

West Point Alumni Glee Club: Singing Sentimentally for Alma Mater Dear

by COL (Ret) Bill Spracher '70

“Come Fill Your Glasses, Fellows!”



The West Point Glee Club and its Alumni counterpart in joint concert at Eisenhower Hall under the baton of Connie Chase, longtime director of the cadet organization who retired in 2025.

The West Point Alumni Glee Club (WPAGC) was founded in late 2007 in the Washington, DC, area to provide old grads the opportunity to “grip hands” in song, have fun, and support the Military Academy. It was a by-product of the inaugural Cadet Glee Club reunion held earlier that year at West Point, which drew grads from coast to coast representing a half century of classes and culminated in a joint concert with the USMA Band on Trophy Point (reunion reprised in 2011, 2015, and 2022, with the next one scheduled for 2026). A handful of devoted pioneers attending the first reunion who lived in the National Capital Region realized they had a gold mine of talent nearby and formed a musical organization that could share this talent for noble purposes within the wider military community.

The author decided to join this merry band of warriors early on and was asked to speak for them in an article intended to spread the word that we exist to serve our alma mater and are looking for new members (this is a revised and expanded version of the article which appeared in *West Point* magazine, Spring 2025). Although the WPAGC is well-known within the NCR after performing on numerous occasions for nearly two decades, our travels outside that area reveal we’re still somewhat of a mystery. The only criterion for membership is being a USMA grad. One does not have to have been a Glee Clubber from cadet days, though most of our singers are veterans of the Glee Club and/or one of the chapel choirs. It’s a fact—some who couldn’t carry a tune as cadets

gradually blossomed in their later years into solid singers! Debates abound regarding how difficult it was to get into the Glee Club in the 1960s vice the 1980s, for example, but we have loyal, competent singers in the WPAGC spanning all the decades from the 1950s to the 2000s. We would very much like to rejuvenate our rabble and add more members from recent classes, though we realize it's difficult to commit while still on active duty and moving frequently.

Most of our full-time members live and work in the DC region, but a few have moved away in retirement and must travel long distances to participate. The WPAGC has an associate member category for those who can join in only occasionally, and we have been blessed by having devoted associates travel from as far away as California, Illinois, Massachusetts, and North Carolina to fill our ranks. That's especially true whenever we've done special events such as singing "The Testament of Freedom" at Carnegie Hall, for a national TV morning news program, and aboard the USS *Intrepid*, all in New York City; providing entertainment at a benefit dinner for the new College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta; taping a radio program at Music Mountain in rural Connecticut; and, best of all, traveling all the way to Ireland for a series of five concerts throughout the southwest part of the Emerald Isle. Most of the proceeds were donated to the Irish Veterans Association. It was that memorable 2018 trip which probably gave us the best chance to live up to the Glee Club motto, "No fun without music; no music without fun!"



SGT David Martin, a superb tenor who added an international flair to the WPAGC, along with an Irish Army official; our then-artistic director, Nancy Riley; and the Club's enthusiastic female contingent following a concert in Ireland.

The WPAGC rehearses on Monday evenings 6:30-8:30 p.m. every other week at a church in Fairfax, VA, while its specialty group “The Loose Cannons” rehearses every Monday at the same site beginning at 5:30. Those unable to attend in person can monitor rehearsals online (and sing along on mute!), a benefit which picked up steam during the pandemic. Our typical performance uniform is a black blazer with a unique WPAGC pocket crest, gray trousers, and a black, gold & gray tie. Women in the group, of which we currently boast three but need more, wear a similar uniform with optional skirt and scarf. For formal events, we wear tuxedos with crest and military ribbons, and for casual events, such as singing the National Anthem at professional sports events, we wear a white polo shirt with crest. In the past, we’ve been invited to perform at Washington Nationals baseball games on several occasions, plus the International Horse Show in DC, and during trips to West Point we’ve sung at Army football and basketball games.

The WPAGC exists in large part to support cadets, and we have a strong, symbiotic relationship with the West Point Glee Club (with whom we’re often confused until the audience is reminded that we graybeards graduated long ago!). Our Club has contributed significant funds over the years to supplement the more youthful Glee Club’s travel budget, and many of our members have individually donated to the Glee Club Foundation. We treasure all the opportunities we’ve had to perform alongside the cadets in joint concerts, which we’ve conducted in the DC area, in Philadelphia, and at West Point. Of course, present-day cadets don’t believe any of our war stories but are envious when hearing how many long cross-country trips we used to make during Spring Leave via military air (a rarity nowadays)! The last time we sang with the cadets at their Rockbound Highland Home was while participating in the Association of Graduates’ “For Us All” fund-raising campaign in 2014. We most recently performed a joint concert with them in 2022 in Chantilly, VA, and later at the same venue did a joint concert with the Wartburg College Choir from Iowa, whose director had led us at Carnegie Hall five years earlier, plus another with a remarkable cello choir directed by our former WPAGC artistic director, Gary Fitzgerald. The WPAGC has also done joint concerts with the renowned Army Chorus and the Herald Trumpets, and our new artistic director, Neil Ewachiw, sang for many years with the former. He is adept at taking us amateur crooners and polishing our singing technique until we sound like seasoned professionals! From our formative years under the baton of the inimitable Bill Cosby, whom many of us remember fondly from when he directed the Cadet Glee Club back in the 1970s-80s, to Gary, to Nancy, and now to Neil, we have been blessed by outstanding, compassionate and, most of all, patient directorship.

Arguably our most inspirational appearances are for “Honor Sings” and “Honor Flights.” The former are the frequent funerals and graveside services, usually at Arlington National Cemetery, for which we sing to honor fallen USMA grads, if requested by the family. Since late 2008, when we performed our first-ever Honor Sing in Fairfax, coincidentally for one of my roommates, we have honored over 150 individuals, to include a few spouses and a handful of non-USMA grads, such as a distinguished WWII aviator who attended several of our concerts and even a USNA grad who was a notable CEO of one of the largest U.S. defense contractor firms in the DC area. On that occasion, held at the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, MD, we sang the Navy

Alma Mater better, and with more spirit, than any entity from Annapolis I've ever heard! Among the USMA fallen we have honored are two Army Chiefs of Staff, a combatant commander, and a USMA Superintendent. Feedback we receive from families of the deceased indicates our contribution made the service for their loved one much more poignant. Regarding Honor Flights, we give a rousing musical welcome to WWII, Korea, and Vietnam vets flown in from across the country to visit the various memorials in the Nation's Capital. Most of the flights for which we've performed arrive at Reagan National Airport. One especially memorable tribute was for Pearl Harbor vets departing the airport after a reunion, and another was for Global War on Terrorism vets and their families departing for Las Vegas courtesy of the Gary Sinise Foundation. Gary, the modern-day Bob Hope, is a good friend of the WPAGC, and we have appeared alongside him for military benefit dinners and for the National Memorial Day Parade in DC. The Club typically does not charge for concerts or other events, considering singing as our patriotic duty, but we welcome honoraria to help increase the funding we provide to USMA.

The WPAGC repertoire includes patriotic music, West Point spirit songs, and a smattering of more modern, non-traditional numbers. Twice we performed a musical extravaganza called "Johnny Vet," which was a tour through U.S. military history with songs from the various conflicts and Glee Club members dressed up in period uniforms. Among the most popular music with our audiences are medleys from the various military conflicts in which the Army has been involved. For example, we performed the Blue & Gray Medley in Gettysburg for the 2013 sesquicentennial of that great battle (on the very field where Pickett's Charge occurred); both the World War I and World War II Medleys for events commemorating important events in those conflicts (such as at the D-Day Memorial in Bedford, VA; General Marshall's home in Leesburg, VA; benefit dinners for the Battle of the Bulge Association and the Army Aviation Association in Arlington, VA; and a Tuskegee Airman's 100th birthday party at the civil aviation museum in College Park, MD); and most recently a Vietnam era medley that draws standing ovations from our audiences, some of which reside at senior communities around the DC area. Perhaps we're popular with these older folks because we tend to look and think like them! We have also sung for various events held at the Vietnam Memorial in DC and, most recently, in a majestic service at the National Cathedral honoring Vietnam vets. The WPAGC is authorized to award Vietnam service pins to veterans of that war attending our concerts. They were first proudly pinned on Club members themselves by former Joint Chiefs Chairman and Secretary of State GEN Colin Powell. Finally, we are in high demand to entertain at Founders Day dinners, having performed in such far-flung places as Washington, DC; Richmond, Charlottesville, and Gainesville VA; Charles Town, WV; and West Point, NY.



GEN (Ret) Colin Powell joins WPAGC members in honoring Vietnam vets.

Our OPTEMPO has increased over the years as we have become better known. One year we performed for 56 separate events. This demands a pool of singers ready, willing, and able to step forward unselfishly and serve their alma mater through music. Much more info about our outfit can be found elsewhere on the website 'wpalumngleeclub.org'. We encourage all grads to participate and help give back to their alma mater. Those interested should contact the Club's recently elected president, E.J. Herold '81, or its vice president (also Loose Cannons OIC), Jeff Lau '83 at e.j.herold@hotmail.com or jeffreylay83@gmail.com, respectively. As an alternative, if they happen to run into a current member, they are welcome to pass along their interest via that channel.

"On the most painful day for a family grieving its loss, the Alumni Glee Club raises its voices in song to honor those who have served. Most often singing at Arlington Cemetery or one of the nearby chapels, these 'old grads' continue to 'give back' long after they themselves remove the uniform of their country."

Ric Shinseki '65
 GEN, U.S. Army (Retired)
 Former Army Chief of Staff and Secretary
 of Veterans Affairs



The West Point Alumni Glee Club supports the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in this formal concert.