
by Ken Mason

The saga of the Stardusters and Bleu Raeders and their joint ventures is the story of a quest for drum corps excellence spanning two decades. Their story is noteworthy enough for what these corps achieved in competition as the most successful groups ever hailing from in or near Louisiana. But they are perhaps better known for being the only drum corps organization to split and join back together . . . twice.

Organized in October 1961, the Stardusters were sponsored by the Hinton Causey Veterans of Foreign Wars post of Arabi, LA. The corps first appeared in field competition in 1964 and from that point on established a travel-intensive determination to participate in national-level drum corps



Stardusters, August 27, 1966, at American Legion Nationals in Franconia, VA (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

competition on a regular basis, despite the geographic challenges. The corps visited Florida annually, where it could find a handful of corps against which to compete.

The corps also attended VFW Nationals religiously, appearing there every year regardless of the show's location. With the VFW show in New Orleans in 1967, the improving corps took its first Midwestern tour in early July of that year. Despite the tough competition at these shows, this trip would also become an annual habit.

The summer of 1968 saw the Stardusters earn their first claim to fame, though a dubious one, by placing third at American Legion Nationals in New Orleans. Many corps boycotted the Legion Nationals that year to protest the AL's lack of responsiveness to rule proposals. Nevertheless, the exposure proved beneficial and it was invited to

Stardusters/Bleu Raeders

CYO Nationals in 1969.

Truman Crawford was hired as music arranger and the corps played all-new music in 1969. Continuing improvement saw the Stardusters reach 16th at the VFW Prelims in 1970, but they were still perched just short of the level required to make the finals cuts in major open class contests.

The summer of 1971 was that breakthrough year, though a bittersweet one. An extended early tour saw them in hot pursuit of the Kilties and Des Plaines Vanguard while defeating several of the established corps that would later contend for the VFW Finals. The corps returned to Wisconsin in late July for more of the same. But several weeks later, when the Stardusters met



Stardusters, August 21, 1968, at VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

up with the touring corps just before VFW Nationals, those same finalist contenders had all pulled ahead.

Undaunted, the Stardusters rallied to once again pass the Sky Ryders and Racine Scouts at the VFW Prelims in Dallas. However, the St. Paul Scouts were not to be denied after several near misses at VFW and the Black Knights had a well-learned knack

for making critical prelim cuts against the odds. Stardusters placed 13th, a quarter-point shy of the 12-corps finals show.

Two weeks later, the American Legion held its nationals in Houston. The Stardusters achieved retribution for their frustrating VFW miss by placing third in the AL Finals. The drum line, under Marty Hurley's tutelage, took top percussion over the Argonne Rebels, Cavaliers and Muchachos. And those same Black Knights that triumphed at VFW now

trailed the Stardusters by about nine points in the final tally.

After the 1971 season, a rift developed in the Stardusters organization and the majority of corps members and staff departed to start another corps under different management. The Bleu Raeders were born. The success of this unit's inaugural season is legendary.

Though many of their people had been together the previous year, the corps had to learn an entirely new program for its first season. An extensive tour was deemed a priority for the corps, with a budget-conscious uniform design selected to help

make ends meet financially. Somehow, the corps put it all together and picked up right where the Stardusters had left off.

The Bleu Raeders made every finals cut they faced in the 1972 season, including the toughest one at DCI Championships, where they got in by four-tenths of a point, eventually finishing 12th in the finals. Theirs was the smallest horn line ever to make DCI Finals (34 players) and the corps was one of the



Stardusters, 1972 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Bleu Raeders, 1972, at the World Open (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

smallest in overall size. The corps also placed third at the AL Nationals in Chicago, where it had the ironic opportunity to compete against the Stardusters, who finished 34th in the 47-unit prelim show.

Unfortunately, the Bleu Raeders would never duplicate their 1972 success. Though the 1973 corps was another fine unit, many new contenders managed to overtake the corps. The 21st position they landed in at DCI Championships is how the 1973 corps is most often remembered.

Meanwhile, the Stardusters were recovering nicely from a weak 1972 season. At the VFW Nationals in New Orleans, the Bleu Raeders and Stardusters again competed head-to-head, both making the finals cut in a 29-corps field. The units finished third and ninth, respectively, in the finals.

Managements of the two ambitious corps decided to join forces for the 1974 season to field one of the largest units in the activity (54 brass/22 percussion/40 guard), at a time when top corps typically fielded 90-100 members. The merger effort included a new name (Regiment Militaire), new uniforms and



Bleu Raeders, 1972, at a Mardi Gras parade (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

mostly new music, including the fitting trademark *Marche Militaire Francaise*. The corps certainly improved upon its predecessors' 1973 records, but did not execute well

enough to catch up with the top 12 corps, except in the percussion caption.

At that level, the Regiment Militaire was able to make all five of the prelim cuts it faced on the way to DCI (a record matched by only one other corps up to that point), while finding itself out of the running for the top 12 when everyone met at DCI. The corps finished in a 17th-place tie at DCI Prelims.

Apparently the two managements still didn't see eye-to-eye on all things and the two corps once again went their separate ways after completing the 1974 season. The Bleu Raeders continued to tour and compete in open class in 1975 and 1976, but without the expertise of their former staff the corps no longer reached the finals in tour shows or the DCI top 25. The Bleu Raeders did not field a corps in 1977 competition.

Meanwhile, the Stardusters returned to the familiar VFW Nationals in 1975, even though it was held in California. But 1976 brought a change of pace, as they discovered the Mid-American circuit. The corps gained ground quickly, placing third at the circuit championship in 1976 and winning the title in 1977 and 1978.

Stardusters also caught the American Legion Nationals in nearby New Orleans, placing third in the finals there. Seeking further challenges, the corps prepared for a national-level class A campaign in 1979, warming up for it by winning a third-straight Mid-American title by more than 18 points over the runner-up.

The 1979 Stardusters corps was a title contender, winning at the American International Open and U.S. Open and turning in an impressive showing as the runner-up at the DCI Class A Finals. The corps even reappeared in VFW Nationals (in New Orleans that year), placing as runner-up to the Long Island Kingsmen. What would be next, the class A title or a move to open class?

Neither. With some key people gone, the Stardusters stayed in class A for 1980, placing fifth at the DCI Championships.

While the Stardusters were earning laurels at the class A level, the Bleu Raeders were starting over from scratch, getting an inexperienced corps on the field late in 1978. The corps grew in size and experience in 1979 and 1980, but not quite enough to make DCI's class A finals. Once again, the Stardusters and Bleu Raeders looked toward a merger, but this time for keeps. The merged unit was known as the Southernaires.

The 1981 championship tour started out in curious fashion. In two consecutive major class A contests, the Southernaires were

runner-up to an Ohio corps that would move up to open class at the next possible opportunity. First, it was the Bluecoats at the U.S. Open. Then, at the AIO in Butler, PA, it was the Glassmen's turn. Bluecoats made the open class finals at AIO and both they and the Glassmen competed in open class at DCI.

Finally, at the World Open, Southernaires took the title, reversing the prelims outcome against St. Ignatius Girls, a World Open legend. The Southernaires would fend off all challengers to win once again at Montreal's DCI Class A championship.

With things looking good in the off-season, the Southernaires elected to move to open class for 1982. But many corps encountered unanticipated difficulties that year due to the economy's impact on financial aid to college students. Like so many other units, the Southernaires spent much of their summer adjusting to a smaller-than-expected corps. They stuck to their commitment to compete in open class, but finished outside of the top 40 at DCI.

The loyal group of members that remained after 1982 was too small to field a corps in 1983, and a 1984 comeback effort also failed as financial backing dwindled. Thus, the 1982 campaign was their last.



Southernaires, 1981 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Ken Mason has been the audio engineer for DCI, DCA and DCUK and is the activity's resident audio archivist. He spends the season traveling and recording as many different corps as possible. Then, during

the off-season, he works on restoring and preserving recordings from the drum and bugle corps activity's past.

Also a history and statistics buff, Mason serves as historian for the Garden State Circuit. He learned of drum corps during his high school marching band days. He went on to play French horn with Phantom Regiment in 1986, then spent three years with the Bushwackers as mellophone soloist (1987-1988) and contra bass (1989).

By then an avid collector of drum corps recordings, he became progressively more involved in recording shows. His work now appears on DCI audio/video products for division III/III, the DCA CDs (since 1998) and the DCUK CDs (since 2001).

He lives in Marlton, NJ.