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Fires Center of Excellence
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FORT SILL, OK – The Fires Center of Excellence is taking extra precautions this week with its precious cargo of Advanced Individual Training graduates.

A light snow was falling shortly after 7:30 a.m. April 14. Inside Rinehart Fitness Center 91 AIT grads with skills so freshly baked they were still simmering lay carefully spaced apart on mats as they waited to board buses. Most of them wore cloth face coverings, which Fort Sill now requires of anybody in public or work settings where social distancing measures may be difficult to maintain.

The buses taking them to Fort Hood, Texas, were disinfected in anticipation of the newly trained soldiers' journey to their first assignments. Each bus would be only half-full to allow six feet of space between riders. There would be no pit stops along the way. The soldiers took food with them, and the buses had restrooms on board to make sure of that.

All the soldiers were screened for COVID-19 before leaving Fort Sill, and they would be screened again upon arrival at their first duty station, according to Maj. Jason Hawkins, executive officer for the 428th Field Artillery Brigade.

“This is the first of four big pushes, with many more to come,” Hawkins said.

The 91 AIT grads going out April 14 were from both 428th FA Brigade and 30th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, the two schoolhouse brigades that provide instruction for the

FCoE. They are the proud possessors of military occupational specialties across the spectrum of the 14-series (ADA) and 13-series (FA) MOSes.

Subsequent busloads would be taking AIT grads to Fort Carson, Colo., Fort Campbell, Ky., and Fort Riley, Kan., which will free up space in the barracks for Combat Basic Training grads expected to arrive here from Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and Fort Jackson, S.C., to embark on their AIT.

Pvt. 1st Class Tara Phillips is a 13 Bravo, or cannon crewmember on the Paladin howitzer. Army life began for her on Nov. 5 as a trainee with 434th FA Brigade. She completed that in mid-February after coming back from holiday block leave. After a one-week break she spent five weeks and four days with C Battery, 1st Battalion, 78th FA, learning her craft. She graduated April 2 and was headed to Fort Hood to become part of a Paladin unit in 1st Cavalry Division.

“I’m very excited. I’m ready to start my career,” she said.

“It’s been pretty cool,” Phillips said of her experience here. “I went to basic here at Fort Sill as well, and then came over to AIT side. Got to learn my piece pretty well. We did our field exercises, probably my favorite thing. We fired 88 rounds in one day. That was hectic, but it was fun. It was a blast.”

She got to push the switch launching 10 or 12 of those rounds with her crew chief, and said this was what she joined the Army for.

Pvt. Keith Spann said he decided to enlist in the Army because he was having some financial struggles at home.

“After high school for four years I wasn’t really doing much with my life, and I just felt something bigger, something better, was awaiting me. And the Army is helping me achieve my goal,” Spann said.

He went through basic at Fort Leonard Wood starting Nov. 18, and then came to Fort Sill to learn how to be a 13 Bravo. Like Phillips, he will be joining a Paladin unit at 1st Cav.

“I’m going to be honest. It wasn’t my first choice. But I’m glad that I decided to go with field artillery because it’s been a blast learning the pieces and how we operate things here. It is super-exciting, especially when you’re the one pulling the cord,” Spann said.

As the brigade physician assistant for 428th, Capt. Alfred Douglas screened all the AIT grads going to Fort Hood.

“They had a list of questions that we asked them, related to the coronavirus, the COVID-19 disease. And then we took their temperatures to make sure they didn’t have a fever prior to loading onto the bus,” the PA said.

Only one had to be sent to Reynolds Army Health Clinic to get rechecked with the thermometers there, but that individual came back within the normal range.

“So we were able to sign off and say she’s good to go,” Douglas said. Screenings like these have kept the captain busy for the past month. He was doing them solely for 428th, but it now looks as if his workload will expand to include 30th ADA Brigade as well.

“Preparation is big, so when we get here (to the embarkation area at Rinehart) we’re not having to do as much with the paperwork. Any time you’re dealing with paperwork it is a lot, so we try to get as much done ahead of time as we can,” he said. Douglas said the AIT grads have all been schooled on social distancing, keeping apart on the buses and wearing cloth face masks.

Editor's Note:

1. For any questions pertaining to Fort Sill please contact Fires Center of Excellence Public Affairs office at 580-442-2521 or 580-442-2384.
2. Story written by Mitch Meador- Tribune Staff Writer
3. Fort Sill Official Facebook Page:(<https://www.facebook.com/officialftsill/>)
4. Fort Sill Website. (<https://sill-www.army.mil/>)