



Spc. Ryan Montgomery, the National Guard Bureau's Soldier of the Year, navigates a portion of the Leadership Reaction Course on Wednesday during the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va. The NCO of the Year competitors tackled the course on Thursday. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Adam Fischman)

Special Forces NCO, U.S. Army Pacific Soldier Named Winners of 2014 Best Warrior Competition

By Michael L. Lewis

NCO Journal

After four days of grueling physical, mental and emotional challenges that included a 12-mile ruck march followed by a written exam, reacting to man-to-man contact in the midst of a near-riot, evacuating a casualty while wearing the most restrictive chemical-protection gear and appearing before a board that included the sergeant major of the Army, two competitors outshone the rest at the 2014 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va.: Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Carpenter, the 2014 U.S. Army NCO of the Year, and Spc. Thomas Boyd, the 2014 U.S. Army Soldier of the Year.

Carpenter, an 18C Special Forces engineer sergeant with the 10th Special Forces Group at Fort Carson, Colo., represented U.S. Army Special Operations Command and ended the competition with the highest score among the 14 NCO competitors. Boyd, a 35P cryptologic linguist with Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 500th Military Intelligence Brigade, at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, represented U.S. Army Pacific and also bested 13 other Soldier competitors.

"It was kind of overwhelming to realize that, essentially since I started competing in April, it has all come to



Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Carpenter, the 2014 U.S. Army NCO of the Year

this point,” Carpenter said. “I’ve done three competitions to get to this one, and now that the final one is over, and to realize I’ve won, it’s pretty amazing”

“It’s a great relief to win, but it wasn’t easy,” Boyd said. “The competition was difficult and the other competitors were tough.”

An Eventful Last Day

The winners were announced at an awards banquet Thursday evening that followed the last day of competition. Swapping what they did on Wednesday, the Soldier of the Year competitors made their board appearances as their NCO of the Year counterparts faced a handful of mystery events: four physical brain teasers at the Leadership Reaction Course, land navigation, inspecting Soldier uniforms and assembling weapons.

As the NCOs worked to figure out the Leadership Reaction Course’s puzzlers, they were visited by Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the chief of staff of the Army; retired Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie Adkins, who was awarded the Medal of Honor last month and who spoke at the awards dinner later that night; as well as other dignitaries curious how the Army’s best were faring in the Army’s pinnacle competition. They found NCOs leading fire teams of three Soldiers through tasks that married brains and brawn.

“The way we put them together, competitors said it was in ways they’d never seen before,” said Sgt. 1st Class Eric Morris, the NCO in charge of the team organizing the competition at Fort Lee. “I think we put together an event that was original, creative and innovative, and forced competitors to be adaptable.”

Carpenter had no problem maneuvering his Soldiers through each obstacle.

“I just remembered back to when I actually worked with privates and I had privates as subordinates,” he said. “Young Soldiers in the Army — I don’t know if it’s fear or just lack of initiative — but a lot of times, it takes clear, concise and correct direction to get them to do what they need to do. So it came down to me realizing that I had to tell them exactly what I wanted them to do. If you tell them correctly, they’ll learn from that.”

Afterward, the NCOs ventured into Fort Lee’s woods without their customary electronic aids during the land navigation event.

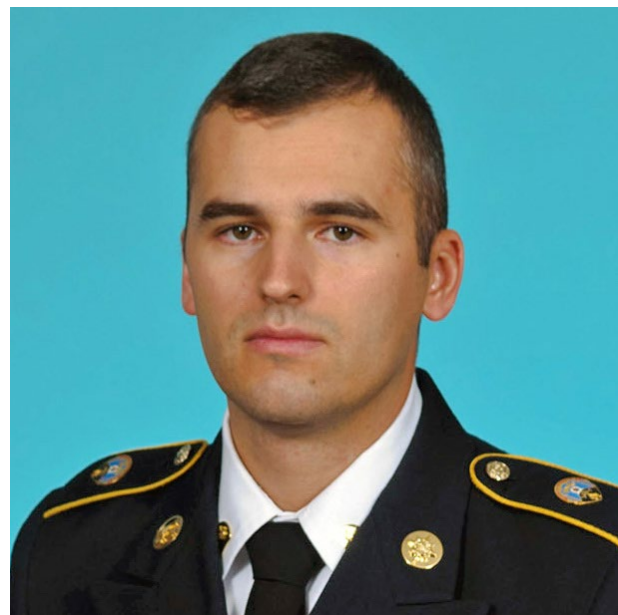
“We’ve relied on GPS technology — whether that’s a mobile phone, Blue Force Tracker, or some of the other stuff we have — and we’ve probably relied on it a little bit too much,” Morris said. “It’s been a while since we’ve sat down with a map, protractor and compass, and done land nav old-school style. Batteries fail, satellites go down and if you don’t keep yourself up-to-date on the basics, you’re setting yourself up for failure.”

Tasked with locating four points in three hours, the competitors had to traverse swamps, thick brush and downed trees. But compared to what they had to endure on Tuesday — eight events spread out over a 12-mile course — the land nav event was downright peaceful, Carpenter said.

“It was nice to get out there and just go for a stroll through the woods,” he said.

Boyd agreed, recalling the more difficult moments of the week.

“It was very intense physically and a little bit emotionally. It required a lot of mental strength to get through it. I’m used to working in an office, so having to run around doing ruck marches in between events, then completing tasks was intense. We did a lot of physical exercise, then



Spc. Thomas Boyd, the 2014 U.S. Army Soldier of the Year

we had to do complex tasks that required thinking clearly, though you're completely exhausted."

Thursday afternoon, the NCO competitors encountered four Soldiers in various Army uniforms, each with up to five deficiencies, said Sgt. 1st Class Elita Haupt, NCOIC of the event.

"We heard from the Soldier competitors yesterday that they really liked the uniform inspection event," she said. "They liked having a real Soldier in front of them and being able to look at the complete picture — hairstyles, fingernails, makeup. In the course of a regular day being a leader, this is what they'd see in the field or at home."

To ensure competitors were up-to-date on their doctrine, they included deficiencies based on uniform regulations that aren't even a month old, Haupt said.

"The main thing is staying proficient in the changes in regulations," she said. "We just had changes on Sept. 15, and we made sure to include those."

The event didn't faze Carpenter, who said he's been studying for months all the doctrine and regulations he expected would be covered during the competition.

"You learn from your mistakes in previous competitions and apply them to the next competition, hoping you'll do better, because as the competitions progress, each one gets tougher," he said. "At this level, you have to be your best in order to beat the best."

NCOs ended the day in front of a table filled with various weapons parts, tasked with assembling and performing a function check with an M-9 semiautomatic pistol, M-4 carbine, M-249 squad automatic weapon and M-240B machine gun. Though he rarely trains with any of them, Boyd said he practiced with each before the final competition.

"The Army focuses on the total Soldier concept. To win the competition you have to embody that," Boyd said. "Though you may have your individual strengths, unless you work on everything, you're not going to be successful. So being a well-rounded Soldier is the key, and that's what my training was focused on — all the things I don't normally do, so I could cover those gaps."

A Favorite 'Last Time'

At the award banquet, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III grew wistful as he shared that the competition would be his last before his retirement in January.

"As you get close to retirement, there's a series of 'last times.' But for me, this is one of those things that, as sergeant major of the Army, I will miss the most," Chandler said. "That's because it has to do with what we do as noncommissioned officers and leaders every day: being with Soldiers, training Soldiers, recognizing excellence, and helping those who may not be achieving the standard."



Boyd maneuvers a tire at the Leadership Reaction Course on Wednesday during the 2014 Best Warrior Competition. (Sgt. Arthur Ruepong)

Though the England-born Boyd has a master's degree from King's College London, he said he still learned much during the competition.

"I've learned so much here about effective leadership," he said. "That's the key thing I want to bring back and apply at my unit to help Soldiers under my charge."

And though he was just named the Army's best Soldier, Boyd said the title comes with an important qualification.

"It's a great accomplishment. But I'm very much aware of all the Soldiers who couldn't compete because they're currently deployed or working on missions that they couldn't be released from because their work is too important," he said. "It's great to win this, but I know there are other Soldiers out there who could do even better than me."

Carpenter said he appreciated the opportunity to compete alongside the best of each command from across the Army.

"I liked being able to talk to the other competitors," he said. "You may be in the Army for a long time and not realize what other Soldiers do. So it's good to be able to put a face and name behind each command and what others do. That interaction makes you even more knowledgeable. There are things I learned from



Carpenter assembles a weapon Thursday during the 2014 Best Warrior Competition. (Photo by Pvt. Rowan Anderson)

other competitors in this competition that I really had no idea about. Now I can take that back, and if I have a problem [in those fields], I have contacts now — ‘Remember me from the competition? I need some help with this.’ Together we’ll accomplish the mission.”

Also placing high in the competition were the following runners-up:

1st Runner-up NCO of the Year: Staff Sgt. Adam White, an 11B infantryman with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, who represented U.S. Army Pacific.

1st Runner-up Soldier of the Year: Spc. Ryan Montgomery, an 11B infantryman with D Company,

2nd Battalion, 153rd Infantry Regiment, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Arkansas National Guard, at Newport, Ark., who represented the National Guard Bureau.

2nd Runner-up NCO of the Year: Sgt. 1st Class David Smith, a 19K armor crewman with 1st Brigade, U.S. Army Cadet Command, who teaches ROTC classes at the University of North Georgia in Dahlonega, Ga., and who represented U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

2nd Runner-up Soldier of the Year: Spc. Chase Teats, a 25S satellite systems operator/maintainer with B Company, 53rd Signal Battalion, 1st Space Brigade, at Fort Meade, Md., who represented U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command. ■

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