

Drill sergeants, AIT platoon sergeant of year winners announced

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Staff Sgt. Brandon Laspe (from left), 2016 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year; Sgt. Ryan Moldovan, 2016 Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year; and Sgt. 1st Class Martin Delaney, 2016 Drill Sergeant of the Year, pose after the awards ceremony Sept. 9 at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

Staff Sgt. John Joss once referred to himself as an “average active adult” in the aftermath of the surgery that took his right leg.

After four days of difficult competition, the 15 NCOs vying to become the 2016 Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year were called into the Bowen Room of the Drill Sergeant School at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for the announcement of the winners.

The toll the competition had taken was obvious, as many limped in to take their spots, walking delicately to avoid blisters and burns on their sore feet. They were pained and tired, but still standing proud.



Staff Sgt. Christopher Johnson runs the final segment of a 12-mile ruck march Friday morning at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

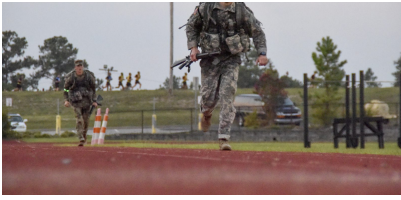
Then the announcement came. **Sgt. 1st Class Martin Delaney**, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, was named the 2016 Drill Sergeant of the Year. **Sgt. Ryan Moldovan**, 98th Training Division, was named 2016 Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the

Year. **Staff Sgt. Brandon Laspe**, Panama City, Florida, was named Advanced Individual Training Platoon Sergeant of the Year.

The 1st Sgt. Tobias Meister Award, which goes to the competitor who scored highest on his Army Physical Fitness Test, was awarded to **Staff Sgt. Dustin Randall**, Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Before the winners were announced, the NCOs heard from Maj. Gen. Anthony Funkhouser, commanding general of the Center for Initial Military Training, who told them he was impressed by what he saw during the week. He also told a story about a family he met.





SStaff Sgt. Brandon Laspe runs the final segment of a 12-mile ruck march Friday morning, with Staff Sgt. Keith Lovely close behind. Laspe was later named AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

"There are a lot of families at my hotel because of the graduation," Funkhouser said. "One family had a little boy, he was probably 10 years old. He sees me in uniform and he comes to start talking to me, making small talk, chatting away. He says, 'Hey, my older brother is graduating tomorrow from basic training. He wants to be a drill sergeant one day.' I say, 'That's pretty neat. Our drill sergeants are impressive individuals.' So, he says, 'Are you a drill sergeant?' I look down at my rank, stand up straight so he can see it, and say, 'No, I'm a General.' He said, 'Oh ... so will you ever get promoted to drill sergeant?'"

After being named Drill Sergeant of the Year, Delaney said the feeling he got when he heard his name called could be summed up in one word: "Incredible."

"Everything is so secretive that you have no idea where you stand," Delaney said. "Everybody is on pins and needles, and you hope you did well enough in all the events so that they can call your name. It was a great feeling. These guys are the best from every installation, so of course, they are going to be very good at everything, and it was kind of nerve-wracking watching them do things so well."



Command Sgt. Maj. Blaine Huston, left, presents the 1st Sgt. Tobias Meister Award to Staff Sgt. Dustin Randall on Friday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The award is given to the competitor who scores the highest on the Army Physical Fitness Test during the Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year Competition. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

As AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year, Laspe said he was looking forward to his chance to work at the strategic level with the Training and Doctrine Command. As part of their victories, the winners of the drill sergeant and AIT platoon sergeant competitions spend the next year working at Fort Jackson, assisting TRADOC with policy.

"The competition was grueling, physically and mentally, but that's what we train for and that's what we prepare for," Laspe said. "I'm excited to affect things at a more strategic level because now, instead of impacting my field and my group of Soldiers, I'll have an impact on the entire Army. That's pretty exciting."

To be named Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year, Moldovan had to survive a difficult challenge from Sgt. 1st Class Jason Scott, 95th Training Division. As the competition wore on, their respect for each other grew through the tests.

"These NCOs are top notch," Moldovan said. "I had to keep up with them 100 percent of the way."

"I could talk to you all day about Drill Sgt. Scott," Moldovan continued.

"His ethics, his principles, his integrity. I'll tell you a story about Drill Sgt. Scott. We were head-to-head, right? It's me against him for all the glory. We had a surprise ruck march. They brought us into a line, we had our ruck sacks on, and they said, 'Alright drill sergeants: Ruck march. Unknown distance, unknown time.' I started tightening my straps. I went to tighten a strap, and it

unsnapped. There was nothing I could do to get it to snap, and everybody was already halfway down the road. Drill Sgt. Scott — knowing that I'm his direct competition — stopped to help me. He said, 'I got you, Battle,' and he snapped me up and then we ran together on the ruck march. I have so much respect for Drill Sgt. Scott. He is a great competitor."



Staff Sgt. Brandon Laspe returns to his seat after being named the 2016 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

There could only be the three winners, but as Funkhouser said earlier in the week, the 15 competitors were already "the best of the best." The 15 walked and limped away from the week with memories they won't soon forget. And Delaney, Moldovan and Laspe walked away with shiny new titles: Drill Sergeant, Army Reserve Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year.