



Best Sapper 2011

ABOVE: Cpt. Douglas Drosch and Staff Sgt. Jacob Matson, 425th BSTB, Fort Richardson, Alaska, pull a humvee during the x-mile run. **BELOW:** 1st Lt. Tyler Knox and 1st Lt. Jonathan Kralick, 82nd ABD, Fort Bragg, N.C., participate in the call for fire event at Forney Drop Zone.

Area friends win competition

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After 56 hours of grueling physical and mental tests, the 2011 Best Sapper title now belongs to two Fort Leonard Wood Soldiers. The winners are Capt. John Chambers and Capt. Joe Riley from the 554th Engineer Battalion.

"It hasn't sunk in yet. This is the best event in the Engineer Corps. It just seems unreal that our names are going to be on that trophy. There are some great individuals on that trophy, and to be a part of that is an honor," said Riley, Company B, 554th Engr. Bn. commander.

Chambers and Riley have been working on projects together since they were students at West Point.

"He is a good friend of mine and a great partner," said Chambers, Engineer Captains Career Course.

Riley had no doubts Chambers was the right choice as his partner for the Best Sapper competition.

"He has such a great base knowledge of all this stuff. Anything I didn't know he did. Out of the two of us, I think John (Chambers) was the stronger one. He technically and tactically knew all of his stuff really well," Riley said.

In all, 37 teams showed up last week to compete.

The competition kicked off April 7, at 4 a.m. with a 3-mile buddy run complete with Individual Body Armor and Small Arms Protective Insert plates paired with a non-standard PT test.

As soon as they finished, the teams jumped on a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter for a helocast and a frigid, 54-degree swim.

"Jumping out of the helicopter was awesome, but I wasn't looking forward to the swimming," Riley said.

After the helocast, the teams trudged to seven challenges called the Round Robin, which was spread out across Fort Leonard Wood.

"The ruck march on Thursday between the events was the hardest for me, because I was wearing a 75-pound ruck, trying to get up hills to the next site, and we were being timed — it was killer," Riley said, "I couldn't wait for that day to be over with. The distances just kept seeming to grow, and the tents just seemed to get further and further away."

That night the teams stayed awake to compete in a 6-hour land navigation challenge.

Friday morning, only the top 20 teams began the Sapper Stakes, which was a series of eight new challenges.

"By the time we got to Sapper Stakes, the remaining 20 teams were the most proficient," said Sgt. 1st Class Steven Laire, Sapper Leader Course. "The last two days will not only show the most qualified Sappers, but the ones that are still staying mentally competent at the same time they are not letting their physical torture beat them down."

Friday night the teams had four-hours to complete a standard Sapper march. Then on the last day of competition, Saturday, the top 10 Sapper teams embarked on the x-mile run — the actual mileage is kept secret from the competitors — complete with 10 stations of physically demanding tasks.

"I am personally looking forward to the ruck march and the x-mile run at the end," Laire said. "I put extra emphasis on making them a little grueling, especially when they are combined together."

During the Best Sapper competition, the winning team pushed through with only about three hours of sleep.

"We just got 20-minute naps here and

there," Chambers said.

The last couple of hours were the worst for Chambers.

"The hardest event for me was the x-mile run, because we had already gone so many miles at that point. Having it at the end, with no sleep, was not fun," Chambers said.

Before the sun came up, Saturday, Gerlach Field was filled with hundreds of Soldiers waiting to cheer on the Sappers as they sprinted across the finish line.

"It was motivating; we knew we were a few hundred yards from the end; it was cool to see all of the Sappers out there from the regiment cheering us on," Chambers said. "It really motivated us to finish strong."

Chambers said they remained consistent during the competition, but he was still stunned to hear their names called as the winning team.

"We were surprised. We had a good feeling that we had done well, but the team from Fort Bragg had dominated us in all of the physical events, and we knew they were pretty tough competitors," Chambers said.

1st Lt. Jonathan Kralick and 1st Lt. Tyler Knox, Company A, 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C., took second place.

Third place went to the Arctic Warriors from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, Capt. Douglas Drosch, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division and Staff Sgt. Jacob Matson, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 425th 3rd Brigade, Special Troops Battalion.

Chambers still can't believe they are the Best Sappers.

"It hasn't sunk in yet. I have got a lot of text messages and phone calls from friends all over the globe, which is kind of crazy," Chambers said, "We just came out here to do well and we did. It's pretty wild."



ABOVE: Capt. John Chambers and Capt. Joe Riley, 554th Engr. Bn., Fort Leonard Wood, Best Sappers 2011. **RIGHT:** Teams jump out of the helicopter for the helocast and swim portion of the competition. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Capt. Michael Ditto and Sgt. 1st Class Davien Houchin, 1457th Engr. Bn., Riverton, Utah, exit the water after the helocast and swim. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** 1st Lt. Tyler Knox and 1st Lt. Jonathan Kralick, 82nd ABD, Fort Bragg, N.C., participate in the tire flip during the x-mile run.

