



Spc. Bethany Brennan, Sgt. Cheikh Fall and Pfc. Keylin Perez, U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers from the 200th Military Police Command's Headquarters Company, work as a team on a land navigation course during a field training exercise at Fort Meade, Maryland, Jan. 10, 2019. The 200th MP Command provides trained and ready MP Soldiers, leaders and units-of-action to the Total Force in order to enable protection and promote the rule of law to win the nation's wars. The command provides the full range of military police support to the Army's decisive action in unified land operations whenever and wherever required. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret)

FROM COMPETITION TO COMMAND POST

Developing Operationally Adroit MP NCOs

By Master Sergeant Keith J. Kinnerson, Sergeant First Class Justin A. Howard,
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The value of Soldier competitions is easy to recognize. Competitors in Best Warrior, Best Squad, and Military Police competitions—whether volunteers or “voluntolds”—find themselves training, studying, and reflecting on basic, advanced, and military occupational specialty (MOS)-specific tasks. Regardless of the outcome, the professional development in knowledge and maturity lasts long after the competition and throughout their military careers. Eric Milzarski, an Army veteran turned writer, emphasizes that competitors also gain valuable name recognition throughout their formation. He notes that “your chain of command will respect you far more for coming in a hard-

fought second place than if you shriveled out of the competition to begin with.”¹

There is another, less often discussed benefit to Soldier competitions. Competitions are major events that require dedicated planning, manning, equipping, resourcing, and rehearsing to perform successfully. Army education spans three overlapping domains: operational, institutional, and self-development.^{2,3,4} What the battle-staff noncommissioned officer (NCO) course provides in a classroom—preparing NCOs to operate effectively on a staff through missions, duties, responsibilities, plans, and orders—is mirrored in Soldier competitions, which place NCOs in the short-suspense, high-demand reality



| Perez and Brennan 2019 (Photo by SGM Zach Wriston)

of an NCO-driven mission.^{5,6} Soldier competitions empower NCOs to experience results-driven planning and operations, preparing them for complex expeditionary operations through competing, planning, manning, resourcing, and equipping.

Competing

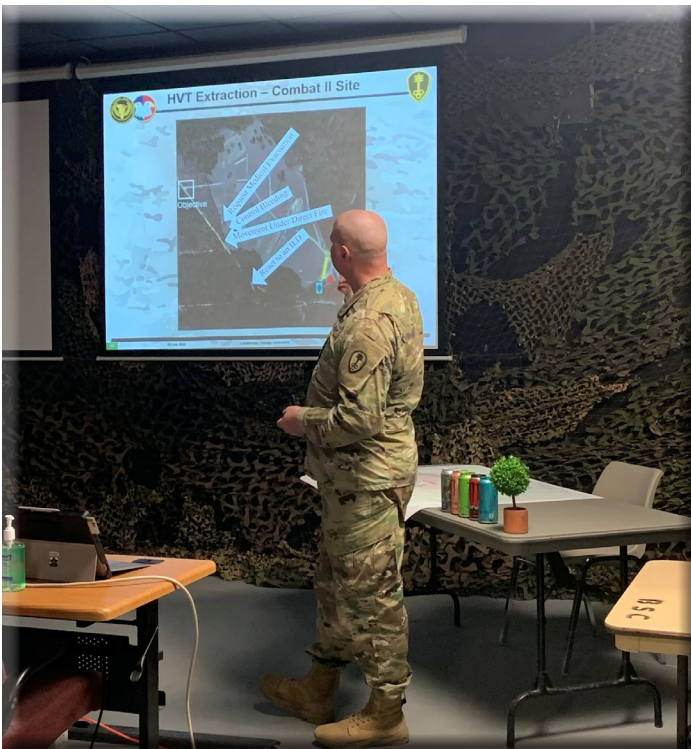
Competing in a best-warrior competition (BWC) or squad competition can significantly change competitors' perspectives, motivations, and daily routines. The approach to success has remained consistent over the years. In the 200th Military Police Command's inaugural competition in 2009, Brandon Harp, the junior enlisted winner and runner-up in the Army Reserve competition, committed to daily ruck marches, five-mile runs, abundant push-ups, and constant study of warrior tasks and training manuals.⁷

A decade later, in 2019, Specialist Keylin Perez prepared similarly for a division-wide competition with over fifty competitors. Now, First Lieutenant Perez credits her NCOs for training, preparing, and supporting her throughout. "My BWC experience was phenomenal, especially the preparation, thanks to my NCOs and the supportive cadre," First Lieutenant Perez said.⁸

Sergeant Major Brian Disque advises competitors to prepare mentally, physically, and emotionally for rigorous competitions, warning of the shock experienced by the unprepared. "After the first 24 hours, the look of shock on their faces suggested they were woefully unprepared."⁹ Soldier competitions highlight the importance of planning and troop leading procedures (TLP), but few NCOs are ready for the behind-the-scenes challenges. Military police operations demand leaders who can think systemically, communicate clearly, and adapt quickly. Soldier competitions cultivate these capabilities through experiential learning.

Operations

For three years, the NCOs of the 300th Military Police Brigade led three combined brigade-level and two division-level competitions involving hundreds of competitors and cadre. The lessons learned during low-risk, high-stress events turned into tangible results during their 2021-2022 mobilization to Guantanamo Bay (GTMO), Cuba. While the competitors are in the spotlight, often literally, the Headquarters and Headquarters Company NCOs developed critical and creative-thinking skills as they planned multiple simultaneous and



| Instructor is briefing an overlay of tactical tasks during competition

continuous events. Competitions serve as practical exercises in mission command, empowering NCOs to make decisions and synchronize resources with live operations.¹⁰ NCOs who plan and execute competitions develop confidence in their ability to manage complexity and uncertainty. These experiences prepare leaders for future roles in operations sections, command posts, and other developmental staff settings. These NCOs gain a better understanding of how people, resources, and time interact, thus increasing their understanding to better support commanders and enable mission success under challenging circumstances in the future.

Planning

Small-unit leaders use TLP to analyze missions, develop plans, and prepare for operations.^{11,12} Focusing on the eight TLP exercises, the Army's problem-solving methodology, and the operations process ultimately develops small-unit leaders' effective planning capabilities. In general, a small planning team will oversee individual events, such as a small-arms range. In complex Soldier competitions, there are frequently more than ten separate events, each requiring a noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC), safety NCOs, medical personnel, support NCOs, and role players. There is no competition without successfully orchestrating separate training events—simultaneously coordinated, planned, rehearsed, and executed in a seamless sequence that places significant demands on both the competitors and cadre.¹³

NCOs who take on the responsibility of planning competition events from “cradle to grave” often find the experience incredibly empowering. This comprehensive involvement allows them to exercise leadership, creativity, and critical thinking skills at every stage, from “receipt of mission” through execution and on to “supervise and refine” through an after-action review. In doing so, they gain a sense of accomplishment and ownership while also tapping into the inherent spirit of competition that drives excellence and camaraderie.¹⁴ The process instills confidence and underscores the importance of meticulous planning and coordination, reinforcing their pivotal role as leaders within the military police structure.^{15,16} This holistic, integrated approach to operational planning fosters a deep connection to their mission and enhances their professional growth and development. TLPs prescribe a framework to enable this planning. From land and ammunition requests to competitor throughput considerations and regulatory adherence, NCOs must consider many planning factors and mission variables: mission, (notional) enemy, terrain and

weather, civil considerations, time available, and especially troops and support available.¹⁷

Manning and Resourcing

As planning progresses, managing the troops and support required for the competition becomes a monumental task. It involves casting a wide net to find capable and knowledgeable NCOs. Determining adequate manning and resourcing is critical to the planning process of Soldier competitions.¹⁸ Large-scale competitions require significant coordination of resources, real-estate, and funding. The Army Reserve receives funding for training, not competitions. Every training dollar is essential to mission success. The give-and-take of negotiating for these precious funds with the G-8, Deputy Chief of Staff for Resources and Materiel, will unnerve the most hardened NCO.

Far too often during the Global War on Terror (GWOT) era, Soldiers and units expected to “fall” into pre-positioned equipment, barracks, vehicles, and facilities. The systematic rotations eliminated the need for the kind of troubleshooting once required of the expeditionary deployers during the early years of GWOT.¹⁹ Working long hours in the operations cell to support 24/7 competitions forced NCOs to think logistically to accomplish the mission and to focus on “reacting rapidly to crises or opportunities.”²⁰

Real-estate and logistical requirements of a division-sized Soldier competition will challenge logisticians and planners to meet the demands of the competition economically. Competitions require all the elements of an expeditionary deployment: weapons, vehicles, radios, feeding, fueling, and lodging.²¹ Understanding and executing the processes required in competition prepare NCOs to “recapture their ability to deploy rapidly with no notice.”²² NCOs developing plans and executing the mission quickly learn the consequences of poorly planned and coordinated feeding schedules or running out of coffee or toilet paper. Because the cadre is typically a small entity, the operations and sustainment cells must think logistically, economically, and operationally. Military police planners must “anticipate events and adapt to changing circumstances” in real-time.²³ These low-risk negative consequences—such as unexpected shortages or food delivered to the wrong training area—prompt immediate feedback from competitors, cadre, and command sergeants major, and they teach lessons that improve future training and operations.



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Shane Hope (left), an explosive ordnance disposal Spc. Brandon Harp, from Knoxville, Tenn. and representing the 200th Military Police Command, calls in fire support during a call for fire task during the Mystery Event at the 2009 Army Reserve Best Warrior Competition at Fort McCoy, Wis., July 15.^{nors)}

Training and Results

Planning and supervising competition events enhanced the cadre's leadership, mission essential tasks, and warfighting skills.²⁴ As the cadre connected the critical training value of simulated, fluid, real-world activities and scenarios that mimic the stress and fatigue of war, it became evident that upholding operational and training standards was paramount.²⁵ ISG Jonathan Mazariegos, remarked how his experience supporting the brigade's competitions enabled him as a senior NCO to refine critical mentoring capabilities in a controlled environment.^{26,27} "I could not be static in my knowledge. I constantly improved my skills to ensure task accuracy and fairness in evaluating. This allowed me to mentor less experienced Soldiers during competitions and later deployments."²⁸

During the events, the cadre also learned the value of increasing capacity and achieving unity of effort while working with other military police brigades, the 200th Military Police Command, and the United States Army Reserve Legal Command (USARLC).²⁹ Sergeant Anna Ickes credited her experience planning and supporting the competition

with teaching her the importance of relationship-building and networking across organizations. "I learned more in-depth about Chemical, Biological, Nuclear, Radiological, and Explosive (CBRNE) and medical capabilities through my experience, which helped me to understand the bigger picture. This was invaluable when I deployed and was assigned to an unfamiliar role supporting detention operations," Sergeant Ickes said.³⁰

One of the most significant results among the cadre was learning to "understand, visualize, and describe problems and approaches to solving them."^{31,32} When Soldiers understand the "big picture" for their organization's training goals, they are energized to strive to do more. Supporting Soldier competitions provided more opportunities to learn and gain confidence. Operations NCOs develop critical cognitive skills as they problem-solve dynamic challenges in a controlled training environment.³³ It also provided the essential experience of the operational domain necessary to develop muscle memory in future positions. "The more involved with operations I became, the more I valued the Army. When I deployed as the joint medical group operations NCOIC, I still had much to learn, but I was far more prepared than my peers," Sergeant First Class Brooke Grether said.³⁴ Operational effectiveness is achieved more quickly by sharing the best practices and common

Spc. Brandon Harp, from Knoxville, Tenn., representing the 200th Military Police Command, leads other Best Warrior candidates up a hill during the 2009 Army Reserve Best Warrior Competition at Fort McCoy, Wis., July 15.



pitfalls, so the Military Police Corps may rise and succeed together.

Best Practices and Common Pitfalls

Several best practices consistently stand out across effective Soldier competitions. Treating competitions as real-world missions enables deliberate planning, rehearsals, and mission orders. Viewing competitions as operations reinforces discipline and realism for planners and improves the overall experience for competitors. The best way to ensure appropriate coordination during competition execution is to conduct a daily synchronization meeting, generally in the evening, with enough time to coordinate assets across training events. This sync meeting is a no-fail coordination point for all cadre across the competition to ensure success in the next day's training. Assigning meaningful responsibility to NCOs and allowing them to exercise disciplined initiative within intent drives leader development through trust and confidence. Empowering NCOs to "own" their respective training events enable planning growth for all cadre involved.

It is also paramount to plan sustainment deliberately. Feeding, transportation, and medical coverage deserve the same attention as training events. Synchronizing these three, along with communications, is another paramount factor in running a smooth competition. Including sustainers in all phases of planning, coordinating, and conducting training instills an operational mindset that will reap benefits long after the competition. Lastly, knowledge management is a must. NCOs must be deliberate in capturing lessons learned through after-action reviews, which institutionalize

learning, improve future performance, and prevent the same pitfalls from occurring again.

A few common pitfalls, such as failing to delegate, inadequate planning, and resourcing, undermine the developmental value of Soldier competitions. Failing to delegate planning requirements can hinder the quality of any event, and competitions are no different. Each training event should include an NCOIC, a range safety officer, a dedicated medic, and support personnel. Conduct planning check-ins and provide guidance in accordance with training timelines, but otherwise, let those NCOs own the

event. Failing to empower those NCOs responsible for training events can also prove costly. They must understand it is their responsibility to plan, resource, and execute the entirety of their mission. The quality of each individual event results from adequate and necessary cadre preparation. Overlooking sustainment details also impacts on the quality of training events and can have second- and third-order effects when timeliness across a competition is key. As discussed above, attention to all logistics requirements is as important as training

events. Experiential learning allows NCOs to develop skills that cannot be achieved any other way. Overall, recognizing and mitigating these pitfalls improves competition quality and leader development.

Conclusion

Soldier competition programs are NCO-driven operations designed to develop and strengthen the force. It is shortsighted to view competitions solely from the perspective of competitor development or to dismiss them as a "dog and pony show." Commanders recognize competitors through accolades and organizational pride, and rightly so.



Competitors reacting to contact in route to their next objective.

Well-organized competitions test the skills, planning, operations, and perseverance of far more NCOs who are performing critical functions behind the scenes. The staff NCOs behind the competitive events will

improve day-to-day operations and hone their organizations' mission focus long after the best squads go home. 🏆

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Army 2nd Lt. Michael Page (center), a platoon leader with 563rd Military Police Company, 91st Military Police Battalion, attends a board at the 91st Military Police Battalion headquarters on Fort Drum, N.Y., March 7, 2023. This event was conducted as part of a best squad competition designed to assess Soldiers on technical and tactical proficiency and teamwork. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Kevin Dunnaway)

Endnotes

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