

SMDC competes at Department of the Army NCO and Soldier of the Year competition

Two members of the Headquarters Company, 1st Satellite Control Battalion proudly represented U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command in the second Department of the Army NCO and Soldier of the Year competition. SSG Steven Cato, SMDC NCO of the Year, and SGT Jennifer Swift, SMDC Soldier of the Year, competed against 10 NCOs and Soldiers in their respective categories during the weeklong competition that was conducted at Fort Lee and Arlington, Va., Sept. 12-18.

The event, initiated last year by Sergeant Major of the Army Jack Tilley, brought together once again the “best of the best” in today’s Army.

At the end of the competition, SPC Russell A. Burnham, U.S. Army Forces Command, was named the 2003 Soldier of the Year, and SSG James W. Luby, Military District of Washington and National Capital Region, was the 2003 NCO of the Year.



Competitors for the Department of the Army NCO and Soldier of the Year Competition pose for a picture with Sergeant Major of the Army Jack Tilley during a break in competition.

Photo by Sharon L. Hartman

SMDC NCO of the Year battled for DA title while younger brother faces own battles in Iraq

ARLINGTON, Va. — SSG Steven Cato of the Headquarters Company, 1st Satellite Control Battalion, represented U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command as he vied for the title of Department of the Army Noncommissioned Officer of the Year during a weeklong competition. The contest, conducted in Fort Lee and Arlington, Va., Sept. 12-18, pitted him against 10 other NCOs representing their major commands as they performed an array of tasks to include a PT test, various common task tests, day and night land navigation, and a mystery event that consisted of a six-mile ruck march, two more CTTs and an M-16 qualification while wearing their protective gas masks. Yet during this time, as often as his mind was focused on the competition and the task at hand, Cato found his thoughts frequently shifting to his brother, John, a truck driver who has been serving in Iraq with a National Guard unit out of Ardmore, Okla., since April of this year. For Cato, the title he was competing for was one, which, in his heart and mind, had already been bestowed upon his brother and every NCO that has served and sacrificed in the fight for freedom.

Cato, a native of Vernon, Texas, joined the Army believing it to be an experience that would send him

down a new and challenging path. He knew nothing of what an NCO was or what his role as one would be, but with five and a half years of service behind him, he can now sum up with one word, what it means to be an NCO: Influence.

“NCOs make today’s Army. We’re molding the Soldiers of the future, and we have an extreme influence on them,” said Cato.

“If a Soldier has a poor leader, it reflects directly on that Soldier. That Soldier may not turn out the same way, but even if he or she is a good Soldier, their progression will be much slower. It will hold them back.

“I definitely keep a higher standard for myself, but I also keep a higher standard for other NCOs. A good NCO will give his or her Soldiers guidance and sometimes even a little push to help them reach their potential. That is my goal as an NCO. To embrace that influence and use it to the advantage of the Army.”

With this attitude, it was no wonder Cato shone at the company, battalion, and regional boards and was subsequently selected as SMDC’s NCO of the Year. Although a competitor at heart, Cato modestly admits that he did not expect to make it as far as he did.

“I have a will to win and always want to do the very

best I can no matter what I'm doing, but the competition I had all the way through the MACOM level was tremendous and I believe, just by pure luck, I came out on top. I never expected to come this far and would have never been upset to be beaten along the way because my competition was that outstanding.

"The competition at the DA level was just another step up," added Cato.

"The Soldiers I work with are satellite controllers like I am. It was interesting and exciting competing against Soldiers from different branches."

The Soldiers he competed against and roomed with for a week, side by side, represented such military branches as Special Forces, Forces Command, Rangers, and the Old Guard to name a few.

"It was a great experience. I was able to learn from these guys and take things from their fields of expertise," added Cato.

"Although there were many differences between the competitors at the DA competition, one thing we all had in common was the drive to live up to that higher standard. We all set standards for ourselves that are so far above the normal standard that we never have trouble meeting the norm, but can have trouble meeting the standards we have set for ourselves. Sometimes this can be a blessing, but other times, an affliction."

When asked what drove him to strive so hard and what prepared him to meet challenges such as this, Cato had another one word answer: Family.

Raised on farms and ranches in Texas and Oklahoma, Cato was placed in a position of responsibility at a very early age. He was responsible for weapons, tractors, making sure he was where he was supposed to be on time, and that his job was accomplished. The standards he had to meet and the safety precautions he had to observe were things he grew up with.

He also credits the love, support, and even discipline from his parents Dena Moss, and Terry and Donita Cato, as well as his siblings, as contributing factors to his successes as an NCO.

"They taught me about sympathy and compassion. They also taught me to listen and understand," said Cato.

"I think the relationship with NCOs is similar to that of your family ... especially the relationship with siblings. We are peers and are all on the same team. As long as things are good, there's nothing to say to try to correct each other. However, we all mess up sometimes and when we do, we should expect someone to come and correct us, just like you would your brother or sister. That's how we in the NCO corps and Soldiers are throughout the Army."



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Top, SSG Steven Cato performs sit-ups during the physical training portion of the Department of the Army NCO of the Year competition; center, Cato dons his protective gas mask prior to performing a nuclear, biological and chemical task; bottom, a judge, right, weighs Cato's rucksack to standard. *Photos by Sharon L. Hartman*

1st SATCON Soldier hangs tough at DA competition

By Sharon L. Hartman

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Department of the Army Soldier of the Year competition was held this year at Fort Lee and Arlington, Va., Sept. 12-18. Representing U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command was Headquarters Company, 1st Satellite Control Battalion, SGT Jennifer Swift — one of four female Soldiers competing “one-on-one” against seven men for the title.

“It was really a tough, good competition, and the people I was up against are the most talented people I’ve ever met in the Army. They are very good at what they do,” said Swift.

A native of Redding, Calif., Swift came into the Army after deciding that the party scene often associated with college life was not for her. Although she didn’t consider the military until her brother joined the Marines her sophomore year in high school, the physical aspect of the military and being able to keep in shape was something that definitely appealed to her. An athlete from a very early age, Swift viewed PT tests and ruck marches as an exciting challenge.

“I’ve been a swimmer pretty much all my life,” added Swift.

“I’m a rock climber right now, and go whitewater rafting. I also started dancing when I was five and the flexibility that comes with that has really helped more than you might think it would.”

Coming to 1st SATCON’s Headquarters Company straight from Advanced Individual Training in early 2002, Swift worked her way up the ranks in good time. Her journey to the Department of the Army Soldier of the

Year competition began as a specialist. She competed for Soldier of the month at her company level just hoping to get practice for her E5 board. (Swift appeared before the E5 board and was promoted shortly after being selected as SMDC’s Soldier of the Year.)

“I won that, so went up to the quarter board, won that and went to the company Soldier of the Year board, and ... I just kept progressing. I certainly never expected to go all the way to the Department of the Army level,” commented Swift.

Once she was there though, she made sure everyone knew she belonged. Especially during the six-mile ruck march that was part of the mystery event. Swift, as did all the competitors, had to carry a 25-pound backpack, but she had to do so on a 5’2” 120-pound frame compared to the larger physiques of the male competitors. Although the other three females were roughly close in size to Swift, what separated her from the other females was the fact that she crossed the finish line ahead of them by quite a margin, and beat several of the males to boot.

“The competition was not quite what I expected. The way they ran the whole thing was very rigid, but it was very, very professional,” stated Swift.

“The ruck march was challenging and difficult mentally and physically, especially with my being short. I could not match the strides of the male Soldiers because they have longer legs, so I would jog ahead of them and





Opposite page, SGT Jennifer Swift takes a much needed break from the competition; left, Swift performs a nuclear, biological, and chemical task; bottom left, Swift prepares herself for a grueling day at the Department of the Army Soldier of the Year Competition; below, Swift finishes qualifying with an M16, in her protective gas mask during a portion of the mystery event.

Photos by Sharon L. Hartman



then walk a bit while they caught up, and would jog again for a bit then walk while they caught up again. I just basically kept doing that the entire time.”

To make things even more complicated, the competitors had to cross the finish line within an hour and a half from the start to get a score on that portion of the event. Although Swift missed the time limit by a mere minute and a half, she did not let it get her down.

“It was really difficult. Coming that close and missing it was frustrating and you get mad for awhile, but then you have to go on to the next event and move on. You can’t be a bad sport. Being competitive does force you to drive yourself a little bit harder to try to do better than the person that is right

next to you, but if you’ve done your best, that’s all you can ask of yourself.”

Swift has been told she will be traveling a bit over the next year representing SMDC as the Soldier of the Year. When that is complete, it will be close to time for her to head off to her next assignment.

“I would like to go overseas, maybe to Germany, but don’t know if I will go to the SATCON Operations Center in Landstuhl or not,” added Swift.

Future goals for this young Soldier include an appearance in front of the SGT Audie Murphy board and continuing her education through eArmyU in pursuit of a degree in applied technology.