

2010 Best Sapper Competition

By Mr. Luke Waack

One of the toughest challenges an engineer Soldier, or sapper, could ever have is vying in and winning the Best Sapper Competition—which in 2010 was a six-day, three-phase event at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, covering the full spectrum of engineer operations and infantry tasks. Moving more than 50 miles on foot, the sappers were on nearly continuous operations, with little “down time” between events that ran the gamut of physical and mental challenges. The competition began with two-person teams performing the most repetitions possible of push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups in 15 minutes—five minutes in each category—then continued with sappers running more than four miles in Army combat uniform and interceptor body armor vest and carrying a dummy M4 carbine.



Photo by Luke Waack

Above: Second Lieutenants Jonathan Kralick (right) and Jeffrey Laughlin, 82d Airborne Division and 20th Engineer Battalion, respectively, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, move a stump weighing hundreds of pounds during the Log Cut and Carry event of the X-Mile Run and the final phase of the 2010 Best Sapper Competition. Kralick and Laughlin took second place.

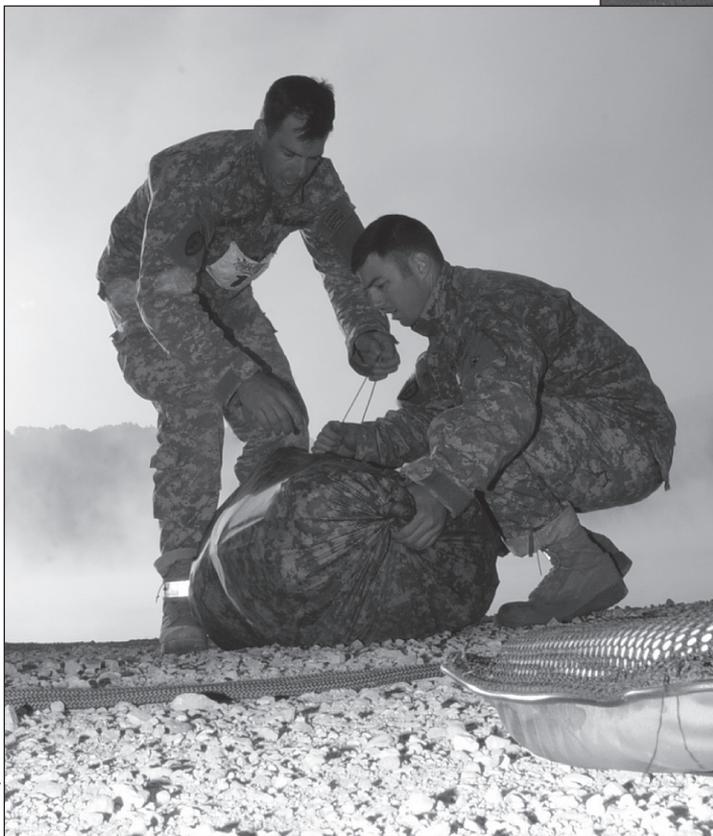


Photo by Luke Waack

Left: Captain Joseph Byrnes (left) and Captain Jason Castro, both Charlie Company, 554th Engineer Battalion, tie up their poncho raft at TA 250, before helo-casting. Byrnes and Castro went on to win the 2010 Best Sapper Competition.



Photo by Visual Information Center

Second Lieutenant Jay Beeman (right) and Captain James Gibbs (left), 11th Engineer Battalion, Fort Benning, Georgia, took third place in the 2010 Best Sapper Competition.

After the first day of challenges, ranging from knot tying to manual breaching of obstacles to evacuate a casualty, the field was narrowed to 20 teams. After the second day, only 10 teams were left. Of those teams, only one could be named Best Sapper.

A previous Best Sapper Competition winner returned to the champion's stage on 21 April at Fort Leonard Wood during the 2010 ENFORCE Conference. Captain Joseph K. Byrnes was a winner in the 2006 competition. He and his teammate this year, Captain Jason D. Castro, were both from Charlie Company, 554th Engineer Battalion, Fort Leonard Wood, at the time of the competition. They beat out 28 teams for the title of "Best Sapper" after more than 50 hours of almost nonstop physical and mental exercise in dozens of Soldier and engineer-specific skills challenges. The teammates used the Warrior Ethos as a guiding principle. They said that they treated the competition as a mission—they received a mission to conduct a three-day competition, gave it everything they had, and left nothing on the course. By working together, they were able to figure out what each of them was good at, and then they came up with a process to eliminate mistakes. They believe that was the key to their success.

Of the six phases of the competition, the pair won the demolition and the land navigation portions. For being named best sappers, they were awarded the Army Meritorious Service Medal and the Army Engineer Association's Bronze deFleury Medal.

The second place team, Second Lieutenant Jonathan Kralick, 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Second Lieutenant Jeffrey Laughlin, 20th

Engineer Brigade, Fort Bragg, won the road march and Sapper Stakes phases of the competition and earned Army Commendation Medals.

Captain James Gibbs and Second Lieutenant Jay Beeman, 11th Engineer Battalion, Fort Benning, Georgia, took third place and were awarded Army Achievement Medals. Captain David Vasquez and First Lieutenant Brett Fuller, 54th Engineer Battalion, Bamberg, Germany, won the non-standard physical fitness test. First Lieutenants Brandon Darroch and Stephen Kraus, 326th Engineer Battalion, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, won the X-Mile Run phase of the competition.

When asked why he entered the competition, one captain replied, "Pride, more than anything. Because I believe there's no better Soldier than an engineer Soldier, and if you're the best here, you're the best Soldier—period." 

Mr. Waack was a staff writer and assistant editor for the Fort Leonard Wood Guidon, as well as the beat reporter for the fort's engineers, when he wrote this article. He is currently the editor of the Arctic Warrior, the authorized newspaper for Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. Before joining the Guidon, Mr. Waack was an Army broadcaster for six years and served in Texas, Italy, and Afghanistan.

