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Up The Band

Gunnery sergeant William Kanteres stands in his office at the Marine Barracks Annex in Southeast DC, between an ironing board and a closed door, and holds up a pair of green pants.

“We send people to the moon,” he says. “You’d think we could make trousers without strings hanging off.”

He pulls a thread off the waistband and holds it up for his audience—Doug Quinzi, a French-horn player, and Paul Mergen, a tuba player, who have enlisted in the Marine Corps. They sit silent, ignorant about “Irish pennants,” pesky threads that hang from seams and buttonholes.

Kanteres unfolds the scissors of his Swiss Army knife and snips a thread. He tells Quinzi and Mergen how to Irish-pennant their uniforms. “Be careful around the fly and buttons. If you cut too close, you’ll learn the hard way, and you’ll have to get a sewing kit.”

Welcome to basic training for the President’s Own United States Marine Band. It’s the only Marine unit without a combat mission—and the only Marines who don’t go through boot camp. But the band attracts some of the country’s top musicians. Last year, an audition for two trumpet positions drew 124 hopefuls.

After winning a spot, new members enlist in the Marines and become staff sergeants. “They arrive here and in most cases don’t know anything about the Marine Corps,” says master gunnery sergeant Thomas Kohl, the drum major. Kohl is ultimately responsible for acclimating the enlistees. But when it comes to transforming civilians into Marines, assistant drum major Kanteres is the man.

A 29-year-old marathon runner who rides a Kawasaki dirt bike to work, Kanteres spent several years playing the sax in fleet bands—a less-refined category of Marine music for enlistees who have com-

pleted boot camp—before a deployment to Iraq in 2003. Over the course of a month, Kanteres teaches a rookie how to walk, talk, and look like a Marine. He outfits them in uniforms with ribbons and emblems and takes them for their first “high and tight” haircut at Sneed’s barber-shop on Eighth Street. He lectures on everything from the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which covers topics like disrespect toward a superior, to protocol when performing at the White House.

Kanteres teaches his charges how to stand at attention (“toes and heels together, fingers curled, lips closed, chest out, thousand-yard stare”), quizzes them on important dates during the band’s 206-year-history, and checks with a ruler that their medals are positioned correctly.

Then there are the survival tactics that Kanteres passes on to newbies: Bend a wire hanger into your hat to keep it stiff; shine your shoes with Windex; if you have to tie your shoes, avoid squatting down on your calves, which wrinkles the back of your trousers. Instead, bend at the waist.

Kanteres shares with Kohl the duties of leading the band, whether it’s the recent presidential inaugural procession, a ceremony at Arlington

National Cemetery, or a summer-evening parade. He dons white leather gauntlets, spins his mace, and barks commands to the band from under his foot-tall bearskin cap.

After the Irish-pennant lesson, Kanteres shows Quinzi and Mergen where to crease their khaki shirts, demonstrating with as much focus as a marksman. “Steam is your friend,” he says. “If your iron is too hot, you will melt your uniform. Do not melt your uniform.”

He tells Quinzi and Mergen that it may take them 45 minutes to iron their first shirt, and they’re not going to be happy about it.

“Let’s face it,” he says, “you didn’t come here to iron.” He lifts the shirt and pulls off an Irish pennant. “You came to play music. But you have to look good doing it.” **W**

The President’s Own Marine Band attracts some of the country’s top musicians. How do you turn a tuba player into a Marine? It involves a certain stare, lessons on ironing, and Windex.

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan

Washington writer Melanie D.G. Kaplan has contributed to the *Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Times*, and *USA Weekend*.



What's under Kanteres's hat? It's a secret he shares with new recruits.