



by Lucy Gordan

# ANNIVERSARY

## THE Swiss Guard

### Turns 500

Photos by Stefan Meier

**T**he Pontifical Swiss Guard, the smallest, most-photographed and oldest military corps in existence, will start celebrating its 500th birthday on June 21, 2005 — the anniversary of Pope Julius II's letter asking the Swiss to protect him in the Vatican. The celebrations will continue until early 2007, with special events planned for the 24th and 25th of September, 2006 — anniversary of when the first recruits left for Rome in 1506 — and three months later on January 21-22, anniversary of when they arrived in 1507.

On that cold winter's day five centuries ago, toward evening, a group of 150 Swiss mercenaries commanded by Captain Kaspar von Silenen, of Canton Uri, entered Rome through Porta del Popolo. The group was blessed by Pope Julius II at the laying of the foundation stone for the new St. Peter's Basilica. Some 30 years earlier, while bishop of Lausanne, Pope Julius, a gifted soldier himself as well as a shrewd politician and the art patron of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Bramante, had been very impressed by the bravery of Switzerland's soldiers. So, to protect his personal safety and defend the freedom of the Church, he had summoned some to Rome.

Although perhaps hard to imagine, in those days Switzerland was an overpopulated and poor country. Men had to emigrate and their most



profitable employment was mercenary soldiering abroad.

Today, like other volunteer armies, the Swiss Guards have a tough time finding enough recruits (less than two applicants per vacancy) to maintain their complement of 100/110: 10 officers, 10 corporals, 10 vice-corporals, and 70 halberdiers.

"About 70% are German-Swiss," said Commander Maeder, "20% French-Swiss, and 10% from the Ticino (Italian-speaking). At the moment, three German-speakers also speak Romansh."

#### BACHELORS

Recruits must be Swiss bachelors between 19 and 30 years of age, at least five feet eleven

inches tall, of good character, Catholics, and must sign a contract to serve a two-year tour of duty.

Under an accord between Switzerland and the Holy See, before a recruit joins the corps, he must have undergone at least his preliminary training in the Swiss Army.

While in the papal force he is exempt from the periodical reserve exercises in Switzerland.

On the other hand, the colonel, lieutenant-colonel, major, captain, and two lieutenants, must all be officers in the Swiss army.

The colonel, or kommandant, belongs to the official family of the Pope, which entitles him to





Halberdiers during the swearing-in ceremony in May 2004.  
Below: Corporal Tiziano Guarnieri instructing guards in St. Peter's Square

walk with his officers behind the pontiff in solemn ceremonies. He is always present at large public ceremonies outdoors in St. Peter's Square, in the Basilica, in the Nervi Audience Hall and in Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence, but not necessarily at smaller events inside the Apostolic Palaces.

#### INDUCTION EACH MAY

Every year on May 6 at 5 p.m. in the St. Damasus Courtyard of Vatican City's Apostolic Palaces, about 30 (39 in 2005) new recruits, brandishing 8-foot halberds or pikes with a bear-shaped blade, are sworn in. During the hour-long ceremony, one by one, each recruit, dressed in the well-known red-yellow-and-blue striped uniform with bouffant sleeves, an armor breastplate and red-plumed helmet, promises in his mother-tongue — French, German, Italian or Romanch (Switzerland's four official languages) — to obey his officers and to protect the life of the Pope at the risk of his own life — “may God and his saints assist me!”



Particularly important are the Swiss Guard's patron saints: St. Martin (November 11), St. Sebastian (January 20), and St. Nicholas von Flue, “*Defensor pacis et pater patriae*” (September 25). In 2003's ceremony, Dhani Bachmann, the first non-white Swiss Guard ever, was inducted. Of Indian origin, he was adopted by a couple from Lucerne and is a Swiss citizen. “However, over the years there have been other guards,” Commander Elmar Maeder told me, “who were not of 100% Swiss blood. Now we have or recently have had a number of Guards with dual citizenship. Poland, Italy, Ecuador, Chile, Croatia are the countries that come to mind at this moment.”

In some cases, one or both parents were born outside Switzerland or even the guard himself, but then grew up in Switzerland and served in the army. “It's very important,” Maeder explained, “that every Swiss Guard has roots in Switzerland, that he feels Swiss, thinks like a Swiss. Otherwise, living here in the barracks, surround-



ed by Swiss, he would feel uncomfortable, if he had a different mentality."

### DAILY LIFE

Before 1914 the Guard was only German-Swiss. Now its recruits come from all parts of Switzerland, but the majority still comes from the German-speaking cantons of Unterwalden, Uri, Schwyz, and over the centuries especially Lucerne. Serving in the Swiss Guard can also be a family tradition. (Twenty-four Pfyffer von Altshofens have served as officers, nine of them as commander.)

"About 75% of the guards do not re-enlist," said the present vice-commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jean-Daniel Pitteloud, who joined the Guard in 1999 as captain, "but some of us make a career and stay on for as long as 30 years. The recruits' main problems are low pay (c. \$100 a week in cash), monotonous guard duty, tough army discipline, long hours (two days of ten-hour shifts followed by a third day free), and there's always duty on Sundays. For many it's their first time away from home. The commander and I are working hard to improve their relations with us officers as well as their job opportunities on returning to civilian life."

### A TYPICAL DAY

Forty-five Swiss Guards are on duty at all times. One of the first things the recruits must learn is how to handle the 8-foot halberd, part pike, part battle-axe, and how to sink gracefully on the right knee with it held perpendicularly in the right hand, in the motions of the papal salute. Although they brandish this 8-foot halberd, the Guards also carry containers of a mace-type spray, concealed in their uniforms. Since the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981, they have studied karate and judo with a black-belt master.

The Guards' job is guarding the State of Vatican City and they stand sentinel at the three main entrances to Vatican City: the gate to Nervi's Audience Hall, the Arch of the Bells, and St. Anne's Gate. In addition, they patrol the Apostolic Palace and stand sentinel in the corridor just outside the papal apartments 24 hours a day. They also keep order at



Halberdier Marcel Krieg just after receiving his medal "Benemerenti" for three years of loyal service.



1914, the apparel was designed by an unknown Swiss Guard.

The puffy sleeves, however, go back to the middle of the 16th century, and were quite possibly inspired by a Raphael painting.



Vice-corporal Erwin Niederberger from Schwyz entered the Guard in 1999 and will remain until after the anniversary celebrations. Left: Halberdier Nicola Böni, one of only three guards from the Ticin, aspires to become a canton policeman or railroad engineer.

the Pope's public appearances: liturgical celebrations in St. Peter's, general audiences, visits to the Pope by ambassadors or heads of state.

A number of Guards also accompany the Pope to his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo and on all pastoral visits abroad.

The Guard's other duties include inspections, briefings, marches, and shooting practice (even though Pope Paul VI banished the use of firearms in 1970 except during emergencies), choir and band practice, and soccer matches with other Vatican City teams.

### THE FAMOUS UNIFORM

Contrary to what most guides tell tourists, their multi-colored, striped dress uniform was not designed by Michelangelo. Nor by Raphael. Actually worn for the first time in

Before 1914, over the centuries, paintings and frescoes depict many changes in its style, whereas the everyday completely blue uniform has remained more or less the same.

### ALMOST ANNIHILATED

The Swiss Guards narrowly escaped annihilation on the steps of St. Peter's during the Sack of Rome when, on May 6, 1527, a thousand German and Spanish soldiers stormed the Vatican. Three-quarters of the 189 Swiss complement, or 147 men, including the commanding officer Kaspar Röist, were killed. The invaders, on the other hand, lost more than 800 soldiers. The surviving 42 Guards protected Pope



Clement VII and 13 of his cardinals as they fled along the Vatican ramparts into the impregnable Castel Sant'Angelo fortress.

After the 1527 slaughter, the Swiss Guards never again saw combat, but on several occasions the Guards had to lay down their arms on papal orders, rather than face extermination. This was true when, during his invasion of Rome in 1809, Napoleon carried Pope Pius VII off to exile at Fontainebleau in France.

During World War II, Pope Pius XII made the Guards store away their firearms so they patrolled the frontier between the State of Vatican City and Italy with only their halberds. Nazi Germany's Panzer tanks never once dared to cross the border.

Another story that Guards like to tell about their corps is the one about the coronation of Clement XIII in 1758. On that occasion, some Swiss Guards turned away a Franciscan friar who did not seem to fit in with all the cardinals and dignitaries on hand. Eleven years later, after the same ex-friar had been crowned Pope Clement XIV, he said, "I enjoyed this coronation. This time the Swiss Guards let me in!"

## TRADITIONS

Once a Swiss Guard, always a Swiss Guard! No longer in service, they keep in close contact through the "Ex-Guardsman Association" which publishes a regular bulletin, the "Exgardist."

The members gather periodically for meetings, attended, if possible, by the commander and the chaplain.

However, the most important reunion of ex-Guards takes place in the Vatican every May 6 for the "swearing-in" ceremony. As Colonel Maeder said in his interview, published in March, 1,600 ex-guards are expected to attend the 2006 ceremony which in all likelihood will be celebrated, not in the customary St. Damasus Courtyard, but in St. Peter's Square.



Guards dressing for the swearing-in ceremony.  
Below: a work-out in the new gym; last-minute alterations at the tailor shop in the barracks.



For the complete story of the Swiss Guards, past and present, order the new Jubilee edition of Antonio Serrano's *The Swiss Guard of the Popes*, first published by Verlangsanstalt "Bayerland" in 1992 and illustrated with excellent photographs, from the Vatican's publishing house:

Libreria Editrice Vaticana  
Via della Tipografia 2  
00120 Vatican City