



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 29, 2021

21-30

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Tennessee Guardsman Wins National Soldier of the Year Competition

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Sgt. William Lukens, a tactical generator mechanic in the Tennessee Army National Guard’s 208th Area Support Medical Company in Smyrna and a senior at Middle Tennessee State University won the 2021 Army National Guard Best Warrior Competition at Camp Navajo, Arizona.

Lukens was one of thirteen finalists who represented the best National Guard Soldiers and Non-Commissioned Officers in the nation during a grueling four-day event that concluded on July 23. “It feels amazing,” said Lukens, “and I am really excited to carry out what I learned here back to my unit and sharpen the skills of other Soldiers.”

With an elevation of 7,000 feet, Camp Navajo presented its own challenges for the competitors. Two weeks before arriving in Arizona, Lukens prepared himself for the higher elevation by hiking part of the Appalachian Trail; “I did 33 miles with a 55-pound pack. I left about 2 p.m. and hiked until 1 a.m. and I took a nap and then I went the rest of the 10 miles.”

The first day of the competition started with the Army Combat Fitness Test followed by a helicopter flight to the desert. “Shooting is something I really enjoy,” said Lukens. “We started with shotguns and pistols. We then flew back to the camp. We fired M-4s at night with [night vision goggles]. It was a lot of fun. I hadn’t done that before!”

After three hours of sleep, next came land navigation. “I was really proud of myself. I quickly found five out of five points.” Following land navigation, the competitors were graded on warrior tasks: radio checks, first aid, the grenade range, weapons range, programming a “dagger” (a military GPS), setting up a claymore mine, and sending a 9-line medical evacuation report. To make it even more interesting, these were timed events with a mile long run in-between.

Next, the Soldiers worked two final events with a combination of stressors. The first event involved troubleshooting an M-4 rifle -- blindfolded. The final event was assembling two different rifles from a box full of parts, in the dark, while loud music played in the background.

The final event on the second day of competition was designed to test these professionals in a unique environment. The competitors were bussed to an Olympic sized pool to demonstrate how well they swam in full uniform. “We had to swim 25 meters with an M-4 over our head,” said Lukens. “If your weapon went in the water, you failed.”

The next four events involved diving to the bottom of the pool to retrieve a piece of tactical gear, swimming 50-meters, 100-meters, and treading water with their hands over their heads without going under. Again, in each event the Soldiers were in uniform. “I came in second in the swimming event, so I’ll train harder for next time,” said Lukens.

On the third day, the competitors were taken to the desert and put into three-person teams. They were graded on a field artillery exercise where they demonstrated “firing for effect” and an urban operation exercise where they demonstrated clearing a building. Next, they drove out to Arizona’s Mogollon Rim for a ruck march with a 35-pound pack. Lukens finished first. The Soldier who came in second was a full 20 minutes behind him.

The final day of competition was a little more cerebral. There was an essay contest, a written exam, and the competitors appeared before a formal board. The competitors were also tested on their drill and ceremony.

“They didn’t tell me how well I did, but they said I could have failed an event and still won,” said Lukens.

That evening, everyone attended an awards banquet where it was announced that Lukens was the “best of the best” and the 2021 Army National Guard Soldier of the Year. He was awarded a Meritorious Service Medal and Soldier of the Year trophy.

“This is a great honor,” said Lukens. “I’m proud to represent my state during the competition and I look forward to representing all 54 states and territories in the upcoming Army Best Warrior competition. This has been an amazing experience.”

Lukens enlisted in the Army National Guard in 2017. In addition to being a college student and president of his fraternity (Kappa Sigma), he is employed full-time with the Guard in Smyrna. He is keeping his plans for the future open, but leaning heavily toward becoming a drill sergeant. “I’ll never forget what my drill sergeant, Drill Sergeant Grainger, said, ‘a deficiency that goes uncorrected becomes a new standard.’”

Lukens’s will be moving on to the U.S. Army’s Best Warrior competition to compete against Soldiers from Active Duty and the Reserves this fall. He will be representing the more than 330,000 Soldiers from 54 states and territories in the National Guard.



Sgt. Cole Lukens from the Tennessee Army National Guard's 208th Area Support Medical Company in Smyrna won the Army National Guard's Best Warrior Competition in Arizona on July 23 and is the 2021 Army National Guard Soldier of the Year. (Photo by 1st Lt. Sarah Kohrt)



Sgt. Cole Lukens from the Tennessee Army National Guard's 208th Area Support Medical Company in Smyrna fires an M-4 rifle during the Army National Guard's Best Warrior Competition in Arizona on July 20. Lukens won the Best Warrior Competition and is the 2021 Army National Guard Soldier of the Year. (Submitted photo)



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