

SOLDIERS BATTLE IT OUT FOR THE TITLE OF



Photo by Spc. Samuel Phillips

Competitors at the 2010 Best Warrior Competition had to convoy to many of their events. Above, a unit convoys through a mock village street en route to the Stress Fire event. The competition, held annually, tests the warrior skills of the Army's best Soldiers and NCOs from the 12 major Army commands, including the National Guard and Army Reserve.

BEST WARRIOR

By Spc. Samuel Phillips

“Be all you can be.” “Army of one.” “Army strong.” Since its beginning, the Army has given average citizens the chance to become something more. But, there are some in the Army who strive to become the best of the best. In 2002, the Army found a way to acknowledge Soldiers who were not content with just being “Army strong” – thus, the Best Warrior Competition was born.

The annual competition pits representatives from each of the 12 major commands against each other in a weeklong struggle at Fort Lee, Va., that pushes them to their physical and mental limits. The competition highlights the singular NCO and Soldier who rise above their peers.

This year, Staff Sgt. Christopher McDougall, a representative of the U.S. Army National Capital Region, and Sgt. Sherri Gallagher, a representative of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, were named the 2010 Department of the Army NCO and Soldier of the Year, respectively. The winners were announced Oct. 25 during the 2010 Association of the United States Army Annual Meeting and Exposition at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C.

McDougall said he was caught completely off-guard when he heard his name announced. “The level of Soldier here was extraordinary. To go in there and be selected above all of them ... I felt a little bit of disbelief, a little bit of shock and excitement. I don’t think there’s one emotion that summarizes how it felt to hear my name.”

“There were so many amazing competitors, and the competition was really tough,” Gallagher said. “At any given point, you didn’t really know where you stood against everybody else. It was just an amazing honor to be named the Soldier of the Year.”

When asked what it meant to be the first female Soldier to win Best Warrior, Gallagher said, “It’s an honor. But the way I look at it, we are all a team in the Army. It doesn’t matter what gender, race, or what you do; we’re all just one big team.”

Even though McDougall and Gallagher can now call

themselves the best of the best, the real story is the week of grueling competition that they endured to earn the honor.

In-processing for the competition began at 6 a.m. Oct. 17, giving the 24 competitors a glimpse of who they were up against. Later that night during the orientation briefing, they were given a vague idea of what was in store.

The next morning, the competition started in earnest with what was possibly the most stressful task: the board. What made this board such a tense undertaking was that it was headed by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston. Even with smiles on their faces, you could tell by the Soldiers’ slightly pale complexions and the cool clamminess of their skin just how intense a task it was.

“You have the sergeant major of the Army as the president of the board. ... As much of an honor as that is, it also makes it really, really nerve-racking,” said Staff Sgt. Alicia L. Anderson, the NCO representative from U.S. Army Europe. “However, once I got in and sat down and they asked me a few questions, it got a little easier.”

“Honestly, I realized that he is the sergeant major of the Army, but I tried my best to realize he is a Soldier just like I am,” said Spc. Eric Bugarin, the Soldier representative from U.S. Army National Capital Region. “That’s probably one of the best things you can do.”

Day 1 ticked by as, one-by-one, the competitors appeared before Preston and his board of six command sergeants major. With the board members never once hinting to how anyone was performing, Soldiers left knowing only that they had given it their all, hoping it was enough.

On Day 2 the competition completely changed gears with a physical fitness test at 5:30 a.m. at Williams Stadium. By the time the competitors arrived, the stands were filled with Soldiers from Fort Lee's Ordnance, Transportation and Quartermaster Schools, who cheered as the Best Warrior competitors took the field. After reviewing the Army Physical Fitness Test standards and viewing demonstrations of each event, it was time to begin.

Spectators could see the determination on each of the competitors' faces. They could tell that these Soldiers were not merely content with passing. Throughout the push-up and sit-up events, the competitors pushed themselves to the limits of their strength without giving up. After two events, with the competitors' faces showing a combination of exhaustion and determination, they readied to run.

When the Soldiers took to the track, lining up for the start of the final event, the stadium grew silent in anticipation. At the command, "Begin," the crowd erupted into a roar of excitement as the competitors raced down the track, commencing the two-mile run. The Soldiers' tore down the track, while cheers and shouts of encouragement came from the stands. When the first competitor crossed the finish line, the spectators let out another roar, and they continued bursting into cheers each time a Soldier crossed the line.

"It was awesome," said Spc. John

Evans, the Soldier representing U.S. Army Medical Command. "I've run some marathons before, but never with so many people in one area like this stadium, watching you like a football game."

Some of the competitors hoped they were giving back just as much motivation as they received from the Soldiers in the stands.

"I thought it was great to see all of these guys come out here," Anderson said. "I think it's good for them to see NCOs and Soldiers who have been in [the Army] a bit longer pushing themselves to be the best. ... I hope that it motivated them. Maybe the ones that don't run as fast will be like, 'Oh wow, great. Maybe I'm going to work at it and maybe I'm going to run faster so I can go to the Best Warrior Competition next time.'"

With the PT test completed, the Soldiers had two events behind them. But there was much more to come.

"There are still tons and tons of events; some we don't even know about," Anderson said. "I'm just going to save what I've got and put everything I have into every single one of them."

Competitors were later taken to McLaughlin Gym for weigh-ins. The rest of Day 2 consisted of a written exam and essay on various Army regulations and standards. The day was topped off with a media event where reporters from various organizations got a chance to talk with each of the competitors.

At the start of Day 3, the Soldiers drew their field equipment and conducted a layout and inspection before receiving briefings on land navigation, weapon systems, first aid and other Warrior Tasks that gave them vital information for the rest of the competition.

However, the Soldiers didn't have a lot of time to review what they learned. Right after lunch, they headed to the urban orienteering course. There, what they knew or remembered about land navigation would mean the difference between success and failure.

Photo by David Crozier

Staff Sgt. Eddie Barba, representing U.S. Army Pacific Command, performs a breakdown and reassembly of the Army's .50-caliber machinegun during the weapons portion of the 2010 Best Warrior Competition held at Fort Lee, Va.

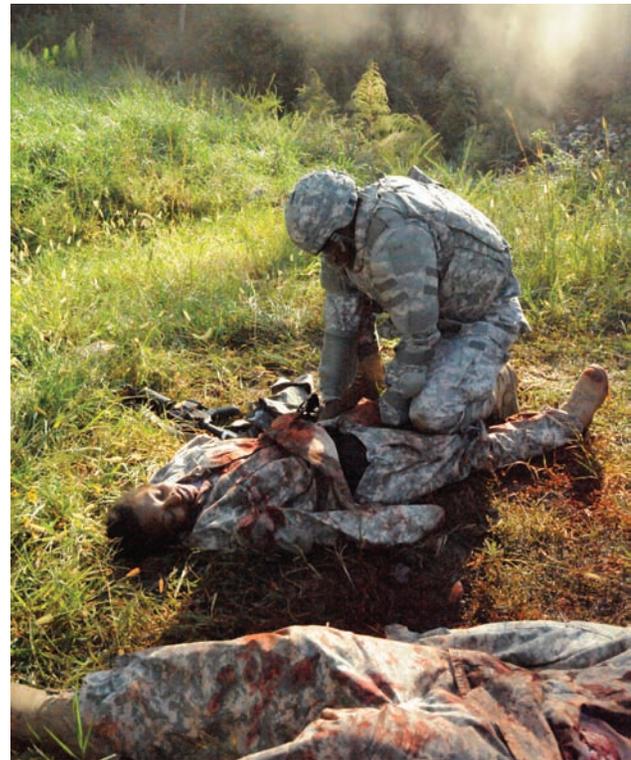


Photo by David Crozier

Sgt. Timothy Hughes, representing 8th U.S. Army, performs combat lifesaver techniques on a simulated casualty during the 2010 Best Warrior Competition held at Fort Lee, Va., during the week of Oct. 17-22.

"The course is not difficult if you have the right skills," said Sgt. 1st Class Edger Esquilin, the NCO in charge of the day and night urban orienteering courses. "However, if you're having problems plotting your points on the map, you might not ever find them."

As the Soldiers' bus pulled up, the dark clouds that blocked out the sun released all the moisture that had been building in them. Light at first, the rain was a slight inconvenience as the Soldiers started pulling what gear they needed out of their ruck sacks. By the time the competitors were ready to check their pace counts and plot their points on their maps, the rain became a downpour.

Spc. Joshua A. McDowell, the Soldier representing U.S. Army Reserve Command, said once he removed his map from its protective plastic bag, it was extremely hard to keep it dry. "The map got soggy really fast, and plotting points became difficult," he said. "You had to be gentle



when writing on the map so not to tear it, then it was hard to see [your plotted points].”

Rain wasn't the only factor competitors had to overcome; Esquilin and his team threw a curve ball at them. Each Soldier had their own lane and each had a scenario to work through.

“At our first point, there was a local national we had to question to get the coordinates to our next point,” said Sgt. Eric Sincore, the Soldier representing USAREUR. “Ultimately, the information we collected led us to a cache of weapons we had to recover.”

The rain let up as the day lanes came to an end, so competitors didn't have to contend with any precipitation as they ran the night urban orienteering course.

After trekking all over Fort Lee, the competitors headed to the range complex on Day 4 to be tested on Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills. Various stations took the Soldiers through everything from providing medical aid to performing weapons functions checks. Impressively, each station looked like a scene straight out of Iraq or Afghanistan.

“My people and I have been going for about two and a half months, preparing daily, going over different scenarios,” said Sgt. 1st Class Dane Sasner, engaging targets and urban operations NCOIC. “We wanted the lanes to be as close as possible to what Soldiers might actually encounter downrange.”

Just by looking around, you could see that Sasner and his team had gone all-out. First was the sheer number of people involved; everywhere you looked there were role-players dressed as local nationals. Then the training complex itself, a maze of modular buildings stacked as high as two stories in places. The structures were made to look as if they had been plucked directly from the Middle East.

However, competitors did not have a lot of time to stand in awe of the world they were plunged into – they had a mission to complete.

“The competitors are going to lead their teams through the village, clearing it as they go,” Sasner said. “They are going to be breaching doors, clearing buildings, engaging enemies, communicating and dealing with all of the commotion and activity going on around them.”

Sasner said the task was made even harder. Soldiers had to distinguish who was an enemy and who was friendly. With artillery simulators and smoke grenades going off all around them, it became very difficult. Competitors had 30 minutes to work their way through the chaos, clear their lane and find their target for extraction.

Another station designed to overwhelm had competitors provide medical aid.

Competitors and teams of Fort Lee

Soldiers assigned to each competitor loaded up into Humvees and began a convoy to the site. Traveling down a gravel road lined with trees on either side, they saw a clearing in the distance. As they approached, they started to make out the shapes of



Photo by David Crozier

Sgt. Larry Isbell performs a uniform inspection on a role-player to ascertain what is wrong with the placement of accoutrements on the Class A uniform. Isbell, representing the U.S. Army National Guard, took part in this year's Best Warrior Competition during the week of Oct. 17-22.



Photo by Spc. Samuel Phillips

Staff Sgt. Loren Gernandt, representing Forces Command, plots his points for the day urban warfare orienteering event during the 2010 Best Warrior Competition held at Fort Lee, Va..

vehicles. Something wasn't right.

The competitors came upon a scene that no Soldier would ever wish to see. Vehicles were torn to shreds, and wounded Soldiers littered the ground. Screams of pain and anguish were the only things that could be heard. Just as it seemed like it couldn't get any worse, gunfire and explosions erupted from the tree line.

After repelling the initial ambush, competitors directed their teams to secure the area while they aided the wounded. The first step was triage, finding out who needed the most immediate aid. With wounds ranging from missing limbs to severe burns, this was no easy task. The competitors did everything they could to treat the Soldiers' wounds and tried to reassure them and keep them calm.

When the task came to an end, the competitors, covered in the fake blood of

ON POINT

those they had just treated, headed back to their vehicles. There wasn't a lot of time to dwell on what had just happened. It was time to head out to the next station.

The remaining stations that awaited the Soldiers were an improvised explosive device lane where the competitors had to react to an IED and transmit a report; a lane where they disassembled and reassembled multiple weapon systems in a haze of smoke with explosions going off all around them; and a convoy mission in a reconfigurable vehicle tactical trainer, which put the Soldiers in a mock Humvee surrounded by a projected virtual environment.

"We did a little bit of everything today. But it was fast paced – one thing after another," said Sgt. David Rider, the NCO representative from USARC. "They could have made everything a lot more basic and a lot more boring. But, I don't think I would have been challenged. I was challenged out here today."

After the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, the competitors conducted a typical zero and qualification range. What the Soldiers were in for after the sun went down was far from normal.

As their bus pulled back up to the range, the area was pitch black; even the vehicles were using only running lights. It was time for the night qualification range. After receiving a safety brief, the shooters found their way to the darkened mounds which held their firing positions. When everyone was ready, the competitors were told to lock-and-load and watch their lane, which was nothing but empty darkness.

Suddenly, everyone heard a hiss as something flew into the sky. When the flare lit, it turned the night into day. More flares hissed and a round of explosions sent fireballs into the night sky. In an instant, the calm night turned into a raging battlefield. The Soldiers fired at targets illuminated by flares and balls of fire. Just as fast as it had started, the last flare burned out and left everyone in the black embrace of night.

Now, only one thing stood between the competitors and the end of the Best Warrior Competition – the mystery event.

At 5 a.m. the next morning, the Soldiers were torn out of bed by the sounds of explosions. They woke to find their mock forward operating base, which had been their home for the last few days, had been attacked. There were casualties everywhere. The competitors had to think fast if they wanted to save anyone.



Photo by David Crozier

The first event of the competition consisted of the board, chaired by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston. Above, Spc. Matthew McLeod, representing U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command, takes his turn at the board.

After treating the wounded, the Soldiers were herded back to the range complex where they faced yet another round of stations designed to test their capabilities. At first glance, many of the stations looked as they did the day before. But, the Soldiers were in for a surprise.

At one station, six competitors and their teams were tasked with providing security for a voting booth. As the competitors moved into position, many of the locals became angry, yelling at and approaching the Soldiers. Just as the competitors were getting the crowd under control, a truck screeched to a halt down the street and gunmen began firing at the voters. A firefight ensued.

After taking up positions behind concrete barriers to support the local authorities who responded, the competitors were ordered to advance on the opposing force, rescue the injured and clear the area of any hostiles. As the first team left the barriers, the city erupted into battle as more and more gunmen fired on the Soldiers. Fighting their way through the smoke-filled streets, the competitors stayed focused and were able to take control of the area. Peace was restored.

Another station brought in the competitors by convoy to the range they had fired at the day before. However, on this day, everything looked different. The lanes between the mounds were littered with wrecked cars, barrier walls and makeshift huts. As each Humvee took its place at the beginning of a lane, the competitors saw a wounded Soldier laying a short distance in front of them. The competitors' mission was to get this Soldier to the medical station further down the lane.

However, the Soldiers didn't know they would be dogged by enemy gunmen the entire time. Fighting for



Photo by Spc. Samuel Phillips

On Day 2 of the competition, warriors were tested on their physical fitness by completing a standard Army Physical Fitness Test. The warriors were given 10 minutes between each event, which began with push-ups and sit-ups and concluded with the 2-mile run. After being tested physically, the warriors spent the rest of the morning taking a written test and writing an essay.

every step they took, the competitors made it to the medical station, where they found their mission was far from over. Now they had to rescue a hostage from another gunman. As the competitors left the station and advanced, the gunman backpedaled, trying to keep as much distance as possible between themselves and the approaching Soldiers. When they had finally taken down the last gunman, the Soldiers led the hostage to the aid station, mounted up and moved toward their next task.

The last two stations were far calmer but no less harrowing, consisting of inspections where each competitor had to find all of the deficiencies on the uniforms worn by six Soldiers. A firing session on the Engagement Skills Trainer 2000, an indoor simulated range, followed.

The capstone event of the 2010 Best Warrior Competition was an all-out combatives tournament. Exhausted from the week of competition and the strain of that morning's events, the Soldiers now had to put everything they had left into the pit. In this double-elimination tournament, only one competitor would claim the title of "Lord of the Pit." As they fought on the mat, you could see determination in their eyes. This was it – the last test – and every one of the competitors wanted to walk away the victor.

And then, it was over. The combatives tournament was complete and the Best Warrior Competition had come to an end. The Soldiers out-processed from Fort Lee and were bussed to Washington, D.C., to await the announcement of the winners.

"This is the best competition we've ever done," Preston said. "What I liked most about this year's competition was that it was scenario-based situations that not only put Soldiers in real-world scenarios but gave them a chance to showcase their Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills and those Soldier skills we want all of our Soldiers to know and do."

Preston also said he was impressed with the competitors. "I've been doing this for a while now; I've seen the competitors come through year after year, and, of course, each year the level of competency of the competitors coming through is a little bit better. I believe this competition influences that. It puts the right focus out there to the organizations to allow leaders ... to focus their training efforts to ensure that the Soldiers we're



Photo by Spc. Samuel Phillips
Staff Sgt. James Harris, representing U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command, takes on a fellow competitor during the combatives tournament, the final event of the 2010 Best Warrior Competition.

growing are our very best."

Both McDougall and Gallagher said they could have never made it to where they are without the support of their units.

"I would never at any time say this is an individual accomplishment," McDougall said. "It's far from that; it's a team accomplishment. My unit had confidence in me since before Day 1 ever started, and that's continued throughout the whole process."

They both agreed that if anyone wishes to make it to the top, they need to take everything one step at a time, keep pushing forward, set small goals and work toward them.

Gallagher's best advice is, "Stay motivated no matter what you do." 📷

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Photo by Spc. Samuel Phillips

A competitor and his team go through the stress fire course during the 2010 Best Warrior Competition held at Fort Lee, Va.

NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS



Staff Sgt. Alicia Anderson
 Unit: C Co, 7th Army Non-Commissioned Officer Academy
 Military Occupation Specialty: 35H, Strategic Intelligence



Staff Sgt. Eddie Barba
 Unit: 1-5 IN, United States Army Alaska
 MOS: 11B, Infantryman/Squad leader



Staff Sgt. Jacob Barner
 Unit: HHC, 160th SOAR (A)
 MOS: 15J, Aircraft Armament/Electronic/ Avionic Systems Repairer



Sgt. John Ferguson
 Unit: HHC, Army Sustainment Command
 MOS: 11B, Infantryman/Security Specialist



Staff Sgt. Loren Gernandt
 Unit: HHC, 20th Engineer Brigade, XVIII Airborne Corps
 MOS: 21Y, Geospatial Squad Leader



Staff Sgt. James Harris
 Unit: Delta Detachment 1st Space Company
 MOS: 14J Air Defense Tactical Operations Center Operator



Sgt. Timothy Hughes
 Unit: A Co, Division STB, 2d ID, Camp Red Cloud South Korea
 MOS: 25U, Signal Systems Specialist



Staff Sgt. Russell Kojo
 Unit: University of California Berkeley Army ROTC
 MOS: 11B, Infantryman Assistant Senior Military Instructor



Staff Sgt. Adam Little
 Unit: OCS Course Manager, 177th Regiment (RTI), Michigan Army National Guard
 MOS: 31B, Military Police



Staff Sgt. Christopher McDougall
 Unit: USAG Stuttgart Provost Marshal's Office
 MOS: 31B, Military Police

NCO OF THE YEAR



Sgt. David Rider
 Unit: 256th Combat Support Hospital
 MOS: 68W with an ASI of M6, Combat Medic, Licensed Practical Nurse



Staff Sgt. Adam Sahlberg
 Unit: USA MEDDAC, Fort Irwin, CA
 MOS: 68W, Combat Medic

ENLISTED SOLDIERS

**Spc. Eric Bugarin**

Unit: 95th MP Company, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA
MOS: 35H, Strategic Intelligence

**Pfc. Cody Dodson**

Unit: HHB, 2nd Bn 44th Air Defense Artillery
MOS: 14J with an ASI of C41 Air Defense, Tactical Operations Center
 Enhanced Operator Maintainer

**Sgt. John Evans**

Unit: USA MEDDAC, Munson Army Health Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
MOS: 68P, Radiology Specialist

Sgt. Sherri Gallagher

Unit: US Army Marksmanship Unit
MOS: 88M, Motor Transportation Operator

**Spc. Loren Gernandt**

Unit: HHC, 20th Engineer Brigade, XVIII Airborne Corps
MOS: 21Y, Geospatial Squad Leader

Sgt. Larry Isbell

Unit: Active Army and the Oklahoma Army National Guard
MOS: 11B, Infantryman

**Spc. Andy James**

Unit: 2nd Battalion 27th Infantry Regiment, HHC, Scout Recon Platoon
MOS: 11B, Scout Observer

Cpl. Sabrina Martinez

Unit: Office of the Judge Advocate, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Special Troops Battalion at Yongsan Army base in Seoul, South Korea
MOS: 27D with an ASI of C5, Legal Specialist Court Room Reporter

**Spc. Joshua McDowell**

Assigned Unit: 7246 Installation Medical Support Unit
Military Occupation Specialty: 68W, Combat Medic

Spc. Matthew McLeod

Assigned Unit: Delta Company, 53rd Signal Battalion
Military Occupation Specialty: 25S with an ASI of 1C, Satellite Communication Systems Operator Maintainer, Satellite Systems/Network Controller

**Spc. Alex Perenishko**

Assigned Unit: 690th Transportation Detachment
Military Occupation Specialty: 88H, Cargo Specialist

Sgt. Eric Sincore

Assigned Unit: A Co 40th Engineer Battalion
Military Occupation Specialty: 21B, Combat Engineer

