

257th Army Band Makes History

By Army Staff SGT G.H. Cureton, 715th PA, DC National Guard

Just a few miles from today's historic swearing-in of Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States and the first African-American to serve as the nation's leader, a group of citizen-soldiers will strike an historic note of their own.

The 257th Army Band, "The Band of the Nation's Capital", will take the stage tonight at one of the Inaugural Balls, marking the first time a National Guard band has been given the honor. The band will play Ruffles and Flourishes, Hail to the Chief and the first dance for the new President and the First Lady, which is 'At Last' by Etta James at the Southern States Inaugural Ball at the District of Columbia National Guard Armory.

"The band is so excited. It is such an honor to play for our Commander-in-Chief," said *Chief Warrant Officer (CW3) Sheila Klotz*, commander, 257th Army Band.

For Klotz it is the realization of eight years of hard work building a band that was in danger of being shut down as she took command in 2001. "The Army Staff Bands officer said we were on the chopping block." Klotz said she was given six months to show marked improvement, or the band could be deactivated.

Today, after seven years of hard work, the bandsmen now find themselves enjoying what is without question a highlight of many of their military music careers.

Klotz credited the leadership of Air National Guard Brig. Gen. McTeague, Assistant Adjutant General, District Air National Guard, with fighting to give the 257th a chance to show that they deserved a chance to represent the nation's capital.

"Brigadier General McTeague did not relent," said Klotz. "She pushed and pushed and pushed trying to get us a spot on the street—in the parade. The District National Guard uniquely reports to the President, so only he can activate a DCNG unit for civil emergencies or war-time support. So, in that regard, it's completely appropriate that we should be the lead off unit. We are the Capital Guardians," she added.

The general's efforts paid off and it looked like the 257th would get the chance to march its way into history during the Inaugural Parade. Unfortunately, the unit's size didn't compare to the larger premier military marching bands. The chief knew that the parade would have to wait. "I told her (the general) that instead of the parade maybe we could play at a ball."

Less than two weeks before the inauguration, the Commander and her band received the call that they would be considered but only after proving they had what it takes. The only thing standing between the 257th and their date with history were the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee and officers from United States Army Band.

"They told us they knew from the first beat, "from the first note you played CDR, 'no problem, we were done. You got it,'" Klotz said.

When Klotz told her musicians they had made the cut reactions ranged from excited to nervous to proud. "We have the opportunity to play at some great places for wonderful audiences around the country but it is great to do something of this magnitude at home," said SGT Alisha Coleman, a clarinetist and tenor saxophonist.

"It is almost unbelievable," said SPC. Yong Clark, a flutist, said of the band's good fortune. Within a month of membership in the 257th, one of Clark's first major performances is one for the history books. "All my friends and family are excited. I think they are more excited for me than I am for myself," he added.

For all of the excitement, one member of the 257th will not be able to join his musical battle buddies on the stage. "One of our most loyal soldiers, SGT Randy Huntley, can't do the mission because he broke his leg in three places. But when he found out we got the gig to play the ball, he sent me an email that said, "WE'VE ARRIVED" in big block letters," Klotz said describing the chill she felt telling the story. "That's how I feel. We went from a rag-tag unit, on the chopping block...to this."

Klotz says she's not sure what the future holds for the 257th, but she says she's looking forward to helping the band continue to grow, and enjoying it's new status as a premier National Guard Band.



The 257th performs pre-ceremony music prior to President Obama's arrival.

(Photo by Dennis Young)