Citadel pride shows in Summerall Guards

By Kevin Gorman

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That the Summerall Guards will precede The Citadel's football team in performing at Heinz Field on Saturday is fitting, considering it is the Military College of South Carolina's most widely recognized unit.

The silent precision drill platoon, comprised of 61 first-class (senior) cadets, has performed The Citadel Series at four Presidential inaugurations, Disney World and Mardi Gras. Since its inception in 1932, the drill based upon the Prussian high step and German close order has been passed down by verbal instruction from one class to the next.

Charlie Taaffe calls it “extremely” impressive to watch.

The Pitt offensive assistant, a late addition to the staff, spent nine seasons as head football coach at The Citadel and remains its winningest coach.
The Summerall Guards are the highest example of the standard set at The Citadel, where students dress in full military uniforms, awake to the reveille of the bugle and march to and from class. Although many of its graduates are commissioned as military officers, it's not required.

The Bulldogs, who play in the Division I-AA Southern Conference, have a different perspective and career outlook than their counterparts with the Panthers.

"Their mind-set is, obviously, they look forward to the challenge," Taaffe said. "The culture of The Citadel, the lifestyle of the cadets there, they are very goal-oriented, highly motivated guys, and they look forward to challenges because every day of their life is a challenge."

"Football there is kind of an escape in some ways. At most schools, football is the most intense thing a kid does all day. At The Citadel or the academies, it's just another one of the intense things that occur during their day."

It takes a highly motivated and disciplined individual to balance the demands of the military lifestyle and its rigorous academic and athletic programs. That makes recruiting a chore, even for a school that has produced the likes of Army coach Bobby Ross and NFL players Paul Maguire, first-round pick John Small, Stump Mitchell, Greg Davis, Travis Jervey and Nehemiah Broughton, a 2005 seventh-round pick of the Washington Redskins.

"Most of the guys you find are guys under the radar," Taaffe said. "That's true of all I-AA. Then you throw in the fact of the daily regimen, the lifestyle of being a cadet and wearing the uniform all day, obviously, it's a lot more
challenging. When you do get that type of kid, he's a real motivated kid, a high-energy kid. In some ways, they're used to doing all the things you do out here, plus the heavy class schedule, the regimented corps of cadets, so they're not hard kids to coach."

The Citadel experience left such an impression with its local alumni that the Greater Pittsburgh Area Citadel Club has spent upwards of $25,000 to celebrate this weekend's game. That expense includes the busing and housing of the Summerall Guards, who will perform The Citadel Series at 11:50 a.m. in front of Gate A at Heinz Field and again at halftime.

"When you talk about representing the school, that's something that's really impressive," said club vice president Bill Elwell, a 1992 graduate who spent 12 years as a U.S. Army infantry officer and Airborne Ranger.

"The Summerall Guard performance really sticks with you. There's a lot of people that don't know anything about the school. We felt it was important to put our best foot forward. It's a source of pride for us. It means a lot for us to have our team come up here."

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