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Trainees return to basics in bay formation at Fort Sill

FORT SILL, Okla., Jan. 21, 2021 -- Basic Combat trainees, drill sergeants and cadre returned from holiday block leave with less than two percent testing positive for COVID-19.

“We had lower COVID rates than I would have ever expected,” said Col. Daniel Blackmon, 434th Field Artillery Brigade commander. “All in all, it shows the cadre were doing the right thing when they went on holiday block leave and probably more importantly, our trainees were doing the right thing. They were going home following COVID protocols, doing the things we told them to do because they wanted to come back and get into training as soon as possible.”

434th FA Brigade Command Sgt. Maj. Scott Slater said the trainees’ return dates were staggered so the brigade could test them for COVID-19 without overwhelming their resources. Program of instruction for all training resumed Jan. 11.

Leaders in the 434th FA Brigade already adjusted training so there is a two-week “bubble” for incoming trainees. They once again had to adjust and use ingenuity to ensure their return would be just as safe.

“What we did coming back from holiday block leave is we said, ‘OK, if they’re living together, they can train together.’ They’re not stopping their training. We’re

just taking them away from a platoon formation and putting them in a bay formation,” said Blackmon. “When the two weeks are up we’re going to put them right back into their platoons.”

There were concerns about letting the approximately 3,000 trainees take holiday block leave due to the pandemic, but the BCT leaders felt if they could mitigate risks, it was worth it to give the cadre a much-needed break from the trail.

“It’s really the only opportunity that we have that our drill sergeants have planned time off so that they can spend time with their families,” said Blackmon. “We have a fairly dictated schedule based on how we do our training here, but at any point in time a drill sergeant can move from battery one to battery two and if that happens any plans they might have had go out the window.

“It was worth it with just the simple fact that it was giving our drill sergeants a chance to take a knee, drink water, and face out.”

Blackmon said the trainees will be screened once again before they break controlled monitoring and return back to platoon formations. Those who tested positive are put into isolation and will return to training once the 10 days are over if they do not have any symptoms the last three days. Those who haven’t missed graduation requirements can return to their unit. If a trainee has missed too much during their isolation, they will be placed in a unit that is in the phase they left and will pick up there.

Blackmon said all the steps they’ve taken have been worth it.

“We are in a good space to continue to train: turn civilians into Soldiers.”

Now that the brigade has tackled the huge hurdle of a safe return from holiday block leave, Blackmon said the future is looking less logistically challenging.

“Right now we’re working on a plan to vaccinate all the cadre. Our No. 1 priority is obviously our Task Force Phoenix folks because they’re the ones that deal with the COVID-19 population the most. We’re going to continue to go down that path until we get everybody vaccinated. And then once that happens it will expand and eventually we think by the summertime we’ll have vaccinations for all of our trainees as well when they come in,” said Blackmon.

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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.