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More than 5,000 Fort Leonard Wood troops journey home for the holidays

FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. – More than 5,000 service members in training at Fort Leonard Wood traveled to see families, friends and loved ones for the holidays today.

The post's Holiday Block Leave operations commenced Friday with more than 50 chartered buses transporting Fort Leonard Wood troops from the installation to Lambert-St. Louis International Airport.

While the Soldiers waited for their flights to leave, they had the opportunity to take part in a myriad of activities at the airport sponsored by the USO of Missouri, Inc., and the excitement, anticipation and happiness were evident among the Soldiers camped out in the terminal waiting to leave.

"I'm excited to be going home," said Spc. Racheal Oloyede, Company A, 554th Engineer Battalion. "I'm looking forward to seeing my daughter."

Oloyede, who is a Soldier with the Georgia Army National Guard, completed 10 weeks of Basic Combat Training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and is now in week three of Advanced Individual Training at Fort Leonard Wood, where she is training to be a 12N, horizontal construction engineer.

Being a native of Georgia, Oloyede said she's not looking forward to coming back to Missouri.

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Why? “It’s so cold,” she said.

But for Pvt. Hunter Bowman, Company B, 58th Transportation Battalion, he’s looking forward to both going home for the holidays and returning back to Fort Leonard Wood for training.

“I have a cousin, who is like a brother to me, and I haven’t seen him in forever. I really miss him,” Bowman said. “But, being on base makes you want to be active duty, because you’re used to the Army lifestyle. You’re used to waking up every morning and running five miles. You tend to love it.”

Unlike Bowman, Pvt. Cecilia Mondragon, Company A, 58th Transportation Battalion, doesn’t have the same sentiment.

Mondragon said she will be sad to leave her family, and she will really miss her best friend, who she hasn’t seen in a long time.

Nonetheless, Pvt. Mondragon, who will miss her best friend from back home, reunited with an elementary school friend today at the airport for the first time in eight years. Both Bowman and Mondragon attended the same elementary school in Virginia.

Only today in the thousands of Soldiers traveling home for the holidays at the airport did Bowman and Mondragon find each other and discover they are both training at Fort Leonard Wood to be 88M, motor transport operators in 58th Trans. Bn., just in different companies.

“This is so bizarre,” Bowman said. “I was talking to one of the other privates, and I said, ‘I know that name, and I know that face,’” he said. “Granted, it’s been eight years since I’ve seen her. It was really cool sitting in an airport of thousands of Soldiers going home for Christmas and meeting a Soldier I went to elementary school with eight years ago. Now we’re in the Army, in the same MOS (military occupational specialty), at the same base, just a building away from each other.”

And, Mondragon was amazed by the discovery.

“The last time I saw him was in fifth grade. I saw his name tag, and I said, ‘I know him.’ I asked him if he was from Virginia, and he said ‘yep.’ I asked him, ‘what’s your first name.’ He said, ‘Hunter.’ I said, ‘oh my gosh, it’s a small world,’” Mondragon said.

About Fort Leonard Wood

Fort Leonard Wood is a thriving and prosperous installation that has evolved from a small basic training post 70 years ago to a premier Army Center of Excellence that trains more than 80,000 military and civilians each year.

Home to the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood now trains and educates service members and develops doctrine and capabilities for the Training and Doctrine Command's U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School, U.S. Army Engineer School, and U.S. Army Military Police School, three gender integrated Initial Military Training brigades, one of only five reception stations in the Army, and the Army's largest Noncommissioned Officers Academy.

Over the past several years, Fort Leonard Wood has received numerous additional responsibilities to include supporting the 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, a large Forces Command unit that is responsible for all deployable capabilities at Fort Leonard Wood. A colonel-commanded Marine Corps Detachment and an Air Force Detachment, which are both the largest on any Army installation, are located on Fort Leonard Wood; a large Navy Seabee Detachment and elements of the Coast Guard train here as well.
