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Photo courtesy of Caitlyn Burchett/Perry Newspapers

'You can run, but you can't hide'

By CAITLYN BURCHETT

Five camo-clad men thrash through the darkness of the woods, branches and briars tugging at their skin, as the tall pines prevent the moonlight from reaching the forest floor.

They rose in the dead of night, answering the call for felon apprehension, plunging into the unknown -- guided by a four-legged tracking machine.

"You can run, but you can't hide!" some 28 men bellowed in unison, as the Taylor Correctional Institution (TCI) honored its newest graduates of the Florida Department of Corrections' (FDC) K9 Academy during a commencement ceremony on Friday, Feb. 26. Dressed in tactical camo fatigues and lace-up snake boots, the new K9 Correctional officers beamed with pride as they accepted their K9 Academy certificates before traveling back to their base institutions.



Photo courtesy of Caitlyn Burchett/Perry Newspapers

While some of the graduates traveled from as far as Miami to participate in the 80-hour program, two of the graduates were Taylor Countians who will be added to TCI's current special K9 team.

Officers Michael Flowers and Dennis Rogers join team leader, Sgt. Eric Sadler, Officer Josh Clark, Sgt. James Brandon Mock and Sgt. Jay Swindle, as well as TCI's three bloodhounds, "Hank," "Turbo" and "Dylan."

"Officers Flowers and Rogers are great officers, and we are happy to welcome them to the team," Sadler said. "Their addition allows us to better serve Taylor County, assist local law enforcement and fulfill our public safety mission."



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The 80-hour K9 Academy, which spans two weeks of training, covers basic and advanced tracking techniques taught by expert handler Sadler, as well as Sgt. Matt Tompkins of Mayo Correctional Institution.

Other participating instructors included: Joshua Underwood of Calhoun Correctional Institution, Travis Pickles of Jackson Correctional Institution and Hobie Hollister from Apalachee Correctional Institution. According to the FDC, the corrections K9 teams is one of the most utilized special teams, having received 567 calls across the state in 2020 alone in response to escaped convicts, lost children and missing elderly.

"Society doesn't know what you do, but you do one of the most dangerous jobs," John Slay, FDC research and training specialist, said.

The mission of the FDC K9 corrections' teams are to seek positive resolution to crisis events, such as the escape and recapture of department inmates, to assist law enforcement with felon apprehension and/or locating missing persons.

Noting that many of the FDC's K9 activation calls occur between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., TCI Assistant Warden Michael Mills said, "These guys don't get enough credit for all the long hours, having to leave their families, going out and catching the criminals who are on the run to keep the community safe."

The two-week program trains officers in simulated tactical casualty care, firearms and canine tracking and handling.

"We give you guns, we go through this training, and we put you through some pretty stressful scenarios -- but all of that is iron sharpening iron," Gabe Simpson, FDC research and training specialist, said.

"It is meant to build you up and reinforce that you are already a person of character, so that when the feces hits the oscillating device, you are prepared, that you are intact and that the decision-making process you go through is sound and built on a strong foundation," Simpson continued.

Officer Corey Stephens of Marion Correctional Institution was selected to speak to the graduating class, giving a synopsis of the two-week program and highlighting the importance of Sadler and Tompkins' training.

"During the K9 handling and tracking portion of the training, some of us went swimming, some of us got scraped and cut, but we all learned how vital a role our GPS systems play in keeping the location of our teammates, including the canines," Stephens said.

"We all know time creates distance, and time is not on our side during any of these situations," Stephens said.

According to Stephens, it was the simulation training that brought everything together.

"Simulation training is the closest you can get to a real-life situation with firearms. This training taught us how fast you can be ambushed during an activation. Some of us were shot, but we learned to communicate and work systematically as a team to get to cover, and to keep our eyes open -- always looking and scanning for possible threats," Stephens explained.



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Concluding, Stephens reiterated the FDC K9 Academy motto: "At the end of the day, you can run, but you can't hide."

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