



The original 560th Air Force Band posed on a jet fighter in 1949.

## Strike Up the Band:

# 50+ Years of Making Music

By Pat Spanjer

**T**he Music Building at Eastern Washington College of Education in 1948 had all the makings of a stage set for a Hollywood wartime movie: budding romance, friendships, drama and music. Always music.

Against the backdrop of a looming war, the young musicians in Eastern's Concert Band were busy spreading goodwill and good music. They loaded onto and off buses in big cities and small towns all across the state, spending nights at high school students' homes and performing community concerts, all the while encouraging countless college-bound students to enroll at Eastern.

All those miles on the road helped turn some of their friendships into courtships – such as between Lois Thomas (flute) and Bob Iller (clarinet) and their friends Georgianna Wallace (flute) and Wally Plowman (oboe).

But back then, as they were making plans for the future, Uncle Sam had other plans – at least for the young men. In April 1948, an Air National Guard band unit was formed on campus, and that allowed most of the men to do their civic duty while still attending college. The Music Building became home to both the Concert Band and the military band's weekly drills.

The friendships formed in those years intensified as these 35 men formed their band of brothers, sharing cramped quarters,

long hours on the road and in the air and the fears of a coming war – friendships that continue today.

On Feb. 5, 1951, the 560th Air Force Band was officially called to active duty to serve during the Korean War. Wally and Georgianna, engaged for nearly a year, flew into their own brand of active duty to make quick wedding plans.

"We always said that if Wally was called up, we would get married," Georgianna says. And, naturally, several members of the band attended their Feb. 16, 1951, wedding in Cheney.

Because all but two of the 560th Band members were Eastern students, the unit's recall was delayed until the end of the school term – April 1 – the day each of the band members received the same call-up letter from Washington Gov. Arthur Langlie.

"We all thought it was the biggest April Fool's joke," Bob remembers. "Many of us had months left to serve in the reserves and only a quarter left to go till we graduated, and here we were being called to active duty."

They were not sent overseas. Based at Geiger near Spokane



Mustering out of the armed forces in 1952 were band members (back, L-R) Donald Allgaier, Loren Bartlett, Wally Plowman, Walter Schaar, Bob Ley, (front, L-R) William Godfredson, Glen Breitspacher, Nathan Commack Jr. and Maurice Davis.



At the Oregon State Fair in Salem, the band earned nationwide attention for playing a concert of marches while riding the giant Ferris wheel.



From left, Loren Bartlett, Donald Allgaier and Wally Plowman rehearse.

and then at Larson Air Force Base in Moses Lake, the 560th carried out the mission of the band – performing stateside.

“We fought the battle of Geiger Air Force Base, the Battle of Moses Lake and the Battle of McChord,” Wally jokes.

The band performed at rodeos, parades, dances, fairs, shopping centers, ice arenas and base reviews. One of the most memorable performances for the musicians drew quite a crowd as they played aboard the giant Ferris wheel at the Oregon State Fair in Salem.

“I had to watch out and lean over to make sure the seat coming around wouldn’t hit the bell of my tuba,” band member Keith Yates recalls.

On a sunny day at Grand Coulee Dam, members of the 560th – sharply dressed in wool uniforms – sweltered as they played for the inauguration ceremony of the huge irrigation system. “It was hotter than ... well, we couldn’t wait to get outta there,” Wally remembers.

The military band and its smaller jazz and dance bands became popular fixtures on live radio programs in Spokane, Tacoma and Seattle, and on television with the Armed Forces variety show *March On* on Seattle’s KING-TV. The extensive travel prompted assignment to McChord Air Force Base near Tacoma.

The band’s regional travel by bus, train and plane was anything but luxurious.

“We were afraid of some of the planes we were flying in,” drummer Gunnar Munther says. “They had two engines, and sometimes one engine would sputter. We never had parachute training, but they told us, ‘When you jump out, pull the cord and hope for the best. Good luck.’”

Bob and Lois had married in 1951, and he was happy to take early release in February 1952 to return to finish his degree at Eastern. At year’s end, after 21 months of active duty, the original 560th Air Force Band was deactivated and a new 560th Air National Guard Band created, which lives on today at Spokane’s Fairchild Air Force Base.

Some of the members of the original band returned to Eastern. Some left to pursue careers. Others stayed on in the military. Many still remain close – so close, in fact, that the musicians reunite every two years to play and reminisce. While their next reunion is a year away, some of them got together in April – during an Eastern alumni reunion event – when members of the Concert Band from their era joined the current EWU Concert Band to play a few numbers. Wally, Georgianna, Bob and Lois were there, too.

Bob and Lois live in Spokane. He retired in 2000 as a professor of education administration and school law at Whitworth College; she played flute with the Spokane Symphony for 15 years, and she and Georgianna still comprise half of the Silver Winds Flute Quartet.

Gunnar Munther worked for the U. S. Postal Service for 36 years and is now retired, living in Spokane. Keith Yates served 18 years in the Air Force, 14 years in the Army National Guard and retired in 1992 as president of the Neighbors of Woodcraft (a fraternal insurance society) in Portland. Keith still plays tuba in several bands (including the One More Time Around Again Marching Band), and is an author (see story, page 15).

Wally and Georgianna are retired from teaching music and live in Spokane Valley, where they care for 140 bee colonies that produce four tons of honey each year. Now, when honeybees busily hum around Wally’s head as he walks in the warm sunshine toward his orchard, a slight breeze at his back carries the faint sound of Georgianna’s flute. It takes him back to Eastern’s Cheney campus, 57 years ago.

It all started more than half a century ago, but the music plays on.

