



U.S. Army Sgt. Jeremy Kimbrough marks the coordinates of a simulated improvised explosive device on a map during the 2019 Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., Oct. 8, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Nathan Smith)

2019 U.S. Army Best Warrior Competition: Lessons Learned

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On October 6, 2019, 22 of the best Soldiers from across the U.S. Army arrived at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., to compete in the 2019 *Army Best Warrior Competition* (BWC). Participants were assessed on their ability to perform tasks with no external stressors added, and then under the stress and unpredictability of a combat-like scenario. The purpose of this article is to highlight the trending issues top-performing Soldiers of the BWC struggled with while performing in adverse conditions.

The BWC Soldier

All Soldiers must master the fundamentals. This only comes from proper training and preparation. *Army Doctrine Publication 7-0: Training* states, “Commanders ensure Soldiers and units train under challenging and realistic conditions that closely replicate an operational environment” (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 1-1). Soldiers who compete in the BWC must be able to maintain focus and consistently demonstrate competence in those tasks, even in unstable circumstances and environments.



U.S. Army Sgt. Nathan Yordy adjusts the front sight post of his M4 carbine during the 2019 Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., Oct. 6, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Nathan Smith)

When describing the caliber of Soldier in the 2019 BWC, Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Joseph Martin said, “You represent what we want in our Soldiers: physically fit, resilient, dedicated professionals who are the examples of readiness” (Lacdan, 2019, para. 6).

Throughout the BWC, Soldiers were assessed on their ability to perform tasks outlined in *Soldier Training Publication (STP) 21-1: Soldier’s Manual of Common Tasks (SMCT)*, *Warrior Skills Level 1* and *STP 21-24: SMCT, Warrior Leader Skills Level 2, 3, and 4* (Department of the Army, 2017; Department of the Army, 2008). These tasks were conducted as part

of a dynamic scenario, replicating emerging threats in diverse realistic operating environments. From the time candidates arrived until the final event, they faced physical, mental, and emotional stressors that affected their performance, testing their grit and fortitude.

Lessons Learned

During the 2019 competition, one of the main lessons learned was that all competitors performed well under ideal conditions where tasks and standards were clearly defined. However, their performance decreased when immersed in ambiguous and challenging scenarios.

The Rifle Range

The initial conditions of this event were a well-lit indoor range with cadre present and a standard uniform with ear and eye protection. No external stressors were involved. Competitors grouped and zeroed their M4 carbine with iron sights and a top-mounted aiming system. The standard was four out of five rounds inside the designated area within a six Minute of Angle in accordance with *Training Circular 3-20.40: Training and Qualification – Individual Weapons* (Department of the Army, 2019b). They also conducted target analysis while making windage and elevation corrections. All competitors performed well and received a “Go” for grouping and zeroing.

The second variation of the event had competitors loading, correcting malfunctions, and firing an M4 and M249 machine gun at night with limited visibility. However, during this event many struggled to complete their tasks in the face of realistic complexity which included combat noises played over a public address system, role players shouting commands and requesting assistance, and the threat of enemy forces.

Due to these stressors, several participants could not operate their aiming system correctly, used the visible laser rather than infrared (IR), or activated the IR laser but did not remove the cover. Also, most could only effectively engage threats at 50 meters as they could not focus their aiming systems to allow for effective engagement



U.S. Army Sgt. Jeremy Kimbrough plots a grid coordinate to call for fire in a stress shooting lane during the 2019 Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort A.P. Hill, Va., Oct. 9, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Victor Perez Vargas)

beyond that. These environmental changes and realistic stressors caused performance to decrease significantly.

The Medical Scenario

During this stage, competitors were required to treat a casualty with a gunshot wound resulting from an insider threat while taking fire. A majority of competitors struggled to provide basic care under fire. Most Soldiers correctly applied the initial tourniquet and knew to apply a second if necessary (Department of the Army, 2016). However, two observations stood out.

One: Competitors didn't assess the tactical situation before moving the casualty to a covered position prior to treatment, nor did they tell the casualty to try and move themselves to cover while the site was being secured (Department of the Army, 2016).

Two: The majority loosened the tourniquet after the casualty complained it was too tight. During the after action review, every single competitor knew this was the wrong course of action but still went against their better judgement and training. This, again, demonstrates that changes in the environment or conditions to which Soldiers are accustomed directly affects performance.

Land Navigation

During this phase of BWC, each candidate was required to carry a GPS beacon for safety and monitoring of their movements. Based on routes observed and feedback from lost candidates, several deficiencies in land navigation skills were noted.

Many lacked confidence with terrain association using only a map, protractor, and compass (Department of the Army, 2013). Some Soldiers didn't analyze terrain properly, instead resorting to the dead reckoning technique, taking them through difficult terrain — becoming lost in the process. Others would find a road and travel on it — a clear violation of BWC standards. Soldiers caught on the road were assessed a time penalty, placed back into the wood line, and asked to provide location and planned route to the next point. They then struggled to pinpoint their location, continued to move in the wrong direction, and were removed from the course before completion due to time or safety concerns.

The majority of candidates exercised proper judgement by accounting for mission, enemy, terrain, troops available—time, and civil considerations (METT-TC) (Department of the Army, 2013). However, the rate of movement decreased exponentially during times of limited visibility. Even some of the fastest competitors

displayed erratic movements and significantly slowed down when negotiating difficult terrain.

It appears that a reliance on technology to conduct land navigation has created a shortfall where many Soldiers are unable to navigate without an electronic device. Soldiers remain dependent on devices vulnerable to jamming or spoofing by an electronically savvy enemy, which will be a detriment in future contested operating environments.

Moving Forward

"We've got the greatest Army in the world, and we want to stay on top."

—Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston
(Tann, 2019, para. 3)

The 2019 BWC demonstrated that even our Best Warrior Soldiers are having difficulty performing tasks in realistic training environments. Now consider the unpredictability of modern and future battlefields. Enemy electronic warfare can deny GPS navigation, rendering communication platforms useless (Harper, 2019). Cyber-enabled information operations are used to remotely alter behavior, including those of host nations (Lin, 2019). Nonstandard, proxy forces confound rules of engagement and hinder our ability to positively identify adversaries. Additionally, cyberwarfare remains one of the most pervasive asymmetric threats on the battlefield (Department of Defense, 2018). The U.S. Army has to train for future fights.

Units can increase adaptability and performance by implementing realistic training scenarios into common Soldier task training. Introducing more physical, mental, and emotional stressors better prepares Soldiers



U.S. Army Soldiers conduct the 2-Mile Run event of the Army Combat Fitness Test during the 2019 Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va., Oct. 6, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Seth Barham)

for multi-domain and large-scale combat operations. Expanding unit training strengthens both individual Soldiers, and develops unit cohesion to coincide with the Sergeant Major of the Army's *This is my Squad* initiative (Rempfer, 2019). ■

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