



Farewell to the Army's MWE Program at Fort Sill

The Legacy and Future of Fort Sill's Field Artillery Half Section

By: Rachal Smith and Emma Kirby

When you drive into Lawton, Oklahoma, headed south on I-44 you will see a pinkish, quartz stone monument with the words 'Welcome to Lawton Fort Sill'. Below those words is an etched image of a horse-drawn artillery unit. Generations of Artillerymen have passed this iconic sign and knew they arrived at the Home of Field Artillery. For over 70 years, the sight of six horses pulling a historic French 75mm field gun has been a symbol of Fort Sill and its Field Artillery roots. "They have always been a signature ingredient to our rich traditions and history of the field artillery and Fort Sill," said LTG (R) David Valcourt, former Fort Sill CG. It has connected soldiers and visitors to the traditions of America's artillery. Known as the Field Artillery Half Section, the ceremonial unit served as a living reminder of the era when horses and artillerymen worked side by side on the battlefield.

The term "half section" dates back to the horse-drawn artillery units of the early twentieth century. A full artillery section consisted of two teams: one half that pulled the cannon and another that pulled a caisson carrying ammunition. In fact, the original lyrics to the Army Song, the "Caissons Go Rolling Along", was written as an ode to the half sections of the era. The modern Fort Sill Half Section recreates one of those historic teams, preserving a military tradition that largely disappeared with the introduction of motorized vehicles. For former Fort Sill Commanding General LTG (Ret.) Randal Rigby, the Half Section is more than a ceremonial unit; it is a reminder of the long partnership between artillery Soldiers and the animals that once carried their guns into battle. "Among my keepsakes is a photo of me mounted with the Artillery Half Section," Rigby said. "In my office, when I was CG, I had a painting of a half section pulling a

75mm howitzer up a steep hill, with cannoneers dismounted and pushing the piece to help the struggling horses reach the top. So much of artillery history has to do with the animals used to transport artillery."

The Fort Sill Half-Section was first organized on a temporary basis in 1963. However, they proved so popular that in 1969 the Lawton/Fort Sill Chapter of the Association of the United States Army, along with local business and civic leaders, purchased the first eight Matched-Bay horses for the formation of a permanent fixture on Fort Sill following the post's centennial celebration. Since then, the unit has represented the history and traditions of field artillery at ceremonies and public events across Oklahoma and beyond. The unit's six-horse team pulls a replica World War I-era French 75mm field gun weighing approximately 6,000 pounds, plus a horse to carry the Chief of the Sec-

tion and one for the guidon bearer. To complete the historic impression, Soldiers wear replica uniforms modeled after those used between 1918 and the 1930s. The Half Section's commitment to authenticity also extends to the horses' equipment, with saddles, bridles, and blankets carefully reflecting the gear used by artillery units of the era.

Over the years, the Half Section has become a familiar presence at military ceremonies and public events, taking part in changes of command, retirements, funerals, cannon salutes, reveille and retreat ceremonies, parades, rodeos, and community demonstrations. Through these appearances, the unit gives audiences a living connection to an important chapter of military history. That legacy was recognized on a national stage when the Fort Sill Half Section appeared in the Army's 250th Birthday celebration parade in Washington, D.C., representing its enduring place in Army history.

Behind the ceremonies was a demanding commitment from the Soldiers assigned to the unit. Up to twelve Soldiers from various Fort Sill units served one-year tours with the Half Section. Many arrived with little or no horse experience and quickly learned the skills necessary to care for and work alongside animals weighing more

than 1,500 pounds. Beyond equine care; they learned how to perform the historical actions of a cannon crew, plus how to fire and care for the French 75mm gun. For Soldiers assigned to the Half Section, the duty was more than a ceremonial assignment; it was a lesson in history, leadership, and teamwork. Working with horses required patience, discipline, confidence, and trust, while operating the cannons connected Soldiers to the legacy of horse-drawn artillery. Through daily care, training, and public demonstrations, Soldiers learned to work closely with one another and with their equine partners, building skills that extended well beyond the parade field. Many participants described the experience as one of the most rewarding assignments of their military careers.

A typical day began before sunrise. Soldiers fed and watered the horses, cleaned stables, groomed the animals, maintained equipment, and practiced riding. They were also responsible for preserving the historic saddles, harnesses, bridles, and cannon equipment. Preparing for major events required even greater effort. On ceremony days, Soldiers often reported for duty as early as 0400 to prepare horses, polish equipment, and ensure everything met the unit's high standards. In addition to caring for the horses, they maintained the unit's grounds

and facilities year-round. Although horse-drawn artillery is no longer used in modern warfare, the Field Artillery Half Section ensured that this important chapter of military history was not forgotten. Through its ceremonies, demonstrations, and dedication to authenticity, the unit honored generations of artillerymen who once relied on horses to move guns and ammunition across the battlefield.

For decades, the Half Section has stood as a living symbol of history, its legacy woven into the post's daily life until July 17, 2026. This farewell is the result of a 2025 order from the Department of War, which ended most military working equine programs across the Army. The order was written in an effort to move soldiers back to the duties of their MOS and increase lethality. The decision, however, has not been universally supported within the Field Artillery community.. MG (R) Lee Baxter, former CG and long-time Fort Sill Advocate, said, "Saying Farewell to the Field Artillery Half Section is like saying goodbye to a very close friend. The Army made a big mistake here and tore a little piece of the heart away from every Field Artilleryman or woman who ever associated with Fort Sill. Our maneuver brethren were always awestruck when they saw our wonderful soldiers who manned the half-section, and the remarkable performance on the field for every demonstration. Short-sighted decisions which alter the culture of a Branch can never be good for the Army." Several local, regional, and national organizations tried lobbying in Washington, D.C., and appealing to Army leadership, with no avail, to save the beloved Half Section.

When it became apparent that the MWE program at Fort Sill could not be saved from the chopping block, Lara and Jerry Armstrong stepped up and formed the National Horse Artillery & Cavalry Conservancy (NHACC). Lara Armstrong had been serving as the Chief of the Half Section at Fort Sill since 2020. She was hired to restore and revitalize the



Courtesy of the USFAA Archives.



1st Lt. Justine Guinaw and MWE Rossi. 1LT Guinaw and her mount competed in the Military Cavalry Competition March 25-31 in Las Vegas. (Photo by Monica Wood)



(Above): The Fort Sill Field Artillery Half Section at MG Winston "Phil" Brook's Assumption of Command of the Fires Center of Excellence on 20 July, 2023 at the Old Post Quadrangle. (Photo by Monica Wood)

(Left): Military Working Equine at Fort Sill were historically named after previous Commanding Generals of the Fires Center of Excellence. Following their working time, they received retirement papers and often celebrated with their namesake. LTG(R) Halverson celebrated MWE Halverson's retirement in a ceremony on 6 May 2024. (Photo by Angela Turner)

(Below): The Artillery Half Section performed a final dress rehearsal prior to heading off to march in the Army's 250th Birthday Parade in Washington D.C.. (Photo by Angela Turner)



Courtesy of the USFAA Archives.



program. Over time, its condition had declined amid resource constraints, maintenance challenges, and competing priorities.. As the first woman to serve as Chief, Lara, brought the unit back to its former glory and health through hard work and care. She recognized the important part this organization played and it's potential impact on the community and beyond. The NHACC was founded to preserve the legacy of mounted military service through education and historical demonstrations, while harnessing the healing power of the horse to support the wellness of veterans, service members, and their families. The Armstrongs, along with the Board of the newly found 501c3, have a goal to become the world's premier mounted military program that honors tradition, inspires service, and sets the standard for excellence in horsemanship, heritage preservation, and community engagement. In addition to therapy for military veterans, active duty, and their families, the organization

will provide team and/or mounted color guard appearances at military changes of commands, parades, rodeos, military recruiting and educational events. As of press time for this article, the NHACC was actively sourcing a historic 75mm cannon caisson and gear to perform the beloved half section artillery reenactments.

While Fort Sill says farewell to the horses and staff of the MWE program, who called the installation home for more than seven decades, the tradition they carried forward may not be gone for good. Thanks to the individuals with a vision to preserve these programs, the NHACC is working towards creating an active Half Section program. These reenactments bring history out of the libraries and museums and serve as a living reminder that preserving military traditions helps connect current Soldiers and future generations to the people, equipment, and sacrifices that shaped the Field Artillery branch.

If you are interested in more information or supporting the National Horse Artillery & Cavalry Conservancy, please visit www.national-horseartilleryandcavalryconservancy.org



Scan to learn about & support NHACC.



BG Patrick Costello, soldiers, family and community friends said farewell to the Fort Sill Artillery Half Section Soldiers and Military Working Equine in a ceremony held Fri., July 17, 2026 at the Corral. (Photo Courtesy of U.S. Army Fort Sill)