

Fort Sill Drill Sergeant of the Year Will Be A 'Force to Be Reckoned With' In TRADOC Competition

By Meghan Portillo - NCO Journal

June 21, 2016



Staff Sgt. Dustin Randall, Fort Sill's Drill Sergeant of the Year, is already preparing for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Drill Sergeant of the Year competition in September. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance, so I'm going to give it all I've got," Randall said. (Photo by Meghan Portillo / NCO Journal)

A year ago, Staff Sgt. Dustin Randall had plans to join Special Forces. Little did he know that in the span of a few short months, he would instead graduate from drill sergeant school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, be inducted into the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club and selected as NCO of the Month, NCO of the Quarter and then Fort Sill's 2016 Drill Sergeant of the Year. He now has his sights set on the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command and U.S. Army Drill Sergeant of the Year competitions.

"I absolutely see him going on to TRADOC DSOY and Army DSOY," said 1st Sgt. Shandrel Stewart of B Battery, 1st Battalion, 79th Field Artillery Regiment, 434th Field Artillery Brigade, who recommended him for the Drill Sergeant of the Year competition. "I think he can win it all. I don't know who the competition is, but Drill Sgt. Randall is a force to be reckoned with. The other competitors are going to have to be on their A-game, and they are going to have to bring it."

Randall said he is excited about competing in the TRADOC Drill Sergeant of the Year competition in September.

"I don't think I will ever have another opportunity in my whole career to do something like this," Randall said. "I definitely don't want to look back on it four or five months from now and say, 'I wish I had given more effort,' or 'I wish I had studied more.' It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance, so I'm going to give it all I've got. Hopefully when they call the winner's name it will be mine. We'll see."

Preparing for the competition

"Drill Sgt. Randall is very competitive," Stewart said. "He will say that he is not, but everything is a competition. He does not like losing, and he is very goal-oriented. You always hear people saying, 'Oh, I don't care if I win or lose.' Drill Sgt. Randall has a way of making you care, making you want to compete with him, making you want to say, 'Hey, if he did it, then I know I can do it.'"

Randall found time to study for the Fort Sill competition even during the "red phase" of basic training, when drill sergeants – usually two per platoon – are with their Soldiers from 4:45 a.m. until 9 p.m. or later. They get their Soldiers out of bed, lead them in physical training, accompany them to the chow hall for meals and run them through the training events for the day. In the evenings, drill sergeants can be found

cleaning weapons, inspecting gear and helping Soldiers deal with personal issues. And then the next day, it's "wash, rinse, repeat," Randall said.

"Even though we were still in red phase, he found time," Stewart said. "He kept 3-by-5 cards in his pocket and studied, studied, studied. During lunch, he studied, studied. So many would have made excuses, but he found the time."

Randall knew the competition could test him on any task drill sergeants teach their Soldiers. Staff Sgt. Franco Peralta, Fort Sill's former Drill Sergeant of the Year, designed this year's competition at Fort Sill to emulate what he experienced last year in the TRADOC Drill Sergeant of the Year competition. Competitors completed a 12-mile foot march, were tested on multiple basic tasks and were placed in simulations of real-life scenarios.

"Situations you think would not be tested, they can throw in there," Randall said. "For example, we were doing a recovery drill for PT – kind of a cool-down stretch at the end – and one of the Soldiers takes a knee and says she just can't do it anymore. She wants to quit; she is having all these issues back home. So we were evaluated on our approach – they call it 'taking off the hat.' You can't always be stern. Sometimes you have to show them you are also human and care for their needs. You've got to coach them through it and get them back in the fight."

Taking pride in an important job

Though being a drill sergeant was not what he had planned for this stage of his career, Randall said he takes so much pride in being the face of the Army for new Soldiers. The best part of his job, he said, is seeing not only the drastic change in the Soldiers by the time they graduate from basic combat training, but the drastic change in their futures.

"The Soldiers who come here with nothing else – they were sleeping in a car before they got here, they had no money, no job – that's kind of how I was when I came into the Army. Just seeing that person transform and have an enormous amount of opportunities when they leave here, that's my favorite part of this job," Randall said. "It's amazing to see those underprivileged individuals come in and realize that hard work pays off, that when they leave here they will definitely have a better life."

On the other hand, he said, the hardest part of the job is seeing individuals come through who really want to be there, but who ultimately don't make the cut.

"In the cycle I just graduated, there was one – she was in military intelligence, very smart, I could tell she wanted to be here. She gave 110 percent, but when she first came in she couldn't do one sit-up. She made progress; she got up to three, and then to seven. But 21 sit-ups is the minimum required on the PT test, so she had to chapter out of the military. It's hard to see. You coach them, and you want them to succeed, but even though a drill sergeant is there 18 hours a day, they can't do the work for them."

Across the board, though, no matter how much a Soldier struggles through basic combat training, they come to admire their drill sergeant, Randall said.

"If you ask any Soldier who they think the best drill sergeant is on this post, they will tell you it's their drill sergeant," Randall said. "They may not say that during the first three or four weeks of BCT, but there is something about the last 4-and-a-half weeks – a transformation to where they really want to be like their drill sergeant. Their drill sergeant is the best and can do no wrong. On graduation day, everybody wants to take pictures with their drill sergeant. I think it's because, deep down, they know their drill sergeant had their best intentions at heart from the get go. Looking back, they know he or she was looking out for them, turning them into a better person."

Drill sergeants play such an important role in shaping the future Army, and Randall said he is honored to have been selected as the standard-bearer for the drill sergeants at Fort Sill.

"Day in and day out, I am setting the example for all of the drill sergeants to follow," Randall said. "I'm mentoring, guiding them as needed. And I am the liaison between the drill sergeants and the command team. So anything they need, anything I can do to make their job easier, that's what I'm here for."

Randall has plans to create a drill-sergeant parliament to get all of the battalions on the same page. The Drill Sergeant of the Year has the ear of the sergeant major, Stewart explained, and if Randall can get all of the drill sergeants to agree on a need or issue, he can better facilitate a change.

Stewart said she hopes the drill sergeants at Fort Sill learn a lot from Randall during his year as drill sergeant of the year: self-discipline, going by the book, prioritizing their time.

"He is the total 360 of what they are looking for in an NCO," Stewart said. "He leads by the book, has a very strong presence. He is very knowledgeable, whether we are talking about weapons, drill and ceremony, field operations. He knows it all. He was the prime candidate. He had so many ideas he wanted to bring to the table, things in the program for the drill sergeants in general that he wanted to change. I hate that I lost him, but I'm glad he won it. It was time for him to grow. He was the best person for the job, and I'm not even surprised that he got it. I knew he was going to win it."