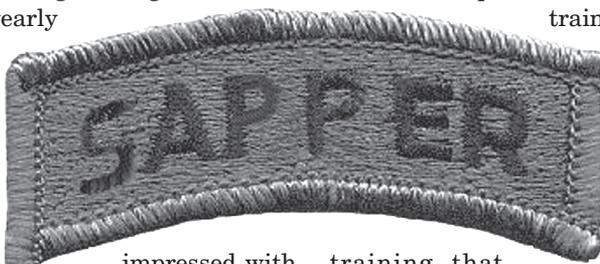


A LIEUTENANT'S LOOK AT THE 2009 BEST SAPPER COMPETITION

By First Lieutenant Christopher D. Blackburn

Warm temperatures and sunny skies accompanied this year's Best Sapper Competition at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, framing the Engineer Regiment's most spectacular yearly event. The Sapper Leader Course cadre—augmented by a cast of hundreds of officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), Soldiers, and civilians—engineered a flawless contest of mental and physical strength that left competitors impressed with its rich training quality and professional execution. Teams entered the competition with victory as their foremost goal, but there is a particular group of lieutenants who may find that the value of the competition extends further than just standing on the winner's podium.



The demands of current deployment cycles leave new engineer lieutenants with one of two ways to get experience as a platoon leader: either during predeployment training or while deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. While both experiences offer plenty of challenges and learning opportunities, platoon leader time in combat often does not expose the young officers to the wide variety of thorough, engineer-specific units conduct when ramping up training that for a deployment. For example, a new lieutenant fresh out of the Engineer Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) II who meets his or her unit downrange and steps into a platoon probably will not have attended a combat lifesaver course or supervised a demolitions range before leading the platoon. Besides the introductory training received

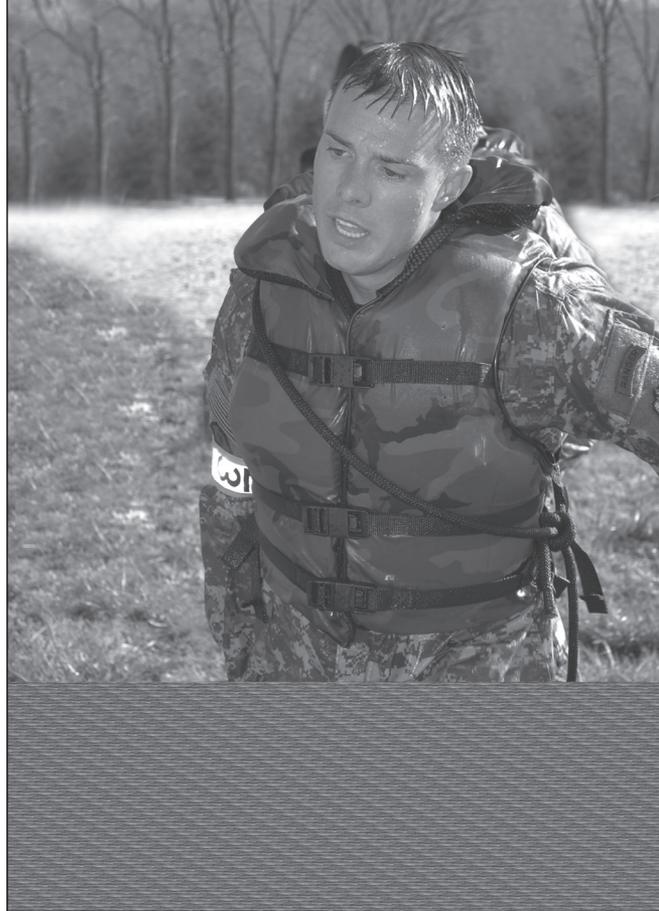


A sapper team sprints to the finish line of the obstacle course in the 2009 Best Sapper Competition.

during each phase of BOLC, platoon leader time is when a young officer is meant to benefit from the mentorship of NCOs and become proficient in engineer skills that he or she will grow to expect of all sappers. Without these training opportunities, a lieutenant in combat may be at a loss when the platoon sergeant suggests using a water impulse charge to breach a steel door or the interpreter asks how to administer an intravenous injection.

As one of those new lieutenants, I found that training for the competition provided the most comprehensive approach to make up for lost time in a garrison environment. Any participant who takes the competition seriously will naturally master basic combat engineer skills, because not doing so will certainly doom a team's competitiveness against the field. Regardless of the technique used to catch up, lieutenants must not replace their foundation of basic engineer knowledge with wartime experiences. Being a platoon leader in combat is undeniably beneficial and often the highlight of an officer's career. But what about time spent as a company commander in a different conflict—perhaps Iraq instead of Afghanistan—where the tactics, techniques, and procedures used as a platoon leader may be inappropriate? Without a strong foundation of basic engineer knowledge and an understanding of the capabilities that Soldiers and NCOs bring to the fight, a commander will struggle to appropriately direct combat power to accomplish the mission. It is up to the individual leader to conduct a self-assessment, identify deficiencies in knowledge or skills, and implement a system to ensure that these gaps are filled.

During no other 52-hour period in a Soldier's career will he or she be subjected to more rigorous, realistic, battle-focused training than during the Best Sapper Competition. While lieutenants typically plan rather than execute training events at squad level and



A sapper heads for the finish line after the helocast.

below, the competition offers lieutenants a rare chance to participate for “free”—free of range control, risk assessment, ammunition draw, transportation, and every other administrative duty required to conduct training in garrison. The resourcing headache is gracefully accepted by the Sapper Leader Course cadre, giving participants an opportunity to appreciate the fruitful



A team from the 66th Engineer Company executes the weapons assembly station during the “Sapper Stakes” phase of the 2009 Best Sapper Competition.



Sappers complete the helocast/poncho raft and swim event during the 2009 Best Sapper Competition.

training and establishing a standard to emulate when planning training within their own units.

Cadets at the United States Military Academy commit to memory General Douglas MacArthur's famed opinion of athletic competition in the Army: "Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds, that upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory." General MacArthur, then superintendent at West Point, was speaking of officer athletes attending the Academy, but his message certainly applies elsewhere. Nonstop physical and mental intensity make the Best Sapper Competition the epitome of friendly strife. Given the reliance lieutenants must place on NCOs to succeed as platoon leaders, the strengthening of the officer-NCO sapper buddy team forms the foundation for victory on other fields. Officer-NCO teams took first and second place in this year's competition, as well as the top spots in 2006 and 2007. Most lieutenants, especially platoon leaders, will never again in their careers be more closely surrounded by the experience and counsel of NCOs. This precious resource should be tapped, not just for the sake of building a competitive team but because the bond created during the competition is everlasting and represents the trademark of success throughout our Army's history. Personally speaking, it wasn't asking my sapper buddy how to throw a grapnel hook, but realizing how familiar he was with the tactical details of its employment, that was most memorable. There are many ways to learn in the Army—field manuals, college courses, officer professional development classes, for instance—but nothing tops the decades of experience and the distinctive, plain-spoken message of a prideful NCO.

This year's Best Sapper Competition was the best yet. An engineer lieutenant need not look far for motivation to prepare and compete. The competition has stiffened over the years, but not unexpectedly, considering the event's training value and the prestige of being named the Army's Best Sapper. The rewards for winning are plentiful: Remington shotguns, a Bronze Order of the de Fleury Medal, a rucksack full of gear, an Army Commendation Medal, and many other keepsakes. However, a lieutenant privileged enough to partner with the type of top-notch NCO we expect to shoulder the mission of the Engineer Regiment may have a different perspective on winning. Like past Best Sapper champions, you may be fortunate enough to combine invaluable training and NCO partnership with impressive accolades.



First Lieutenant Blackburn is a platoon leader with the 66th Engineer Company, 2d Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, and served as a platoon leader and task force engineer during the company's deployment to Iraq from December 2007 to February 2009. He is a graduate of Ranger School and holds a bachelor's in civil engineering from the United States Military Academy.

Note: First Lieutenant Blackburn and his sapper buddy, Staff Sergeant Moises Ramirez, 66th Engineer Company from Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, finished among the top 10 in the 2009 Best Sapper Competition. First Lieutenant Blackburn also earned the Engineer Regiment's Outstanding Engineer Platoon Leader Award in 2008.