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2009: THE YEAR OF THE NCO

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Grueling four-day competition challenges U.S. Army Europe's best warriors for 2009 Soldier, NCO of the Year titles



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Sgt. Rachel Singratsomboune of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment tends to a fellow Soldier role-playing as a 'casualty' with a head wound during the medical testing portion of the 2009 U.S. Army Europe Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year Competition in Grafenwoehr, Germany, Aug. 11.

By Sgt. Daniel J. Nichols

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

GRAFENWOEHR TRAINING AREA, Germany --

Eleven Soldiers and noncommissioned officers spent four days having their physical and mental stamina and warrior skills challenged in the 2009 U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year Competition, Aug. 9-13.

The annual competition determines who is named USAREUR's best Soldier and best NCO this year, and who will represent the command in Army-level competition.

"We've got a very challenging week for you," said USAREUR Command Sgt. Maj. Ralph Beam during a reception the first day. "If it was easy we'd get anyone to come up here and do it. Regardless of who comes out as the winner at the end of this week ... you're

really going to be a winner if you make it to the end of the week. That should be your challenge."

This year's competition was intended to be tougher than competitions in the past.

"The competitor that we're looking for to send to the Army level is the one that is very good at dealing with fatigue, physical and mental," said Sgt. Maj. Michael Kennedy of the Joint Multinational Training Command's operations division here, who designed many of the tasks for the event. "The Soldier that can operate on minimum amounts of rest and information for long periods of time and still remember to do the little things even when they're tired, sore, and not real happy about the situation they're in."

The competition kicked off Aug. 10 with an Army Physical Fitness Test, and then competitors flexed their mental prowess with a military board, an essay assignment and a written exam. The mental challenges had some itching to do some field training.

“The whole competition’s been pretty good so far, except for the board,” said Soldier of the Year competitor Sgt. Robert Murray from Hohenfels, Germany’s 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment. “I was kind of hoping we could leave for the field now.”

Later that night, the competitors did head for the field, leaving behind everything but their military gear, ID cards, and ID tags. They wouldn’t return until three days later.

Their first task was night orienteering and night land navigation, a course that kept them moving from late night until early the following morning, when the competitors bedded down for a short rest under a rising sun.

“It was daylight outside when I went to sleep,” said Sgt. Jason Gilliland, NCO of the Year competitor from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. “The sun was out, and when I woke up it looked like the sun didn’t move too much in the sky, so I’m guessing maybe an hour, an hour-and-a-half of sleep.”

The candidates quickly moved on to the next tasks, which included a medical task lane, weapons familiarization, and a ‘pile test’ which involved assembling five working weapons from a box of parts in less than 15 minutes.

“It was pretty tough,” said Gilliland, “It’s a lot of thinking -- a lot of stress involved -- a lot of physically demanding tasks that needed to be performed. So you’re under physical stress, emotional stress, fatigue from being tired, and just trying to think -- and it’s hard to,” he said.



SGT DANIEL J. NICHOLS
(Left to right) Sgts. Manuel Rodriguez and Rachel Singratsomboune, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment; Spc. Gavin Spain, NATO Brigade; and Staff Sgt. Stephane Douge and Spc. Andrew Yang, 172nd Infantry Brigade, seal up their personal items such as wrist watches, wallets, cell phones, and any other item that can be used to tell time or location, shortly before departing to a field location during the U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year Competition at the Grafenwoehr (Germany) Training Area, Aug. 10.



SGT DANIEL J. NICHOLS

Sgt. Jason Hancock, (foreground) of the 21st Theater Sustainment Command establishes security behind a wall with his squad while Spc. Andrew Payne of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team calls in a situation report, during competition on the Military Operations on Urban Terrain site at the 2009 U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year Competition in Grafenwoehr, Germany, Aug. 12.

After another long day the competitors caught some sleep, and then moved out on their next task later that night.

“Probably sometime tonight, the competitors will enter a new playing field,” said Kennedy.

“There will be those of them who just don’t really want to win any more; they just want to finish because their pride won’t let them quit.”

“Now all of them want to win it to some degree,” the sergeant major added. “But it’s up to me to measure how much they want to win it in that 72 hours, with four or five hours of sleep walking 50 to 60 kilometers carrying 40-60 pounds of equipment and not knowing what you’re doing every 10 minutes to 10 minutes. I hope to separate those who really want to win and those who just want to compete.”

That night competitors went on a foot march that truly tested their limits.

“It was long and it was difficult, because you don’t know how far you’re going,” said Spc. Gavin Spain of the NATO Brigade. “You just go from one point to another, and the next thing you know 1K turns into two, two turns into five, five into ten, and after that you just lose count. So you just keep moving.”

The next day’s challenges included reacting to indirect and direct fire on a Military Operations on Urban Terrain site; reacting to improvised explosive devices while on a mounted patrol; identifying and throwing grenades; and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear skills testing.

Sgt. Jason Hancock was Pfc. Jason Hancock when he competed last year for Soldier of the Year honors. This year the 21st Theater Sustainment Command sergeant aims to be named top NCO, but he admitted this challenge is different.

“Either it got a lot tougher, or I got a lot older,” said Hancock.

That night was the last night movement for the contenders before the final day of competition. In the dark with only a chem-light and a small flashlight with a red lens, Spain plotted a point the

size of a pinhead on his map. On a couple hours' sleep it looked like a daunting task, but he said he was actually getting used to being asked to push himself beyond the seemingly impossible.

"I've been going hard at these competitions since like February. No down time, no break in between. I mean it all feels really like one competition ... the next competition is really just training you up for the next one," he said.

On the final day competitors qualified on the M-4 rifle, ran an obstacle course, and completed a leadership reaction course before taking some time to patch up their feet for the next mission.

Your next task, Beam told them, is a one- to 10-kilometer run over various types of terrain. At the finish point you will receive your next mission. We will stay in a tight group, leaving no one behind. You have 10 minutes to stretch before we move out.

After less than a kilometer the group was heading to the NCO Academy, where a crowd of about 50 command sergeants major, company first sergeants, sponsors and friends waited to cheer them on.

Concluding the run, Beam turned the competitors over to Kennedy, who had only one thing to say: "Fall out!"

Exhausted, fatigued, covered in sweat, dirt, blisters and pain, the competitors gratefully followed orders and accepted the praise of those who had come to congratulate them.

The competition was over. But perhaps the hardest part – finding out who won – was just beginning.

That announcement will be made Aug. 27 at the 2009 Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year awards ceremony at the Village Pavilion in Heidelberg, Germany.

More information on the competition and reservations for the awards ceremony are available on the USAREUR home page at www.hqusareur.army.mil/soy. The deadline for reservations is Aug. 24.



www.hqusareur.army.mil