

THE ARMY'S



After a week of competition, two Best Warriors emerge

STORY BY MICHAEL L. LEWIS

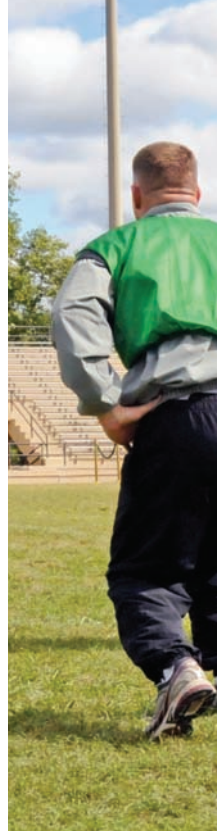
PHOTOS BY SPC. DAVID M. GAFFORD



Soldiers and NCOs are trained “by the numbers,” so perhaps the numbers are the best way to sum up this year’s showcase of the Army’s best and brightest Soldiers and NCOs. The 2011 Department of the Army Best Warrior Competition included 26 competitors, the Soldiers of the Year and NCOs of the Year from 13 Army commands; more than 100 hours of competition, held Oct. 3–7 at Fort Lee, Va.; and two winners — Spc. Thomas Hauser, the 2011 U.S. Army Soldier of the Year, and Sgt. Guy Mellor, the 2011 U.S. Army NCO of the Year.

Now a decade old, the competition was designed to gauge the gamut of Soldier abilities, said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III. It was his first time hosting the competition.

“One of the things we look for in our Soldiers is someone who is adaptive and agile, a resource manager, culturally astute,” he said. “There’s more to being a Soldier than just being in combat. Combat is the culmination of all the things we ask them to do — the study, self-development, mentoring, leadership.”



Above: Spc. Ryan Lindberg, left, and other competitors begin the second event of the competition, a computer-based exam testing them on their knowledge of Army regulations and procedures.

Right: Sgt. John Colmenares, in yellow, leads his formation in the Preparation Drill during the Physical Readiness Training event.

The Competitors

26 Soldiers represented 13 major commands in the 2011 Department of the Army Best Warrior Competition Oct. 3-7 at Fort Lee, Va.:

Cpl. Ryan Barger

U.S. ARMY RESERVE SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 21 **IN THE ARMY:** 2½ years **MOS:** 31B military policeman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 303rd Military Police Company, 97th Military Police Battalion, 89th Military Police Brigade at Jackson, Mich., and as a full-time student at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich.



Sgt. Jeremy Brake

INSTALLATION MANAGEMENT COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 37 **IN THE ARMY:** 9 years **MOS:** 92A automated logistics specialist **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** U.S. Army Garrison-Daegu, South Korea



“It really does show the completeness of today’s Soldier,” Secretary of the Army John McHugh said during the competition. It was the first time the Army’s top civilian had visited the Armywide Best Warrior. “It’s not just about how great they are at being a combatant — they do that every day in Iraq and Afghanistan — but the total, thinking, flexible warrior.

“It’s not just who can shoot the straightest and who’s best at taking down a potential prisoner. It’s about thinking; it’s about writing; it’s about communicating; it’s about their ability to think on their feet,” McHugh said.

Representing major commands throughout the Army, including the U.S. Army Installation Management Command for the first time, the competitors had to survive a gauntlet of smaller competitions at the unit, battalion, brigade, division and command levels to earn their tickets to the culminating event at Fort Lee. For some, that process began even before last year’s Armywide Best Warrior Competition. The arduous progression, Chandler said, results in competitors who have been tempered by battling fellow warriors head-to-head.

“Competition is key to our Army,” Chandler said at the awards luncheon Oct. 10 during the Association of the U.S. Army’s annual meeting and exposition in Washington, D.C. “Saying, ‘I’m the best’ is an important part of being a Soldier. Aspiring to be the best is ... part of being a professional — to continue to study and hone your skills, to be pushing for and striving for something that some people will never achieve.”

The superlative honors that Hauser, a military policeman representing U.S. Army Forces Command, and Mellor, an artilleryman representing the U.S. Army National Guard, eventually took home were on the distant horizon for competitors when events began before dawn Oct. 3. In the crisp autumn darkness, the Army’s top 26 warriors began the competition with the Army Physical Fitness Test. But they weren’t alone; more than 1,000 Advanced Individual Training Soldiers studying at Fort



Lee cheered them on from the stands of Fort Lee's Williams Stadium.

"Having all the people at the PT test and making an impression on those young Soldiers is pretty cool," said Sgt. Casey Hargaden, who represented the National Capital Region.

The crowd and fellow competitors provided ideal encouragement, said Pfc. Travis Williams, who represented U.S. Army Europe. "I got under 12 minutes on my run; that's the fastest I've ever done it," he said. "Having that competition was pretty motivating. There's no way I would be able to do that back at my unit."

Because the PT test was virtually guaranteed to be a part of the competition, warriors were able to train for it, said Staff Sgt. Ilker Irmak, who represented U.S. Army Medical Command.

"Before I got here, I did some physical training, some more physical training and some more physical training," he said with a laugh. "With my sponsor, we were like the Spartans in 300. I also studied a lot, but more out of personal interest in order to develop myself."

That extra academic training would serve Irmak and his fellow competitors well in the next event that morning, a computer-based exam of "basic" Army regulations and procedures, followed by a written essay. But competitors said the questions were far from common knowledge.

"The essay was definitely different. I've never really seen anything like that," said Spc. Ryan Lindberg, who represented the U.S. Army National Guard. "There were 20 questions, and I didn't know if they wanted us to answer all 20 questions with a short, bad answer or six questions with a really good answer. Time was short."

"I know with the computer exam and written essay, there was some stuff on there that I was like, 'Man, I guess I'm just not trained up to standards,'" said Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stackpole, who represented the National Capital Region. "Sometimes

Staff Sgt. Andrew Brown

SPACE & MISSILE DEFENSE COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 26 IN THE ARMY: 8 years MOS: 14H air defense enhanced early warning operator **CURRENT**

ASSIGNMENT: Joint Tactical Ground Station training and evaluations NCO in charge at 1st Space Company, 1st Space Battalion, 1st Space Brigade, Colorado Springs, Colo.



Sgt. James Byrnes

U.S. ARMY EUROPE NCO OF THE YEAR

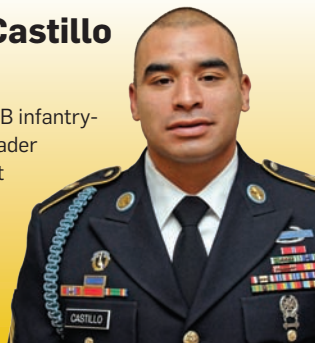
AGE: 23 IN THE ARMY: 5½ years MOS: 31B military policeman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 615th Military Police Company, 709th MP Battalion, 18th MP Brigade, 21st Theater Sustainment Command, Grafenwöhr, Germany



Staff Sgt. Jonathan Castillo

FORCES COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 30 IN THE ARMY: 7½ years MOS: 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** Warrior Leader Course small group leader at the Fort Polk, La., NCO Academy





we get honed just to what our mission is with our specific assigned unit and what our [military occupational specialty] is. But the Army is a lot more and a lot bigger than that.”

Indeed, one new Army initiative proved to be quite problematic to competitors that afternoon as they were instructed to lead a platoon of Soldiers (Advanced Leader Course students, in fact) in the Preparation Drill from the new Physical Readiness Training program. The task stymied several warriors, though others had little difficulty.

“I had done PRT in basic training; we were one of the first groups in the Army to see how it worked. But I haven’t done it since,” Williams said.

“Still, we were told it might be here. So I took some time to read through the [training circular],” he said. “But getting out there and having to lead it? And then to find out they were all ALC students? That was kind of fun for me — ‘Do this! Do that! Do push-ups!’ They didn’t know I was a PFC.”

“PRT has been around for two years, but a lot of units still haven’t implemented it yet, so it surprised a lot of competitors,” said Spc. Blaise Corbin, who represented U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. “People need to look ahead when it comes to this high-level competition. This is ‘All-Army’ and people need to be prepared for it.”

Left: Staff Sgt. Adam Connolly restrains an “insurgent” while members of his fire team keep angry “villagers” at bay during the military operations in urban terrain event.

Below left: Spc. Bernard Quackenbush, right, readies for his board appearance before the sergeant major of the Army as his sponsor uses a ruler to double-check his uniform.

Below right: At the board, Pfc. Travis Williams answers a question posed by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III, left.



Sgt. John Colmenares

EIGHTH U.S. ARMY SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

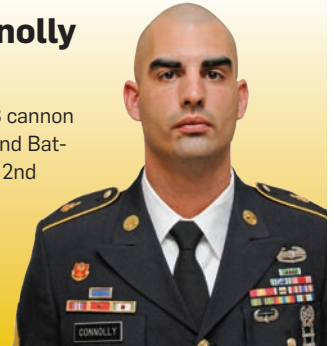
AGE: 22 **IN THE ARMY:** 4 years **MOS:** 31B military policeman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 532nd Military Intelligence Battalion, 501st MI Brigade, U.S. Army Garrison-Yongsan, South Korea



Staff Sgt. Adam Connolly

U.S. ARMY PACIFIC NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 27 **IN THE ARMY:** 5 years **MOS:** 13B cannon crewmember **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 2nd Battalion, 11th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii



Spc. Blaise Corbin

TRAINING & DOCTRINE COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 20 **IN THE ARMY:** 1 year **MOS:** 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Ranger Training Battalion, Ranger Training Brigade, Fort Benning, Ga.



Sgt. Christopher Couchot

U.S. ARMY RESERVE NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 27 **IN THE ARMY:** 9 years **MOS:** 25B information systems specialist **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** senior transmission systems operator with B Company, 98th Expeditionary Signal Battalion, 505th Theater Tactical Signal Brigade, 335th Signal Command (Theater) in Mesa, Ariz.



Spc. Dusty Edwards

U.S. ARMY MEDICAL COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 28 **IN THE ARMY:** 2½ years **MOS:** 68K medical laboratory specialist **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** Armed Services Whole Blood Processing Laboratory East, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J.



Sgt. Casey Hargaden

NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 20 **IN THE ARMY:** 1½ years **MOS:** 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 1st Battalion, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), Fort Myer, Va.



Staff Sgt. Ilker Irmak

U.S. ARMY MEDICAL COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 31 **IN THE ARMY:** 7 years **MOS:** 68H optical laboratory specialist **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** General Leonard Wood Community Hospital, Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.



Sgt. Brandon Kitchen

SPACE & MISSILE DEFENSE COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 21 **IN THE ARMY:** 2½ years **MOS:** 25S1C satellite systems network coordinator **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** B Company, 53rd Signal Battalion, 1st Space Brigade, Fort Meade, Md.



Spc. Zachary Liermann

U.S. ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 21 **IN THE ARMY:** 3 years **MOS:** 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** automatic rifleman with A Company, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, Fort Lewis, Wash.



Spc. Ryan Lindberg

ARMY NATIONAL GUARD SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 23 **IN THE ARMY:** 6½ years **MOS:** 12B combat engineer **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 817th Engineer Company (Sapper), North Dakota National Guard in Jamestown, N.D., and as a full-time student at North Dakota State University in Fargo.



Sgt. James Byrnes scans for possible threats during a daytime marksmanship event.

Awareness of the latest Army initiatives would prove to be a challenge for competitors the next day, Oct. 4, at what was viewed as the highest-stress event, a board appearance before the sergeant major of the Army and six of the Army's senior-most command sergeants major.

"I think I was surprised in some circumstances about the lack of knowledge of some things that I thought were pretty well-known," Chandler said. "I think it's always tough for Soldiers to have an idea of what the expectations are at this level. But it is the *Department of the Army* competition, so our questions are going to be about things that the entire Army is focused on right now. I think some folks had their eyes opened, and some others knew the answers very well."

The pressure was intense, Lindberg said. "It was fast and furious," he said. "It was one question after another, just back and forth, back and forth."

"Some of the questions were just shotgun blasted — eight questions are coming at you at one time," Stackpole said. "They just want to see how you would react."

"It's unnatural not to be nervous; there's senior leadership looking directly at you," said Staff Sgt. Jonathan Castillo, who represented U.S. Army Forces Command. "But how well do you demonstrate that composure, that confidence?"

Sgt. Douglas McBroom, who represented U.S. Army Materiel Command, had a simple strategy for dealing with any board-related anxiety.

"The sergeant major of the Army and the command sergeants major, they used to be in the same seat as me. They used to be a private; they used to be a young NCO. So I just imagined each of them as a young guy like me."

Hauser said he actually enjoyed the board.

“The sergeant major of the Army really wants to get to know you personally and what kind of character you have. As the president of the board, he said more than my previous boards; he spoke more, he got involved. I liked that. I was surprised they didn’t ask me to recite the Soldier’s Creed. But I guess at this level, they expect everyone to know that.”

With the board appearance out of the way, the first half of the week was over.

“Once you get the board piece over, then it’s time to execute the tactical portion,” Stackpole said. “I’ve been looking forward to that. I’m very glad that tomorrow we’ll be issued our gear, and we’ll go get our hands bloody and our boots muddy.”

The next three days would be nearly nonstop as competitors completed day and night urban orienteering courses, detainee operations lanes, day and night marksmanship qualifying, scenarios in the military operations in urban terrain range, uniform inspections, real-world combatives situations and other events designed to test the skills Soldiers need to call themselves technically and tactically proficient.

“These are the make-or-break events,” said Staff Sgt. Adam Connolly, who represented U.S. Army Pacific. “Everyone has done pretty much the same up to that point — PT, everyone’s good; the board, everyone’s good. It all comes down to discipline and the attention to detail for those warrior tasks.”

Because the competition was just as much a test of the warriors’ leadership skills as their own competency, each was assigned a fire team to guide through the various scenarios.

“My team was pretty good,” McBroom said. “They stayed in character pretty well and acted like they didn’t know any-

Staff Sgt. Raymond Santiago obtains his coordinates using a GPS device during the day orienteering event.



Sgt. Douglas McBroom

U.S. ARMY MATERIEL COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 23 **IN THE ARMY:** 5 years **MOS:** 88H cargo specialist **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 690th Transportation Detachment, 597th Transportation Brigade, Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va.



Sgt. Jonathan Melendez

INSTALLATION MANAGEMENT COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

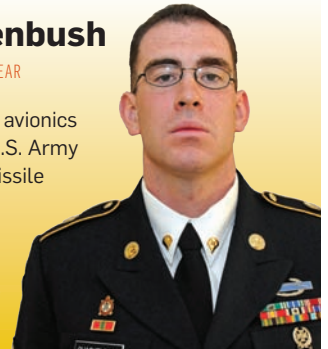
AGE: 24 **IN THE ARMY:** 6 years **MOS:** 31B military policeman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** Provost Marshal Office, U.S. Army Garrison-Schinnen, Netherlands



Spc. Bernard Quackenbush

U.S. ARMY MATERIEL COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 24 **IN THE ARMY:** 5 years **MOS:** 94R avionics radar repairer **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** U.S. Army Research Laboratory, White Sands Missile Range, N.M.



Staff Sgt. Raymond Santiago

TRAINING & DOCTRINE COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

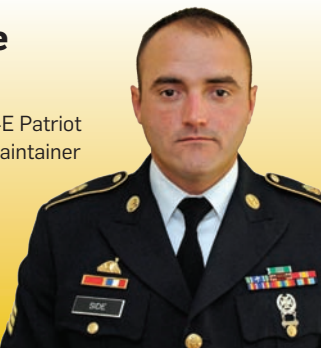
AGE: 33 **IN THE ARMY:** 10 years **MOS:** 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** instructor with A Company, 4th Ranger Training Battalion, Ranger Training Brigade, Fort Benning, Ga.



Sgt. Christopher Side

U.S. ARMY PACIFIC SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 30 **IN THE ARMY:** 7½ years **MOS:** 14E Patriot missile system enhanced operator-maintainer **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 1st Battalion, 1st Air Defense Artillery Regiment, Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan



thing about the Army, like they were a brand-new private on day one. All we had to do was just train them and tell them what to do: This is our mission, this is how we're going to execute it. And we carried it out pretty well. With my fire team, I don't think we got one no-go at any station."

Though there would be little sleep for them or their teams during the next 72 hours, competitors said they looked forward to the later events, even if they hadn't yet had combat experience.

"I haven't been deployed yet, but I trained up on those

tasks, so I'll probably be proficient in them," said Spc. Dusty Edwards, who represented U.S. Army Medical Command. "Of course, they always throw curve balls in there, and it's always fun to react to those curve balls to see how you perform under fire."

"Being inside and all formal, that's out of our comfort zone," said Sgt. John Colmenares, who represented Eighth U.S. Army in South Korea. "But going out to land navigation, the battle drills and shooting, that's where everybody feels at home. We were all more relaxed and efficient."

No matter what the events brought — even the dreaded "mystery event" on the final day of the competition — Castillo was prepared for whatever the Fort Lee team had for the competitors.

"I'm trained for anything," he said. "If they pull a rabbit out of the hat, I'm ready for the rabbit. If they pull a cat out, I'm ready for the cat. If they pull out a dog, I'm ready for that, too."

Williams, for one, was eager to spend himself completely in the final events.

"If I'm not tired and sore and unhappy with life at the end of the week, I've done something wrong," he said. "I want to leave here completely, utterly destroyed — mentally and physically — because that way I'll know I've done everything I could to win."

After the smoke cleared from the last event Oct. 7, there was still one last order of business, though it didn't count for any points — a double-elimination combatives tournament, which Mellor also won. Then, at last, the competitors had the weekend to rest before the winners were announced at the AUSA luncheon.

There, Chandler praised the competitors' spirit and professionalism.

"What you've accomplished is nothing short of inspiring," he said. "You've spent a week of exhausting training and rigor, tested your physical and mental skills, and performed all your battlefield missions. Regardless of the final tally, each and every one of you is a winner. Each of you represent the best of our Soldiers, and what you and your units have done to get here is nothing short of magnificent."

After their names were announced, Hauser was humble.

"I never thought I'd be the one standing here, because the competition was ridiculously tough. Any one of us could have won," he said. "It could have been just one slip-up that might have dropped me in the competition."

Mellor, too, said the level of competition made him doubt his chances — albeit briefly.

"I mean, this is the top of the Army's finest," he said. "The NCOs and professionals I was competing against, there's so much experience, so much background, so much history there. With all that experience that they have, it's hard to believe that I could come in and win. But I told myself, I'm going to do the best that I can do, then I'll walk away feeling good."

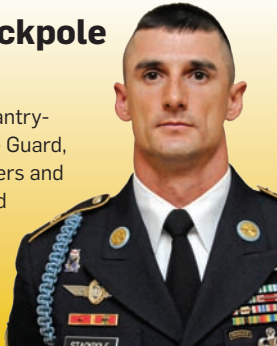
Having competed now in the Armywide competition twice (as a specialist, he competed in the 2009 Best Warrior), Mellor encouraged other NCOs to compete in future competitions.

"I hope that NCOs realize there's this great opportunity out there," he said. "The best thing I've gained from it is the

Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stackpole

NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 31 **IN THE ARMY:** 13 years **MOS:** 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** Sergeant of the Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Battalion, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), Fort Myer, Va.



Staff Sgt. Sean Swint

EIGHTH U.S. ARMY NCO OF THE YEAR

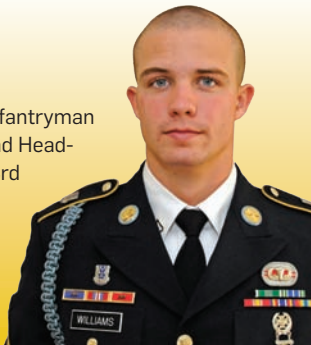
AGE: 24 **IN THE ARMY:** 6 years **MOS:** 13M Multiple Launch Rocket System crewmember **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** B Company, 1st Battalion, 38th Field Artillery Regiment, 210th Fires Brigade, Camp Casey, Korea



Pfc. Travis Williams

U.S. ARMY EUROPE SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

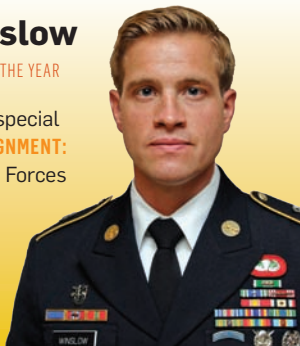
AGE: 19 **IN THE ARMY:** 1 year **MOS:** 11B infantryman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, Vicenza, Italy



Staff Sgt. Samuel Winslow

U.S. ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 33 **IN THE ARMY:** 12 years **MOS:** 18B special forces weapons sergeant **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** C Company, 3rd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, Fort Carson, Colo.





Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stackpole shoots at a target during the day marksmanship event.

experience. I am a better person, I am a better Soldier, I am a better civilian because of this competition. It's amazing how much it shapes and changes you and makes you a better professional. Through all the training, through all the drills, through all the studying, you go through that self-development process."

He plans to take many lessons learned from the competition back with him. "It's given me a lot of confidence and a lot of experience," he said. "That experience, I can take back to my unit and help my Soldiers better themselves. If nothing else, it can be motivation to them of what they can achieve."

Indeed, Chandler says the competition is a showcase of the

professionalism of the Army's warriors.

"You see the embodiment of our NCO Corps," he said. "You see noncommissioned officers teaching, coaching and mentoring Soldiers. You see Soldiers and noncommissioned officers pushing themselves and continuing to keep competing, no matter what, no matter how hard it gets. That is really what our Army is all about. It's about competing, it's about being victorious, it's about saying, 'No one is more professional than I.'" 🇺🇸

To contact Michael L. Lewis, email michael.lewis73@us.army.mil.

U.S. ARMY SOLDIER OF THE YEAR 2011

Spc. Thomas Hauser

FORCES COMMAND SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

AGE: 21 **IN THE ARMY:** 2 years **HOMETOWN:** Cincinnati, Ohio **MOS:** 31B military policeman **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** 563rd Military Police Company, 91st MP Battalion, 10th Sustainment Brigade, at Fort Drum, N.Y. **GOALS:** obtain a master's degree in business management and achieve the rank of command sergeant major. **ON WINNING:** "It was all hard. But, you've got to find that inner person in you to push yourself that little extra to keep going."



U.S. ARMY NCO OF THE YEAR 2011

Sgt. Guy Mellor

ARMY NATIONAL GUARD NCO OF THE YEAR

AGE: 24 **IN THE ARMY:** 7 years **HOMETOWN:** Fayette, Utah **MOS:** 13B cannon crew-member **CURRENT ASSIGNMENT:** B Battery, 1st Battalion, 145th Field Artillery Regiment, Utah National Guard at Manti, Utah. **GOALS:** finish his bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Utah Valley University in Orem and make the Army his career. **ON WINNING:** "It means a lot to [my unit], and it means a lot to me. They are what pushed me a lot through the process."

