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Drill sergeants' return to AIT scheduled for late 2019

By JONATHAN (JAY) KOESTER

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During a dress rehearsal for TRADOC's State of NCO Development Town Hall 4, Sgt. Maj. Jose Velazquez (from left), Master Sgt. Michael Lavigne and Sgt. Maj. Brian Lindsey discuss how the live production would work.

A decade after taking drill sergeants out of Advanced Individual Training and replacing them with AIT platoon sergeants, the Army is planning on bringing the drill sergeants back.

Though the idea has been floated in the past, during TRADOC's fourth State of NCO Professional Development Town Hall, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Gragg, the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, Virginia, said the plans are now moving forward. Drill sergeants could be back in AIT as soon as October 2019.¹

"The goal is to get [drill sergeants] back," Gragg said. "We know the force would like them there. We know there is a deficiency in Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills. We know there is a decrease in the level of discipline."

The announcement of a timeline for drill sergeants' return to AIT came after Master Sgt. Michael Lavigne, the town hall moderator, asked Gragg why there is no AIT platoon sergeant badge like there is for drill sergeants. The lack of a device has been one of the problems in getting NCOs to serve as AIT platoon sergeants.²

"We have inquired about [an AIT platoon sergeant badge] on several occasions, asking what can we do to incentivize the AIT platoon sergeant program," Gragg said. "We have a challenge in meeting and maintaining AIT platoon sergeants in the force with the numbers that we need. We are habitually not at that 100 percent mark that we'd like to be. Though we are mandated to man to that level, we're not there. Often it's because individuals have no desire to come out there and do it because there is nothing in it for them. The drill sergeant gets a badge and some special pay. The instructor can earn a badge. I can't do anything for my AIT platoon sergeants. In the process of understanding that, that's why we're going to go back to making them all drill sergeants."

One of the few incentives for serving as an AIT platoon sergeant is that it is a broadening assignment that helps noncommissioned officers get promoted. Between 50 percent and 70

percent of AIT platoon sergeants get selected for promotion.³ But even that incentive comes with caveats.

“The only challenge that I do have with them is that, in comparison to their drill sergeant brethren, they may not get promoted in the same fiscal year because of the simple fact that when that drill sergeant takes their DA photo, they have something in their photo that says they are doing that special duty,” Gragg said. “My AIT platoon sergeants, when they take their photo, they don’t have anything on there. If there’s nothing in that photo that says they are performing that duty — if they don’t have an evaluation on the board file by that time, they won’t see it — so the board won’t necessarily be able to give them credit for that duty. That following year, when they have an evaluation on file, they get picked up.”

In response to a comment in the town hall online discussion board, Sgt. Maj. Brian Lindsey of the Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development at Fort Eustis, Virginia, disputed the idea that AIT platoon sergeants’ job was “babysitting Soldiers.”⁴

“The impact of the AIT platoon sergeant at that level is crucial to when that soldier leaves there,” Lindsey said. “When I’m in AIT, I’m learning my job. It’s crucial that a Soldier leaves there with confidence and is competent when he gets to his first unit of assignment. So, you’re not a babysitter. You should be a great coach, teacher and mentor to ensure when a Soldier gets there, he is a force multiplier for that organization.”

Any leadership failures by AIT platoon sergeants is solely the fault of a flawed system that didn’t give them what they needed to succeed, Gragg said. The move to return drill sergeants to AIT should improve that system.⁵

“For my AIT platoon sergeant brethren out there who would think this is a slap on them, it is not,” Gragg said. “Because those same individuals who are AIT platoon sergeants will be the same exact individuals who will be the drill sergeants. What we’re trying to do is give them more tools to be successful.”

Sometimes, those tools are something as simple as the distinctive drill sergeant hat.⁶

“Right now, I can’t give [AIT platoon sergeants] the infrastructure to be successful,” Gragg said. “They are out there at a 1-to-40 ratio by regulation, but actually they’re out there at a 1-to-120 ratio sometimes in their organizations. How does an individual control a crowd of 120 when in a uniform that looks just like theirs? If you are not vertically gifted and taller than everybody, then they can’t see you. If they can’t see you, those individuals don’t self-discipline unless they hear you, so your sphere of influence is 3 meters around you, eye-to-eye. But if I put distinctive headgear on you, that sphere of influence is increased to 30 meters or so. People around you start self-policing; therefore, those self-policing habits will hopefully become lifelong habits and increase the discipline inside the force as we go along.”

References

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- 4) Lindsey, Brian, “TRADOC State of the NCO Development Town Hall 4.” *YouTube*. April 10, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvF3_3BdDTc
- 5) Gragg, Michael, “Town Hall 4.” April 10, 2017.
- 6) Ibid