

# Teams Featuring NCOs Take Best Ranger, Best Sapper Competitions

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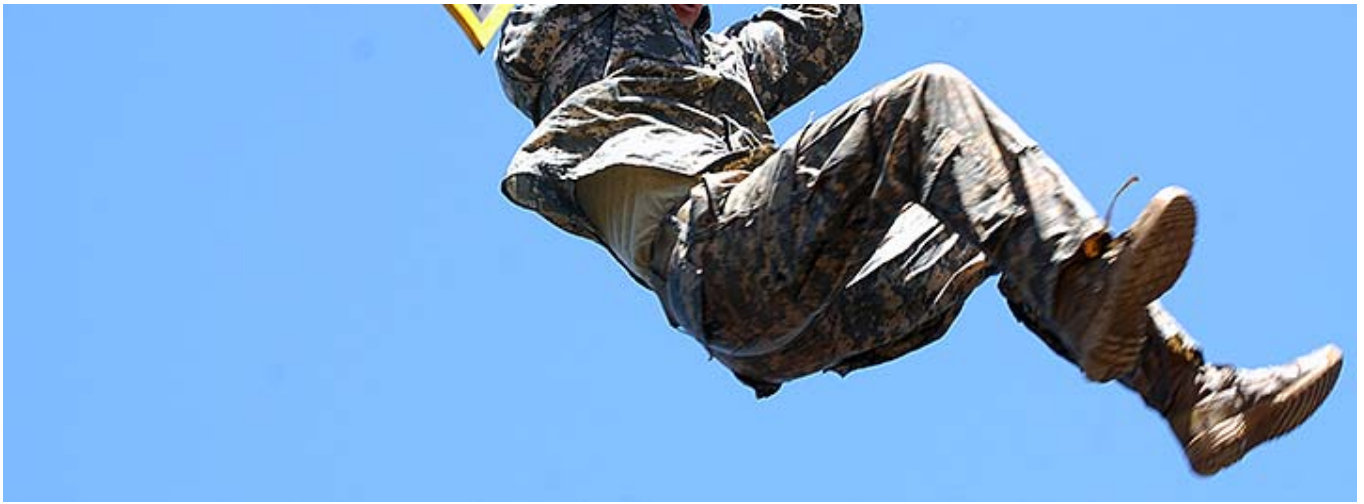


NCOs made up half the winning teams of both the Best Ranger and Best Sapper competitions earlier this month.

Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein, with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, competed with Capt. Robert Killian, from the Colorado Army National Guard, and the pair were named the Army's best Rangers after the 60-hour crucible ended April 17 at Fort Benning, Georgia.

It was the first time in the competition's 33-year history that it has been won by an Army National Guard team.





Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein navigates a water confidence course. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Edward Reagan)

“It still really hasn’t totally sunk in yet,” Friedlein said after the awards ceremony. “I’m just really amazed. I can’t believe we did it after the three days of struggling and just constantly trying to chip away at first place, then taking the lead after night orienteering and losing it on the obstacle course, just fighting all the way to the end.”

Friedlein, whose team finished with 4,063 points, said he has never seen a competition so close, with only a 12-point difference between first and second place.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein, left, and Capt. Robert Killian, right cross the finish line of the 33rd annual David E. Grange Jr. Best Ranger Competition 2016 at Fort Benning, Ga. Friedlein and Killian were the first National Guard team ever to win the competition. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Edward Reagan)

The pair narrowly beat out 1st Sgt. David Floutier and Staff Sgt. Joshua Rolfes of the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade.

In third place was the Maneuver Center of Excellence team of Capt. Michael Blanchard and Capt. Brian Slamkowski.

Events for this year's competition included an unknown distance run, unknown distance swim, urban obstacle course, weighted litter carry, a stress shoot, nighttime ruck march under load, a written exam while fatigued, night land navigation, combat water survival obstacle course, the Darby Queen obstacle course, helocast and a final buddy run.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein scales a climbing wall. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joshua Wooten)

“Everything was back-to-back,” Friedlein said. “The competition this year was designed really well. They gave you no time to recover and you just had to give everything and stay focused and prepare for the next event after you finished the one you were just on.”

The competition pace also meant no dwelling on any missteps along the way.





Capt. Robert Killian helps Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein exit Victory Pond after swimming to their next event. (U.S. Airforce photo by Senior Airman Keith James)

“If you made any mistakes, just let them go and say ‘Alright, it’s done, can’t go change it,’” Friedlein said.

Going into the first night’s ruck march, Friedlein said he and Killian knew they had to push hard.

“We already knew we were kind of behind in points, not exactly where we wanted to be,” he said. “We didn’t want a real big point gap, so Capt. Killian really pushed me.”

That meant more than just verbal encouragement, Friedlein said.

“When I say he pushed me, he physically pushed me on a lot of the uphill just to get me going faster so we could close the gap.”





U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein ties knots during the Best Ranger Competition (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joshua Wooten)

By the end of the first day more than half of the 50 teams that began were cut. Medical problems forced two teams out and competition officials dropped the teams with the 25 lowest scores.

As the competition wore on, Killian and Friedlein continued to bounce around the top three spots, with mistakes on individual events preventing them from definitively jumping ahead.

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The key thing is making the least amount of mistakes as possible, Killian said. We just left it, went on to the next one and said, 'We're just going to have to push harder now and make up for any shortcomings that we had.' ”

Both Killian and Friedlein continued to push each other until the climactic end. Going into the final event — a buddy run — Friedlein said the pair knew they had a 3-point deficit to make up. Killian kept him focused on the way ahead.

“I wasn't allowed to look back to see where the other guys were. He just kept lying to me, telling me they were right there,” he said. “It wasn't until [the final turn] that he put his hand on my head and said ‘Hey, man, we're about to win the pistols,’ and I was thinking, ‘How are you saying that if they're right behind us?’ ”

It was a moment of supreme accomplishment for Friedlein.

“The whole three days, trying to keep up with Capt. Killian was a struggle,” he said.

The struggle paid off. Patrick Murphy, the acting secretary of the Army, presented the first-place awards to Killian and Friedlein.



Capt. Robert Killian, right, and Staff Sgt. Erich Friedlein move to the next firing range during the Stress Shoot event at the 2016 all-Army Best Ranger Competition. (Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Darron Salzer)

“[The competitors] are an inspiration to all of us in our military, all one million Army Soldiers,” Murphy said. “The fact that we had a team from the [Army] National Guard — Colorado and Pennsylvania — team up and win that competition is pretty special.”

After the ceremony, Killian said he’ll be back to compete again. He promised a former teammate, who is now going through the Special Forces qualification course, that the two would compete as a team again.

“There hasn’t been a Green Beret team to win it in a while, so I have a different reason to come back,” Killian said.

Friedlein had a more immediate goal.

“I’m going to eat a big burger and probably go home and take a nap,” he said.

As the Ranger competition closed at Fort Benning, the Best Sapper Competition got underway April 18-21 at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.



Sgt. 1st Class David Rizo controls a Talon mobile robot during the Best Sapper Competition at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Hewitt)

Forty-eight pairs of the Army’s toughest engineers from Hawaii to Italy showed up for the 10th annual competition, but hoisting the trophy on the third day was the team of Sgt. 1st Class David Rizo, a platoon sergeant with the 37th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat

Team, 82nd Airborne Division, and Capt. Jason Bahmer, a paratrooper with 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division.

Capt. William Whitfield and Capt. Michael McLaughlin, both from the 1st Cavalry Division's 3rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, placed second. First Sgt. Jose Casillas and Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Shay of the 82nd Airborne Division's 307th Brigade Engineer Battalion placed third.



The 82nd Airborne Division team of Capt. Jason Bahmer and Sgt. 1st Class David Rizo hold up the first place trophy after winning the Best Sapper Competition at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Hewitt)

“I’m ecstatic,” Rizo said after the competition. “We put a lot into this and were really confident going into the events with the chance to come out and represent the 82nd Airborne Division.”

The three-day competition consisted of 42 events, more than 50 miles of distance covered and only 50 hours to complete it.

The events tested Sappers in technical and tactical skills and challenged their physical and



mental strength.

Engineers moved all over Fort Leonard Wood on foot participating in a non-standard physical fitness test, a rappel tower, stress shoots, zip lines, door breaches, demolition charges, ingenuity tasks and the famous X-mile run that has been described as the Sapper Cross Fit games — a final event the 19 remaining teams experience before finally crossing through the red Sapper castle at the finish line.



Sgt. 1st Class David Rizo performs 135-pound thrusters during the Best Sapper Competition. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Hewitt)

“These guys are the best,” Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Green, command sergeant major of the 82nd Airborne Division, said of the division’s teams. “They’ve dedicated blood, sweat, and equity to come out [here], represent the division and show that they are the best of the best.”

Each day, a handful of teams were eliminated.

“We push the competitors to their mental and physical breaking points to see what they are made of,” said Staff Sgt. Robert Moore, an instructor at the Sapper Leader Course. “Teams that are strong will succeed and teams that are unprepared or fall behind will be cut.”

Master Sgt. Eric Prescott, of the 307th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, was the primary coach for the first- and third-place teams, who had

been training for the event since January.

He says the teams conducted fitness training three times a day and trained in engineer skills throughout the week to ensure proficiency.



Capt. Jason Bahmer and Sgt. 1st Class David Rizo carry a 250-pound crate during the Best Sapper Competition at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Hewitt)

He incorporated training events at Fort Bragg's Pre-Ranger facilities, including multi-day events simulating the competition. The competition's schedule and events are kept confidential from the public; coaches and candidates can only anticipate the events.

Moore said, "The tasks they are evaluated on differ from year to year so they don't know what to expect."