



Spc. Adam Christensen (left), the 2013 U.S. Army Soldier of the Year, stands with Sgt. 1st Class Jason Manella, the 2013 U.S. Army NCO of the Year, in front of the post flagpole Nov. 23 at Fort Lee, Va., where the 2013 Army Best Warrior Competition was held. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

# NCO And Soldier of the Year Show Resilience, Hard Work Pay Off

*By Michael L. Lewis*

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One year ago, now-Sgt. 1st Class Jason Manella was suffering from a traumatic brain injury after his third deployment. Two years ago, now-Spc. Adam Christensen was a plumber looking to do something that would make a difference. Today, they are the Army's Best Warriors — the 2013 Army NCO of the Year and Soldier of the Year — and are exemplars of how character, commitment and competence are the hallmarks of the Army profession.

Announced Friday night, Nov. 22, after three days of grueling competition at Fort Lee, Va., that pushed the competitors representing 12 major commands to their physical and mental limits, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III called the winners the best of what the Army has to offer.

"I'm proud of them," he said Friday. "They are the standard-bearers, the disciplined leaders and future mentors. The Army is a profession, and they represent all of us."

## Drawing on their experience

Manella, 27, a civil affairs specialist with B Company, 445th Civil Affairs Battalion, 364th Civil Affairs Brigade, represented the U.S. Army Reserve and was ready for the jokes and good-natured ribbing that those in the reserve component often hear from their active-duty colleagues.

"I feel that the challenge of being a Reservist or National Guardsman is overcoming the initial stigma," Manella said. "Immediately, a lot of active-duty Soldiers are going to assume that you are less trained, less prepared, less competent. But that's not necessarily the case.



Christensen throws a rope to a member of his fire team during the Leadership Reaction Course event Nov. 21 (Photo by Spc. Steven Hitchcock)

ited his NCO, Staff Sgt. Robert Norton, for helping him overcome his shortcomings with the board.

“The board has always been my weakness,” Christensen said. “Being in the field and doing the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, that’s where I love to be. Honestly, I have to hand it to my sponsor. Sgt. Norton sat me down, and we went step-by-step through the most important things at a board. We worked on presence, on delivery. My ability in the board is unrecognizable compared to when I first started doing these competitions, and I have Sgt. Norton to thank for that.”

Winning among the entire Army, including active-duty Soldiers and those in the National Guard, proves that all Soldiers are competent, no matter which component they belong to or train in.”

Still, being a Reservist brought its challenges. Besides having to squeeze in studying and preparation for the competition in between college classes, a full-time job and weekend Reserve drills, Manella said the Reserve does one thing in particular differently which required him to adapt and overcome.

“As a Reservist, boards are not common. We don’t do oral boards for promotions,” Manella said. “But during my first tour overseas, I was attached to an active-duty battalion, which is what we always do with my [military occupational specialty]. Trying to get promoted to sergeant, I was trying to show my leadership, who were on a different base, that I was going above and beyond. So I competed in an active-duty Soldier of the Month board, and that’s how I learned reporting procedures, how to study and how to prep.”

That preparation proved to be prescient. Because the competition was so close, even into the final day, the points competitors accrued during their board appearance before Chandler and the seniormost command sergeants major in the Army proved to be the deciding factor for the entire competition, Chandler said.

“Really, the difference was the board,” Chandler said. “The board was the separator to determine who was best.”

Christensen, 29, a military policeman from the 472nd Military Police Company, 793rd Military Police Battalion, 2nd Engineer Brigade, at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, cred-

## Overcoming adversity

Christensen, who is older than his NCO counterpart, Manella, entered the Army late after stints as a full-time student and plumber.

“I liked plumbing; I had been going to school before; I had done a lot of different things,” Christensen said. “But I asked myself, ‘Do I want to plumb for the rest of my life?’ Thinking about what I wanted to do, I just wanted to be part of something big that gives back to the community and the country.”

With only two years of service, he hasn’t had the advantage of being deployed. But he found a way to minimize that lack of experience, again thanks to his NCOs.

“I think what’s helped me get this far is just having great Army leadership,” he said. “Being able to train as we fight has helped to overcome not having the actual field experience. I think being the same age as my NCOs has helped me to approach them a lot more and ask them, ‘Hey, what was it actually like when you were deployed? What kind of pressures were you working with?’”

Hit by multiple blasts from December 2011 to May 2012, Manella was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury and struggled to cope with its effects.

“The first few months, it was very difficult,” Manella said. “I’d get dizzy spells, nausea, headaches, a lot of confusion, just a general inability to concentrate or read more than a few sentences at a time. I was slurring and stumbling over words, forgetting things, getting stuck on very simple words. I was a little bit like Captain Jack Sparrow in the Pirates of the Caribbean — you would just see me standing there, reeling in a circle. So I had a lot of frustration with that.”



“I’ve been blessed with, essentially, a full recovery,” he said. “As it was explained to me, the brain is somewhat plastic and can kind of heal itself. There’s a window of 6 to 12 months it can do so. So I got a lot of time off to rest, a lot of therapy for cognitive stuff, as well as physical therapy for balance and equilibrium issues. Every month or so, it just got slowly better and better until now, I have pretty much nothing residual other than headaches, and reading and memorizing stuff is a little bit harder than it used to be. But I just have to try harder than I used to.”

Manella, who competed in lower levels of the Best Warrior Competition as a specialist seven years ago, decided to make training for the competition part of his therapy.

“After I got injured, I started thinking about using Best Warrior as a rehabilitation tool, because I could come back and do it as a noncommissioned officer. My benchmark was to make it at least as far as I did when I was a Soldier. I figured I’d be able to overcome everything I had gone through if I could surpass that, which I’ve done. It’s definitely rewarding.”

## Representing the Army

As the champions of the Army’s premier competition, Manella and Christensen will now be the face of the Army at events nationwide during the next year. Both said they looked forward to using that bully pulpit as a way to encourage those facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

“This is an opportunity for me to help be part of a change, hopefully inspiring others with TBI-related ailments, or just wounded warriors in general,” Manella said. “A year and a half ago, I was at a low point in my life. It was a challenge just to stand up or finish a sentence. I almost gave up. But I didn’t. I feel that pulling myself through, putting in this much effort and never quitting is what the Army always talks about: ‘I will never quit.’ It’s about actually living up to the Army Values and just continuing to fight, using resilience to fight back.”

“Anything is possible,” Christensen said. “When I joined the Army, I failed the first PT test I ever took. But I told myself that, by the end of basic training, I’d be able to score a 300. I was in the bay at night with a circle of guys just doing pushups like crazy. And by the end of basic training, I had a perfect PT score. So every time I get Soldiers who have problems with their PT tests, I tell them that. If you push yourself and

have the drive, no matter where you come, no matter what your MOS is, you can get yourself there. Never give up. Be professional. Keep pushing yourself.”

Both said they sacrificed many a night out to prepare for the competition. But without that hard work, failure was guaranteed.

“A lot of guys made fun of me for doing these competitions,” Manella said. “Because on the weekends, I’m not out drinking with them; I’m in studying. The next morning, I’m PT’ing hard. I think it all comes down to work ethic. One of the best motivational speeches I heard, Arnold Schwarzenegger gave, and he said, ‘You can’t climb the ladder to success with your hands in your pocket.’ You have to work your butt off. I think anyone who applies themselves, they can get here.”

Success is also found in sweating the everyday details of Soldier business, Christensen said, recalling that many of the competition’s events — changing a humvee tire, conducting an in-ranks inspection, and leading Army Physical Readiness Training, for example — judged competitors’ ability to conduct routine tasks to Army standards.

“When you do the day-to-day things — going to the motor pool, performing preventive maintenance on our trucks, laying out all of our gear so we can sign some paperwork then put it all away — you feel you’re stuck in the day-to-day grind. But when you do something like this, you realize that what you do every day matters, and being good at that is something you can take pride in.”

And though it sounds trite, Manella said his message is simple: “Don’t give up. Keep trying.”

“It seems like some sort of cliché. But I feel that I’ve learned a lot through this process,” he said. “It’s really a matter of how much effort you’re willing to put into anything. It was really difficult the first few months to study, to train and to prepare. I was getting insane headaches, getting dizzy. But I just had to learn the new limitations I



Manella participates in a weapons drill event Nov. 21. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)



Christensen (left) represented U.S. Army Pacific in the competition, Manella represented the U.S. Army Reserve. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

had and build around them. And that's one of the core things taught in basic training — adapt and overcome; be flexible.”

After his stint as Soldier of the Year is complete, Christensen said his aim is to finish his bachelor's degree in linguistics and be selected for Special Forces training.

“I was putting together my packet when they asked me if I wanted to compete in the first competition,” he said. “Then, I just kept going to the next competition and the next. So [Special Forces] is my next goal. I've got to get back to rucking every day and just training up for it again.”

Manella hopes to become a drill sergeant or a career counselor.

“I want to diversify my career, but also help other Soldiers,” he said. “I like the idea of being a drill sergeant to instill all this information and training, to be a good leadership example to new Soldiers in the Army, to be the first example of what a leader looks like. Or being a career counselor, assisting Soldiers who are in, influencing them to stay in.”

Above all, both are looking forward to returning to the work they put on hold to become competitive at the Army's highest level.

“I'm just looking forward to going back to soldiering,” Christensen said. “I honestly can say, despite all the good plumbing stories I have, there's a lot more job satisfaction with what I'm doing now. Despite being only a specialist, I know I'll get there.” ■

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