POWERING THROUGH

The Army's toughest combat engineers battle to discover who deserves to be called **BEST SAPPER**

Staff Sgt. Jacob Matson uses a battering ram to open a bolted door as his teammate, Capt. Douglas Droesch, offers encouragement at the end of the X-Mile Run, the last event of the competition. The team represented the 425th Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, from Joint Base Elemendorf-Richardson, Alaska.

STORY & PHOTOS BY SGT. SAMUEL J. PHILLIPS

Every year, two-man teams of combat engineers from throughout the Army storm Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and run, walk, crawl, swim and blast their way through a three-day competition in hopes of earning the title "Best Sapper." This year, 37 teams answered the call to prove their skills through tasks including a harrowing helocast and the mystery-shrouded X-Mile Run – over 56 continuous hours of grueling events that would force them to use every ounce of their skills and push them to the limits, both physically and mentally.

During the competition, participants cleared mine fields, destroyed road blocks, breached doors, evacuated casualties and marched more than 52 miles. When the smoke cleared and the last door was breached, only one team had the right to call themselves Best Sappers: Capt. Joe Riley and Capt. John Chambers of the 554th Engineer Battalion at Fort Leonard Wood.

"It was a hard competition," Riley said. "If it hadn't been for the other teams giving it everything they had and motivating us to push ourselves beyond our limits, we would have never made it."

"That's the purpose of the competition," said Sgt. 1st Class Steven W. Laire Jr., the senior training management NCO with the Sapper Leader Course, which is taught at Fort Leonard Wood. The course's cadre is responsible for running the competition. "We want the competitors to leave everything out on the course."

In the early morning hours of April 7, competitors donned their individual body armor — weighing more than 16 pounds — and grabbed their rifles. Winding down a path through the woods, the teams emerged onto a street to find graders standing ready with clipboards in hand. In short order, the 37 teams were broken into three groups, and the first was sent to the starting line of the first event — a 3-mile run. After a grader shouted, "Begin," the Soldiers tore down the street. The first phase of Best Sapper — a nonstandard physical fitness test — had begun.

"Truthfully, 'nonstandard' is an understatement," Laire said. "We wanted to incorporate exercises from the new [Army Physical Readiness Training] manual and, at the same time, design a test that would push the competitors to near exhaustion."

The first group of Soldiers trudged up and over hill after hill, disappearing into the distance. Moments later, the second group took to the course, and as they vanished over the last hill, the third group followed. Graders and spectators alike were left behind, eagerly awaiting their return.

As the first team came into sight, cresting the farthest hill, murmurs broke out among those at the finish line. Everyone strained their eyes, trying to be the first to identify the Soldiers laboring toward them. Once in view, it was clear that the run had taken its toll on the teams. As their faces twisted in pain, team members gasped for air as sweat streamed down their faces.

"This is the first year that we have put the run before the other events in the nonstandard PT test," Laire said. "We wanted to keep the competitors guessing and shake them up a bit."

"I like the way they threw the curve ball at us," said Staff Sgt. Steven M. Herman of the 11th Engineer Battalion out of Fort Benning, Ga. "Everyone has been training for the tests that they have given in the past and, instead of doing the standard run, they threw something a little different at us."

The looks on the competitors' faces as they crossed the finish line was all the proof needed to see the run was successful in "shaking up" the competitors. In fact, from the finish line, spectators could hear Soldiers being sick after pushing themselves further than their bodies could handle. However, three more PT test events awaited the teams after they crossed the finish line.

"Of course, there were the standard push-ups and sit-ups. But to change it up, we gave them 5 minutes for each event instead of 2," Laire said. "Then, we added an additional 3 minutes of heel hooks to finish off the competitors."

After the test, however, there was no time to rest or prepare for Phase II of the competition, a round-robin of events that kicked off with a helocast. Competitors, wearing a full combat load and short wet suits under their uniforms, lined the side of a landing zone for the UH-60 Black Hawk that would carry them to their destination, a man-made lake used to train sappers.

As the Black Hawk approached the drop zone, competitors started to stir and the 5-minute warning was given. When the 1-minute warning sounded, competitors prepared themselves for the task ahead: With their weapons and rucksacks, they were to

Right: Two teammates jump from a UH-60 Black Hawk into a lake during the first day of the 2011 Best Sapper Competition. Teams then had to swim with all their gear to the shoreline.

Below left: A competitor performs heel hooks during the nonstandard physical training test on the first day of the competition.

Below right: Sgt. 1st Class Oscar Rodriguez and 1st Lt. Patrick Benitez of the 4th Engineer Battalion, Fort Carson, Colo., emerge from the lake after successfully completing the helocast event.

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— SGT 1ST CLASS STEVEN W. LAIRE JR.

Above: Pfc. Jason Fitzpatrick uses an arc cutter to cut through the hinges of a door during the round-robin portion of the competition. Fitzpatrick and his partner, Pfc. Allen Copeland, represented the 27th Engineer Battalion from Fort Bragg, N.C.

Right top: Spc. Michael Wheeler jumps through a window in the casualty evacuation lane of the round-robin phase.

Right bottom: Wheeler's teammate, Sgt. Maj. Reginald Maxwell, looks at the path ahead as the two pull a stretcher under a web of barbed wire. Wheeler represented the 94th Engineer Battalion from Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and Maxwell represented United States Army Central and Third Army from Atlanta, Ga.

jump out of the helicopter into 49-degree water. The helicopter arrived at the drop site and, in under a minute, the competitors were out the doors, and the bird headed back up into the sky.

Once in the water, the competitors had a nearly 100-yard swim to the shore. Once they arrived, they took a minute to haul their water-laden gear to dry land before rushing to the finish line.

"The water was cold at first. But once you're in there for a while, working your way to shore, it's not so bad," said Sgt. 1st Class Davien Houchin, a competitor representing the 1457th Engineer Battalion, a National Guard unit out of Riverton, Utah.

Seven more tasks faced competitors in Phase II, including thermal breaching. Soldiers arrived at the station to find an arc cutter and three obstacles. Their mission was to cut through all of them – a rack of 10 pieces of rebar, three door hinges and a 3-inch-thick steel bar, Laire said.

The round-robin phase also included the destruction of an improvised explosive device. This lane required the competitors to operate a Talon robot through a mock village in search of an IED. The teams then had to construct a charge and use the robot to place the charge within inches of the IED without touching it. To top it off, they had only 10 minutes to accomplish the task.

The rest of Phase II consisted of the call for fire, forward reconnaissance, expedient devices, casualty evacuation and hybrid systems events. Afterward, competitors headed into Phase III, a 6-hour night land navigation course. Each team was given a map and six points to find as they traversed the thickly wooded landscape dotted with bodies of water. Since it had rained just days before the competition, the task was that much harder, Laire said.

"Every year, the land navigation course claims its share of teams during the competition. We've had teams get lost, give up looking and literally fall asleep from exhaustion," Laire said.

However, even if a team doesn't succumb to the land navigation course, it still has to make the cutoff, Laire added. At the end of Phase III, only the top 20 teams advanced to Phase IV, cutting the number of competitors almost in half. For those teams that made the cutoff, Phase IV challenged them with Sapper Stakes.

An explosive event, military operations in urban terrain breach was designed to test each team in its ability to construct and deploy simple explosive devices in the field, Laire said. At the beginning of the task, each team was given a shotgun, a detonation cord, two bags of water and various other supplies.

The task was to construct two charges — one a simple double-length of detonation cord, the other a water charge. The teams then used these charges, along with the shotgun, to breach three doors. First, with well-placed shotgun blasts at the hinges, the door went down without much of a fight. The next door was not as lucky and was blown off its hinges with the det-cord charge. Lastly, a well-constructed water charge blasted into the door with such tremendous force, it left behind a crater in the door.

Another event in the Sapper Stakes was the unoccupied search. This task also required competitors to operate a Talon robot. This time, however, they had to use the robot to enter a building that was reported to house IEDs and IED-making material. After entering the building, each team had to find as many high-value items as possible while avoiding any booby traps.

Later in the in-stride breach event, teams constructed charges to clear a roadway of simulated mines and a double-stacked wall

of concertina wire. After 15 minutes to prep their charges, it was time to place them. Since safety is the first thing on everyone's mind when moving through a mine field, the sappers had a unique way of avoiding the mines.

As one member of the team stood back, another used a grappling hook to find a safe route to advance by swinging and tossing the hook in the direction of travel and pulling it back to ensure there were no mines in that path. The second member advanced to just behind where the hook last landed and repeated the process until both members of the team reached their destination safely to place the charges and clear the wire.

Other Phase IV events included field expedient charges, knots, room entry and clear, weapons assembly and reflexive fire.

"All events throughout the competition focus on either sapper-specific skills or basic soldiering skills. Either way, competitors should be ready for whatever we throw at them," Laire said.

Phase V was the X-Mile Road March. Competitors had 4 hours to complete a course designated "X-Mile" because they were not told the total distance in advance.

"A road march in full gear is bad enough. But when you factor in lack of sleep, physical exhaustion and the fact that you don't know how far you are going, it turns into a whole new beast," Laire said.

There was another twist to this march, however. As soon as the event ended, another cut was made. This halved the number of teams once more, and only the top 10 found their way to the sixth and final phase of the competition.

Phase VI, the X-Mile Run, began at 4 a.m. April 9, more than 53 hours after the competition began. This was each team's last chance to leave everything it had out on the course, Laire said. With whatever energy they could muster, the competitors faced off against what would be an 8-mile run. They had the additional tasks of running with a protective mask, a spike drive, a humvee pull, a relay while carrying dummy M15 mines, a tire flip, carrying concertina wire, a chain drag, expedient rigging and a crater-charge carry.

After all of this, there was but one obstacle left before the teams could storm a replica of engineers' castle insignia and cross the finish line: two doors. However, these doors were bolted and the teams had only a small battering ram to bust them down.

"After everything we had been through, the only thing that kept me going was the fact that I knew once I got through those doors, it was all over," Herman said.

"This whole competition has been a learning experience," Houchin said. "I love having the opportunity to participate in events like this. You couldn't ask for better training."

Additionally, Laire issued two challenges — first, he wants more combat engineer NCOs to lead by example by participating in the competition, and second, he would like for Marines in the combat engineer career field to try their hand in Best Sapper.

"Best Sapper not only gives us a chance to recognize the best combat engineers, it allows us to showcase what sappers can do," Laire said. "Sappers are a vital asset, and this competition is our chance to show it." NCOJ

To contact Sgt. Samuel J. Phillips, visit the NCO Journal *website at* https://usasma.bliss.army.mil/NCOJournal/.

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— SGT 1ST CLASS DAVIEN HOUCHIN

Top left: Sgt. 1st Class Davien Houchin carries a dummy M15 mine through a metal tunnel during the X-Mile Run, the competition's final event. Houchin and his partner, Capt. Michael Ditto, represented the 1457th Engineer Battalion from Riverton, Utah.

Top right: Staff Sgt. Robert Smith (front) and 1st Lt. John Case carry a bundle of concertina wire during the X-Mile Run. They represented the 14th Engineer Battalion from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

Left: Staff Sgt. Steven M. Herman (left) points out features of their objective to 1st Lt. Jay Beeman as they carry shaped charges they constructed during the field expedient charges event. The team was representing the 11th Engineer Battalion from Fort Benning, Ga.