



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III speaks to competitors Monday at the 2014 Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va. (Photo by Spc. Heather England)

Organizers, Competitors, SMA Ready to find out who is the Army's Best Overall NCO and Soldier

By Michael L. Lewis

NCO Journal

They've come from 14 commands from throughout the world — 14 NCOs of the Year and 14 Soldiers of the Year — ready to tackle what is billed as the pinnacle soldiering competition: the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va. By week's end, the two who best prove their proficiency, agility, strength and smarts will be named the 2014 Department of the Army NCO of the Year and Soldier of the Year. But first, they must endure a gauntlet of events that is expected to test every facet of being a U.S. Army Soldier.

Indeed, the competition is designed to reveal who is best *overall*, said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F.

Chandler III. This year's competition is the last he'll oversee before his retirement in January.

"This event looks at the total Soldier — not only your physical ability, but your mental ability and your emotional ability. We're looking at all aspects," he told competitors Monday afternoon. "Some of you may be outstanding physical specimens. But this is not just about being the most physically fit Soldier; we're going to test your mind too. We're going to put you in some environments that you are going to be unfamiliar with. ... I think you'll be challenged this week, and I'll bet it will be in something you were not prepared for."

“And that’s a big part of what this is about,” Chandler continued. “We expect NCOs to be agile and adaptive, critical and creative thinkers, and leaders. You can do a task, but can you think through the task and answer the question of why we’re doing what we’re doing? That’s what we’re here to test you on. Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills are important, but it’s about how you do when putting it all together — seeing the bigger picture and how you and your Soldiers fit into it.”

Putting Together the Competition

Devising events that were comprehensive in nature was the task of NCO planners at the Army G-3/5/7’s Training Directorate at the Pentagon and the Warrior Training Center at the U.S. Army Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee. Since January, they’ve been brainstorming event ideas and working out the logistics to be able to scrutinize competitors in the various aspects of soldiering.

“We’ve planned everything based on SMA Chandler’s intent and guidance, and he’s very much into standards and ensuring whatever we do comes from doctrine,” said Sgt. 1st Class Eric Morris, the NCO in charge of the Warrior Training Center and of the cell organizing the competition. “The events this year reflect that. You’ll have to not only be tactically and technically proficient, but you’ll have to be resilient and adaptive as well.”

“These Soldiers are smart and adaptable. We want them to use their critical-thinking skills in order to come up with

the right solution,” said Sgt. Maj. Donna King, CASCOM’s G-3/5/7 sergeant major who led the planning at Fort Lee. “But there’s not really anything new. We’re just going to uphold the standard. They shouldn’t be surprised.”

“We’re going to put these Soldier and NCOs into situations, and they’re going to have to be able to perform and overcome anything, while still representing themselves, their unit and the Army to the best extent possible,” Morris said. “They’ll have to use their brains. They can’t just go off of muscle memory.”

Though the events competitors will be expected to endure won’t necessarily be familiar, they had to be designed around everyday Soldier tasks, explained Master Sgt. Patrick Casey, the event coordinator for the Army G-3/5/7’s Training Directorate.

“SMA Chandler has stressed it a thousand times: Events have to be relevant, they have to be realistic, and they have to be conditions that we can evaluate based on standards,” Casey said.

And evaluators will be more attuned to deviations from the standard than ever before, King said.

“We’ve emphasized to our graders over and over again: This is the standard and we want you to uphold that standard,” she said. “After all, this is the Department of the Army level. This will determine who’s the best of the best in the Army.”

Nonetheless, the Army is in the midst of a constrained financial environment, and the top Army competition



Competitors wait to have their equipment checked Monday at the start of the 2014 Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee. (Photo by Spc. Jordan Talbot)



An NCO on the organizing staff observes competitors as they compose their essays during the first day of the 2014 Best Warrior Competition on Monday at Fort Lee. (Photo by Spc. Jordan Talbot)

had to be planned with that in mind, Chandler said. The budget for this year's event is 80 percent less than it was just three years ago, he said.

"These last two years, we really haven't had a whole lot of money," Morris said. "So to be able to put together something that is still spectacular enough for the Department of the Army level and that is challenging and rewarding, that's been our biggest accomplishment."

"How we've had to adapt the competition because of the fiscal constraints has actually made it better," Casey said. "The competition has been condensed down to where there's not a lot of down time. So they're constantly moving from one station to another. It's made it more concentrated and more stressful on the Soldiers."

Ready for Anything

On Monday, most of the competitors were eager for the events to begin in earnest early Tuesday morning. Though Monday had a weigh-in, an equipment check and an essay to be written, competitors wouldn't be transported until Monday night to the makeshift forward operating base that would serve as their competition home.

To prepare for this week, many like Staff Sgt. Peter Kacapyr, the U.S. Army Forces Command NCO of the Year, hit the books.

"A couple weeks ago, I started a study plan and systematically went through all the information I needed to learn," Kacapyr said.

"The Army comes out with new manuals, new guidance, new regulations all the time, so I've been constantly going to the Army Publications [Directorate] website looking up what's new," said Staff Sgt. Kevin Hopson, the U.S. Army Materiel Command NCO of the Year. "I've just been learning all the new changes and making sure I'm up-to-date on those."

Others, like Cpl. Ryan Perea, the U.S. Army Installation Management Command Soldier of the Year, said they tried to soak up as much information as they could.

"We made sure to get our hands on as much training as possible, whether that was medic training, ruck-marching, cross-training with as many people as we could, putting time in at the ranges, or putting our hands on whatever we needed to train with," Perea said.

As for what expected events they were looking forward to this week, many competitors cited a perennial favorite — land navigation.

"In any competition like this, I love land nav," Hopson said. "I've never been to Fort Lee before, but if they have woods, I'm excited to go tromping through them. That's just how I grew up — out in the woods exploring."

“Land navigation is personally my favorite thing,” Perea said. “I like the idea of losing the technology and just going out there to survive based on your wits and knowledge of the landscape.”

Still others looked forward to the most formal of the week’s events, appearing before a board presided by Chandler.

“I’m honestly looking forward to it,” said Sgt. Nicholis Couture, U.S. Army Europe’s NCO of the Year. “It should be pretty interesting being before the sergeant major of the Army as he’s judging me on everything I say or do. I think it’ll be fun.”

But just having made it to the Army’s pinnacle competition and being surrounded by the Army’s best was — almost — enough, Hopson said.

“This is something I’ve never done before, obviously, and that I may never get to do again,” he said. “So I’m just trying to enjoy every bit of it that I can and not worry too much.”

Event organizers were eager to begin as well.

“We’ve been planning this since January, and it’s Super Bowl time now,” King said. “We’ve trained hard, we’ve done our rehearsals, now it’s just time to execute.”

Tuesday will begin with an early morning Army Physical Fitness Test followed by a grueling mix of events that incorporate the standard Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills. On Wednesday, NCO of the Year competitors will make their appearances before the board while the Soldier of the Year competitors tackle the always-surprising mystery event. The groups of competitors will swap on Thursday, with those vying for Soldier of the Year facing the board. The competition will culminate Thursday night with an awards dinner when the winners will be announced at Fort Lee and online for the rest of the Army. ■

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