



Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Russell, from left, Staff Sgt. Christopher Croslin and Staff Sgt. Jonathan Miller led the way on a ruck march during the 2014 competition at Fort Jackson, S.C. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

NCOs Grow During Time As Drill Sergeants, AIT Platoon Sergeant Of Year

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

Winning any U.S. Army competition brings honor and glory to the victor. But the winners of the Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competitions get an additional perk. During their year as reigning champions, they get a new job.

In September 2014, Staff Sgt. Jonathan Miller was named Drill Sergeant of the Year, Staff Sgt. Christopher Croslin was named Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year and Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Russell was named AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year. After their victories, Miller and Russell immediately went to work at the strategic level at TRADOC's U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

The three said their experiences during the past year inspired them and showed them the big picture on Army issues.

"It's been a learning experience," Miller said. "Serving as Drill Sergeant of the Year has opened my eyes to a lot of things that I wasn't aware of before. Working at the strategic level is much different than working as a squad leader or team leader, which is what I was used to. Seeing the big picture up here is truly awesome."

Russell, who has been in the Army for 13 years and deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq, also enjoyed his time working at Fort Eustis.

"It's been eye opening to see the Army at a strategic level and be able to travel and see how other sides of the

Army train, how they prepare Soldiers in Advanced Individual Training and basic training,” Russell said. “You get to see the whole picture.”

Croslin served his year as Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Croslin said he originally joined the Army Reserve so that he could stay near family in Oklahoma.

“I always wanted to serve in the Army and fight for my country,” Croslin said. “I joined in 2004 because of my desire to serve. The way I saw it, our country was at war, and I need to be over there. Whatever it was that I could do, I would serve however they needed me. But at the same time, I love my civilian side of life. I didn’t really want to be moved around the country my whole life. I’m a very family-oriented person, and all my family lives here in Oklahoma. I had the need and the want to serve, but at the same time stay close to my family.”

Though Croslin wasn’t sent to the Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, his year was still busy at Fort Sill, working with new recruits there, as well as traveling for various duties.

“I think everybody’s experience being Drill Sergeant of the Year is different,” Croslin said. “What I have pulled from it is the experiences I’ve been able to have with senior leadership — working with my command, getting their knowledge on what it means to be a leader. This is a position where you really get to spend some time with those leaders.

“And there was a lot of mentorship with other drill sergeants,” Croslin said. “A lot of drill sergeants look up to you when you become that pinnacle of a drill sergeant, so you have to hold yourself to a higher standard. Because everybody is basing it on: You are what’s right. There is a pressure that comes along with that. I knew that would come with it, but at times, you really realize that all the eyes are on you.”

Croslin credited the NCOs he started his career learning from with jumpstarting his Army Reserve career.

“To start it all off, it would have to be my drill sergeants in Basic Training,” Croslin said. “I remember them like it was yesterday. They set that example from day one in basic training of what it meant to be a Soldier.

They showed what it meant to pay attention to detail, and that dedication to your country and to those around you, as well as the development of a team and what it meant to be part of a team.”

Miller said that early example is what made him want to become a drill sergeant.

“NCOs have been a pivotal part of my time in the Army,” Miller said. “As a young Soldier, NCOs were there to help guide me, to help correct any deficiencies that I had and to shape me into not only the Soldier that I was but the NCO I have become. It started with my drill sergeants. Everybody remembers who their drill sergeant was regardless of how long ago they served. Everybody remembers that influential person in their life. And that led me to want to become a drill sergeant, because I realized how pivotal they were in so many Soldiers’ lives.”

A year spent working at the strategic level didn’t change what Miller saw as the problems that need fixing in the Army.

“The biggest change that I’d like to see across the Army is the overall discipline,” Miller said. “We see a degradation of the discipline that Soldiers have nowadays. There’s not the level of competence and discipline that I expect. I may have high hopes, but I think we’ve become lax, and I’d like to see us go back to a much more disciplined Army. Get out of the friendship mentality and get back to the leader-driven Army.”

Russell said he hoped to see more NCOs getting directly involved with their Soldiers’ training and not attempting to use technology as a quick fix.

“I want to see us getting back to the Army as a profession, getting back to the Army ethics,” Russell said. “We need to put more emphasis on training Soldiers and developing the individual Soldier instead of looking for technology to do that.”

Though Russell, Miller and Croslin all enjoyed their year at the top, their stint has come to an end. Recently, three NCOs took their places, as Staff Sgt. Jacob Miller was named 2015 Drill Sergeant of the Year, Staff Sgt. Mark Mercer became the Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year and Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Enriquez was named AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year.

And the Army goes rolling along. ■



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