Soldiers Mentor High School Students to Compete in Cyber Competition

By 1st Lt. Benjamin Allison, Cyber Officer with Detachment-Hawaii, 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion

SCHOFIELD BARRACKS, Hawaii – Cyber Soldiers from Detachment-Hawaii (DET HI), 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion (MI BN), have been mentoring high school students to compete in the Air Force Association’s CyberPatriot program since the 2015-2016 school year, and their support has led to the student’s selection as a team finalist in the CyberPatriot IX National Finals Competition in Baltimore, Md., April 2-6.

Out of 4,400 teams registered, the team from the Leilehua High School Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC) program, the Mules, is one of only 28 National Finalist teams that will compete in the competition, and is the only team from Hawaii to advance to the finals.

“The CyberPatriot competition engages our students in real cybersecurity threats,” said Jason Nakamoto, Leilehua High School principal. “(It) shows real-world applications of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) lessons.”

This is the team’s sixth year competing in the CyberPatriot program, and during that time they have competed in Regionals three times and twice at Nationals; however, they were not expected to perform well this year due a loss in senior members and veterans.

“Despite the young team, the hard work of the students and dedication of the mentors has brought the team back into the spotlight,” said Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Lee Unrein, a cyber operations technician, DET HI. “Putting Wahiawa’s Leilehua High School back in Nationals for the third year in the program’s history.”

The Mules are coached by retired Army Lt. Col. Nicholas Spiridigliozzi, the Leilehua High School Army JROTC Senior Instructor, and Army Spec. Evan Wittman, a cryptologic network warfare specialist, DET HI, has been the lead mentor.

“CyberPatriot not only gives students a career path, but it’s also a matter of National Security,” said Spiridigliozzi. “We must continue to ‘grow’ our young people in Cyber Security as it is a critical piece to the future of our Nation.”

Wittman said that the CyberPatriot (regionals) consists of several six-hour competitions of increasing difficulty that require students to vet and secure Windows and Linux-based virtual machines. Additionally, the competition includes a networking challenge which requires students to perform subnetting and network configuration using Cisco IOS virtualization software. The challenges range from simple tasks like enabling and installing updates to modifying server configurations to identifying and removing malware.

According to Wittman, by mentoring the Leilehua JROTC students, he and the other Battalion Soldiers are “in essence…training the future of our Nation, which will pay dividends in the future.”

Throughout the school year, several Soldiers have volunteered their time after work and on weekends to mentor the students in various Cyber Security concepts.
“The single biggest factor in this Team’s success has been our mentors,” said Spiridigliozzi. “In my opinion, the best mentors in the Nation. Not only are they technically great but they also have an innate ability to connect with our students in a way that allows each cadet to quickly learn and absorb what is being taught. This superb mentor team always has a training plan for the students, and knows exactly what needs to be taught during each training day to maximize the student’s learning potential. Most importantly, they professionally set the example in everything they do – it’s no coincidence each of our Cadets wants a career in the Cyber Defense field.”

Spec. Wittman, who will accompany the team to the CyberPatriot competition in Baltimore, said that at Nationals, the students will be expected to configure their own physical switch while simultaneously vetting, patching and triaging several Windows and Linux virtual machines. Additionally, there will likely be a red team element that will attack the student workstations and include a mobile-focused component.

“I love teaching and mentoring, and being able to see that light bulb kick on with these kids is fulfilling,” said Wittman. “I honestly wish I had an opportunity like this when I was growing up, and I feel that these young adults truly do appreciate the knowledge they're receiving.”

According to the Air Force Association’s CyberPatriot Website, the Office of the Secretary of Defense is a sponsor of the CyberPatriot program, and encourages the military Services to support these STEM efforts.

For more on the CyberPatriot program visit the CyberPatriot Website, which includes the CyberPatriot IX Competition Timeline and for a list of the CyberPatriot IX National Finalists.
WAHIAWA, HAWAII – Soldiers from Detachment-Hawaii (DET HI), 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion (MI BN), have been mentoring high school students to compete in the Air Force Association’s CyberPatriot program since the 2015-2016 school year, and their support has led to the student’s selection as a team finalist in the CyberPatriot IX National Finals Competition in Baltimore, Md., April 2-6. Pictured, in the front row, are Lt. Col. Nicholas Spiridigliozi, the Leilehua High School Army JROTC Senior Instructor, and CyberPatriot Coach, along with several of his cadets and CyberPatriot competitors. The mentors (back row), from left to right, are Army Spec. Evan Wittman, lead mentor, Spec. Joshua Abraham, Spec. Jacob Cochran, Sgt. Matthew Meador, all cryptologic network warfare specialists, and 1st Lt. Benjamin Allison, a cyber operations officer. (U.S. Army Photo)

WAHIAWA, HAWAII – Army Spec. Evan Wittman, a cryptologic network warfare specialist, Detachment-Hawaii (DET HI), 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion (MI BN), mentors a Leilehua High School Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC) cadet who is participating in the school’s CyberPatriot program. (U.S. Army Photo)
WAHIAWA, HAWAII – Soldiers from Detachment-Hawaii (DET HI), 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion (MI BN), mentor Leilehua High School Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC) cadets who are participating in the school’s CyberPatriot program. Pictured are Chief Warrant Officer 3 Lee Unrein (standing far left), a cyber operations technician, Sgt. Matthew Meador (standing striped shirt), and Spec. Evan Wittman (sitting in blue), both a cryptologic network warfare specialists. (U.S. Army Photo)
WAHIAWA, HAWAII – Chief Warrant Officer 3 Lee Unrein, a cyber operations technician, Detachment-Hawaii (DET HI), 782nd Military Intelligence Battalion (MI BN), mentors a Leilehua High School Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC) cadet who is participating in the school’s CyberPatriot program. (U.S. Army Photo)