

First Sgt. Bright retires from the 111th Army Band

By Stephen M. Lum

First Sergeant Ronald E. Bright hung up his dress blues after more the three decades of sharing his musical talents with the Hawaii National Guard (HING) family, August 27.

Bright earned his bachelor's degree in speech and drama from the University of Hawaii in 1956. He was drafted in 1958 and served two years with the Army's 25th Infantry Division band.

While on active duty during a performance at Schofield Barracks, the cymbal-twirling percussionist caught the eye of then HING Bandmaster Chief Warrant Officer Carl Baptiste. The late 1st Sgt. William Yuen was tasked with actively recruiting him into the 111th Army Band.

The Big Island musician's versatility shone as he became the piano player in the band's stage combo, and advanced from backup to former bandleaders Sgt. 1st Class J. David Castro, to assistant music librarian and assistant drum major.

Earlier Guard years were spent teaching during the day at Roosevelt High School and playing piano at a local burlesque club at night.

"I used to correct school papers between shows," said Bright.

Added Castro, "During annual training one year, he would leave in the evening to play piano at the clubs until two or three in the morning and still report in time to perform at the 5 a.m. march around Schofield's tent city."

A few years later Bright transferred to Castle High School, where, in addition to teaching English, he built Castle's successful performing arts program.

He then brought his dramatic flair to Guard events, including the 1984 musical salute to the spirit of the American-Hawaiian troops of the Army Guard's dining out and ceremonial music and lunch break entertainment for the Army Guard's 1985 Organizational Day.

Until 1981, band Christmas concerts were usually performed at local shopping centers. In 1982, Castro wanted more than the traditional sit down concert and approached Bright with his vision of a show for our Guard family.

"Ronnie took it from there," said Castro. "He's been the driving force with producing the chorus, song and dance, and audience participation sections of the show."

First Sergeant Bright leaves behind him a musical legacy that will not soon be forgotten," said Maj. Gen. Edward V. Richardson, state adjutant general, at Bright's retirement party in August.

Richardson presented Bright with the Legion of Merit at his retirement ceremony held at the Diamond Head gym. Bright joins Castro and Yuen as 111th Army Band members with Legion medals.