



BEST OF THE BEST

Story and photos by Dottie White

FORT LEE, Va.—Two U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/Army Forces Strategic Command Warriors were among the 24 who competed in the Department of the Army's Best Warrior Competition here Oct. 17-22.

The event, in its ninth year, pitted top Noncommissioned Officers and Soldiers from 12 commands against each other in the quest for the titles of Department of the Army Noncommissioned Officer and Soldier of the Year.

SSG James R. Harris, an early warning systems operator with Delta Detachment, 1st Space Company, Joint Tactical Ground Station, Misawa Air Base, Japan, represented USASMDC/RSTRAT as the command's NCO of the Year.

SPC Matthew R. McLeod, a satellite systems/network controller from Delta Company, 53rd Signal Battalion, Wahiawa, Hawaii, competed as the command's Soldier of the Year.

"I decided to compete in the Best Warrior Competition to represent Space and Missile Defense Command and to showcase the valuable Warrior tasks and battle drills that we as Soldiers should be proficient in," said McLeod, a Fremont, Calif., native.

Harris, a Redding, Calif., native, said he competed "to showcase the leadership and Soldiers that can come out of such a small detachment like ours and to prove that I have what it takes to compete with the best."

The Warriors' week began with in processing followed by a casual dinner during which SMA Kenneth O. Preston welcomed the competitors and their sponsors.

The competitors kicked off the weeklong competition with an appearance before a Command Sergeants Major Board led by Preston. During this event, the Warriors were to have command of their appearance and knowledge of the Army. Each competitor faced the board individually and was required to answer a variety of questions related to the Army.

The following day included media interviews and a pre-combat inspection in which Warriors organized their issued equipment

and made sure they had everything they needed for the week.

Early the next morning, competitors were required to take an Army Physical Fitness Test consisting of sit-ups, push-ups and a two-mile run.

McLeod, who scored exceptionally well, said this was his favorite part of the competition. "I have always enjoyed working out and testing my body physically to exceed standards, both personally and for the Army?"

The APFT was followed by a written exam and essay. Later, the competitors gathered for the daytime urban orienteering course.

For Harris, this was the most challenging part of the competition.

"It was pouring down rain for the whole thing, and it made it pretty rough on your feet," he said.

The Warriors were required to navigate on foot to various checkpoints on Fort Lee within a specified timeframe using a map and a compass. That evening, they completed the nighttime urban orienteering course.

Day four consisted of Warrior tasks, battle drills, and range qualifications. The competitors were required to work through battlefield scenarios including: individual conduct and the laws of war; combat first aid and unexploded ordnance.

Competitors were also required to fire an M4 rifle, the basic weapon of today's Warrior, at a set number of targets under timed conditions during day and night operations.

McLeod found this to be the most challenging part of the competition.

"They used a non-traditional way of testing our skills on the M4 by using prone unsupported, kneeling, and standing (firing positions)," he said. "This was quite a challenge because it's not something we do often enough.

The final day arrived with the mystery event, which is designed to see how well the Warriors can think on their feet while under physical and mental stress.



Above - SPC Matthew McLeod waits for the next event; Right - SSG James Harris, second from right and McLeod, far right, listen to task instructions.



This year, Soldiers dealt with emergency trauma, hostage rescue, ambush, uniform inspection, and a combatives tournament to finish the competition.

“My favorite part of the competition was the situational training exercise in the urban environment because it was some of the most realistic training that I have ever participated in,” Harris said. “It will be very helpful when training my Soldiers and others for upcoming deployments.”

Combatives are the techniques and tactics useful to Soldiers involved in hand-to-hand combat. Proficiency in combatives is one of the fundamental building blocks for training the modern Soldier. There are four certification levels.

Harris, who is certified at the highest level (4), came in third place overall during the tournament.

Preston said today’s Soldiers must be versed in a variety of Warrior tasks outside of their primary military occupational skill.

“I want to show with this competition that you don’t have to be a Special Forces Soldier, armored crewman or infantry Soldier to be successful,” Preston said. “It’s basic, fundamental Soldier skills that all of us, regardless of our occupational specialty, should be competent at.”

He announced the overall winners during a luncheon at the 2010 Association of the U.S. Army Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., Oct. 25.

SSG Christopher McDougall, National Capital Region, was named the 2010 Department of the Army Noncommissioned Officer of the Year, and SGT Sherri Gallagher, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, won the 2010 Department of the Army Soldier of the Year.

Preston spoke highly of all the competitors.

“There are company, troop, and battery commanders and first sergeants out there who would literally give up body parts for the 24 Warriors who you see here,” he said. “They are really that good.”

Although he did not win the competition, McLeod said this has made him a better Soldier.

“The competition has helped me already because I now know what skills I need to hone in on and learn even better,” he said. “I can also bring what I learned back to my unit, so I can teach them valuable skills as well.”

Harris said this was a huge learning experience and he is not going away empty handed either.

“I learned a lot about myself when I was faced with difficult decisions, time crunches, and a demanding environment,” he said. “All the things I learned are great tools that I can use to train my Soldiers.”



SPC Matthew McLeod and SSG James Harris participate in the Range Qualification event at the 2010 Department of the Army Best Warrior Competition.