

SPOTLIGHT

Meet Your Army: 1st Lt. Lopez is making sure inaugural parade is 'dress right dress'

By C. Todd Lopez

WASHINGTON (Army News Service) -- A native of Tecumseh, Michigan, 1st Lt. Tyler J. Lopez joined the Army for the discipline he craved and the direction he knew it would bring to his life.

Today he finds himself in the nation's capital, assigned on a temporary duty to Joint Task Force-National Capital Region in support of the 58th presidential inauguration, which will take place Jan. 20. The task force is charged with coordinating the military ceremonial support for the inaugural period.

Lopez is working as part of the joint planning team for the inaugural parade. He's in charge of the route control portion of the parade and what he calls the parade's "merge point."

"If you think of a parade, there's going to be different elements," he explained. "We'll have anything from military marchers, bands, and all that good stuff, to horses and floats. The merge point is where everything comes together in the parade to actually get in file order."

On inauguration day, or "I-Day," he said, he will be responsible for making sure that, at the merge point, everything looks "dress right dress."

Right now, Lopez said, not all of the task force's service members are on board. The full contingent will arrive later. For now, he said, they're still in the planning stages of meetings, slides, and briefings.

Over the next few weeks, however, task force participants will pick up the pace with more hands-on tasks like a windshield tour of the parade route and a map exercise that will run task force participants through scenarios on working with civilians attending the inaugural parade.

On Jan. 15, just five days before I-Day, there will be a "full-blown Department of Defense rehearsal" to get ready for the main event.

For Lopez, mission success on the day of the inauguration will mean ensuring that "everything that happens between the start point of the parade and the release point of the parade looks dress-right-dress [and] ... that the president, [who will be] watching in the reviewing stand, is proud of what he sees."

TECUMSEH, MICHIGAN

Lopez calls the city of Tecumseh, near Ann Arbor, where he grew up with his brother and sister, "a small city, a beautiful city." His dad was one of 18 children, so Lopez has a number of aunts and uncles.

"They all live generally in that same area," he said. "So Christmas and Thanksgiving are kind of big events -- everybody comes back to town."

Several of Lopez's uncles also served in the military, including one who was killed in Vietnam. Lopez has visited the Vietnam Wall in Washington to see his uncle's name there. Back in Michigan, though, he said, there wasn't much of a military influence. None of his family enlisted voluntarily, he said. His uncles who served were drafted.

While the tragic events of 9/11 inspired many military-age Americans to enlist, Lopez was in the fifth grade at the time, too young to fully grasp what had happened. So unlike many who joined the Army since that day, the event had little impact on his decision to join.

Even when he was in high school, he said, it didn't occur to him to enlist. But when his two best friends went off to join the Marine Corps after graduation, that did have an impact on him.

"I think I envied that a little bit," he said.

It wasn't until 2009, during his freshman year in college, that he finally became interested in the Army. At the University of Michigan, a friend exposed him to the Reserve Officer Training Corps. Lopez said during a career day at the school, he stopped by the ROTC table to talk with Army representatives about opportunities.

"I was kind of searching for something to grab onto and drive my life a little bit," he remembered. "I liked the idea that ROTC is all about building leadership, building decision-making, building how you handle people and Soldiers. I like discipline. Discipline in life and in decisions. That kind of background for me tied in well with the Army."

Lopez also liked the idea of being a leader.

"I like having responsibility, making decisions, and that feeling when people take your decisions and then act upon them," he said. "The Army kind of gave me a path to have that ... and I never looked back."

In 2013, just weeks after graduating from college, he was off to the Basic Officer Leaders Course. He is now assigned permanently to Fort Eustis, Virginia, where he serves as a training officer with the 53rd Transportation Battalion Movement Control.

He handles ammunition, land and range management, and ensures that units headed to field training exercises have everything they need.

PREPARING FOR TOMORROW

Since he was commissioned, Lopez has also been to Afghanistan. His tour was supposed to last nine months, but it was cut short at four months. While there, he was in charge of an entry control point for a month in Kandahar and later volunteered for another position in Bagram as a training officer.

In Afghanistan, Lopez briefly experienced only the tail end of a conflict that he had watched unfold on television during most of his youth.

Lopez's time in uniform, he believes, will be defined not by the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan, but instead by the Army's preparations for the next conflict, one that will likely be very different. The next conflict could be with a nation that can match the United States -- a near-peer competitor for the Army.

"What's going to define my career in the Army is how we take Soldiers who have fought the counterinsurgency their entire career and transition them back to focusing on standard armies ... countries that have air power, land power and sea power," Lopez said.

MAKING A MARK AS A LEADER

Right now, Lopez is defining mission success according to his current responsibilities. He wants his part of the inaugural parade to go off without a hitch.

The judges of his performance at the inaugural parade in January will be the hundreds of thousands of spectators who line the streets of the nation's capital. But for his Army career, success will involve much more.

Career success for Lopez means being the best leader he can be. The judges of that will be the Soldiers he leads. Ultimately, they will be the ones who will determine whether he's become the kind of officer he wants to be.

"I didn't do this because I wanted to have some fun. I joined because I think I have something to give," he said. "And I hope that when my career is over, whenever that may be, that the Soldiers that I led can say that I gave that to them: a proper leadership."

Lopez's duties in Washington will end sometime in early February, he said. After that, he will return home to Fort Eustis. In April, he will go to the Maneuver Captains Career Course. And after that, he said, he hopes the Army's will have bigger, better leadership opportunities for him to pursue.

"I would kind of like to see the more traditional Army side," he said. "Fort Hood, Fort Bragg, Fort Campbell, and getting into like a normal brigade combat team element, and see the tactical side of the Army a little more."

"That's what I'm hoping for. I'd kind of like to maybe get to Special Operations Command, or U.S. Army Special Operations Command, and kind of try to get one of the Special Forces units and try to be a group support battalion member over there."

