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### U.S. Signal Soldiers join German servicemembers on march toward armed forces proficiency badge

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5th Signal Command Public Affairs Office

**NIEDERMOHR, Germany** -- Leaves crunched underfoot as a group of German and American Soldiers took off with 25-pound rucksacks strapped to their backs under an overcast German sky.



STAFF SGT ELIZABETH A. SHERIDAN

Sgt. Mark McClanathan of the 43rd Signal Battalion (right) extends a handshake to German Airman 1st Class Hans Ettelbrueck, Polycone Air Defense Unit, during a 25-kilometer rucksack march that is part of qualifying for the German Armed Forces Badge for Military Proficiency, in Niedermohr, Germany, Nov. 6.

Twelve Soldiers from 5th Signal Command's 43rd Signal Battalion and members of the German air defense unit Polycone, based in Bann, Germany, marched together Nov. 6 toward earning the Abzeichen für Leistungen im Truppendienst -- the German Armed Forces Badge for Military Proficiency.

The rucksack march is one of five challenges that must be met to earn the proficiency badge, and is graded by age group and gender. Two

Soldiers, based on their gender and age, had four hours to march 25 kilometers; the remaining 10 had five hours to complete a 30-kilometer march.

The proficiency badge, an annual requirement for German units, gave the Soldiers of the 43rd a chance to train in a way their jobs generally do not permit, with the added benefit of getting to know some of their German counterparts.

“There are many benefits in our company's attempt to qualify for this badge. First, it challenges the Soldiers physically. Second, it breaks the monotony of their daily duties.

Third, it enables them to set a goal and push themselves to reach that goal, and fourth, it builds unit cohesion,” said Capt. Hans Weber, 181st Signal Company commander.

“I have been here since 2001, and this is my first chance to work with the German military,” said Sgt. 1st Class Justin J. Gussler of the 43rd. “This was a good chance to get on the ground with another unit. It is great for the younger Soldiers to do this early in their careers so they can take it and be able to use it later on.”

The team, split between the 181st Signal Company and the 11th Signal Detachment, trained for a month and a half for the physical task of the march.

“The biggest challenge was the preparation. When we started doing the four-mile march, it was hard for me to keep up with the pace. By 14 miles, I was able to keep up,” said Pvt. Ashley Slason of the 43rd, the only woman on the team. “It was a really good opportunity to do extra activities outside of the unit.”

The preparation offered its own rewards, Gussler said. “It was great to look with the Soldiers at what seemed to be an impossible goal, but we followed a set training plan and on the day of the march they were ready to go, knowing they could do it,” he said. “It just shows them you can achieve whatever you set your mind to.”

Several of the German servicemembers who took part in the march also said they enjoyed joining their American comrades for the challenge.

“This was my first time hanging out with Americans. It was a good chance to see the different ways our armies work,” said Pvt. 2nd Class Dominic Weber. “It was fun to talk with them as we marched, and to see a different side to things.”

“This is a good opportunity to work in an international environment; to see different nations doing the same thing,” said German Sgt. Maj. Johann Gayer.

In addition to the march, the Americans will have a chance to take on some of the sports activities that are among the badge qualification events, including a 200-meter swim and a high jump. They will also have the option of qualifying with German weapons.

