

## On Campus

### Rutgers Queens Guard makes a comeback

By Stephanie Perez



Credit: Courtesy of Rutgers University Queens Guard

The Rutgers University Queens Guard was once one of the best military drill teams in the world, but its membership dwindled in the past decade. Now, with the help of alumni, the team is getting back on its feet — and winning trophies.

The Rutgers University [Queens Guard Precision Rifle Drill Team](#) was once known as one of the best military rifle exhibition display teams in the world. In 1961, the Guard traveled to Washington, D.C., to represent New Jersey at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration. By the 1980s, the team had performed in West Germany, France, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

Fifteen years later all that remained of the team's former glory were dusty boxes of memorabilia and a color guard that performed at university events. After years of silence, the Queens Guard showed an impressive revival in 2007 when it performed at its first competition in 13 years. These days, the progress continues as the Guard continues to perform at regional and national competitions — and even is taking home trophies.

The new Guard owes much of its present success to a dedicated group of former Rutgers Guard members. In 2005, two officers of the Queens Guard Alumni Association approached Army ROTC faculty head Lt. Col. Peter Sandberg, hoping to stir passions for the reconstitution of a competitive team.

Jason Leung-VanHassel, then an Army ROTC cadet lieutenant, took on the challenge as commander to work with alumni to get the team back on its feet, along with William Gripp, an Air Force ROTC cadet lieutenant, as his executive officer. Leung-VanHassel, who graduated from Rutgers in 2007, was one of only two members on the team in 2003, a far cry from the 50 cadets on the Guard in 1961, when it won the national championship under the command of Kenneth Iuso, the current Rutgers University registrar.

Getting the Queens Guard back into competitions was no easy task. The team desperately needed to recruit new members and relearn unique rifle and foot movements. Throwing and catching heavy rifles with 16-inch bayonets in various patterns and in unison is no small task. "It required a lot of long hours and the occasional bruise," Leung-Van Hassel recalls.

Fortunately, Leung-VanHassel and Gripp received a lot of support. John Waldinger (RC'72), vice president of the Queens Guard Alumni Association, traveled to the New Brunswick Campus weekly from his home in northern New Jersey to organize and train new members in the team's uniquely precise style.

The hard work paid off. This past February, the Guard took home top honors from the Northeast Color Guard and Trick Drill competition. Guard members Adil Manzoor, Greg Jusinski, Javier Castaneda, and Julio Mueckay all won various individual events.

Until recently, the drill team was composed of only Army and Air Force cadets, but it just re-opened its membership to the wider university student population. Manzoor, one of the first noncadets to sign on, has performed on every team that the Guard brought to competition last year.

His passion for performing military-style maneuvers with a team began with junior ROTC programs during high school. "I started doing stylized drills as a high school freshman, and since then I've loved learning new, more difficult and complex movements," says Manzoor, a cell biology and neuroscience major who hopes to attend medical school.

The group's diversity is a part of what makes the team special for the Queens Guard Army ROTC faculty adviser Tom Mendelson. "We wear a uniform that represents the Queens Guard of Rutgers," says Mendelson, an Army retiree. "When our team wins against other military-only schools, it makes me proud because we are just hanging our hat on being from Rutgers University."

“Representing Rutgers at a competition is amazing,” says Mueckay, an electrical and computer engineering major at the School of Engineering, who has competed three times this year with the Guard. He would love to see the team reach the status of their predecessors. “The team is still young, and we make our mistakes,” says Mueckay, a junior. “But after every competition, event, or practice, we become a stronger, more solid unit.”

The team still has much work to do if it wants to get back to the days when it was invited to perform at the [Edinburgh Military Tattoo](#) in Scotland, an annual exhibition of the finest military ceremonial units in the world. But Mendelson believes that once the national honors start pouring in, the international invitations will follow. Manzoor agrees: “This is just the beginning,” he says. “From here I believe that the team will go to great heights.”

For more information about the Guard, click [here](#).

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