orange flag to Cotter. After the competition, we went to the Harvey Seeds Post where we were toasted and treated with respect.

In Philadelphia in 1949, we reached our pinnacle. Cotter said that night at finals was the best job the Jersey Joes ever did. One of the drum judges made many favorable comments and penalized the drummers very few times, but gave us a score of 9.3 out of a possible 20 points. Did he think the available score was only 10 or did he mean to give us 19.30 and did not press hard enough when he made the 19? Who knows. The tally judge did not pick up the discrepancy. Whatever it was, it cost us the championship. Even with the error, we came in second to the Gabarina Skyliners of New York City by only 1.5 points.

In 1950, the convention was in Los

Angeles, which we did not attend. Cotter had left and many of members quit because they thought we were disbanding. We took in new members and employed Frank McCormick, the great Reilly baritone bugler, as our instructor and drum major. He did not fit.

In 1951, the convention went back to Miami. Cotter came back to give it one more try. Several former members came back. Cotter gave us new music and the corps size was increased to 40 playing members. French horns and an 11-man color guard were added. We performed well, but placed third behind the Skyliners and the Caballeros.

Cotter left in October and was replaced by Pete Donatiello, a long-time Jersey Joes bugler. He had just graduated from music school. Under his leadership, the corps kept several of Cotter's marches and added several new arrangements such as *Lady of Spain*, *Zana*, *Gillette* and *Who*. We competed in national competitions in New York and Washington. We did not win, but made finals both times. We were six for six making finals.

The Jersey Joes were a great parade corps and were in demand from May through October every year. Most weekends we had two. On Memorial Day we did parades in three local towns plus another which was always held the Sunday before the holiday just so we could lead the parade.

Much of our operating capital came from fireman's parades. The balance of our money came from scrap drives conducted every Sunday morning, musicals, lotteries and socials. It was not easy being a Jersey Joe, but it was a labor of love.

The youngest member of the 1948 corps was 20 years old. Although he has passed away, he would have turned 75 in 2003. As of this writing (January 16, 2003) there are only 14 members still with us of the 45 men who competed at Miami in 1948. Just about a year ago, our beloved leader, Bob Cotter, died of a stroke while practicing his trumpet at his home in Saluda, NC.

There are members of the corps who competed between 1949 and 1954 still around, but they, too, are becoming few. All told, still kicking are about 50 of the approximately 180 people who belonged to the corps in our nine-year history.



Ed Mannion is a former member of the Jersey Joes, Having joined in 1946, only two days after being discharged from the Navy. He was in the color guard initially, then played baritone.

He now serves as a trustee of the corps, maintains the organization's historical archives and helps organize periodic reunions.

He lives in Delran, NJ, has a BS degree in engineering from Drexel University and worked as superintendent at two cast iron pipe foundries for 20 years, then for General Motors, before retiring in 1990.

The remaining members get together often to reminisce about the corps.