



Staff Sgt. Claudia Collazo instructs young Soldiers on how to march during the third day of the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, S.C.

NCO Competitors Persevere With ‘Determination And Grit’

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester — NCO Journal

As the 2015 Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competitions continued for a third day Wednesday, the competitors were feeling the effects of being pushed to their limits.

The noncommissioned officers were all dealing with heat, humidity and a blistering pace of events. Several had bandages covering up blisters and bruises. But none were giving up.

Staff Sgt. Michael Johnson, AIT Platoon Sergeant, Company H, 1st Battalion, 222nd Aviation Regiment, Fort Eustis, Va., said the AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition had been tough ... and he knew the road wasn't getting easier.

"It has been quite a bit harder than what I expected," Johnson said. "From the previous boards that I've done, there's a lot more going on. Maybe the first day and a half

is about all we did in a full week in the other boards, so it's definitely a lot.

"We still have the 12-mile ruck march, so that's going to be extremely challenging after all this," Johnson said. "It's physically very draining to do something like that, even when you're fully prepared and ready, let alone after you've done everything that we've already gone through."

Going through the competition's events had been humbling, Johnson said.

"I've learned that I still have a lot to learn," he said. "Although I have learned a lot in the past 18 months as a platoon sergeant, I still have a long way to go to be the best."

After going late into the night Tuesday doing night land navigation, the competitors were back up and in formation at 3:45 a.m. Wednesday. After a five-mile run,

they went through exercises that graded their skills at teaching young Soldiers Physical Readiness Training, including the proper way to handle a Soldier who drops out and refuses to train.

In the afternoon, the 14 competitors were put through tasks that put them to the test in a variety of ways. At one station, the challenge would be physical, such as completing an obstacle course. The next stage would test them mentally, with written tests or an interview with the media.

Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Russell, last year's AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year, said he is impressed by what he has seen this year.

"We send them through some physical tasks, get them worn down, get them tired, get them exhausted," Russell said. "Then, we throw in some mental tasks to test them to see how they react when they're exhausted, see how they cope with that.

"I've been seeing a lot of determination and grit," he said. "I've seen people powering through some things that would otherwise probably stop them."

At the end of a full day of taxing physical and mental exercises, what did the competing NCOs have to look forward to Wednesday night? An Army Physical Fitness Test.

There is no way the challenge of the events could be completed without using what he had learned about the Army's Performance Triad, said Sgt. 1st Class Samuel



Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Enriquez crawls through the end of an obstacle course during the third day of the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Enriquez, AIT Platoon Sergeant, Company D, 232nd Medical Battalion, 32nd Medical Brigade, Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

"We tell our Soldiers to be physically and mentally tough, and we push them," Enriquez said. "We talk to them about good nutrition to reinforce their physical and mental strength. We tell them to get sleep. It's the Performance Triad: eat, sleep and exercise. I'm going to tell you right now, if I didn't practice the Performance Triad, I would not be able to do what I'm doing right now. I think what the Army reinforces really helps you.

"I expected a lot of physical adversity," he said. "I expected to be drained. And I expected to find out a lot of stuff I didn't know. But what I didn't know surprised me. Some of the stuff I didn't feel quite confident in, I was actually quite good at, and some of the stuff I felt I should be an expert at came back and surprised me. It's a difficult competition."

Staff Sgt. Claudia Collazo, AIT platoon sergeant, Battery B, 3rd Battalion, 6th Air Defense Artillery, Fort Sill, Okla., said she has been using thoughts of her family to inspire her to continue in the difficult competition.

"I expected it to be hard," Collazo said. "It should be that way because we only want the best. Whoever that is, they deserve it. A lot of things I never thought I could do, I'm actually doing, so that's pretty cool"

Staff Sgt. Jonathan Murray, AIT Platoon Sergeant, Company C, 369th Signal Battalion, 15th Regimental Signal Brigade, Fort Gordon, Ga., said watching all the competitors overcome the challenges has been inspiring.

"It's been physically harder than I originally anticipated," Murray said. "There are a lot of things here that threw me off — not that that deterred me or demotivated me — they just kind of threw me off, and I think that's a great thing in competitions. They get you outside your comfort zone.

"This competition inspires me because you're coming together with all the best platoon sergeants from their respective installations, so you know if you're coming to this competition, it's going to be a real competition," he said. "I want to be the best, like any other NCO, or any



Staff Sgt. Michael Johnson navigates an obstacle course during the third day of the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)



Sgt. 1st Class Heidi Anne Hartman comes out from a crawl during the third day of the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

person with drive and motivation. I'm going to take my skill set, throw it out there against the best competitors, and see where I measure up."

The gravity of the duty of a drill sergeant is what kept Staff Sgt. Russell Vidler inspired to compete. Vidler, of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 389th Regiment, 4th Brigade, 98th Division, was competing to be named the Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year.

"The pace is probably a little more than I expected, but it's been a great competition," Vidler said. "All the competitors are top notch. It's living up to its name.

"Drill sergeant is the most important job in the Army," he said. "We set the baseline for all Soldiers at all times, but especially in combat. I remember specific times when I was deployed when after the fact I was like, 'Wow, my drill sergeant just saved my life,' because it was what he taught me that I used. It's pretty awesome how we can affect change."

Sgt. 1st Class Dimario Habersham, AIT platoon sergeant for 5th Platoon, Company B, 344th MI Battalion at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, said the challenges of the event had helped rejuvenate him.

"I feel more invigorated with each event," Habersham said. "It forces me to remain on my toes both mentally and physically. What I'm finding is, as I go through each one, I begin to realize that self-doubt really has no place. Because I'm fully capable and fully competent to tackle all of these tasks to standard and exceed standard on several occasions. I feel great. I feel like I'm improving as the competition goes by, and that's my goal."

For Staff Sgt. Eric Hulien, Company E, 3rd Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, who was competing to be Drill Sergeant of the Year, the competition must have felt like the Super Bowl. Because like every star athlete after a big event, when it was done, he was heading to Disney World.

"I'm going to Disney World on Saturday. Seriously," Hulien said. "Saturday through Monday, I'm going to Disney World with my family, so I'm looking forward to that. I'm not looking forward to probably still being sore at that point, but my wife said she would drive the whole way, so I'm looking forward to resting then." ■



Staff Sgt. Michael Johnson, at left, leads Soldiers through a room-clearing exercise as part of the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

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