

Servicemembers rehearse Presidential Inauguration

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Army Staff Sgt. Derrick Brooks, who serves with 741st Military Intelligence out of Fort George G. Meade, Md., stood in for President-elect Barack Obama during the rehearsal for the 56th Presidential Inauguration. Stand-ins for the president, vice president and their families were selected due to height, weight, gender and ethnicity

similarities, according to Air Force Maj. Andra Higgs, action officer with the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee. Marine Corps Photo by Lance Cpl. Bryan G. Carfrey

WASHINGTON, Jan. 11, 2009 – From providing musical performances to acting as key personnel during the swearing-in process, hundreds of servicemembers were on hand this morning around the nation's capital to support the 56th Presidential Inaugural rehearsal.

Each branch of service played a key role in working out potential issues before the inauguration, said Howard Gantman, staff director of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies.

The rehearsal started promptly at 5:30 a.m., with a rough walk-through, followed by the placement of military bands and joint-service cordon personnel.

Army Staff Sgt. Derrick Brooks, who serves with 741st Military Intelligence at Fort George G. Meade, Md., took a position of honor as he stood in for President-elect Barack Obama. Brooks' speech consisted of nothing more than, "My fellow Americans. God bless America," but event coordinators said his role was critical.

Other servicemembers stood in for Vice President-elect Joe Biden and the Obama and Biden families. Navy Seaman LaSean McCray played the role of Michelle Obama. Army Spc. Nicholas Ruppel stood in for Biden, and Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Karen Lowden, as Jill Biden.

Two military children stood in as the Obama girls. Dominique Sewell, the 14-year-old daughter of Army Sgt. 1st Class Natalie Sewell-Johnson, stood in as Malia. Ten-year-old Gianna Justice

Samora-Nixon, daughter of Navy Chief Petty Officer Kenneth Nixon, was Sasha.

All were selected based on height, weight, gender and ethnicity similarities, explained Air Force Maj. Andra Higgs, an action officer with the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee.

The military's involvement in the presidential inauguration is a centuries-old tradition, which honors the commander in chief, recognizes civilian control of the military and celebrates democracy, Higgs said.

More than 5,000 servicemembers will participate in the Jan. 20 event and provide ceremonial assistance.

"It's an honor for them to be center stage," Higgs said. "We're very glad to have been provided with such world-class support."

Today's rehearsal gave members of the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee a sense of what they can expect next week, when 240,000 ticketed guests and potentially millions of spectators gather in Washington to see Obama become the 44th U.S. president.

"It's an honor and a privilege to take part in this [rehearsal]," said Navy Lt. Marcus Jones, who stood in as an Obama family member. "Beside the birth of my children and my marriage, this will be one of the most memorable days of my life."