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Fort Bragg Soldiers win Best Sapper 2015 at FLW

FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. – A pair of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Soldiers recently emerged victorious from Fort Leonard Wood’s grueling 2015 Best Sapper Competition.

“We didn’t expect to win, because we had a very short notice that we were going to be teammates,” said Sgt. Brandon Loeder, who participated in the competition with 1st Lt. Daniel Foky. The Soldiers are assigned to Company B, 127th Airborne Engineer Battalion, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division.

Foky’s original teammate was not able to compete.

“A week before the competition Sgt. Loeder stepped up to the plate,” Foky said. “We just came to compete and see how well we could do. We are definitely surprised and pleased with the outcome.”

Foky sought out Loeder as his partner weeks before. However, Loeder just finished Fort Leonard Wood’s 28-day Sapper Leader Course at the end of March, and was unsure if his body would be recovered in time to compete.

The Best Sapper competition took 46 teams across 50 miles in 50 hours, from April 21-23.

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Master Sgt. Kevin Wiseman, Sapper Leader Course chief instructor, said the 9th Annual Best Sapper competition had more events and more competitors than ever before.

“As an instructor organizing one of the very first competitions, a competitor in 2007 and a team sponsor in 2012 - I wanted to improve on those experiences,” Wiseman said.

“The competitors did not know what was coming up next, and they were constantly on the go. This was a non-stop competition,” he said.

Under the cover of darkness, 92 Soldiers started with a non-standard physical fitness test.

Sappers immediately continued on to the nine-timed tasks that made up the round-robin phase, beginning with a poncho raft swim. The rest of the day was spent navigating from one event to the next on foot, covering more than 12 miles.

From expedient climbing to the Claymore mine challenge, the tasks were designed to push Sappers past their mental and physical breaking points - filtering the smartest and strongest Sappers to the next level of competition.

Following the round robin of events, the Sappers were narrowed down to the top 33 scoring teams.

Through the first evening, the Sapper teams participated in land navigation, those scores cutting the teams to 20 for day two - Sapper Stakes.

The seven events of Sapper Stakes tested the competitors on their basic Soldier and combat engineer specific skills with tasks including a stress shoot, Jumar ascender climb and hands-on demolition exam.

“There was a zip line across the river. It was so [much] fun,” Loeder said. “We got to run and jump off a cliff. It was cool.”

Day two’s 20-mile ruck march was the hardest event, according to the winning team.

“We knew it was going to hurt, but we didn’t expect it to hurt as bad as it did,” Foky said. “The last four miles were horrible. Sgt. Loeder really carried us through the road march. He motivated me to finish.”

Loeder agreed.

“We were already fatigued. So, walking 20 miles with a 60-pound ruck sack was rough,” Foky said.

Wiseman said the course was so tough that six teams dropped from the competition, meaning only three teams had to be cut to make the top 10 teams that were to compete during the last event.

With little to no sleep on the third and final morning of competition, the Sappers mustered their last bit of motivation to tackle the x-mile run, which included 10 physically demanding challenges spread across an undisclosed number of miles.

Looking weary, but ready, the final 20 competitors donned their chemical masks and charged across the x-mile run's start line.

Teams were then met with challenges including the Skedko rescue litter drag, two separate fitness circuits and ultimately through the traditional Sapper door breach.

“The hard part wasn't the running, it was all of the events they had interspersed. It was an 82-minute smoke session for us,” Foky said.

Overall, Foky said he was impressed with the execution of the competition.

“It was very well put together and the support from Fort Leonard Wood was huge. It made it more fun for us,” Foky said.

Another team from Fort Bragg took second place - Sgt. 1st Class Andre Bland and Capt. Jason Bahmer, assigned to the 307th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division.

Third place went to one of nine teams from Fort Leonard Wood - 1st Lt. Christopher Bartenhagen and Staff Sgt. Armando Sandoval, assigned to the 5th Engineer Battalion, 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade.

“Honestly, it was really awesome to be around all of the teams. Everyone who was there wanted to be there and deserved to be there. Being able to compete against some really skilled, proficient and experienced Soldiers was motivating,” Foky said.

“Rarely do we get to be around a group of people who are that hard charging. Just being able to compete with them was an honor,” he said.

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Phase winners:

- Non-standard physical fitness test: 1st Lt. Christopher Bartenhagen and Staff Sgt. Armando Sandoval
- Round robin: Sgt. Brandon Loeder and 1st Lt. Daniel Foky
- Land navigation: 1st Lt. Cody Millhouse and 1st Lt. Isaac Ro
- Sapper stakes: 1st Lt. Christopher Bartenhagen and Staff Sgt. Armando Sandoval
- Road march: 1st Lt. Rudy Chelednik and 1st Lt. John Kuderka
- X-Mile run: 1st Lt. Rudy Chelednik and 1st Lt. John Kuderka

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For more information, contact the Fort Leonard Wood Public Affairs Office at 573.563.4145.

Encl(s): Photos

NBC_mask.jpg: 1st Lt. Helmuth Siemer and Spc. Jason Haro run the Physical Endurance Course wearing NBC protective masks. *(Photo by Melissa Buckley, Guidon photojournalist.)*

Poncho_Raft.jpg: Staff Sgts. Robert Moore and Jared Gay swim across Training Area 250 lake with their poncho raft in tow. *(Photo by Melissa Buckley, Guidon photojournalist.)*

Rappel.jpg: 2nd Lt. Joseph Poznanski and Sgt. Joseph Morris perform an Australian rappel during the Expedient Climbing event. *(Photo by Melissa Buckley, Guidon photojournalist.)*

About Fort Leonard Wood

Fort Leonard Wood is a thriving and prosperous installation that has evolved from a small basic training post 70 years ago to a premier Army Center of Excellence that trains about 80,000 military and civilians each year.

Home to the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood now trains and educates service members and develops doctrine and capabilities for the Training and Doctrine Command's U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School, U.S. Army Engineer School, and U.S. Army Military Police School, three gender integrated Initial Military Training brigades, one of only four reception stations in the Army, and the Army's largest Noncommissioned Officers Academy.

Over the past several years, Fort Leonard Wood has received numerous additional responsibilities to include supporting the 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, a large Forces Command unit that is responsible for all deployable capabilities at Fort Leonard

Wood. A colonel-commanded Marine Corps Detachment and an Air Force Detachment, which are both the largest on any Army installation, are located on Fort Leonard Wood; a large Navy Seabee Detachment and elements of the Coast Guard train here as well.
