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We are the engineers

Combat engineer compete for bragging rights

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Fort Bragg, N.C.- Paratroopers of Company A, 508th Special Troops Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, competed in a “Sapper Stakes” contest Jan. 14 and Jan. 15 to see which squad had the best combat engineer skills.

The company first sergeant, 1st Sgt. H. Isaacs, is a 12-time veteran of sapper stakes and has been participating in the tradition since 1990.

“This not only builds esprit de corps but it’s also very important training,” Isaacs said. “These are perishable skills.”

They competed in tests ranging from basic Soldier tasks like a physical fitness test, medical evacuation and grenade throwing, to more engineer-specific jobs like laying barbed wire, unexploded ordnance demolition, and a boat race using rubber zodiac boats.

Even in between events, the Paratroopers were tested on their skills. The Squads were given grid coordinates and a map, and moved tactically between testing sites.

While most of the events involved one squad being tested at a time, the competition was nonetheless fierce.

“You can see it in their faces,” said Capt. Alexander Samms, commander of Co. A. “You can see the intensity.”

While many Soldiers are familiar with the sapper tab that sapper-qualified Soldiers have been allowed to wear on their left shoulders since 2004, few troopers other than combat engineers fully understand what it means to be a Sapper.

The skills that a combat engineer company brings to the table are vital to the brigade, Isaacs said. The engineers can provide information on what the situation is like on the ground, what roads and bridges may be crossed with what vehicles, so the commander will know what he's sending his troops into.

The demolition qualified Paratroopers can also dispose of explosives the size of a 120mm artillery shell. That saves a lot of time and the risk of sending in an Explosives Ordnance Disposal team, Isaacs said.

Leaders in combat engineer units are trained at the U.S. Army Sapper School at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. under harsh physical conditions in special engineer-related combat tasks. Most of the squad leaders in A Co. have the Sapper Tab, and working with the squad at Sapper Stakes is one way to get young Paratroopers interested in earning their Sapper tabs.

"Every member of the squad knows he's an essential member of the team. It opens their eyes to what we do as engineers and it makes young Paratroopers want to go to Sapper School, and to Ranger School."

"It was pretty fun," said Pfc. Ronald Moats, a combat engineer with the company. "I love being with the guys, being outdoors ... We prepared a lot for this."

The Army also has a Best Sapper competition, but due to the constant training that the unit does it can't send every Paratrooper, Samms said.

"We can't send them all to Best Sapper," Samms said. "But we can send them all to Sapper Stakes."