



# 15 Begin Competition to be Named Top Drill Sergeant, AIT Platoon Sergeant

*By Jonathan (Jay) Koester*

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**T**he competition to name the 2014 Drill Sergeant of the Year and the 2014 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the year kicked off Monday morning at a rainy Fort Jackson, S.C.

But after what these NCOs had been through just to earn their way here, a little rain wasn't going to slow them down. After an early-morning physical training test, the 15 NCOs took on a hand grenade assault course, an unknown-distance ruck march and some rappelling and rope climbing work at Fort Jackson's Victory Tower.

Sgt. 1st Class Travis Jackson of E Company, 1st Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, 194th Armored Brigade, at Fort Benning, Ga., said the road to Fort Jackson was difficult, but gave him the determination he'll need this

week as he competes to be the Advanced Individual Training Platoon Sergeant of the Year.

"To win at the [U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence] level, it felt pretty good, because it was very challenging," Jackson said. "It definitely tested my abilities and what I was capable of doing. It gave me a boost of confidence. I expect this week to test my abilities, not only physically, but mentally. I'm looking forward to see where I place against the individuals I'm up against."

Staff Sgt. Derek Leonhardt of A Troop, 5th Squadron, 15th Cavalry Regiment, 194th Armored Brigade, at Fort Benning, Ga., is competing to be named Drill Sergeant of the Year. Leonhardt said he hopes to make Fort Benning proud.



Sgt. 1st Class Kenny Smith of D Company, 16th Ordnance Battalion, at Fort Lee, Va., goes through the hand grenade assault course as a drill sergeant grades him. Smith is competing to be named AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year. (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

“It’s all about unit pride,” he said. “I’m representing Fort Benning. They chose me to represent them, and that means a lot. I’m not in this for myself. It’s a great opportunity, but I want to make Fort Benning look good, so that’s what I’m here for. I think it’s going to be physically

challenging, mentally challenging and just overall exhausting.”

Though the week will be full of tough competition, with six competing to be Drill Sergeant of the Year, and nine competing to be AIT Platoon Sergeant of the year, Staff Sgt. Jonathan Miller of the 787th Military Police Battalion, 14th MP Brigade, at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., said he was also looking forward to bonding with the best of the best he will meet this week. Miller is part of the drill sergeant competition.

“I’m proud to be here representing the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.,” he said. “To go against the best drill sergeants that the Army has to offer at all the different installations is truly an honor.

I look forward to going against each one of them and building that sense of camaraderie between us. Even though it is a competition, at the end of the day, we’re all still in the same Army, the same team, so I’m looking forward to it.”



As Sgt. 1st Class Charles Sheffield of B Company, 309th Military Intelligence Battalion, 111th MI Brigade, at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., makes his way down a rope obstacle on the Victory Tower as Sgt. 1st Class Ryan Moreno of B Company, 84th Chemical Battalion, at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., makes his way up Monday. Both Sheffield and Moreno are competing to be AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year.



Sgt. 1st Class Alex Montero of the 98th Training Division, U.S. Army Reserve, throws a practice grenade on the hand grenade assault course Monday. Montero is one of two competitors from the 108th Training Command competing for the title of Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year.

As the competition began, Sgt. Maj. Thomas Campbell, the G3/5/7 (operations/plans/training) sergeant major for the U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, Va., told the competitors that they would be tested on all aspects of being a strong NCO.

“You will take something out of this to take back to your organization,” Campbell said. “It’s not necessarily just a test of strength, or brawn or brains. This is a test of the overall leader character attributes. Everything is going to be tested: character, knowledge, methods of instruction, execution.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Woods, command sergeant major for the U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, reminded the contestants that the winners of the competition don’t just return to their units. They earn new jobs at the strategic level at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.



Moreno goes through the hand grenade assault course Monday.

“When they win, they come to TRADOC,” Woods said. “They add their relevancy, because they are now identified as the high-end drill sergeant and AIT platoon sergeant. We have a lot of civilian staff who work with us, and they retired a number of years ago. By having the



Smith takes part in the ruck march Monday as he competes to be AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year.

drill sergeant and platoon sergeant of the year work with them, it gives [the staff] access to a subject-matter expert. And that resource is re-stocked every year, keeping it fresh.”

But before they can begin to think about the perks of winning, the competitors will

have to make it through some grueling days. After completing the ruck march Monday, which turned out to be about 5 miles, Miller said he was still feeling OK.

“It’s been good so far,” Miller said. “I finished the grenade qualification course, then shortly thereafter started on the unknown-distance ruck march. Anytime you don’t know where you’re going, what you’re doing, how long it’s going to be, it definitely adds a challenge, more mentally than physically. I think the hardest part is not knowing what’s next, not knowing how far you’re going, when you’re going to get there.”

What was waiting for the competitors at the end of that ruck march was the Victory Tower. Still recovering from the march, Sgt. 1st Class Charles Sheffield of B Company, 309th Military Intelligence Battalion, 111th MI Brigade, at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., said he was worried about the effort it would take to make it through the Victory Tower.

“To be honest, it’s going to be very challenging after rucking it here,” Sheffield said. “But with a never-quit, can-do attitude, I’ll make it through.”

Sheffield’s can-do attitude was later tested on the tower as his legs began to cramp while navigating the ropes about halfway through



Sheffield grimaces as his legs cramp Monday during a rope climb on the Victory Tower.

the obstacles. At one point, it looked like he wouldn't be able to complete the course. But after taking an extra moment to stretch and prepare, Sheffield powered through, showing he was serious about not quitting.

Sheffield wasn't the only NCO hit hard by the day's events. After all the competitors successfully navigated the Victory Tower's ropes and rappels, many were lined

up behind an ambulance getting fluids intravenously. The physical events done for the day, they had only a written exam to look forward to Monday night.

Of course, the NCOs can look forward to another full day of physical and mental tests Tuesday. Woods reminded the contestants, with tired bodies and minds, what was at stake. ■

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