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Tennessee Guardsman is finalist in nationwide top-soldier competition

NASHVILLE – Sgt. Mike Headrick, a Tennessee National Guard soldier from Dunlap, in East Tennessee, will be among seven National Guardsmen from across the entire United States competing next month for the prestigious title of Non-commissioned Officer of the Year.

Headrick, 40, has been in the Tennessee National Guard for only six years, but will be going head-to-head against the Guard’s “best of the best.” The competition begins at Fort Benning, Georgia, on July 30 and ends in Washington one week later.

The sergeant is a member of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment’s Det. 1, Headquarters Troop, 2nd Squadron, in Gallatin.

The road to the national finals has been a rugged one, starting all the way back at the hometown unit level. In Headrick’s case, each unit in his ACR squadron selected an NCO to compete at the Squadron level. Testing included weaponry, first aid, warrior task training, and much more. Then there was questioning by a panel of senior NCO’s on Army regulations and history.

As a Squadron winner, he moved up to regimental competition and faced similar – but harder – challenges to include a physical fitness test, more warrior tasks, weapons qualification and a 10-mile road march. The second day saw him being questioned again, this time in his Class A uniform and facing a Board of Sergeants Major.

Moving up into statewide competition, everything became still tougher, and this time a land navigation course had been added. The final day of state competition included a six-mile road march with 35-pound rucksack, and concluded with the mandatory appearance before a new panel of Sergeants Major.

After winning the state competition, Headrick then had to beat competitors from the National Guard’s Southeast Region which encompasses Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. And from there it was on to the national finals.

At every level, the quality of competitors increased, as did the degree of difficulty of the tasks.

(more)

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Headrick is top competitor 2-2-2

Now up against the best in the United States and its territories, Headrick faces a significantly stepped up version of the state and regional contests. It will include two full days with little or no sleep, packed with challenges such a grueling PT test and five-mile run, day and night land navigation, 12-mile road march with 30-lb rucksack, water survival, day and night weapons qualification, obstacle course, and hand-to-hand combat. Then there's the inevitable appearance before yet another panel of steely eyed Sergeants Major.

From the squadron level on up, Headrick had to study more and train harder. "I knew that if I allowed any sloppiness or mistakes, the others would be at the top of their game and I'd be out," he said. "The scores are always very close and a few points often decide the winner."

"The best part of all the competitions, other than all the things you learn as you study, are the competitors you meet," Headrick said. "I really enjoy being around them and actually learning from them. I always feel like there must be a mistake somewhere for me to be included with such a great group of people."

In civilian life, Headrick is a Certified Master Auto Technician at Bavarian Auto in Chattanooga. Interestingly enough, he has only been in the Tennessee National Guard for six years, joining at age 33 just before the age-limit cutoff. He turned 34 while in Basic Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

"One month after I completed Advanced Individual Training and came home to a house in Knoxville we'd just moved into, we received our warning order for deployment," he recalled with a wry grin. "We deployed to Iraq in 2004, but as far as I was concerned that's what it's all about."

Headrick has been married 20 years to his wife, Audrey, and they have one son.

"I joined the National Guard while my wife was attending the University of Memphis. After the 9-11 attacks I wanted to get involved and help do my part," he explained.

"I wanted my son to grow up in the same America I'd grown up in. I didn't want him to have to consider what city he'd be working in, or how tall the building, because of the threat of terrorism.

"I thought at my age (33 at the time) the best thing I could do was join the National Guard and be trained and ready if I was needed."

And he's never looked back.

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