

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

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### USAREUR's best battle for top Soldier, NCO honors

By Spc. Joseph H. McAtee, U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany – Of the thousands of Soldiers in U.S. Army Europe, 12 represented their commands during the 2008 Soldier of the Year and NCO of the Year Competition at the Seventh Army NCO Academy at Grafenwoehr Training Area here Aug. 10 to 14.



Spc. Chris Hubert

Soldiers and noncommissioned officers take off from the starting line in the Army Physical Fitness Readiness Test two-mile run. The test was the opening event of the weeklong 2008 U.S. Army Europe Soldier/NCO of the Year competition taking place in Grafenwöhr, Germany.

The four-day event included a variety of challenges, tests and events designed to test each Soldier's knowledge, competence and concentration under pressure.

Senior NCOs from each unit accompanied the 12 competitors, providing leadership and guidance throughout the event, but the competitors' merits, not their leaders' support, determined the results.

“It's going to test your discipline. It's going to test you mentally,” Command Sgt. Maj. Ralph R. Beam, U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army command sergeant

major, said of the competition. “This is a big gut check.”

“These competitions are good because it lets you know as a leader things you can improve on and things you can show your Soldiers,” said NCOY competitor Sgt. Christopher Smith, 172nd Infantry Brigade. “A good understanding of the steps you could take in the future to better train and lead: that's really the thing I look for when I come.”

Staff Sgt. Jonathan R. Higgs, 464th Military Police Platoon, shared Smith's view.

“It’s an honor to compete against all these other Soldiers. They are the best in Europe, and being here among these Soldiers is a real honor,” Higgs said, adding that preparing for this competition motivated him to study, sharpen his knowledge and develop greater professional leadership skills.

Sgt. Maj. Brad M. Weber, USAREUR personnel sergeant major, said the competitors were selected as Soldiers and NCOs of the Year by their individual commands and underwent thorough testing at the unit level before reporting to Grafenwoehr.

The USAREUR competition began early Monday morning with an Army Physical Fitness Test: two minutes of push-ups, two minutes of sit-ups and a two-mile run.

Following the PT test, Beam; Command Sgt. Maj. David D. Wood, 21st Theater Sustainment Command command sergeant major; Command Sgt. Maj. Isaia T. Vimoto, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team command sergeant major; Command Sgt. Maj. Steven W. McClafin, 172nd Infantry Brigade command sergeant major; and Command Sgt. Maj. Frank Graham, 7th Army Joint Multi-National Readiness Center command sergeant major, quizzed the Soldiers’ military knowledge during a board to assess competitors’ ability to perform under pressure.

While the Soldiers appeared before the sergeants major, the NCOs took a written exam. When each group had finished, they switched events.

That evening, the competitors traveled to Vilseck for the Engagement Skills Training Module, a simulator that analyzes Soldiers’ ability to react to hostile fire, and the Humvee Egress Assistance Trainer, which forces Soldiers to exit a simulated overturned vehicle.

“All of the stuff we’re getting tested on is stuff every green-suit should know how to do,” said Sgt. Stanley E. Black, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 7th Army Joint Multi-National Training Command. “We’re only getting tested on what we should know how to do anyway.”

The second day of competition saw the Soldiers in complete battle gear and going at full speed. The candidates spent the day at a Military Operations in Urban Terrain site and at ranges where they exhibited their marksmanship skills at various firing positions while changing magazines and ensuring their weapons continued to fire properly. After the alternative fire range, competitors qualified on a standard range.

“The (MOUT site) was interesting because we were crawling through muddy, wet tunnels,” said SOY competitor Sgt. Nicole E. Crottie, A Company, NATO Army Element.

By Tuesday evening, the entrants said they were enjoying the spirit of the competition.

“It’s great to see the other competitors, and it’s very encouraging to see good professional NCOs and Soldiers from around Europe and to see what they can do,” said competitor Staff Sgt. Cory W. MacNeil, 7th Army Non-Commissioned Officer Academy.

“Competing is awesome, it’s fun, it’s realistic, it’s challenging, it gives me a good opportunity to assess my combat readiness as a Soldier,” added Black.



Spc. Joseph H. McAtee  
Sgt. Nicole E. Crottie, Company A, NATO Army Element, listens to a German Army soldier’s instructions at the military operations on urban terrain site during the “Mystery Event” challenge. She is one of seven entrants in this year’s USAREUR Soldier of the Year Competition.

“It’s nice meeting all these other NCOs from different (military occupations) doing the same training,” said Staff Sgt. Mark Lewis, 18th Military Police Brigade.

That night, the competitors went on a 15-kilometer (about 9 miles) rucksack march followed by a night fire range.

By the end of the march, some competitors suffered from blisters on their heels, dehydration and exhaustion.

“I’m hurt and in pain. I can’t wait to get it done and over with,” said Staff Sgt. Dejan Pajic, V Corps Special Troops Battalion. “But eventually, I will look back it and say ‘wow, that was a great experience’.”

The final day of competition put the Soldiers through various situational training exercise lanes. Some lanes combined physical readiness with practical knowledge, such as the nuclear, biological and chemical lane where competitors donned full chemical protection suits and completed various tasks while sprinting. Other lanes tested their tactical skills, such as troop-leading procedures and reacting to fire as a squad leader.

On the final evening, competitors traversed a land navigation course before sundown and well after, demonstrating their ability to move across terrain with and without the benefit of visibility.

When the competitors and their sponsors arrived for breakfast Thursday morning, Beam and Weber were on hand to congratulate them all for their performance.

“Everybody in here is a winner by virtue of the fact that you (made it) here,” said Beam. “I’m proud of each and every one of you. Now you can go back and tell your chain of command that you did your best.”

“The competition was very tight. All of you performed very well; you should be extremely proud of what you did,” added Weber.

The USAREUR Soldier and NCO of the year will be announced during an award ceremony August 28 at the Armstrong Club at Vogelweh Housing in Kaiserslautern.

The entrants for the 2008 USAREUR Soldier of the Year were:

- Sgt. Stanley E. Black, HHC, 7th Army Joint Multi-National Training Command
- Sgt. Nicole E. Crottie, NATO Army Element, Company A
- Spc. William L. Foulks, Southern European Task Force signal section
- Pfc. Jason A. Hancock, 18th Combat Support Battalion, 21st TSC
- Pfc. Robert W. Harshbarger, V Corps Special Troops Battalion
- Spc. Daniel Ponton, 172nd Infantry Brigade

The entrants for the 2008 USAREUR NCO of the Year were:

- Staff Sgt. Jonathan R. Higgs, 464th Military Police Platoon, SETAF
- Sgt. Keithrick D. Howard, HHC, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe Battalion
- Staff Sgt. Mark Lewis, 18th MP Brigade, 21st TSC
- Staff Sgt. Cory W. MacNeil, 7th Army NCO Academy
- Staff Sgt. Dejan Pajic, V Corps Special Troops Battalion
- Sgt. Christopher Smith, 172nd Infantry Brigade

*Editor's Note: Sgt. Daniel J. Nichols, USAREUR PAO, contributed to this story.*



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