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FORT BENNING, GA. (03/30/2011)(readMedia)-- Tension split the early morning fog as Soldiers' voices and crunching footsteps in the darkness guided the way to the All-Army Small Arms and Long Range (Sniper) Championships, March 20 to 27 at Fort Benning, Ga.

The Illinois National Guard Competitive Marksmanship Team used its training, discipline and drive to place third among all 48 teams with one Soldier taking first-place overall in the small arms event and one Soldier winning first-place in both sniper events with the highest aggregate score.

"There is no other Army event that brings together so many military occupational specialties, branches and components into one place," said Command Sgt. Maj. Chris Hardy, the senior enlisted advisor of the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit. "The skills you have demonstrated here during this competition are the skills you will take back to your units to raise the Army's standards in marksmanship and battlefield readiness."

The Illinois National Guard Competitive Marksmanship Team includes five Soldiers, who at their first championship showed Illinois has some of the best marksman in the military. The "A" team consisted of Warrant Officer Candidate Kyle Gleason of Lincoln, team captain and assigned to Marseilles Training Site Detachment in Marseilles; Sgt. 1st Class David Perdew of Astoria, Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 44th Chemical Battalion in Macomb; Staff Sgt. Tracy Mix of Marseilles, Company A, 33rd Brigade Support Troop Battalion; Staff Sgt. Bill Thorpe of Millstadt, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion,130th Infantry Battalion in Marion and Sgt. Terry Pody, team coach of Machesney Park, Marseilles Training Site Detachment.

It was the largest turnout in 18 years with more than 300 Soldiers, Airmen and cadets taking part in eight days of competitive shooting.

Soldiers from across the country were invited to perform in two back-to-back championships. The first is the six-day small-arms championship of 12 individual and eight team matches. The second tournament is the two-day, long-range (sniper) championship, governed by two separate matches shot from 800, 900 and 1,000 yards with M-24 sniper rifles.

"For a competitive marksman, consistently applying the fundamentals and achieving success on the range translates to achieving success in anything you do whether on the battlefield or other walks of life," said Hardy. "The positive pressure of this competition forces a Soldier to correctly apply the fundamentals in a way that simple qualification cannot. The critical importance of basic and advanced marksmanship and the value of training Soldiers so they can deliver accurate and effective fire cannot be understated. It makes a significant impact in raising the Army's overall combat readiness."

Prior to the All-Army championships, the Illinois National Guard Competitive Marksmanship team started with a five-day training session in Quincy on a 500-yard known-distance range followed by an additional three-day train-up in Tullahoma, Tenn., with 64 other National Guard Soldiers from various states.

"These are some of the best guys I've ever worked with," said Pody. "It is a privilege to coach Soldiers that set the standard for leadership and marksmanship wherever we go. They all devote personal time and resources into this team and their level of dedication and desire to win is unmatched."

Each tournament offers a series of scenarios that are not found in other military marksmanship events. Combined arms lanes required competitors to crawl in sand under barbed wire and fire upon a variety of different targets while running. Each event is choreographed to present a stress level paralleled to a true combat scenario.

Rather than paper targets simulating various distances, known-distance range scenarios are

used to provide the actual distance between shooters and targets. Shooters must adapt to factors that come into play at actual distances such as wind fluctuation and change in bullet trajectory.

Multi-gun stages test shooters' ability to transition between rifle and pistol against various target sizes. While on the move, shooters switch from weapon to weapon, reloading and changing positions as they engage targets.

Some of the more difficult matches consist of a one-and-a-half and a two-mile run in full combat gear prior to target engagements. Physical conditioning and accurate marksmanship fundamentals are a challenging mixture, which simulate real-life scenarios.

"Pure combat stress is the purpose of these scenarios," said Gleason. "You have to run two miles in all your gear, rush to get on the firing line, then you need to control your entire body to get accurate shots. They want to test us under extreme physical stress, simulating firing in combat. They implement the time limit and combat gear to see how we do against all the outside factors of shooting well."

The Illinois team placed in the top 10 in all eight team matches. Perdew was the first first-time shooter, Perdew, to ever win the All-Army Small Arms and All-Army Sniper event in the same year. Perdew was awarded a Secretary of the Army M-1 service rifle for winning the first-place overall novice individual championship. He later swept the Long Range (Sniper) Championship by winning first-place in both events with the highest average score, for this he was awarded a customized AR-10 assault rifle. Additional prizes, coins and awards were distributed among the team for excellence in the tournament, placing third amongst all 48 teams in the highly sought after All-Army Team Aggregate Championship Match.

"This has all been a little bit of a surprise and it is still sinking in," said Perdew. "I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to represent my state and consider it an honor to be here."

Many Soldiers train all year to prepare for the All-Army Competition. Prior to each competition, competitors are required to complete mandatory small-arms training.

"The All-Army Marksmanship Championships are essential, for and geared to, providing combat readiness," said noncommissioned officer in-charge of the match Sgt. 1st Class Richard Merrill, of Nashville, Mich., U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit. "It provides Soldiers throughout the Army the chance to enter a competition setting where they can learn more about precision marksmanship, shoot from longer distances thanthey normally would, take that knowledge back to their units providing better-trained Soldiers for a better-trained military."

Every inch of measurement and second in time distinguishes a win from a loss amid the level of competitiveness and skill at the All-Army matches. With every site picture, breath and trigger squeeze, performance during those crucial moments creates individual and team champions.

"We certainly have openings for new shooters and we want as many Soldiers as possible to come down to The Adjutant General match," said Pody. "None of America's enemies have ever been killed by a baseball, football, basketball or golf ball. That will always be the job of a skilled marksman."

Story by Army Sgt. Adam Fischman, Illinois National Guard Joint Force Headquarters