



SEEKING THE BEST



29 two-partner teams compete over 53 grueling hours to find out who are the Army's toughest and smartest combat engineers

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAEL L. LEWIS

Dripping with sweat, even though the early morning temperature was 50 degrees, two Soldiers dragged their wounded comrade under a crisscross of knee-high barbed wire and up to a bolted door. Though clearly exhausted, they had no time to lose; precious seconds ticked away as they slammed the steel door with their battering ram. Finally the door gave way, only to reveal yet another obstacle: a window that was the only way out.

For sappers like them, it was just another day's work. But here, they were under the watchful eye of their profession's best in only the fourth hour of the 2010 Best Sapper Competition at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., last month. The manual breach course through which the team was carrying its 180-pound dummy was one of more than two dozen events spread across 53 continuous hours and 42 grueling miles — all designed to test each team's strength, smarts, stamina and sanity.

In its sixth year, the competition drew 29 two-man teams of combat engineers from across the Army to the home of engineers. There, in the heart of the Ozarks,

Left: A Sapper Leader Course cadre member supervises Sgt. 1st Class Nathaniel Day and Sgt. Tony Doss of the 489th Engineer Battalion, Camp Robinson, Ark., as they prepare two field expedient charges during the 2010 Best Sapper Competition at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., in April.

Right: Staff Sgt. Jess Maney of the 951st Sapper Company, Wisconsin National Guard, peers around a wall as he traverses the urban challenge course on Day 2.

cadre from the Sapper Leader Course — the punishing month-long program in which Soldiers earn the coveted Sapper tab — observed expectantly as each duo proved their mettle and knowledge of sapper know-how.

“The competition gets compared to Best Ranger, and it is similar from the outside looking in: three days and very little sleep,” said Staff Sgt. Corey Wilkens, the NCO in charge of the event. “But, this competition incorporates a lot more academics than just brute strength. They have to think. There’s a lot of technical information that if they don’t know, they are not going to do well.

“You have to be smart *and* strong,” he said. “To us, the Best Sapper isn’t just the person who can run the farthest, lift the most and continue on for three days. In order to coin yourself ‘Best Sapper,’ we know that you’ve got it upstairs and in your heart, and overall, you’re one physically fit team.”

The competition is essentially a concentrated form of the Sapper Leader Course, said Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Wells, the engineer regimental command sergeant major. “It’s got a lot of basic combat engineering skills that they must display proficiency in. Demolitions are a big part of it; going over, around or through obstacles is another. So, you need to know your knots and lashings; you need to know how to make a bridge out of a piece of rope.”

The contest is made to be much more challenging than what Sapper School students experience, Wilkens said.

“Every year, we’ve made it just a little bit harder. Like this year, there were many times when I said, ‘Wow. Do we really need to do that? Isn’t it hard enough already?’ And, there was always somebody who said, ‘Yes. This is Best Sapper.’ Roger that. If we don’t, then it’s just a





Above: Spc. Daniel Moe of the 511th Engineer Company, Fort Campbell, Ky., eyes a target through his compass during Day 2 of the competition. He and his partner were calculating the width of a chasm.

Right: Sgt. David Bauman of the 951st Sapper Company, Wisconsin National Guard, forces open a door on the manual breach course.



Opposite page, top: Spc. Jonathan Hall of the 5th Engineer Battalion, Fort Leonard Wood, climbs across a rope while his partner, 1st Lt. Christine Murray of the 1st Engineer Brigade, follows behind him on the physical endurance course.

Opposite page, bottom: A Sapper Leader Course cadre member observes as Doss and Day construct a charge to be transported and detonated remotely by the Talon robot.

sapper competition instead of *the Best Sapper*.”

Competitors arrived from far and wide — some sporting Sapper tabs, some not — and included a number of notable participants: the first teams from the reserves and National Guard, the first private first class to compete in just his eighth month in the Army, a specialist who volunteered two days before the competition to replace his former platoon leader’s sick partner, and the first team to be sent from downrange, a pair of sergeants from Iraq.

“I did this before; I competed last year and, physically, I’d never been challenged as hard as I was last year. I’d never before had to stop a road march because my feet wouldn’t let me,” said Sgt. Wesley Shields of the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Forward Operating Base Echo, Al Diwanayah, Iraq.

To train, he and his partner, Sgt. Joshua Hanks, spent a month doing two

ruck marches a week to condition their feet. “In the evenings, we tried to focus on the mental aspects — knots, first aid, weapons assembly.”

“I’ve been trying to pick his brain and have asked him so many questions, I feel like I was here last year,” Hanks said.

Of the 29 teams, 12 had at least one enlisted member, including six all-NCO teams. One such pairing hoped their participation would be an inspiration to their Soldiers back home.

“They asked us, ‘Why are you doing it? Why are you putting yourselves through that?’” said Sgt. Daniel Moreno of the 11th Engineer Battalion at Fort Benning, Ga.

“For us NCOs, we’re just trying to lead by example and show our Soldiers this is something they can do, something to strive for,” said Moreno’s partner, Staff Sgt. Steve Herman.

The competition kicked off at 0300 on Day 1 with a non-standard physical train-

ing test, in which teammates tag-teamed each exercise to do as many as possible in five minutes. “We also do pull-ups, but as many pull-ups as you can do,” explained Capt. Douglas Solan, the Sapper Leader Course company commander, who used to teach at the school as an NCO earlier in his career. “We do a run, but let’s do it in full combat gear,” he added, stressing the extreme conditions his instructors built into the competition.

After the arduous workout, the depleted competitors had yet to begin the day-long circuit, a nine-station round robin event that spanned Fort Leonard Wood’s cantonment area. Teams had to road march from station to station with their 65-pound pack — all the specialized equipment a sapper would need to carry — while being timed to ensure a sense of urgency.

On that first day, teams showcased their knowledge of knots and steel-cutting charges; ran, jumped, crawled, climbed and splashed their way through a physical



endurance course; assembled and disassembled a small arsenal of foreign and domestic weapons; remotely identified and destroyed a suspected improvised explosive device using a Talon robot; carefully located and identified a collection of buried mines in the world's most dangerous sandbox; and powered their way over, under and through a series of obstacles while transporting a wounded comrade — the 180-pound dummy.

“All we’re doing with this competition is taking what sappers do day-in and day-out and compressing as many things as we can into three days. But, generally speaking, we do this type of stuff as our

job and there’s a lot of people who don’t know that,” Wilkens said. “A misused sapper downrange is a crime. They’re so versatile and so able to help you in so many ways — people should know our capabilities.”

As dusk descended after the round robin event, there was no rest for the weary as the road march was about to begin. “It’s not just any road march,” Solan said. “This is Missouri and we’re here to test sappers. So, we put them on the most rugged piece of terrain that we could find at Fort Leonard Wood, and it really broke some teams off.”

The number of teams was narrowed

to 20 after that, and competitors were allowed only a few moments of rest before being transported to the next event at sunrise, where they constructed a watertight raft for their gear out of their ponchos, some cord and a few carabiners. Then, the teams helo-casted out of a hovering CH-47 Chinook into a fog-shrouded lake before swimming to shore, their bobbing gear in tow.

Thus began the competition’s signature event, the Sapper Stakes. After navigating a mock Middle Eastern street scene while being shot at by insurgents with live man-marker rounds, teams were tested on reflexive-fire and room-clearance techniques; rappelled down a 90-foot cliff (usually upside-down because of the weight of their packs) to calculate the width of the chasm below; constructed and detonated a makeshift Claymore mine and grapeshot charge out of a soap dish, coffee can, remnants from a hardware store and blocks of plastic explosives; and demonstrated their finesse with explosives in the MOUT course.

“One of the biggest things sappers do these days is military operations in urban terrain,” Solan explained. “It’s not about how much we can blow up; anybody can take a piece of C-4 and just blow up something and destroy it. A sapper needs to know how to blow up something without completely destroying it or harming people inside, because sometimes, we’ve got to get inside a building but don’t need



Above: A Sapper Leader Course cadre member watches as partners Capt. Kyle Moore, left, and Sgt. Ronald Camp saw through a log during the final event, the X-Mile Run.



Left: Sgt. Michael Beattie of the 511th Engineer Company, Fort Campbell, reassembles an AK-47 during a timed exam.

essarily want to kill or hurt anyone.”

As the event stretched into the evening, teams readied themselves for the penultimate challenge, the land navigation course from hell, which began under the cover of darkness just before midnight.

“I’m pretty proud to say that our land navigation course has always been one of the hardest,” Solan said. “We have special forces guys come here all the time and they’re challenged by our *regular* land nav course. For the Best Sapper Competition,

you know we’re going to bust out something special.”

Indeed, of the 20 teams initially sent out, 12 found nothing in the pitch black. Only four teams found a checkpoint and returned before time expired. The event winners only managed to locate two.

After tabulating the cumulative totals, only the top 10 teams advanced to the final tortuous event, the pre-dawn X-Mile Run, so named because competitors know neither the length of the course nor what

other mystery trials the cadre will throw at them.

“That is supposed to be a surprise,” Wilkens said. “It’s a whole different level of testing. That last day is not academic at all. It’s just brute strength and adrenaline and whatever else you have left.”

This year, the course was nine miles, wending through the central athletic fields of Fort Leonard Wood. It began with a half-mile run while wearing a gas mask, then teams sawed through one log and carried another a half-mile; carried a Bangalore crate; navigated an obstacle course while carrying M15 mines; flipped a giant 380-pound tire over a ramp and wall (a task “designed by Satan himself,” one competitor quipped); pounded a fence post into the ground; assembled and disassembled a Bailey bridge; transported another dummy via a pole-less litter and carried four 40-pound “sand babies” for nearly a mile.

After all that, teams ended the compe-

Right, top: Sgt. Joshua Hanks works with his partner, Sgt. Wesley Shields, to set up a water impulse charge to breach a door in the MOUT course.

Right, bottom: Steam rises from a soaked Sgt. Chad Brannan, left, and his partner, Sgt. William Eddleman, of the 1st Special Troops Battalion, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, as they carry their makeshift poncho raft after helo-casting into and swimming across a pond.

tition similarly to the way they began on Day 1 — breaching a pair of steel doors to reach the finish line through a near-life-size replica of the engineers' castle insignia.

Basic trainees from Fort Leonard Wood and representatives from across the regiment, in town for the engineers' annual conference, lined the last steps of the route and cheered the competitors as they lurched toward the finish. After a quick, post-run medical checkup, the teams were at last allowed to rest.

The winners, Capt. Joseph Byrnes and Capt. Jason Castro of the 554th Engineer Battalion at Fort Leonard Wood, said much of their success was due to the many NCOs who originally trained them to become sappers.

"I'd done this competition before with my platoon sergeant. Coming into this year's competition as a two-captain team, I realized that we're missing that NCO backbone, that base of knowledge that sapper NCOs have and have built on over years and years," said Byrnes, who as a second lieutenant won the Best Sapper Competition in 2006 with his partner, Staff Sgt. Jefferey Goodman.

Castro agreed. "We missed that piece of the puzzle. I would look at Joe sometimes, and he would look at me and say, 'Man, I just wish you were an NCO, because today you suck.' That's just the way it is. Their knowledge and their base are just irreplaceable; you just can't fake it."

As the only NCO to make it to the elite final round, Sgt. Ronald Camp of the 1st Engineer Battalion at Fort Riley, Kan., was proud to represent the NCO Corps in the top 10.

"It feels good. But I really, really wish there were more NCOs. I would like to see a lot more of us win."

He credited the close working relationship he had with his partner, Capt.



Kyle Moore, for propelling them far in the competition.

"They didn't throw anything at us that we hadn't worked on. If I didn't know it, he knew it; if he didn't know it, I knew it. If we both had a little familiarization with it, we'd put two and two together and made it work. That's the whole point of this partnership."

"I think we both hit points where we didn't think we could do any more. But, we pushed each other to do it," Moore

said. "Like before the helo-cast, we made a deal: 'I'll swim and pull the raft if you keep yourself going. But, you're going to have to drag me when we get to shore.'"

Camp and Moore were among many participants who expected to return to compete again next year. "Might as well," Moore said. "Though, right now I'm just thinking about breakfast." 

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