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Service members begin preparations for 58th presidential inauguration

By David Vergun

JOINT BASE

MYER-HENDERSON HALL, Va. (Army News Service) -- More than 6,000 service members are part of a military task force preparing for the 58th presidential inauguration, which will take place in Washington, D.C., Jan 20.

"This peaceful transfer of power is so important for this country," said Maj. Gen. Bradley A. Becker, commander of the Joint Task Force - National Capital Region.

"[My troops] have the honor of representing the more than two million men and women in all the services, many of whom are deployed," Becker said. The Army is the lead service on the task force, which plans and carries out the military portion of the inaugural.

This tradition goes back to 1789, when the Army, the militia, and Revolutionary War veterans escorted President-elect George Washington into Federal Hall in New York City, Becker noted, speaking at a media roundtable here, Thursday.

WHAT THE SERVICES WILL DO

Michael D. Wagner, chief of National Events Planning, JTF-NCR, said the official inaugural period, codified in public law, is from Jan. 15 to 24.

The first event will take place Jan. 15, when there will be a large-scale rehearsal across the

district involving military assets and the Presidential Inaugural Committee, the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, and interagency partners.

Military assets in attendance will cover a large range, from each of the services' premier bands and color guards to all of the service academies, including the Coast Guard and Merchant Marine academies. All service components, including active, National Guard and Reserve will be represented, Wagner said.

In addition, there will be the parade itself, street cordons and honor cordons for the Capitol and White House, he said. Also participating will be logistical and other supporting assets like movement control teams, engineering units, public affairs and transportation elements.

After the inauguration, balls and galas will be held at which military members will be present, he added.

Although public law specifies the end of the inaugural period as the 24th, tradition holds that the end is the 21st, concluding usually with some sort of service at a church, Wagner said.

What the armed services won't do, Becker said, is take the lead on security. The Secret Service does that, with help from the metropolitan police, Capitol Police and National Park police.

PREPARED FOR SURPRISES

The Presidential Inaugural Committee is currently undergoing the process of standing up, Wagner said. Committee members will make decisions about any special events like opening ceremonies or special concerts.

Wagner, who has participated in 10 previous inaugurations, said surprises are the norm, but the military is used to that.

"Until the [Presidential Inaugural Committee] stands up, ... there are always changes on different parts of the ceremony from the opening to the inaugural ball to galas," Becker said. "We have a lot of great Soldiers and noncommissioned officers who are agile and adaptive, and we have a range of options."

The planning for the next inauguration begins even before the current inauguration takes place, Wagner noted. "It has to do with manpower and budget cycles, which run four or five years ahead of real time," he explained.

The real surprise this year, Wagner said, may be the weather. He still recalls the 1985 inaugural when the temperature never rose above 9 degrees. That year, for safety concerns, ceremonies were held inside the Capitol Rotunda.