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Fort Sill Soldiers saddle up, harness team skills

FORT SILL, Okla., Feb. 11, 2021 — The Fort Sill Artillery Half Section is iconic to Fort Sill's Frontier Living.

Its presence at ceremonies is commonplace. But for some of the Soldiers in the section, riding horses is brand new.

"Everyone you see up on the saddle are all new riders. This is their first time," said Gerald Stuck, Half Section chief.

Stuck's job is to train the Soldiers on the basics of riding a horse, taking care of them, and all the ins and outs of making the Half Section run.

Their first lesson Feb. 2 was in teamwork.

"Basically, they're just learning how to control a pair of horses. We're just doing it at a walk today. Tomorrow, we'll probably do some single-mount training and then we'll speed it up."

The horses were hitched up with three riders and three Soldiers sitting in front of a trailing cannon.

"It's not just worrying about one horse you have to worry about your pair, so you have to multitask. That's one of the hardest things for people, especially these guys. Most of them are all brand new riders,

never rode a horse until they came to the Half Section. It's teaching them to cue the animal," said Stuck.

He said the cues are pressure with the rider's legs, their crop and their voice. Stuck would yell "Forward, ho," and the riders' goal was to take off in a synchronized movement.

"On the command 'forward,' preparatory command, they're getting the horses separated to move and then on the command 'ho' everyone should be driving the horse forward. It's called pulling a draft. I want them all to take off at the same time. It's one of the hardest things to do," said Stuck.

Besides properly starting the movement, there is also strategy to how the horses are hitched up. Horses in front of the cannon are called wheel. Those in the middle are called swing, and those at the front are called lead. The horses the riders are on are called near and the ones the riders are not on are called off.

"'Wheel' horses are the biggest. Lead sets the pace and any time you start a new horse, you start them at swing off. The reason for that is because if he was to jump and kick out, 'wheel' could actually suck him back in," said Stuck.

Once they took off, they traveled in splaying circles across the parade field. The horses and their riders were now working in their normal office environment.

And just like in any office, there are different personalities that have to be accounted for in making a cohesive team.

What seemed like one pair being allowed to bicker, a rider explained is actually what makes them work.

“We let the wheel fight because that’s Valcourt,” one rider said as he pointed, “and he likes to go to sleep. So, if McDonald is messing with him he’ll stay awake. It’s a yin-yang thing.”

When the section stopped to rest, one horse in particular looked like he wanted to do more laps.

“Every horse has their own personality,” said Stuck. “Halverson’s the new guy. He started off at Fort Sam Houston with their unit then went to Fort Hood. We picked him up last July. He’s’ doing really good and this is going to be his first season so hopefully when we start ceremony season he’ll be good to go.”

Their first ceremony is expected to be March 13.

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Editor’s Note:

For any questions pertaining to Fort Sill please contact Fires Center of Excellence Public Affairs office at 580-442-6270 or 580-442-2521.