

Best in Army

'Lumberjacks' hone skills, prepare for Sapper competition

BY ANDREW POMYKAL
Sentinel Staff

Ask any combat engineer and he'll tell you – a good day in the Army includes blowing stuff up.

The combat engineers of Fort Hood's 20th Engineer Battalion, who currently hold the distinction as best in the Army, are perfecting their techniques and mental acuity in preparation for the annual Sapper Competition. The event pits the best engineer teams against one another in head-to-head events. It includes many elements of the Army's formal Sapper course which focuses on leadership skills and specialized combat engineer and infantry tactics. The event is scheduled for April 19-22 at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

"We plan on winning that trophy again and bringing it back to the 'Great Place,'" said Command Sgt. Maj. Terrence Murphy, 20th Eng. Bn.

The term "Sapper" can be traced back to 1501 during the French wars. Using excavated trenches, assault forces could advance and therefore "sap" enemy fortifications. Sapper engineers are specialists in the construction and repair of field fortifications, and the use of demolitions and modern heavy equipment to obstruct or harass the enemy.

Seven of the 17 Sapper teams that are slated to compete in the competition are assigned to the 20th Engineers. Many of the Soldiers in the event recently returned from a tour in Iraq and delayed taking leave time in order to participate in the training, according to Murphy. For this evolution, teams were paired regardless of rank.

The training began at 3 a.m. with a physical fitness test of timed sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups and a written demolitions test meant to challenge individual technical competency. Then, the Soldier's donned



Photo by Andrew Pomykal, Sentinel Staff

Combat engineer Pfc. Austin Lumpkin prepares a simulated explosive demolition charge recently during "Sapper" training. He and others assigned to the 20th Eng. Bn., 36th Eng. Bde., are brushing up on their skills before traveling to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., for an annual competition. Fort Hood's Sappers are the event's reigning champions.

backpacks crammed full with 65-lb. combat loads (in addition to their water supplies) and navigated over a rugged 20-mile course to different

timed events to test their mental and physical abilities.

At one stage, the Sappers completed a 40-foot rope climb using

a complicated sling system, referred to as the "Prusik climb." While one Soldier climbed the rope, his partner held the rope fast while seated on the ground and acted to belay or anchor the rope. The knot itself is named for Dr. Karl Prusik, an Austrian who perfected many rope ascension techniques.

Further down the course, Sappers were again challenged mentally to accurately calculate the amount of explosives necessary to fell trees, cleanly cut through metal bridge girders and disable huge concrete supports, effectively downing a bridge. Other events included more knot tying, mine recognition, simulated demolitions tasks, field and urban environment breaching techniques, first aid and injury triage and medical evacuations.

"This is a good course that requires a lot of stamina," Murphy said.

"It's like a MacGyver course," said 2nd Lt. David Judson of Woodstock, Ill., referring to many instances that demand expedient field adaptations and quick thinking. He said the hands-on training enhanced small unit leadership skills and pinpointed the intricacies of Sapper core competencies.

His partner in the competition, Pfc. Austin Lumpkin of Bell Chase, La., said the event was "a darn, good workout" and he will benefit from the experience as he intends to reenlist.

But the rigorous activity is designed to do more than break down bunkers and bridges. It is intended to build the confidence

and capabilities of junior Soldiers who are expected to use their talents both in garrison and on the battlefield, according to Lt. Col. Peter Andrysiak, Jr., 20th Eng. Bn., commander.

"(By choosing to participate) these guys clearly separate themselves from their peers and provide an excellent example for junior Soldiers," he said. "Part of my command initiative is to develop young, competent leaders who can operate in decentralized combat environments ... where split-second decisions could be critical."

Critical indeed, agreed Staff Sgt. Stephen Dadisho, who served as an instructor/evaluator during the event. While deployed to Iraq, he used Sapper skills to destroy numerous enemy weapons caches and breach gates, fences "and anything else that needs to be removed or blown up," he said.

Created in 1917, the 20th Engineers gained fame for their fortifications of the Casablanca Hotel in North Africa, where President Theodore Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in 1942.

They also landed as part of the assault element on Omaha Beach at Normandy, France (as dramatized in the movie "Saving Private Ryan") and went on to fight their way across Europe during World War II.

This and many other training exercises scheduled for the near future are just a few ways the unit's leadership hopes to boost Soldiers' confidence and build unit cohesiveness before upcoming deployments.

“It's like a MacGyver course.”

-2nd Lt. David Judson, referring to recent "Sapper" training

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