



Staff Sgt. Jonathan Murray, competing for 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year at Fort Jackson, S.C., is graded on his ability to disassemble and assemble an M16. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Weather, Events Test Drill Sergeant, AIT Platoon Sergeant Of The Year Competitors

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester — NCO Journal

High temperatures and humidity greeted competitors at the 2015 Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competitions Tuesday.

It was the second day of the competition and participants navigating the confidence obstacle course at Fort Jackson, S.C., were challenged even further by rising temperatures. An event scheduled for late Tuesday afternoon was eventually postponed because of the weather conditions.

By that time, the 14 competitors had already been through a gauntlet of events. Their day started at 5:15 a.m. with a three-mile timed run. Later in the morning, the competitors went through various stations testing their abilities to instruct and motivate Soldiers, as well as their skill in assembling and disassembling weapons and other tasks.

During the challenges, Staff Sgt. Mark Mercer, competing for named Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the

Year, stopped to talk about why he wanted to be a part of the event.

“Competition breeds excellence,” said Mercer, a drill sergeant with 3/378 Battalion, 95th Infantry Division in Norman, Oklahoma. “I love to compete. I’ve loved to compete ever since I was little. So when this opportunity came and they said we need someone to compete at the battalion level, I was ready to go. I love to meet the new people, test my limits, see what I’m capable of and find out my strengths and weaknesses.”

Staff Sgt. Eric Ross said he was competing for the title of AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year as a way to stand out.

“I wanted to be part of this competition to separate myself from my peers and do something different,” said Ross of Company A, 554th Engineer Battalion, Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. “Most AIT platoon sergeants are pretty much on the same page and do the same stuff. Doing this separates you from the pack.”



Staff Sgt. Clark Burns crawls under barbed wire while going through the Confidence Obstacle Course during the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Sgt. 1st Class Dimario Habersham said he was part of the competition to be named 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year because he wanted take on something that was such a mental and physical challenge.

“I’m challenging myself to say at the end, when all is said and done, that I actually did it,” said Habersham, an AIT platoon sergeant for 5th Platoon, Company B, 344th MI Battalion at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas. “I want to be able to say, ‘Yes, it was tough. Yes, it was difficult. But I rose to the occasion, and I did the best that I absolutely could do.’ Hopefully my peers will take from my example and pursue this avenue as well.”



Staff Sgt. Franco Peralta swings through the Confidence Obstacle Course during the 2015 Drill Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, S.C. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Several of the stations involved instructing Soldiers on the proper method to accomplish certain marching moves, and Habersham said the competition was a good refresher on those tasks.

“The challenge ties into the professional realm, too, because there are things that we often forget as noncommissioned officers as we go up in the ranks,” Habersham said. “So it is important to have the opportunity to revisit some of these tasks that we have not done in years so that we can remain current and fresh. That way, when we get trainees in our formations and, for example, they need to understand the basic marching element or the basic steps of marching, we can provide that instruction to them.”



Staff Sgt. Jonathan Murray conquers an obstacle at the confidence obstacle course during the 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, S.C. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

Habersham said he couldn’t help but be filled with Army pride as he looked around at his fellow competitors.

“We all bring different skills and talents to these competitions and to the force, which is what I think makes the Army such a dynamic force,” Habersham said. “We have so many different people who can operate on so many different levels and excel at those levels, it enables our force to truly be the greatest in the world.”

While spending the week competing with the best of the best, Staff Sgt. Jacob Miller reflected on what he had learned during his time as a drill sergeant for Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

“The biggest thing was learning how to manage your time and how to incorporate that with your job as a drill sergeant,” Miller said. “Time is of the essence. You are an NCO, so you know how to train Soldiers, but being a drill sergeant, you have to know everything. You have to take the time to learn all that stuff and be able to teach it the next day so that Soldiers know the standard when they go through the taskings.”



Staff Sgt. Russell Vidler administers a counseling statement during the 2015 Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, S.C. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Sgt. 1st Class Heidi Hartman, competing for AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year, also said she had learned much during her time as an AIT platoon sergeant for Company C, 1-81 Armor Battalion, Fort Benning, Ga.

“The main thing is to be extremely flexible,” Hartman said. “Just go with it. Things fall through. Just always have a backup plan, that way if training falls through, you’re not just sitting there wasting time. You can still train.”

own craft and making sure you’re competent enough to train the future of the force.”

Later Tuesday, the competitors took on both day and night land navigation before getting a few hours of well-earned sleep. They will be right back at it early Wednesday morning, spending another full day testing their limits and seeing where they stack up against their peers. ■

Drill sergeants from the U.S. Army Drill Sergeant Academy at Fort Jackson graded the events. Staff Sgt. Ian Rogers, a drill sergeant at the academy, said he enjoyed meeting and grading the competitors.

“To me, this is important because whoever wins, they are the Drill Sergeant of the Year, the Platoon Sergeant of the Year,” Rogers said. “Just to be a part of that, grading who is the TRADOC Drill Sergeant and Platoon Sergeant of the Year, that’s a good thing. Stuff like this is important to me because, at the same time that you’re a drill sergeant or platoon sergeant, you’re also still mastering your

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