

Auxiliarist Participation

The United States Coast Guard Pipe Band

"Wow! I didn't even know the Coast Guard had a bagpipe band!" That, by far is the largest response I get from people when I tell them about the USCG Pipe Band. Some other frequently asked questions are: "Where do you play?" "How many are in the band?" "I've always wanted to learn to play the bagpipes or drums...how do you become a member?" "What do the colors in your kilt mean?" Hopefully, after reading this story, a few more people will be familiar with this "hidden gem" of the Coast Guard.



Photo by PAC Tom Perduto, by permission

Marching up 5th Avenue in New York City

The band was the brain child of CWO Kevin Gilheany who was stationed at a Marine Safety Office in Louisiana and is also a piper. A question entered his mind one day, "I wonder how many other Coast Guard personnel play the bagpipes?" He thought it would be interesting to find out and posted a bulletin on the internet via Fred's Place. August 2nd, 2002, at the Coast Guard Festival in Grand Haven, Michigan, the Coast Guard Pipe Band was born with seven pipers and three drummers. Naturally, the first tune played was none other than Semper Paratus! On September 6th, 2002, the USCG Pipe Band became incorporated as a non-profit organization and authority was granted by CG Headquarters to use the name "U.S. Coast Guard Pipe Band, Inc." It is important to note that the U.S. Coast Guard Pipe Band, Inc. is not an official part of the United States Coast Guard but is recognized by the Coast Guard as an affiliated organization and is exclusively operated as a charitable organization.

Today, the band is over 70 members strong with over 30 members being Auxiliarists! It is made up

of Coast Guard Active Duty, Reserve, Retired, honorably discharged War Veterans and Auxiliary personnel. This band has many purposes. One of the most important is public affair functions. Recently, the USCG Pipe Band has participated in a concert with the Chieftains in Washington D.C. at the Kennedy Center, played in the Veteran's Day Parade and Re-Christening of the Carrier Intrepid in New York City with President Bush in attendance, marched down 5th Avenue in the heart of New York City during the St. Patrick's Day Parade and has appeared at the Coast Guard Festival in Grand Haven, Michigan for the last seven years! The band has also been interviewed on the web-based *The Coast Guard Channel* and one of the original band members appeared in a scene from the movie "The Guardian". These are only a few highlights in the short illustrious life of this extraordinary band.

One of the reasons this band is "extraordinary" is because it takes a lot of commitment to be a member. Members are spread out throughout the country from the East Coast to the West Coast and travel mostly at their own expense with instruments in tow to perform. Practices are rarely held

Auxiliarist Participation

as a full band. Members sometimes pass around a CD or DVD and try to get to a performance as early as possible to blow up the pipes and get everyone in tune before the show. The entire band plays as a unit only a few times a year. It is broken down into smaller regional detachments and will support the Coast Guard, Coast Guard Auxiliary and Coast Guard Foundation activities in their area. Such activities could be a memorial service, a military ball, highland games, patriotic and military parades, public concerts, Commissioning Ceremonies for Coast Guard vessels and units, Change of Command Ceremonies, Retirement Ceremonies and funerals of Coast Guard members, to name a few. As a matter of fact, having a piper at changes of command, funerals and memorials has quickly become a new Coast Guard tradition and our pipers and drummers are available for such.

The Coast Guard Band has its own colors, which is called a Tartan. A Tartan is a blend of colored fabric that represents different tribes or clans. It is a red, white and blue pattern which was inspired



Photo by Theresa Henry, by permission

USCG Pipe Band with Commandant Thad Allen

by the family Tartan of Alexander Hamilton, the founder of the Revenue Marine and the "father" of the modern day Coast Guard. The red symbolizes the courage and sacrifice of the men and women of the Coast Guard and its predecessor services and their families in war and peace for more than 200 years. There are ten threads of white which represent the ten original Revenue Cutters commissioned by Alexander Hamilton, himself in 1790.

Blue symbolizes the seas sailed by cutters and the skies flown by aircraft of the Coast Guard as they carry out their missions to serve and protect. The Tartan was approved by then Commandant Admiral James Loy on May 1st, 2002. Before that time, members wore kilts of their own home band Tartan.

The Coast Guard Pipe Band is always seeking new members. The skill levels vary from novice piper/drummer to a very competent grade 2 musicians (very accomplished). But you don't necessarily have to know how to play the bagpipes or drums to become a member of the band. There are other opportunities such as fund raising, public affairs, recruiting and other positions available to Auxiliarists, Retirees, Reservists, War Vet's and Coast Guard Active Duty personnel. Membership is also not limited to persons of Scottish descent but is open to any person meeting the membership requirements regardless of race, color, national origin, ethnic origin, age, religion, sex, handicap or marital status.

The Auxiliary itself brings a wealth of gifted musicians to the band and has members ranging in ages from 40 to 75 and Offices held from new member status to Commodore. The Pipe Major, the musical leader of the band, is an Auxiliarist. Throughout its seven years of existence, the band has earned a total of four Meritorious Team Commendations, a Meritorious Service Award and countless "thank you's" from Captains and Admirals. No matter what facet of the Coast Guard you're in, be it Auxiliary, Retired, a War Vet, Reserve or Active Duty, you are treated with honor and respect. In turn, the U.S. Coast Guard Pipe Band always stands at the ready to serve the Coast Guard and the country. Semper Paratus is not only the definition of readiness for the band, it's an attitude shared by all of its members!

To engage the band for a function, to find out about becoming a member, or to just learn more about your United States Coast Guard Pipe Band, visit us at:
www.uscgpipeband.org

- Steven S. Mehal
SO-PA
Division 7