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Tenn. National Guard hosts State Best Warrior Competition

SMYRNA, Tenn. – Top junior enlisted leaders and junior Noncommissioned Officer from the Tennessee National Guard and representatives from the Bulgarian Armed Forces competed in the State Best Warrior Competition, Feb. 22-27. The competition took place at Tennessee Volunteer Training Sites in Milan, Smyrna, and Tullahoma; Middle Tennessee State University; and the Lynchburg area.

Thirteen competitors that included nine Soldiers, two Airmen, and two members of the Bulgarian Armed Forces, competed against each other to earn the title of either Soldier of the Year or Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. All Soldiers and Airmen competing represented one of Tennessee’s five major Army commands or three Air Guard Wings.

“We had a great turn out this year with incredibly talented enlisted leaders from across the state,” said State Command Sgt. Maj. James Crockett. “It is always great when we can combine skillsets from our Army and Air Guardsmen in joint training events like this.”

The Best Warrior Competition is a culminating event that challenges the competitors with realistic situations to test their attention to detail, individual skill, and teamwork ability. The competitors were graded and scored based on their performance in each task. Although each competitor completed the same tasks, the competition is divided into two categories, one for junior enlisted leaders who compete for Soldier of the Year and the other for noncommissioned officers who compete for NCO of the Year.

“The Tennessee Best Warrior Competition tests Soldiers and Airmen in basic and advanced warrior skills,” said Sgt. 1st Class John Draper, the project manager for this year’s State Best Warrior competition. “These competitors spend months studying, practicing, and training for this competition; this training provides them a way to become experts in their craft and warrior skills.”

This year’s competition was designed to physically and mentally push the competitors further than previous years by incorporating more dynamic events. In six days, competitors completed over 40 events and logged over 78 hours of training. Events included a 12-mile ruck march, land navigation, survival swim, obstacles courses, weapons qualifications, written exams, and basic Soldier tasks. Additionally, the competition expanded to multiple locations across the state, requiring aerial transportation for the competitors.

“We added more events this year to really maximize training and push the competitors to their limits,” said Draper. “Not only did we add events, we were able to increase the size of the training and locations, allowing the competitors to train on air assault type missions with a UH-60 Blackhawk. We were also able to invite our Bulgarian counterparts this year, something we were unable to do in the past because of COVID-19 restrictions.”

Tennessee extended an invitation to partner country, Bulgaria, to participate in the competition as part of their on-going, joint training mission. The Tennessee National Guard and the Bulgarian Armed Forces have been partners in the National Guard’s State Partnership Program for over 22 years. This unique U.S. National Guard program allows states to train alongside allied countries, while building relations and enhancing cohesion between allied military forces.

“I am proud to be part of this competition and grateful for the opportunity to train alongside my counterparts here in Tennessee,” said competitor Sgt. Stoyan Ivanov, a squad leader with the Bulgarian 61st Mechanized Brigade. “It is important for our militaries to train together and learn from one another.”

After six days of competing, the competition concluded and of the 13 competitors, two surpassed the rest.

Spc. Grayson Vaughn with the 252nd Military Police Company won Soldier of the Year and Sgt. Zachary Kleinfelder with the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment won Noncommissioned Officer of the Year.

“This was a great competition,” said Vaughn. “This was a whole week set aside for some pretty intense training. I can walk away knowing that I am a better Soldier now than I was a week ago and I look forward to representing Tennessee at the Regional competition.”

The State Best Warrior Competition is a prequalification to the annual Region III Best Warrior Competition where winners from the surrounding states will compete for the regional title at Camp Blanding, Florida. Vaughn and Kleinfelder will represent Tennessee at this competition later this year. Regional winners from across the nation will advance to compete at the National Guard Best Warrior competition this summer.



Sgt. Zachary Kleinfelder, a member of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment, poses for a photograph with his family and senior NCOs with the Tennessee National Guard after being selected as Tennessee's 2022 Noncommissioned Officer of the Year on Feb. 27. (Photo by Sgt. Finis Dailey)



Spc. Grayson Vaughn, a member of the 252nd Military Police Company, poses for a photograph with Command Sgt. Maj. James Crockett, Command Sgt. Maj. for the Tennessee Army National Guard, after selected as Tennessee's 2022 Soldier of the Year on Feb. 27. (Photo by Sgt. Finis Dailey)



Sgt. Zachary Kleinfelder, a member of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment, competes in the Tennessee National Guard's Best Warrior competition from Feb. 22-27. Kleinfelder was selected as Tennessee's 2022 Noncommissioned Officer of the Year. (Photo by Sgt. Finis Dailey)

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