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A Short History of the 6th Army Pipe Band and its Influences on the WUSPBA
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The 6th Army Pipe Band, based at the Presidio in San Francisco was a “feeder band,” some whose graduates became instrumental in the formation of the WUSPBA.

During World War II, General Mark Wayne Clark commanded the 5th Army in the European theater. From the end of the war in 1945 until 1947, Clark was Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Occupation forces in Austria. In June of that year, Clark returned to the U.S. and assumed command of the 6th Army based at the Presidio. Impressed by the pipes and drums of the British Army in Europe, he decided in 1948 that a pipe band should be formed for the 6th Army.

After World War II, other pipe bands were formed in all branches of the U.S. military including the 5th Army Pipe Band (based at Fort Carson, Colorado). There also were pipe bands in the Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines as well at the Naval Academy and several other military academies¹.

The formation of the 6th Army Pipe Band was described in an article published in the May 1960 issue of the *Piping Circle* by Victor Biswell, former Pipe Major for the band. He mentions that, “The types of personnel that joined, or were sent to, the band were many and varied. We had everything from Parkhead roudies to religious converts. When we were short of pipers, our commanding officer, a brass band director, would send us a spare saxophone player to be trained to play the pipes. Our C.O. seemed to think that this could be accomplished in a mere six weeks.” Biswell continues with stories of their service. His closing line, I think, represented a good assessment of some of the players: “There are quite a few people throughout the U.S. that will remember the band, if not for being the only American Service band to do any serious playing, at least for some of the pranks that the band members pulled.”²

A 6th Army combined roster for both the brass and pipe bands, probably dating from 1956 or 1957, shows the following members of the Pipe Band.

- NCO in charge: A. Pierce.
- Pipers: J. Donaldson, B. Miller, G. Knutson, K. Bolstad, C. Epperson, G. Smith, E. Rowbottom, J. Taylor, V. Biswell, V. Stewart and R. Kirkland.
- Drummers: C. Capperauld (**see bio here**), W. McErlean, M. Stebels, K. Adcock, T. Hahn and G.

Crooks.

The 6th Army bands spawned more than pipers and drummers. Under the trumpet section in the brass band roster, appears the name H. Alpert. Alpert went on to form the well-known *Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass* in the 1960s.³

Ozzie Reid (**see bio here**) supplied information and photographs for an article, *Northern California Pipe Bands That Have Faded Into History*, published by the Silicon Valley Pipe Band and currently available on their website.⁴ One of the bands he reported on was the 6th Army Pipe Band. Ozzie reports that he was the last surviving member of the band and “spent the last six months of my tour of duty as assistant supply clerk with the chore of dispensing our kit to the U.S. Army Reserve group in Sacramento.” Ozzie relates that you had to enlist for three years and be auditioned. The band traveled 80,000 miles a year.

In the 1990s when I was researching the 6th Army and other pipe bands in the U.S. military, I asked Charlie Capperauld about his service. He told me that they were on the road twenty-eight days a month. When I asked Ozzie if anyone had written a history of the band, he replied, “We never wrote a history, we were it.”⁵

The 6th Army Pipe Band injected quite a core of talent that later revolutionized piping on the west coast. Ozzie mentions several pipers and drummers by name that came from the 6th Army Pipe Band. In addition to himself, he mentions:

- Victor Biswell, former 6th Army P.B. pipe major, later Pipe Major for the Silicon Valley Pipe Band,
- Willi McErlan, snare drummer – Nicknamed “Weasel. He served as lead stroke for Triumph Street 1971–1981,
- Willi Capperauld, bass drummer, later played with the Silicon Valley Pipe Band,
- Charlie Capperauld, lead stroke for the 6th Army Pipe Band; later Drum Sergeant for the L.A. Scots, WUSPBA judge and more,
- Sam Sweetman, piper – later became Interim President of WUSPBA in 1963 during transition from PCPBA. Member of Lockheed band and Silicon Valley Pipe Band.⁶

The 6th Army Pipe Band was disbanded in 1958, with the Army citing lack of funds. The Washington Post lamented, “Hoot, mon, the 6th Army’s in such a tight fix it canna’ longer afford to keep its kilted bagpipe band a-going.”⁷

Even though the band had a short life – 1948-1958 - we still have many reasons to be grateful to General Mark Clark!

Notes and Sources

1. It is worth noting that the other pipe bands in the U.S. military were also “feeder” bands, generating pipers and drummers for civilian bands. Many east coast pipers and drummers were associated with them in one way or another. John Recknagel, former pipe major for the Atlanta Pipe Band, a great dance piper and a certified judge for the Eastern United States Pipe Band Association (EUSPBA), has collected information on pipe bands in the U.S. military and shared some of his information with me.
2. Biswell, Victor A., Ex-Pipe Major, Six Army Band, *The American Sixth Army Pipe Band*, Piping Circle, May 1960. A copy of this article was provided to me by Curt Sisco of Brea, California.
3. *Roster – Sixth Army Band*, undated. This roster was provided to me by Ozzie Reid circa 1996-1997.
4. *Northern California Pipe Bands That Have Faded Into History*, Silicon Valley Pipe Band website, <https://siliconvalleypipeband.org/>. This article is well worth reading for additional history.
5. Conversations with C. Capperauld and O. Reid, 6th Army Pipe Band File, J. Thornton archives, 1996.
6. *Past Officers*, Andrew Lenz, Jr., The Western United States Pipe Band Association, <https://wuspba.org/past-officers/>.
7. Economy Forces Army to Give Up Its Kilted Pipers, Washington Post, Washington, D.C., December 16, 1958.



A photograph of the 6th Army Pipe Band in June of 1958. Top row: Sgt. Al Pierce, Ken Adcock, Willi McErlean, John McCullough, Charles Capperault, Terry Hahn, Sgt. Richard Kirkland. Bottom row: Bob Varvell, George Knudson, Jack Donaldson, Gerald R. Smith, Chuck Epperson, O. Reid. (photo courtesy of Ozzie Reid)



The 6th Army Pipe Band on parade, St. Patrick's Day, San Francisco, California, March 18, 1956. (National Archives photo SC 474710)