

## arts festival



NATHANIEL G. KINNISON

The Virginia International Tattoo features a precision display of NATO's 28 nations with booming music, tight choreography and flashy uniforms.

# Path to the Tattoo isn't always a smooth one



Even with months of preparation, things sometimes just don't go as planned in enormous production

### if you go

**What** Virginia International Tattoo

**Where** Scope, 201 E. Brambleton Ave., Norfolk

**When** 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday

**Tickets** \$20-\$100, students start at \$10

**More info** (757) 282-2822, [www.vafest.org](http://www.vafest.org)

**\$20**

**Tattoo Hullabaloo** featuring dancers, musicians, food. 5:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 12:30 p.m. Sunday. Scope Plaza, 201 E. Brambleton Ave., Norfolk. (757) 282-2800

By Roy A. Bahls  
*The Virginian-Pilot*

The Virginia International Tattoo brings a precision display of NATO's 28 nations with booming music, tight choreography and flashy uniforms.

Getting 850 people from all over the world moving together is an enormous challenge, said Tattoo producer and director Scott Jackson, one that takes months of preparation.

But some things just don't go as planned. Jackson has been with the Tattoo for nine of its 15 years, which means he's seen plenty of times when the best plans went awry.

One time a group of Highland dancers piled into three vans to drive to Norfolk from Canada.

"Two vans sailed through customs, but one was stopped and they were told it was illegal for them to come and be in the Tattoo," Jackson said. "I had a Highland dancer sobbing on the phone in the middle of the night."

Jackson called customs officials, found an immigration attorney and got things straightened out.

Getting the performers' equipment here can also become a nightmare.

Jennifer Hafner, in her sixth year as the event's assistant pro-

ducer, remembered a peculiar dress rehearsal picture from 2008. One of two vans carrying a Navy ceremonial honor guard had broken down on the way, and they crammed everyone into their remaining vehicle.

"They were ready to go on the floor and I walked by and they were holding their guns," she said, "but they were wearing their street clothes. I said, 'No, no, this is a dress rehearsal,' and they said, 'Well, we didn't have room for our uniforms and our guns, so we chose to bring our guns.'"

Jackson has found that it's not the language barrier that presents the biggest challenge in communicating.

"It's easy to find a translator, but the way we interpret things and the way we are different culturally, that's the tough thing," he said.

One year Jackson asked a group from Norway to prepare a funny drill team skit with brooms.

"Well, they show up and they had put together an incredibly serious, exact, perfectly synchronized broom team," he said, "but it wasn't funny."

So he used his laptop to pull up a slapstick routine from YouTube.

"They came back the next day and it was hilarious," he said. "But they had to be there and see it."

Jackson has also learned to be

careful what he asks for.

The Marines sometimes throw a fake grenade into a pit to get a bang while running an obstacle course.

"One year ... I asked them, 'Hey, can you make a bigger explosion?' They said, 'Sure we'll give you a bigger explosion.'" Jackson said. When the group returned, "They put the grenade in - fire in the hole! - and they blew up my obstacle pit, completely blew it up. Wood everywhere, smoke. I was stunned, and the Marines started cheering. They thought that was the greatest thing ever."

Tattoo Drum Major Jim McGarity organizes and leads the massed band, this

year made up of performers from Germany, Tonga, United Kingdom/Nepal and the United States.

"You have to be focused on everything that's going on," he said. "Not just your job, but all the parts coming together, and if for some reason you see something going wrong, then you've got to try to fix it."

Sometimes Jackson has to lay down the law on each group's time allotment.

"I have to be pretty dictatorial about that because every group wants more time," he said.

The Steel Defense Force Band from Tobago was given a six-minute slot, but at the

first rehearsal they played for 10 minutes. Jackson asked them to cut it, and they compromised at seven minutes. The deal held for four shows.

"At the fifth show, in the middle of their scene they went into an improv and people started climbing into the aisles and dancing with audience members," Jackson said. "I was furious that we were off time, so I ran to their director, and he had the biggest, greatest smile on his face. There was nothing I could do but laugh. All I could do was smile and say, 'You know, you got me.'"

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