

501st MI Brigade makes history at Army maintenance competition

*Story by Sgt. 1st Class Terry J. Goodman and
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FORT BELVOIR, Va. — Excellence is not something easily achieved. It involves going above and beyond the standard. Excellence means doing more than what is expected and sometimes getting nothing more than self-satisfaction of accomplishing the mission.

However, Soldiers of the 501st Military Intelligence Brigade, Republic of Korea, received both satisfaction and the knowledge their performance in the Fiscal Year 2003 Army Award for Maintenance Excellence competition has never been achieved by another brigade.

Each unit within the brigade not only participated as a finalist in the AAME competition, but either placed first or was a runner-up in every category — an unprecedented accomplishment in the competition's 22-year history

Representatives from the 532nd and the 3rd MI Battalions, who placed first in the Large and Medium categories respectively, attended separate awards ceremonies Aug. 3 and 4 in the Military District of Washington. The Soldiers attended the INSCOM ceremony at Headquarters, Army Intelligence and Security Command Aug. 3 and the Army Chief of Staff's ceremony in Alexandria, Va., the following day.

The AAME, established in 1982, is designed to improve and sustain unit maintenance readiness; to evaluate the status of total unit maintenance; to recognize outstanding unit level accomplishments and initiatives; and to promote competition at Major Command, Headquarters Department of the Army and Department of Defense.

Master Sgt. Dennis A. McComas, maintenance sergeant for the 501st MI Bde., said the outstanding maintenance excellence of the 501st began with an outstanding maintenance program called the Maintenance Terrain Walk, which was instituted by the former 501st Commander Col. Mary A. Legere. She met with her battalion commanders and formulated a solid foundation for overall maintenance, simultaneously pushing the entire brigade to compete in the Army Award for Maintenance Excellence.

Maj. Terrence Murrill, executive officer, 532nd MI Bn., said Col. Legere set a long, term maintenance plan and followed it.

"It all started with a vision," Murrill said, "She didn't want to do this for the purpose of just competing, or winning, or bringing popularity to the brigade. She wanted it to better the maintenance program."

Legere took a hands-on approach in training, coaching and mentoring her leaders with the MTW program. Quarterly, she would make visits to her units to critique and ensure the overall, successful execution of the program.

"The MTW program served as our roadmap to AAME," said 532nd MI Bn. 1st Sergeant Hopeton Staple. "The more repetitions through it; the easier that roadmap was to read.

The concept of the program was to have a progressive understanding of how to achieve maintenance excellence through a single, tested program."

“I absolutely believe that’s what gave us the edge. That mixed with the competitive nature of AAME,” Murrill added. “Competition is nothing new to anybody in the Army. For example, playing volleyball for a PT session, the intent may be to do physical training, but somebody wants to win.”

For the 527th MI Bn., placing in the AAME was familiar territory; the unit has either placed first or runner-up in the Large Category 10 out of the past 13 years.

“I think it’s a just a tremendous accomplishment that the brigade was able to do this as a whole,” said Maj. Suzanne C. Nielsen, executive officer, 527th MI Bn. Another focus the brigade worked on this year that played a key role in its success was making a correlation between maintenance and mission.

“The Soldiers understand how important the mission is, so we focused on helping them understand how important maintenance was to accomplish that mission,” Murrill said. “Maintenance isn’t just a part of the mission, it enables the mission.”

This focus became integrated into the Soldiers’ day-to-day responsibilities, and it allowed the leadership to emphasize their role in overall maintenance.

“The maintenance excellence was incorporated into every aspect of the brigade,” he added. “From the barracks to the motor pool, nothing went without the understanding of the importance of maintenance.”

Some of the 501st Soldiers received individual recognition for their contributions toward the brigade’s unprecedented success.

“It feels great to be recognized for simply doing your job,” said Pfc. Alexandria N. Jordan, who received an Army Commendation Medal for her contributions in preparation for AAME.

Both the 532nd and the 3rd MI Battalions are currently competing against superior maintenance units throughout the Department of Defense in their respective categories next month for the coveted Phoenix Trophy, the highest award for field-level maintenance in DoD. All packets are currently being reviewed and the winners will be announced either the last week of August or the first week of September.

“This has been an extraordinary feat on behalf of the brigade,” said Lt. Col. Scott W. Levin, deputy commander, 501st MI Bde. “From the Maintenance Terrain Walk to the actual inspection, we learned so much this year. Compared to what we take with us, the recognition is all just an added bonus.”

(Editor’s Note: Sgt 1st Class Terry J. Goodman is the Intelligence and Security Command’s Senior Public Affairs NCO and Pfc. Jason A Merrell is the Public Affairs Soldier assigned to the 501st MI Brigade.)