



Sgt. Nicholis Couture, U.S. Army Europe's NCO of the Year, tackles a role-player in the react to man-to-man contact lane Tuesday during the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Patricia Ramirez)

On Day 2, Best Warrior Competitors Tackle Long Marches, Hostile Villagers and the 'Fun Box'

By Michael L. Lewis

NCO Journal

After a Monday full of administrative details, essay writing and being introduced to each other and the week's schedule, the 28 competitors of the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va., were eager Tuesday to begin what is perhaps the most physically challenging day of competition. Roused hours before sunrise from their cots at their makeshift forward operating base on Fort Lee's range complex, the competitors rode in the back of trucks to the day's first event, the Army Physical Fitness Test. But it would be the last time they'd travel on wheels that day.

"It started out great this morning," said Command Sgt. Maj. Terry E. Parham Sr., the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Support Command and Fort Lee. "The weather was perfect for an APFT — not too cold, not too hot — and the Soldiers did very well. But for the rest of the day, to every event these Soldiers go, they have to march from Point A to

Point B. By the time the day is over, they'll have between 9 and 12 miles under their belts. And they have their 35-pound rucks with their gear on their backs."

Competitors wended their way to eight locations along a circuitous route through Fort Lee's ranges. They included lanes pertaining to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear skills; M-9 pistol and M-203 grenade launcher marksmanship; close-quarters marksmanship; a 45-question multiple-choice exam; medical evaluation and evacuation skills; and reacting to man-to-man contact. At each stop was a real-world scenario competitors would have to apply all their knowledge, training and experience in order to successfully complete.

"We give them the mission, but that's about it," said Sgt. 1st Class Naira Frazier, NCO in charge of the CBRN lane. "We don't tell them anything, because they're already supposed to know. These are Skill Level 1 and 2 tasks."



Sgt. 1st Class David Smith, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's NCO of the Year, performs pushups during the Army Physical Fitness Test event early Tuesday morning at the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va. (Photo by Sgt. Jourdain Yardan)

Her lane, for example, consisted of an elaborate scenario that, if done to standard, would normally take competitors between an hour and an hour and a half to complete, depending on whether they were vying for the title of NCO of the Year or Soldier of the Year.

"The scenario is they are at a chemical storage facility," Frazier said. "Because they are in a chemical environment, they have to be very cautious and take their time."

They also were expected to know the differences among the various levels of mission-oriented protective posture gear and when each is necessary, she explained. The highest — MOPP Level 4 — requires a gas mask and head-to-toe suit that competitors found stifling.

"Being in MOPP Level 4 gear and pouring out sweat wasn't the most fun I've had here," said Staff Sgt. Brian Hester, the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command NCO of the Year. "Part of it was properly decontaminating and testing the air — you had to go by the book. At one point, I had to wait 10 minutes, and they said, 'Here's your stopwatch.' So I sat there for 10 minutes in all that hot gear. There was no cutting corners."

Part of the scenario involved evaluating, treating, evacuating and decontaminating a casualty found

inside of the CBRN chamber, which meant competitors had to do lots of heavy lifting in the restrictive protective gear.

"I never like having to put that mask on and that suit," said Staff Sgt. Victor Munoz, the U.S. Army Medical Command NCO of the Year. "You just start to sweat, and it's so hot. Then you have to drag that [stretcher], and it's not like you can try to catch your breath, because your breathing is restricted. It was just uncomfortable."

But, Frazier explained, the lane showed the importance of knowing basic CBRN-related skills that every Soldier should know.

"As you can see, CBRN is no joke," she said coughing after exiting the chamber, which was filled with CS gas. "It's not something where you can come and automatically know how to do it."

At the close-quarters marksmanship lane, competitors were tested on how to apply skills learned over 13 years of wartime deployments, but in an environment that isn't a war zone.

"The scenario here is they've come to help this village after an earthquake has happened," said Staff Sgt. James Shuster, the lane's NCOIC, while casually tossing a bang-producing noisemaker to contribute to the lane's ambience. "That's to simulate a gas main explosion. ... There's a team on-site already, and the competitors are coming in to assist with security, because there are pockets of hostile personnel in the area."

"Once they go through the door, they'll be presented with hostile and non-hostile targets," said Sgt. 1st Class Eric Morris, the NCOIC of the cell organizing the entire competition. "So they'll have to determine on their own, based on their rules of engagement, if they're able to shoot or not shoot, and who to shoot and who not to shoot. That right there is unique, be-



Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Carpenter, U.S. Army Special Operations Command's NCO of the Year, conducts chemical, biological, and nuclear decontamination Tuesday during the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Patricia Ramirez)



Spc. Keegan Carlson, the U.S. Army Reserve's Soldier of the Year, navigates through the 'Fun Box' obstacle Tuesday during the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Andy Yoshimura)

cause it's not a combat, wartime situation, yet they're presented with hostile intent. Seeing how they react to that, I think, will be interesting."

The lane also features the day's most memorable obstacle, Morris said.

"We have something we call the 'Fun Box,'" he said. "Basically its the size of a room, but it's a maze they'll have to crawl through and around with all their gear, simulating what it might be like to move through a collapsed building. That right there is going to test their resilience, because they're going to be hot and sweaty, carrying all this gear, and they've already done a [physical training] test and all these other events. Now they're having to crawl through a box."

"It's 34 inches [tall and wide] throughout the entire thing," Shuster said. "It starts out on the far side. They have to come under, then there's a box they have to go over and then down. They'll come around, then they have to go up two pretty big stairs, they'll come across the top, then through the front, and down and out."

The inventive obstacle made a definite impact on competitors, said Spc. Keegan Carlson, the U.S. Army Reserve Soldier of the Year.

"It looks from the outside like a small building with a small entry hole," he said. "Then you get in there, and I thought there would be two corners maybe. Next thing I know, I'm going around five or six corners, going up inclines, crawling up, crawling down."

"I didn't fit in the thing," Munoz said laughing. "It was rough. There were points in there when I started to re-evaluate my life: 'What am I doing in here!?"

Competitors also had to apply their Army Combatives skills to a real-world scenario at the react to man-to-man contact lane. There, they came upon a near riot in progress, explained Staff Sgt. Korento Leverette, NCOIC of the lane.

"We have two families in this village who are fighting over who is the rightful owner of this farmland," Leverette said as dozens of role-players began chanting slogans and brandishing farming tools. "As the competitor comes in, they'll be told that their assistance is required to help calm the situation using non-lethal force. Then, an aggressor will come up with the village elder, and in the course of their conversation, the aggressor — who is actually Army Combatives Level 2-certified — will become more aggressive, at which time the competitor will have to take control of the situation."

"It has a combatives element to it, but it's separate from combatives," Morris said. "There's a Warrior Task and Battle Drill — react to man-to-man contact — and it's the SMA's intent to separate the Battle Drill and the idea of training the skill of combatives."

"The sergeant major of the Army didn't want a combatives match," Leverette said. "He wanted a real-world scenario, something you might encounter, where you would use the skills you'd learn in Army Combatives."

Competitors said they appreciated the applied approach.

"We train as we fight, so I kind of came in with that mindset, that this was going to be a real scenario," Hester said. "I was very tired. It felt like I had been walking for a year. But to get to use my combatives training in a safe environment, to test my skills, that was really good. I had to dig deep, but when it was over, I felt the adrenaline pumping."

Competitors were expected to get a decent night's sleep before splitting up and engaging in two very different events Wednesday: The NCO of the Year competitors will make their appearances before a board presided by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III, while the Soldier of the Year competitors will face the mystery events. On Thursday, the two groups will switch, and the Soldier of the Year competitors will face the board. Later



Staff Sgt. Victor Munoz, the U.S. Medical Command NCO of the Year, assists a "casualty" in the medical evacuation lane Tuesday during the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee. (Photo by Spc. Heather England)

that night, the winners will be announced at an awards dinner at Fort Lee and live on the Internet.

Though it was the eve of him being scrutinized by the seniormost sergeants major in the Army, Wednesday's board appearance didn't faze Munoz.

"You never get used to walking into a room and standing before the sergeant major of the Army," he said. "And I don't think you can ever be completely ready. Because you're being questioned on everything, and it's impossible to know it all, it all comes down to how you handle yourself in there. But I'll probably do some cramming tonight." ■

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