

NCOs of Old Guard Lead 58th Presidential Inauguration

By Martha C. Koester, NCO Journal

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Sgt. 1st Class Christopher G. Taffoya, platoon sergeant for 3rd Platoon Honor Guard Company, stands at attention during the 58th Presidential Inauguration in Washington D.C., Jan. 20, 2017. More than 5,000 military members from across all branches of the armed forces of the United States, including Reserve and National Guard components, provided ceremonial support and Defense Support of Civil Authorities during the inaugural period. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. William Lockwood)

Being a part of the renowned 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) affords many Soldiers unparalleled opportunities on a global stage. For Sgt. 1st Class Christopher G. Taffoya, platoon sergeant for 3rd Platoon Honor Guard Company, it was an opportunity to perform in his second inauguration in an honor guard cordon – this time, as noncommissioned officer in charge of the ceremonial unit.

Taffoya was in charge of a six-man cordon, which serves as an official escort, for President Donald J. Trump at the Capitol before his presidential swearing-in ceremony Jan. 20.

“We are the first Soldiers that he interacts with, which is really cool,” Taffoya said. “It’s just six Soldiers and me.”

It’s a pretty big deal to the NCO from Montclair, California. His first inauguration was President George W. Bush’s second in 2005, where Taffoya served in an honor cordon for the entire day.

Sgt. 1st Class Christopher G. Taffoya, platoon sergeant for 3rd Platoon Honor Guard Company, stands at attention during the 58th Presidential Inauguration in Washington D.C., Jan. 20, 2017. More than 5,000 military members from across all branches of the armed forces of the United States, including Reserve and National Guard components, provided ceremonial support and Defense Support of Civil Authorities during the inaugural period. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. William Lockwood) Sgt. 1st Class Christopher G. Taffoya, platoon sergeant for 3rd Platoon Honor Guard Company, stands at attention during the 58th Presidential Inauguration in Washington D.C., Jan. 20, 2017. More than 5,000 military members from across all branches of the armed forces of the United States, including Reserve and National Guard components, provided ceremonial support and Defense Support of Civil Authorities during the inaugural period. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. William Lockwood)

“It’s a big deal to me, being just a kid from California coming from an extremely modest upbringing,” Taffoya said. “And then to be in two presidential inaugurations, making that history, just for my family alone, is really awesome. But to be [a part of the representation of the free

presidential inaugurations, making that history, just for my family alone, is really awesome. But to be [a part of] the representation of the free world, showing the world that this is what right looks like. This is how you change power. It's just really cool. It's a big thing, and it's not something I take lightly."

Celebrating pageantry

More than 2,000 Soldiers from the Old Guard were tapped to support the 58th Presidential Inauguration. The Old Guard's Presidential Salute Battery, the Fife and Drum Corps, as well as Army cordons were among the performers. Service members participating in the inauguration represent a joint force, which includes Soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen and Coast Guardsmen.

Every Soldier from the Old Guard who has a role in the presidential inauguration has a responsibility to get every detail right.

"The magnitude of the operation was immense," Old Guard commander Col. Jason T. Garkey, told Army publications. Garkey participated in President Bill Clinton's second inauguration in 1997 and Bush's second one in 2005. "In previous inaugurations, I participated in specific parts, but as the regimental commander responsible for Joint Task Force Ceremony, I had visibility on every detail involving the regiment."

Garkey was pleased with the inauguration planning.

"The complexity and amount of detail developed into the plan was extremely impressive," Garkey said. "The seamless integration of our ceremonial and contingency tasks capitalized on every aspect of the regiment. It validated everything we have worked toward since this past summer."

Military tradition

The military's contributions to the presidential inauguration have evolved into a centuries-old tradition. The U.S. military has participated in inaugurations since April 30, 1789, when members of the Army, local militia units and Revolutionary War veterans escorted President George Washington to his first inauguration ceremony at Federal Hall in the nation's first capital in New York City.

Taffoya takes pride in the Old Guard's historical role in such a momentous event like the inauguration.

"One thing in common through all 58 inaugurations is ... us — from the start with President George Washington until now," Taffoya said. "The Old Guard has always been a part of inauguration. We have been a part of that foundation, and America has seen us. To be part of that representation is a big deal. It's an honor. Just being in the unit is cool, but to be able to have the president 1 foot from you, passing you by and being able to render honors to him is just surreal."

Every NCO in the Old Guard strives for perfection in performing ceremonial duties, and discipline is necessary to serve. Soldiers in the Old Guard must pass the demanding Regimental Orientation Program, a three-week course designed to teach new arrivals the subtle distinctions of the uniforms of the Old Guard, rifle movements and marching that is unique to the elite precision unit. Maintaining ceremonial composure is critical to the unit's Soldiers.





Members of the Joint Honor Guard stand at attention during an early morning rehearsal for the 58th Presidential Inauguration in Washington D.C. The rehearsal was held on Jan. 15, 2017, the Sunday before the inauguration. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

"My discipline didn't start when I showed up to the Old Guard," Taffoya said. "It started with my first squad leader, who instilled the discipline in me as a Soldier in 2002. I do the same for my Soldiers. Whether it's here or at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the one thing that carried through is discipline and enforcing it as an NCO.

"That's the biggest thing because everything else is a breakaway of discipline," he said. "You could have all of the Army Values, but if you don't have the discipline to use them or to implement them, you don't have any of them. We in the Old Guard take it seriously because we are representing our Army. If we don't represent the Army right, then we are not doing Soldiers justice, whether we are deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan."

NCOs such as Taffoya recognize that all of the painstaking attention to detail at the Old Guard helps make for better leaders.

"You have to be on your game," he said. "This is like our Super Bowl. It comes once every four years, so it's all hands on deck. A lot of the whole