

U.S. AIR FORCE BAND

MISSION

The mission of The United States Air Force Band is to deliver world-class musical products that inspire emotions, create positive impressions and communicate information according to Air Force objectives for the defense of the United States of America.

To achieve that mission, the Band has the vision of being a premier Air Force organization performing strategically designed musical missions -- planned, packaged and delivered with precision.

The United States Air Force Band endeavors to:

Enhance Airman morale, esprit de corps, and retention.

Encourage young men and women to serve in the Air Force.

Increase public awareness and understanding of the armed forces and the mission, policies and programs of the Air Force, enhancing public trust and support.

Strengthen the reputation of the Air Force as a good neighbor and as a respected professional organization charged with part of the responsibility for national security.

LINEAGE

Air Force Band, Bolling Field, DC constated and activated, 1 Oct 1941

Redesignated The AAF Band, Bolling Field, 20 Jun 1942

Redesignated The Air Force Band, 26 Sep 1947

Inactivated, 5 Mar 1948

Redesignated The US Air Force Band, 6 Apr 1949

Activated, 25 Apr 1949

US Air Force Band designated, 9 Feb 1948

Organized, 5 Mar 1948

Discontinued, 25 Apr 1949

Both US Air Force Bands consolidated, 19 Mar 1979. Consolidated unit designated as U.S. Air Force Band

STATIONS

Bolling Field, DC, 1 Oct 1941

ASSIGNMENTS

Air Force Combat Command (later Army Air Forces), 1 Oct 1941

Continental Air Forces (later Strategic Air Command), 17 Jul 1945

Bolling Field Command (later Headquarters Command, USAF), 9 Dec 1946

1100 Air Base Wing, 1 Dec 1957

Headquarters Command, USAF, 16 Jul 1964

76 Airlift Division, 1 Jul 1976

76 Military Airlift Wing, 1 Oct 1977

76 Airlift Division, 15 Dec 1980

Air Force District of Washington, 1 Oct 1985

11 Operations Group, 15 Jul 1994

COMMANDERS

Alf Heiberg, 1941-1944

George S. Howard, 1944-1963

Arnold D. Gabriel, 1964

James M. Bankhead, 1985

Amy R. Mills, 1990

Alan L. Bonner, 1991

Mark R. Peterson, Jan

Keith R. Lance, May 1995

Lowell E. Graham, 1995

Dennis M. Layendecker, 2002

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

The United States Air Force Band's official military life began on September 24, 1941, with the formation of the Bolling Army Air Forces Band under the sponsorship of Lieutenant L.P. Holcomb, commanding officer of the Air Base Group at Bolling Field. Since that time, the Band has grown from relative obscurity to stardom under the leadership of ten diverse and talented conductors.

The United States Air Force Band is the youngest of the military bands based in Washington, D.C. The commander who organized the Band and nurtured it from its meager beginnings to an ensemble respected by both the military and civilian communities was Alf Heiberg, who led the group from 1941 to 1944. Without his vision and commitment, the Band might never have been established. The first ensemble consisted only of four players. But by April 1942, the group had grown to 48 members. The Band was officially activated along with 58 other Army Air Forces bands around the country on October 1, 1941. The first performance by this newly organized group was a Christmas concert held in the gymnasium at Bolling Field.

During 1942, the Band made great strides in its development as a fine musical organization. The group expanded to a total of 100 musicians by the end of that year. Additionally, the group began to travel throughout the United States, performing at many fairs and athletic events, providing the Band much needed visibility. It was also during 1942 that The Army Air Forces Band was designated as the Headquarters Band of the District of Washington. As a means to identify band members in uniform, Heiberg designed a cap emblem using the pilots' wings with a superimposed musical lyre. This symbol has remained the emblem of The United States Air Force Band throughout its history.

In 1943, the Band recorded several concerts, which were broadcast on nationwide radio by the National Broadcasting Company. This exposure helped the Band become the official musical representative of the Army Air Forces, giving the ensemble the "premier band" status that it maintains today. That same year, the Pentagon created the Air Force Bands and Music Programs Office to oversee the entire Army Air Forces band program. Lieutenant Colonel Heiberg was named the first "Chief of Bands."



Official Army Air Forces Band, circa 1943. At far right, first row is commander, Maj Hugh R. parks. At far left, standing alone is Capt Alf Heiberg, director of the band.



Capt Alf Heiberg, director of the band, circa 1943



The commander of the band, Major Hugh Parks shakes hand with the composer Irving Berlin During the latter's recent visit to the field, circa 1943

An historic year in the development of the organization came in 1944. The Band visited six cities in eastern Canada on its first major tour. After the enormous success of this tour, the group returned to the United States to play a command performance for President Roosevelt. Late in 1944, Howard took the Band on its first international tour; the group performed in England and France while the Royal Air Force Band toured the United States. This was the first tour for The Army Air Forces Band that included sites outside continental North America.

Despite this success, 1945 was the first true test of the Army Air Forces' commitment to the band program. The end of the war, the immediate separation of all but five of the members of the group, the immediate cutback of funds to the military, and the rush to demobilize the armed forces could have sounded a death knell to the organization. However, because of the program's success during the war, Howard was asked to remain in command of the Band and was given the charge of reorganizing it to serve in peacetime functions. He immediately embarked on a recruiting program to return the group to its original size, and the total manpower strength was increased to 115.

Because of this influx of new bandsmen, the necessity for a Bandsman Training School became obvious, and one was formed in October of 1945. The number of officers increased to five in order to accommodate the responsibilities of the new band and the school. Howard was named

leader of the Band School in addition to his duties as commander and conductor of The Band.

The Symphony Orchestra was instituted during this reorganization and was the first group of its kind in any military band organization. The orchestra made its debut at the Watergate Auditorium on August 17, 1946. The Symphony Orchestra ultimately supplied players not only for the Strolling Strings (now known as The Air Force Strings) but also for the Concert Band, which, under Howard's direction, included cellists.

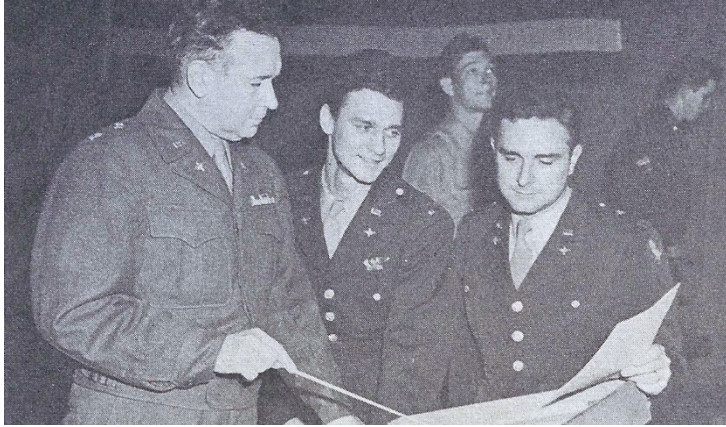
The group truly became The United States Air Force Band in 1947 when the Army Air Forces were officially designated as the United States Air Force. All units of the organization assumed the official "Air Force" title. Yet the Band itself remained the same and continued to grow in quality and number of performing units.

By 1948, the fledgling Air Force organization began to show its effect on the United States. It played an important role promoting the new service through its hour-long broadcasts titled, "The Air Force Hour," which began on January 18, 1948. That year also saw The Air Force Band evolve into a total entertainment organization capable of presenting the following units:

- 100 piece Marching Band
- 90 piece Symphony Orchestra
- 85 piece Symphonic Band
- 40 piece Symphonette
- 25 voice Glee Club
- 4 combos: Jumping Jacks, Crew Chiefs, Top Hats and Max Impact
- The Strolling Strings
- A Jazz-Dance group similar to The Airmen of Note



Maj George S. Howard



L to R Maj Howard, Lt Bielski, Capt Keim



The Bolling Singing Sergeants



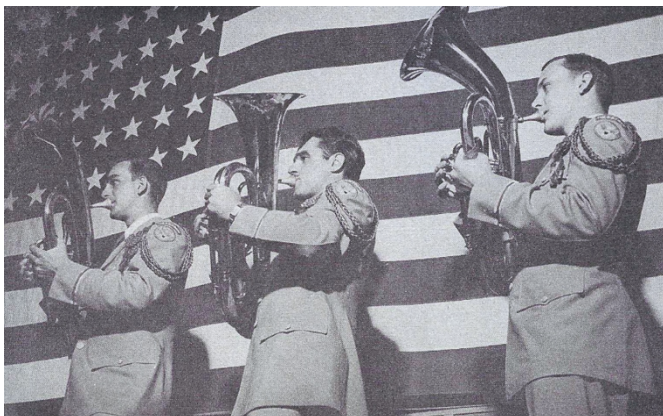
Seen above are Major Geo. S. Howard. and in the front row the Cox brothers, in the back (from L. to R.) are the Will brothers and the Mitchell brothers, all members of the AAF Band.



Singer KAY ARMAND—featured artist—accompanied by AAF Band.



Triple wedding at Base Chapel



Baritone section of the Official Army Air Forces Band. L. to R. : S/Sgt. Robert A. Sadler, Wash., D. C., S/Sgt. /lbert Perrotta, Paterson, N. J., and S/Sgt. William A. Schenemann, Park-ersburg, W. Va.



The Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps and Pipe Band were organized in 1949 and became part of the Band squadron in 1950. The Airmen of Note was also officially organized in 1950 with Chief Warrant Officer Fred Kepner as the leader.

The Air Force Band resumed its international tour schedule by returning to Europe and drawing enormous audiences at sold-out houses. Concert tours to Europe took place in 1951, 1953, and 1954. The Band also toured the Far East in 1956 and again in 1957. A 1959 trip to Central and South America and a 1960 visit to the Far East were the final tours of the Howard era. Colonel George S. Howard retired on September 1, 1963. Upon Colonel George S. Howard's retirement from The United States Air Force Band, the positions of commander and conductor were briefly separated, with Lieutenant Colonel Shale Tulin assigned as commander of the Band and Captain Harry H. Meuser as conductor. The Band was placed under the administrative and operational control of the Secretary of the Air Force, Office of Information and assigned to Headquarters Command.

During this transition year, organizational restructuring caused manning to be reduced from 330 to 116, and the effects were felt throughout the Band. This cut caused many changes not only in the personnel but also in the units of the organization. Among those changes, the Singing Sergeants was reduced to 12 singers and the Drum and Bugle Corps and Pipe Band were transferred to a different command.

Captain Meuser began as a bassoonist in the Band and was named assistant conductor under Colonel Howard. Despite the challenging restructuring during his tenure as conductor, Meuser enhanced the Band's visibility significantly. The organization participated in a fund-raising project to raise money for the National Cultural Center (later to be named the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts) in Washington. This project was the only time the military bands were allowed to distribute recordings commercially and charge for their purchase; all proceeds were given to the Center Fund. Meuser also directed the Band in the funeral of President John F. Kennedy, and the inauguration of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

In July 1964, the Air Force transferred Arnauld D. Gabriel from his command at the Air Force Academy Band to the position of commander and conductor of The United States Air Force Band. Gabriel inherited a well established program, but one that had been racked with budget cuts and

changes in personnel. Some units had been transferred to other commands; others had been decimated by decisions to separate personnel and cut back the number of men in the existing units. Despite these problems, Gabriel, during his more than 20 years as commander, was able to rejuvenate the Band and carry it to new musical heights.

After a few months under Gabriel's command, the Band resumed traveling by instituting semi-annual concert tours to different parts of the United States. These tours were the first under a new program for tour financing--the government covered all expenses for the tours, allotting each member of the Band an equal amount of money for each day's expenses.

Perhaps Gabriel's greatest contribution to the popularity of the Band was his creation of the Guest Artist Series. This program began to evolve in 1966 as a way to introduce prominent local artist personalities to the Band program by featuring them in concerts. Amateur talent from the Washington, D.C., area was also invited to perform with the Band. The program grew in popularity and was expanded to include noted musicians and actors (Doc Severinsen, William Conrad, Peter Graves, Marilyn McCoo and Melba Moore), guest conductors (Aaron Copland, Karel Husa, Leroy Anderson, Morton Gould and Henry Mancini), and performing groups (The Statler Brothers, The Lettermen, The Gatlin Brothers, Manhattan Transfer and the Dave Brubeck Quartet) from throughout the country. Prominent celebrities, both musicians and non-musicians, were invited to sing, play, read or recite with the Band. While only a few names have been mentioned, total guest artists to date number over 300!

At the end of the Howard era, the Band had ceased participating in international tours. But by 1968, it was felt that this highly beneficial program should be resumed. The first tour destination was Latin America. In 1969, the second tour was scheduled for Europe, visiting Scotland, Germany, Spain, England, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

During the early '70s in the United States, there was a strong movement in our country to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. The Air Force chose to be proactive and open as many career fields as possible to women. In 1973, Karen Riale Erler became the first woman to become an instrumentalist in any of America's premier military bands. Several women had been a part of the organization previously, primarily as vocalists with the Airmen of Note, but Erler was the first woman hired as an instrumentalist. The Air Force Band is proud to have pioneered among the armed services the inclusion of women in the music career field.

In 1972, a Washington, D.C., radio announcer named Bill Cerri began playing holiday music over the airways during a summer heat wave. Cerri took the listeners' minds off the hot weather and at the same time created a new tradition called "Christmas in August." The Air Force Band and Singing Sergeants, with Colonel Gabriel conducting, joined in the spirit in 1975 by inaugurating the first annual "Christmas in August" concert with Bill Cerri as host.

In the 70s, the influence of rock 'n roll music became so important to the American musical scene that the Air Force wanted to include a group specializing in this genre. To that end, Gabriel created a group called Mach One in 1975.

Throughout the Band's history, individual players of the Band had been performing chamber music in their off-duty hours throughout the Washington, D.C. area. But there had been no attempt to program or market the group as a part of the Band. So in 1970, the Chamber Players Series was created as a means for the Band to bring quality music to Washington audiences. In 1985, The Ceremonial Band, which represented the Air Force at ceremonies and patriotic programs throughout the National Capital Region, became an all-brass and percussion ensemble and was renamed The Ceremonial Brass.

During his tenure, Gabriel's many guest-conducting appearances and domestic band tours showed prominent composers that the concert band idiom and The Air Force Band in particular were wonderful ways to express their music. A commissioning program for new works written for, and dedicated to, the Band helped to reinforce the concert band as a legitimate performing ensemble, and provided a means by which The Air Force Band could promote a new direction for band music.

In February of 1985, Colonel Gabriel retired from the Air Force. During his career, he helped the Band reach new vistas of quality and popularity and made it one of the most sought-after military bands in the world. In 1985, Lieutenant Colonel James M. Bankhead took the helm as commander and conductor of The Air Force Band. One of his earliest accomplishments was the creation of a Foreign Bandleader Exchange Program, designed to foster personal contact with international military band counterparts. During that year, guest conductors from Brazil, Portugal and the United Kingdom conducted The Air Force Band in concerts at the Sylvan Theater and at the U.S. Capitol.

In 1986, Mach One was updated/modified to reflect a more modern sound and the name was changed to Spectrum. It reorganized once more in 1991 by adding several vocalists to form a costumed and choreographed show group called High Flight. In 1988, Bankhead created an innovative "revue-like" show, drawing members from the Air Force Strings, Airmen of Note and Singing Sergeants. This group was named Serenade in Blue after the radio program, which had been so successful in the 1950s and '60s. Serenade in Blue made several successful performance tours.

Lieutenant Colonel Bankhead commanded the first military musical unit to visit the People's Republic of China as the Band resumed international tours in 1987. Two years later, Bankhead took the Band to Europe and participated in the French Bicentennial Celebration. In 1989 & 1990, The Band's tours of South America featured the exciting new production Serenade in Blue. The idea for the South American and European tours was conceived during visits made in connection with the Band's Foreign Bandleader Exchange Program.

Perhaps Bankhead's most long-lasting contribution to the Band was his tireless effort to move the organization out of its decaying World War II era buildings into a new facility. This effort finally paid off in 1995 when the Band moved into its current state-of-the-art home in "Hangar Two" at Bolling Air Force Base. Captain Amy R. Mills became commander and conductor of The United

States Air Force Band in November 1990, when she assumed command upon the retirement of Lieutenant Colonel Bankhead. Captain Mills conducted the Band's annual holiday concert titled An American Family Christmas with special guest, Wilford Brimley. Additionally, she conducted the 1991 Guest Artist Series featuring actor William Conrad, country star Roy Clark, as well as baritone Robert Merrill in a concert videotaped and later aired on many PBS stations throughout the country. In March 1991, she returned to her position as vice commander with the assignment of Lieutenant Colonel Alan L. Bonner as commander and conductor. She left active duty in June 1991 to pursue a civilian-conducting career and became of a member of the Air Force Reserve.

Lieutenant Colonel Alan L. Bonner had been the vice commander of The Air Force Band near the mid-point in his career, and returned on March 1, 1991, to serve as the Band's seventh commander and conductor. Lieutenant Colonel Bonner previously commanded the Strategic Air Command Band and took that group to Saudi Arabia during the Desert Shield/Desert Storm conflict. During his tenure as commander of The Air Force Band, Bonner organized and presided over such important events as the Band's 50th Anniversary celebration, the premiere of Ron Nelson's award-winning composition Passacaglia (Homage on B-A-C-H) at the Cincinnati Conservatory, and the initiation of the Young Artist Competition in 1993.

In 1994, Bonner recreated the Glenn Miller AAF Orchestra of 1943-1945, comprised of members from of The Air Force Strings, Airmen of Note, Singing Sergeants and Concert Band for several concerts commemorating the 50th anniversary of World War II. He took the Band on numerous tours and conducted the Concert Band and Singing Sergeants on several recordings, including A Fresh Air Force Christmas, Our Martial Heritage, The Wall and The Last Full Measure of Devotion.

Major Mark R. Peterson became commander and conductor of The U.S. Air Force Band on January 27, 1995. Peterson conducted The Air Force Band on its spring 1995 Guest Artists Series, which included performances with Roberta Peters, Leslie Uggams and Frank Sinatra, Jr. He was promoted to the rank of major shortly before leading the Band on its historic trip to Russia in May 1995. The Russian trip commemorated the 50th anniversary of VE Day and coincided with the summit between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin. Under Major Peterson's leadership, a 60-piece band using members of the Concert Band and Ceremonial Brass performed joint concerts in Moscow's Red Square with the Russian Ministry of Defense Band and other international ensembles. The group also marched in the Moscow parade commemorating the Allied Victory in World War II. Also, during his tenure as commander, final preparations were made to move into The Band's new building, the recently renovated "Hangar II," on Bolling Air Force Base. His tireless efforts ensured a smooth transition to the state-of-the art facility.

Keith R. Lance, Commander, May-September 1995 On May 15, 1995, Lieutenant Colonel Keith R. Lance became commander of The United States Air Force Band. He presided over the Band during the search for a permanent commander and conductor. Under Lt. Colonel Lance's watch, the conducting duties were the responsibility of the Band's vice commander, Capt. A. Phillip Waite, and executive officer, 2Lt Scott Guidry. Major events during this period included the Band's appearance in Carnegie Hall; "Winged Victory," a special concert commemorating the National Day of Recognition of the Army Air Forces Veterans of WWII; the 20th anniversary of "Christmas

in August"; the Ceremonial Brass' trip to The Netherlands and the Singing Sergeants' 50th Anniversary celebration.

On September 15, 1995, Colonel Lowell E. Graham became the commander and conductor of The Air Force Band. The change-of-command ceremony took place on the same day as the official grand opening/open house of the new Band building, Hangar II. Certainly no stranger to Washington, Colonel Graham was conductor of The Air Force Band's Air Force Strings and String Orchestra from 1975 to 1981. Among his first performances as the new commander and conductor were overwhelmingly successful appearances at the 1995 Midwest International Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago, the Florida Music Educators Association in Tampa and the 30th Anniversary Season of the Guest Artist Series.

In June 1996, Colonel Graham conducted a concert titled "A Duke Ellington Portrait" featuring The United States Air Force Orchestra. The event took place at the historic Lincoln Theater in Washington, D.C., and the repertoire included some of the Duke's seldom played large-scale symphonic works. 1996 also saw The Air Force Band return to the tradition of performing 4th of July concerts at the National Air and Space Museum. In December of that year, Colonel Graham led the Concert Band and Singing Sergeants in a Christmas concert at famed Avery Fisher Hall in New York City. He also expanded the annual Christmas concerts to include performances in Baltimore beginning in 1996, and Richmond, Virginia, beginning in 1997. Colonel Graham led The Air Force Band in the 53rd Presidential Inaugural Parade in 1997, as well as the Air Force's 50th anniversary celebrations in Las Vegas and Washington.

Important tours include the combined Airmen of Note/Ceremonial Brass' performances at the Army Tattoos in Sweden and Norway in 1997, High Flight's trip to Bosnia in 1998, the recreated Glenn Miller Army Air Forces Orchestra's tour of Europe in 1999, and the Air Force Strings tour of Asia in 2000. A special concert by The United States Air Force Orchestra at Constitution Hall in 1999, and the release of the compact disc Duke Ellington: The Symphonic Portrait that same year celebrated the centennial of the composer's birth.

On July 9, 2002, Colonel Dennis M. Layendecker became the commander and music director of The United States Air Force Band. The change-of-command ceremony took place concurrently with the retirement of Colonel Lowell E. Graham. Commissioned in October 1983, Colonel Layendecker was selected by Colonel Arnauld D. Gabriel to join The United States Air Force Band, in Washington, D.C., as director of The Air Force Strings and associate conductor of The Air Force Symphony Orchestra. He remained in that position until 1988. Among his first performances as the new commander and music director were the nationally televised commemorative ceremonies marking the anniversary of September 11, and the popular Christmas in August concert in downtown Washington, D.C.

USAF Unit Histories
Created: 10 Aug 2011
Updated: 3 Jun 2022

Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.
Bolling Field Command, Washington D.C. 1948. Newsfoto Publishing Company. San Angelo, TX. 1948