



By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

A national honor given by the U.S. Army has come to a native son of the Venango community. In October, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Aaron Beckman, who is stationed in Germany, was named the Army's Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) of the Year.

Beckman was flown to Washington, D.C. last week for a number of ceremonies, including the laying of a wreath at Arlington National Cemetery. The festivities will continue next month when he and other soldiers participate in a week of events surrounding the U.S. Army All-American Bowl, a premier high school all-star football game in Texas.

In an interview with *The Imperial Republican* last week, Beckman said, "The award means a whole bunch to me since 2009 has been designated Year of the NCO."

He's proud of the fact with more than 200 years of service, the U.S. Army's Noncommissioned Officer Corps has distinguished itself as the world's most accomplished group of military professionals.

"The Army recognizes our ability to lead soldiers. Our successes are what other militaries around the world try to emulate," Beckman said.

"For me to be recognized (by this group) is overwhelming," he said.

The selection of NCO of the Year, as well as the Army's Soldier of the Year, aren't decisions made by a panel of his peers or bosses.

Both selections actually came through the Army's "Best Warrior" competition held in Fort Lee, Virg., where 24 individuals representing 12 Army commands competed in the "Super Bowl" of competitions.

In the actual competition, soldiers are tested on their Army aptitude by conquering urban warfare simulations, and also go through board interviews, physical fitness tests, written exams and Warrior tasks and battle drills relevant to today's operating environment.

Just to earn the right to compete, warriors chosen to vie for the titles have mastered a series of benchmarks throughout the year.

They also went before two selection boards comprised of six senior sergeants major from across the Army. Chaired by Sgt. Major of the Army Kenneth O. Preston, each was evaluated on personal appearance, military bearing and knowledge of critical Army topics.

All Army active duty, National Guard and Reserve-component soldiers were eligible to compete in the Best Warrior Competition.

Beckman said the most challenging part of it all was staying focused.

He said he's used to preparing other soldiers for possible battle, rather than focusing on himself. He hadn't really planned to be a competitor, but said he had a lot of encouragement from his chain of command and his wife.

Once he got into the competition, however, he said the mental aspects of preparation "were second nature to me."

He said it was a big honor to be in Washington, D.C. last week, to not just represent his unit but the entire command.

In addition to the ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery, which he called a "hallowed place," he also toured the Pentagon, "where I was able to meet a lot of people who are involved in funding what we do."



What was even more significant to Beckman while in D.C. were two young men with whom he spent the two days.

Top high school football recruits Seantrel Henderson of St. Paul, Minn., and Dillon Baxter of San Diego were with Beckman there, participating in the ceremonies and touring, as well.

Beckman sees such interaction with young people as very important in building bonds.

"They don't really have a lot of interaction with the military, but this helps build some unity between the Army and young Americans," he said.

Although young talents such as Henderson and Baxter may some day be professional athletes and are concentrating on school now, he feels this will be something they may always remember.

"When they remember back to 2009, maybe they'll remember they met an NCO from the Army and realize that we are not just a force to fight, but we want to build bonds with those Americans the Army protects. We want to give back," Beckman said.

Henderson and Baxter are among six finalists for high school football player of the year honors. The 10th anniversary Army All-American Bowl will be played in San Antonio Jan. 9, 2010 live on NBC. Kickoff is 12 noon CT.

After his time in D.C., Beckman was flown back to Germany and plans to spend the holidays with his wife, Jasmin, a native of Germany, and their three children, Christopher, 7; Hailey, 4; and Jayden, 2. His in-laws will also be joining them.

Beckman graduated from Julesburg (Colo.) High School in 1996, although his parents, Dwight and Joyce Beckman, were lifelong residents of Venango and still live in the community.

He said his parents decided to send the children to classes in Julesburg because Venango was going through school consolidation at the time. His dad also worked in Julesburg part of the time.

It should be a special Christmas in the Beckman homes, both in Venango and Germany, realizing it's always possible to do great things, no matter the size of community you call home.

Biography

Sgt. 1st Class Aaron L. Beckman

U.S. Army Europe Command

NCO of the Year

Current unit of assignment C Co., 7th Army noncommissioned Officer Academy, Camp

Normandy, Grafenwoehr, Germany.

Time of service 12 years.

Sgt. 1st Class Aaron L. Beckman currently serves as the Senior Small Group Leader with C Co., 7th Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Camp Normandy, Germany. In 2003, he deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Beckman has completed Sapper School and is Combatives Level 3 and Combat Lifesaver certified.

His military awards and achievements include the Meritorious Service Medal; Army Commendation Medal with V device; Army Commendation Medal with six Oak Leaf Clusters; and Army Achievement Medal with 11 Oak Leaf Clusters.

Beckman is pursuing a degree at Central Texas College, and graduated from Julesburg High School in Julesburg, Colo.