

# **The Russell High School (GA) Band in World War II: A Commitment to Sacrifice and Volunteerism**

By William E. Fry

2021

World War II brought many changes to the lives of American students. With millions of young men mobilized for war, students necessarily became more active and engaged on the home front. With a new reality of shortages, rationing and other hardships, students learned civic responsibility that reflected in sacrifice, cooperation, and volunteerism. Young people were vital in war effort activities such as selling War Bonds, planting and maintaining victory gardens, and even collecting scrap metal. High school bands contributed to the cause by promoting an esprit de corps and aiding various causes through parade appearances and patriotic performances.

In its 17-year history prior to WWII, the Russell High School Band of East Point, Georgia enjoyed a good relationship with, and generated positive public relations for, Russell High School and the East Point community. The band provided entertainment at football games, in-school ceremonies, ROTC inspections, weekly Russell High chapel assembly musical interludes, and monthly evening PTA programs, in addition to traditional annual evening concerts. With the outbreak of World War II, the Russell High Band broadened its focus to include fostering support for, and promoting interest in, causes designed to win the war. Through sacrifice and volunteerism, the Russell High Band did its part for the war effort mainly by participation in numerous downtown East Point and Atlanta parades and other patriotic events.

## 1941

In response to growing military threats in Europe, President Roosevelt and Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act (STSA) on September 16, 1940, the first peacetime draft in U.S. history. The STSA initially required the registration of all men between the ages of 21 to 35 for one year of service with induction made possible by a national lottery.



Constitution Staff Photo—Pete Reton.  
**IN THE ARMY NOW**—The first group of draftees from East Point's local board left early yesterday morning for induction at Fort McPherson, and this was the farewell they got from the Russell High school band, city officials and board members. The first draftees are Volunteer William C. Kuglar, second from the left, and Mitchell R. Smith, Walter J. Russell, George E. Stovall, Bill Downs, Woodrow W. Moore, Clyde E. London, Benjamin C. Starr, Oscar M. Chambers, Oliver A. King, Guy D. Bishop and Wilbur J. Ellison.

When East Point's first group of World War II draftees was chosen, family, friends, and various city officials honored the future soldiers at a farewell event on January 10, 1941, an occasion memorialized in an *Atlanta Constitution* photo.<sup>1</sup> Russell High Drum Major Tommy Plummer, and Drum Majorettes Mildred Carroll, Beulah Wright, Ruth Lewis, and Jean Shelton, with other select members of the Band, played at this event, thus beginning the first of numerous contributions to the World War II effort by the Russell High Band.

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<sup>1</sup> Pete Reton, Photo: "In the Army Now," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 11 1941, 2.

With World War II in full swing in Europe, and with calls for America's intervention, war was on everyone's mind. To lift spirits, the Russell Band participated in a Patriotic Rally held at the East Point City Auditorium on the evening of May 23, 1941. A writer in *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter* implored, "All loyal Americans are urged to attend.... it will be an evening of splendid entertainment.... music by the Russell High School Band, directed by Capt. Roy Drukenmiller."<sup>2</sup>

Atlanta celebrated the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual observance of Armistice Day on November 11 with a huge parade. Participants ranged from political officials, active duty military units, State Defense Corps groups, and veteran organizations to patriotic societies and Civic/Fraternal organizations. Among this large number of parade participants were the bands and ROTC units from Russell High, GMA, Boys' High, Tech High, Fulton High, West Fulton High, Commercial High, North Fulton High, Decatur High, Marist School, Murphy Junior High, and Joe Brown Junior High.

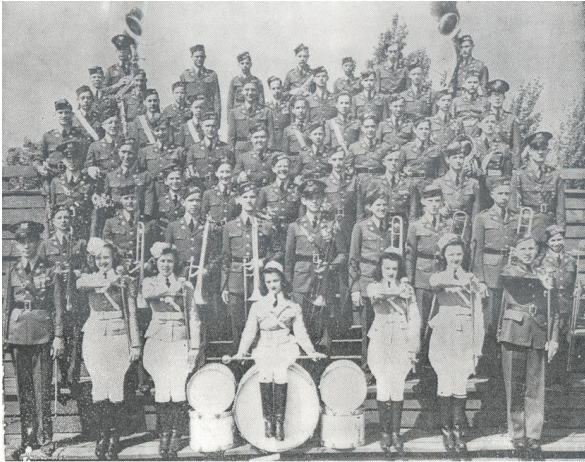
## **1942**

Occasional citywide blackouts and air raid drills were reminders of the threat of enemy activity during World War II, and various civic groups were organized to administer this part of the Civic Defense program. The Russell Band performed on March 17 at a graduation of Air Raid Wardens, about 244 of whom were part of a practice air raid drill held two nights later in East Point between 8-10:00 p.m. The following week, the Russell Band performed as the opening group for an East Point Defense Rally, an

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<sup>2</sup> E. D. Martin, ed., "Big Patriotic Rally at East Point City Auditorium Friday, May 23, 8 p.m.," *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, May 16, 1941, 1.

event featuring information concerning blackouts, civil defense procedures, and air raid warnings.<sup>3</sup>



1942 Russell High Band

Charles Snow, a prominent former Russell student and East Point musician, wrote an operetta, *Magnolia Blossom*, as a benefit for the East Point Navy Relief Committee. The work was produced in the East Point City Auditorium on May 21-22 and starred numerous Russell students in the acting and singing roles.<sup>4</sup>

With America's World War II presence well into its first year, many Hollywood movie stars volunteered to make public relations tours to help sell War Bonds and Stamps, and bands helped to publicize these events. As a participating group in the Greater Atlanta Music Festival program held at Georgia Tech's football field, the Russell Band was on hand when Dorothy Lamour, famed Hollywood actress, was at the Festival to help with the Georgia War Savings Bond pledge campaign of May 1942. Another



Veronica Lake in Atlanta

Hollywood personality, Veronica Lake, arrived in Atlanta for a one-day war bond drive on Tuesday, September 29. She was welcomed with a parade that included the Russell High and Commercial High bands, both of which escorted Ms. Lake and her entourage to her hotel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E. N. Martin, ed., "Defense Rally for East Point will be Held at Russell High Auditorium April 2," *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, March 27, 1942, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Clark Howell, ed., "East Point Unit to Give Show for Navy Relief," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 17, 1942, 12D.

A second class of Civil Defense volunteers graduated on October 1, 1942. This group included the first all-female Air Raid Wardens in East Point to graduate from Red Cross and Air Raid Warden courses. The Russell Band provided musical entertainment for the graduation ceremony at the East Point City Auditorium.

With America actively involved in war since December 1941, the continuation of Atlanta's popular Southeastern Fair was very much in doubt. In an effort to conserve resources, Joseph B. Eastman, U. S. Defense Transportation Director, issued a directive in June 1942 urging the postponement of all state and county fairs, along with non-essential conventions, meetings, and group tours.<sup>6</sup> Mike Benton, veteran parade organizer and President of the Southeastern Fair, decided to proceed with the Fair, citing the essential business and agricultural nature of the Fair and the fact that no specific law prohibiting the Fair was issued.<sup>7</sup>

The 1942 edition of the Southeastern Fair utilized a "United Nations" theme to show solidarity with the war effort. The Russell Band, along with 20 other bands, participated in the Southeastern Fair Opening Day Parade through Atlanta on September 24. At the Fair the following day, the Russell Band entertained a crowd estimated at around 2,000. A *Russell Wildcat* article revealed the following additional details:

"From the U.S. Motor Court at 5:30 P.M., the Band played a program of marches that was broadcast over radio station WAGA. At eight-thirty the grandstand show got underway. Marching on the field, the band played Sousa's *Washington Post March*, and then formed the Letter "A" playing *America*. Other letters presented in formation were "R" and "V," and the *Stars and Stripes Forever March* and *Warming Up* were other selections played. The climax came as each member of the band carried a flag representing one of the Allied Nations, placing it on the reviewing platform. The singing of the *Star Spangled Banner*,"

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<sup>5</sup> Betty Sue Nally, Bobby Wells, and Ramsey Buice, "Russell Band Greets Veronica Lake on Bond Selling Drive, *Russell Wildcat*, October 9, 1942, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Clark Howell, ed., "ODT Urges that all Fairs Be Deferred," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 19, 1942, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

led by the Russell Band Director, Mr. Swartz, and played by the band, brought the show to a close.”<sup>8</sup>

On October 27, a Navy Department representative spoke to the Russell High ROTC in recognition of Navy Day. The Russell Band performed the *Star-Spangled Banner* for the Flag Raising and played *Warming Up*, *Washington Post*, and *Honor Band* as part of the ceremonies. On December 7, the Band performed at a Pearl Harbor Day Victory school assembly program, a Diversified Co-op class-sponsored event that raised over \$1,550.00 in bonds and \$135.00 in stamps.

### **1943**

On February 1, 1943, Russell High initiated a new student organization, the all-female Russell Auxiliary Corps (RAC). Since ROTC did not include female students, Russell girls were now able to contribute to the war effort as members of this quasi-military group. The Russell RAC debuted as an official Russell High organization and marched with the Russell Band and ROTC contingent as part of a Monday night, March 15 Red Cross Drive Parade in Atlanta. This 60-member group wore uniforms of khaki and white and was usually the only all-female unit present in Red Cross and other parades.

On February 10, the Russell Band marched in the Atlanta Cruiser Parade in downtown Atlanta. The parade raised money to replace the USS *Atlanta* that was sunk in the South Pacific in 1941. The USS *Atlanta*, sponsored originally by Margaret Mitchell (author of *Gone With the Wind*), was a Navy cruiser launched on September 6, 1941, that saw action in the Battles of Midway and Eastern Solomons. Shortly thereafter, in the Battle of Guadalcanal, the USS *Atlanta* was scuttled due to heavy damage.

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<sup>8</sup> Louise Reese, ed., “Band Entertains at Fair,” the *Russell Wildcat*, October 9, 1942, 3.

A large Atlanta War Bond Drive Parade was held on Monday, April 19. The parade formed at Peachtree and Baker Streets and proceeded along a route southward on Peachtree/Whitehall Streets to Mitchell Street before concluding at Trinity Avenue. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that approximately 200,000 to 250,000 people viewed the parade, making it one of the biggest in Atlanta to date. The Russell High Band, along with the newly formed, all-female RAC and A, B, and C companies from the Russell ROTC, marched among a large number of parade units that included those from West Fulton High, Hapeville High, Commercial High, Hoke Smith Junior High, Joe Brown Junior High, North Fulton High School, Georgia Military Academy, Richardson High, Bass Junior High, Tech High, Boys' High, Fulton High, Decatur High, and Washington High.

All Atlanta-area Elks Lodges celebrated Flag Day with special music and guest speakers on June 13. In East Point, the Russell Band provided music for the 4:00 P.M. event held at the East Point City Auditorium. Mr. Willis A. Sutton, Superintendent of Atlanta Schools, delivered a patriotic speech for the East Point ceremony.

The Third Greater Atlanta War Loan Drive Parade was held in downtown Atlanta on the evening of September 20. The parade moved northward along Baker Street, up through Carnegie Way and Five Points, and concluded around the Trinity Avenue and Garnett Street area. The Russell High Band, ROTC color guard, and other ROTC units participated, along with similar units from Commercial High, Boys' High, Tech High, North Fulton High, and West Fulton High; the bands of Murphy Junior and O'Keefe Junior High also marched.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Warnick, "Thousands March in Great War Loan Pageant," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 21, 1943, 2.

The Southeastern Fair occurred on September 24 through October 3. As was the case the year before, officials debated whether to cancel the Fair as a method of conserving fuel, tires, and other war material. The decision to continue was based on boosting wartime morale and providing better food and nutrition, especially as it related to generating interest in developing victory gardens. Consequently, the Fair theme for 1943 involved food conservation and preservation and featured Canning Exhibits in the Agriculture Building.

“School Day” at the Fair for Fulton County and other non-City of Atlanta students was held on Friday, September 24; students from the Atlanta Public Schools held their “School Day” on Friday, October 1. The Russell Band performed on the first “School Day” at 2:30 P.M. at the Fair Grandstand and played again later that night in a massed band concert with bands from other Fulton County high schools. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported, “In the grandstand the bands from all the Fulton County high schools gave a concert.... Every seat was filled, with a generous overflow standing by the fence.”<sup>10</sup>

College Park held a local Third War Loan Drive on Sunday, September 26. The parade formed on West Rugby and marched to the City Hall, where local officials held a rally. The Russell High Band and ROTC units marched along with bands from GMA, College Park High School, and George F. Longino School. Shortly thereafter, East Point sponsored a local Bond Rally at the East Point City Auditorium. Mr. Harlee Branch, a

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<sup>10</sup> Martha Summer, “Starry-eyed children at Fair Fascinated by Midway Sights,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 25, 1943, B7.



prominent Atlanta lawyer, was guest speaker for the event, music for which was provided by the Russell High Band and male quartet.<sup>11</sup>

With World War II in full swing, the annual Community Fund Appeal merged with the National War Fund in a campaign that lasted through much of October. To raise awareness of this important event, Atlanta held a parade on Monday evening, October 11. In addition to Russell High, other participating bands included: Hapeville High, West Fulton High, North Fulton High, Decatur High, Boys' High, Tech High, Commercial High, O'Keefe Junior High, Bass Junior High, Murphy Junior High, Joe Brown Junior High, and Hoke Smith Junior High.

### **1944**

During the month of March, the Russell Band was very busy with activities related to American Red Cross drives. On March 8, the Band played an evening concert in the Russell High Auditorium as a benefit for an East Point Red Cross Drive. According to the *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, several hundred people attended.<sup>12</sup> The band, along with Russell's RAC unit, also marched in an evening City of Atlanta Red Cross parade on Monday, March 13. The Russell Band, RAC and all ROTC units closed out the month with a Monday, March 27, appearance in the Red Cross Drive Parade in East Point, a celebration that featured numerous civic, civilian defense, and regular military organizations. The parade's motto was, "Give that he may live."

In between Red Cross performances, the Russell Band performed as part of a March 17 "Memories of Music" program, a collaborative effort of four Fulton County high school bands — Russell (Charles E. Taylor, director), North Fulton (R. S.

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<sup>11</sup> Clark Howell, ed., "East Point Residents Urged to Attend Rally," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 26, 1943, 10A.

<sup>12</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Large Crowd Attends Red Cross Rally at Russell High Wednesday," *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, March 10, 1944, 1.

Lowrance, Jr., director), College Park (A. R. Strang, director), and Hapeville (Mildred Wade, director) — held at the College Park City Auditorium. Each band performed individually and then combined as a massed band conducted by Miss Joy Ruth Adams, Fulton County music supervisor. The Russell portion of the program included *Cavalcade of the United Nations* and a medley of military service songs. The massed band concert concluded with *Our Director*, *America the Beautiful*, and *Star Spangled Banner*.



The 1944 Southeastern Fair was a ten-day event held from September 28 to October 8. The Opening Day Parade in Atlanta was billed as a ‘March to Victory’

and included high school bands from around the state. A new Fair event included the first-ever use of high school choirs for feature appearances at the Agriculture Building. The Russell High Glee Club performed two shows, one at 2:00 p.m. and the other at 4:30 p.m., on October 8, the last day of the Fair. Choirs appearing earlier in the week were the Girls’ High Chorus, Commercial High Glee Club, and the North Fulton Glee Club.

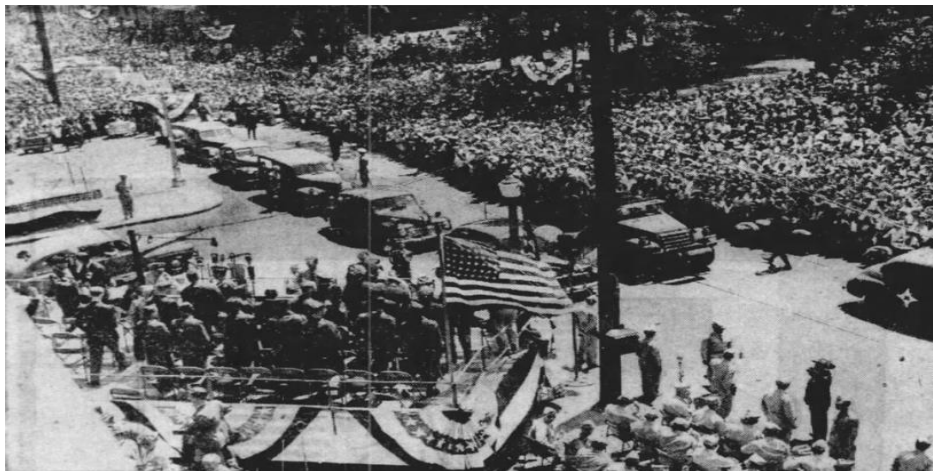
## **1945**

The Atlanta-area American Red Cross held a 2-week fund appeal from March through April that included a large parade on March 25. Military units and vehicles, along with groups from the Yaarab Shrine Club, civic organizations, and high schools participated in the parade that proceeded up Peachtree Street, through Five Points, and out to Whitehall Street. The Russell Band performed in the parade that also included

bands from Boys' High, Tech High, D. T. Howard High, B. T. Washington High, and West Fulton High.<sup>13</sup>

World War II hostilities ended in Europe with Germany's surrender on May 7, 1945. On the orders of General George Marshall, army chief-of-staff, Atlanta was chosen to be the first city in America to have a homecoming celebration for returning military service personnel. On short notice, Mike Benton was called into duty to plan this homecoming welcome.

On Thursday afternoon, May 24, after about a week of newspaper and other media announcements, a plane carrying approximately 50 high ranking officers and other military members landed at Candler Field (Atlanta Airport) to an overwhelming hero's welcome. Four-Star General Courtney H. Hodges, a Perry, Georgia, native, was the highest-ranking member among the returnees, and as such was singled out as the most prominent Guest of Honor. He had commanded the American forces that ultimately joined up with the Soviet army in Germany just weeks before.



Viewing stand as seen from Georgian Terrace balcony

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Warwick, "Red Cross Parade To Dazzle City Today," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 25, 1945, 1.

Writing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, Herman Hancock stated, “Every military and patriotic organization in Atlanta will participate in the welcome, including the Georgia State Guard, every available band, Boy and Girl Scouts, the American Women’s Voluntary Service (AWVS), Red Cross, ROTC units from schools of Atlanta, Fulton, and DeKalb counties and other nearby cities.”<sup>14</sup> As was the case with the 1939 premiere of *Gone with the Wind* and similar such motorcade celebrations, Benton positioned all the bands in stationary locations along the entire parade route, thereby allowing the military vehicles to ‘pass by’ the bands. The motorcade began at Virginia and Stewart Avenues and traveled up Whitehall Street before concluding at the Georgian Terrace Hotel on Peachtree Street. Authorities estimated that approximately 400,000 to 500,000 people viewed this homecoming event, making it the largest parade in the history of the City of Atlanta.

### **Post-war**

Germany surrendered in May, and the war in the Pacific ended in August; yet, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Russell High Band continued its patriotic duty. On October 5, the band performed in the Russell High Auditorium as part of a National Anthem Memorial Celebration, an event attended by Mr. Jere Wells, superintendent of Fulton County Schools. On Tuesday, October 23, the Russell Band provided musical entertainment for an Inter-City Civitan Club meeting held at the East Point City Auditorium honoring Wright Bryan, editor for the *Atlanta Journal*. Bryan was a recently released prisoner of war, having been captured in Europe while on assignment for the *Atlanta Journal*.

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<sup>14</sup> Herman Hancock, “Atlanta Plans Huge Welcome to Georgia’s Hodges Thursday,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 20, 1945, 5-B.

On Monday, November 12, the Russell High student body paid tribute to the fallen of World Wars I and II. This Armistice Day observance took place during the school day and featured a parade of Russell's band and ROTC units. Later in the day, the East Point VFW 7007 organized a large Armistice Parade that included the bands and ROTC organizations from Russell and College Park High Schools. Military units from Ft. McPherson also participated. The parade formed at East Point City Hall, proceeded down Main Street in the business district, and concluded at Hillcrest Cemetery on Connally Drive.

Atlanta and the nation successfully completed numerous Red Cross drives during the World War II years. The Red Cross was extremely important to service personnel and their families both during and immediately following the War. By early 1946 the Red Cross was still in critical need of supporting local and worldwide activities for millions of soldiers on active duty and those being discharged from service. A Red Cross campaign began on March 21 with a downtown Atlanta parade along the usual parade route. The Russell Band, ROTC and RAC participated along with twelve other area high school bands. Paul West, former Russell High principal, was the Co-Chair of the Fulton County Campaign; Roy Drukenmiller, Russell high principal and former Russell High Band director, was campaign coordinator for East Point.

### **Coda**

In conclusion, two themes are remarkable and appear consistently throughout the World War II years chronicled here. First, the Russell High Band was deeply committed to volunteerism, civic responsibility and service to the war effort in the East Point and greater Atlanta area as evidenced by the overwhelming number of public performances.

The band members gave of themselves and provided music that heightened awareness of many causes and brought immeasurable value to the lives of many.

Secondly, like many bands at the time, the Russell Band stepped up and did its part to foster patriotism and democracy, which had the effect of making Russell High School and the East Point area a better place to live during a dark and difficult time. This would not have been possible without the self-sacrifice and volunteerism of the World War II-era Russell Band students.

*Dr. William E. Fry, Russell High Band '71, retired as a band and orchestra director in 2011 after 36 years of teaching. Currently, he holds a part-time music position at Point University in West Point, GA and is the artistic director of the Columbus (GA) Community Orchestra.*