



Staff Sgt. Jesse K. Murray, the U.S. Army Africa NCO of the Year, knocks to enter the board Wednesday at the 2014 Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va (Photo by Staff Sgt. Patricia Ramirez)

Best Warrior Day 3: Competition Tightens as NCOs Make their Board Appearances

By Michael L. Lewis

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After an exhausting Tuesday that tested competitors' ability to apply Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills in real-world situations, the third day of the 2014 Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va., Wednesday saw those vying for NCO of the Year separate from those seeking to become Soldier of the Year.

While the latter group engaged in a handful of mystery events that challenged their tactical and technical proficiency, the 14 NCO competitors donned their Army Service Uniforms and headed to the Army Logistics University to make their appearances before a board presided by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F.

Chandler III and comprising some of the seniormost command sergeants major in the Army.

"I thought the board went extremely well today," Chandler said. "I think that all the NCOs did a great job preparing and were very knowledgeable about a great many things. There were, of course, some strengths and weaknesses; some folks knew they had some areas they had to improve upon. But I think overall that the board, the candidates and their sponsors did a phenomenal job."

Competition organizers said the board was split over two days this year in order to allow extra time for the board members to scrutinize the NCO competitors.



Staff Sgt. Luke R. Klein (right), the Army Service Component Commands' NCO of the Year, is inspected by his sponsor just before entering the board Wednesday at the 2014 Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Patricia Ramirez)

"We train Soldiers on tasks. We train leaders to work through and solve problems. I think there's a significant difference between the two," Chandler said. "So we spent some time on the Army ethic and the Army Profession, and we asked some general knowledge questions that were posed as vignettes — we asked them to decide how they were going to do things based on a situation they were presented with. That focuses on the leader development we expect from our NCOs and their agility, their adaptability."

'I Didn't Pass Out. So That's a Plus'

After their appearances, each of which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, competitors reflected on what many described as the most stressful event of the competition.

"I did the best I could and hopefully that was good enough," said Staff Sgt. Peter Kacapyr, the U.S. Army

Forces Command NCO of the Year. "It's difficult in the same way any other part of the competition is; it's just a different kind of difficult."

"There's always things you think you could have done better," said Staff Sgt. Kevin Hopson, the U.S. Army Materiel Command NCO of the Year. "But overall, I think I prepared well, and I didn't pass out. So that's a plus."

Indeed, for some competitors, their first priority was remaining calm and composed despite nerves that were nearly overwhelming.

"The board process has always been a real challenge for me," said Staff Sgt. Devin Jameson, the National Guard NCO of the Year. "There's just so much knowledge out there to study and try to retain. Then I get nervous being in front of all those sergeants major, so what little I do remember flees my mind in that moment. It's pretty nerve-racking."

"It went as well as I thought it could," said Staff Sgt. Landon Nordby, the U.S. Army Reserve NCO of the Year. "The board has always been a really tough thing for me. SMA Chandler made it a nice environment, but I don't think I'd ever feel *comfortable*."

Competitors said they've been studying Army doctrine for months to prepare for this day.

"I did a lot of reading, a lot of reviewing, trying to make sure I knew the breadth of questions they could ask me," said Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Carpenter, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command NCO of the Year. "There are a lot of possible questions they can ask you, if you look at all the manuals they could have taken questions from. So I just did a lot of studying."

"The questions are very broad; they can be from anywhere," Nordby said. "You could study every day and all the time on tactical stuff, technical stuff or programs. But you just never know what they're going to ask you. You just hope you're ready and are doing the best you can."

"The Army comes out with new doctrine all the time, which is good," Hopson said. "We're keeping updated; we're keeping fresh. It's an adaptive Army, but you have to make sure you adapt with it. Remembering that was key to my preparation."

Beyond studying, many competitors relied on mock boards to practice.

"I had a very dedicated group helping me out, and I attended three mock boards just last week," said Staff Sgt. Jacob West, the Military District of Washington NCO of the Year. "They were some of the worst boards I've ever attended — trying to get under my skin, testing all sorts of knowledge, even asking me about the captions of pictures in [field manuals]."

But all that preparation was expected to endure long past this week's board appearance, one competitor said.

"It's not just about preparing for six months for this board," Jameson said. "You should be, throughout your career, striving to understand Army doctrine and Army programs and all the different aspects of what being a Soldier and being a leader means."

Bringing It All Home

As the competition nears its end — the winners will be announced at an awards dinner Thursday night, which will be broadcast live on the Internet — many competitors looked forward to bringing home what they've learned this week.

"What I've liked the best, out of all the competitions leading up to here and including this one, is meeting all these other NCOs," said Sgt. 1st Class David Smith, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command NCO of the Year. "I think that's what we're here to do. Meeting all these NCOs and these Soldiers has made me realize how strong the Army NCO Corps and the Army's Soldiers actually are. It's re-energized me and motivated me to go out and do my best."

"I've been able to speak with a lot of other NCOs and I've learned a lot from them," said Sgt. Andres Martinez, the U.S. Army Installation Command NCO of the Year. "They're almost all E-6s, so they've been able to give me a lot of good advice. I mean, it never hurts to get more information from someone else."

"I'll take back with me a greater appreciation for the Army as a whole," West said. "I've gotten to work with people from different [military occupational specialties] here on a daily basis, and it has allowed me a much greater understanding of my place in the profession."

"It's been great just hanging out with these guys," Nordby said. "It's been a real learning experience. If anything, I've learned to train Soldiers better, and that is, by far, the most important thing that can come out of this."

Thursday, the Soldier competitors will face the board while the NCOs discover what mystery events are in store for them. But the NCO competitors said they were prepared for anything.

"I hope it's something fun. I hope it's something challenging. And I hope it's something I'm good at," Smith said. "I'm just looking forward to it, no matter what it is. I think it's what we all came here to do — to be pushed to our limits, and I think they've done an excellent job of doing that so far. I don't think they'll let us down tomorrow."

With only one day left to compete, Chandler said it was still anybody's to win.

"The competition is very close," he said. "The NCOs still have to do the mystery events tomorrow and the Soldiers still have to appear before the board, but it's very tight right now. These competitions usually are right up until the very end. Right now, we're very close, and I expect it to become even tighter." ■

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