



The Canopy

North Central Florida All Airborne Chapter

Issue 3 / Volume 32 / December 2024

Remembering Lee Damon

The Canopy remembers lifetime member Leland Damon, **page 4.**



Photo provided by family of Lee Damon

Inaugural Best Redleg Competition

The Canopy interviews fire support team competitors from the Best Redleg Competition, **page 5.**

Directory & Chapter Calendar

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Upcoming Events

Saturday, Dec 14th, 1200 hrs VFW Post 8083
 Chapter Christmas Party! 12666 US-441
 Belleview, FL 34420

From The Editor

Hello troops! I was finally able to put together the material from the Best Redleg Competition that's been sitting on the shelf for the last several months. The 75th Ranger Regiment was very open to speaking and allowed me to talk to the regimental fire support NCO a few weeks ahead of the competition and to talk with the team on the opening day of the competition. The 82nd was much more difficult to coordinate. Despite weeks of calling and emailing, I was only able to talk with the team in the evening of the opening day. The 82nd DIVARTY has a new CSM and a new Cannonball 6 now, so I hope to introduce myself. The new DIVARTY CSM is CSM Seymour, a name you all may recognize. He's very active in association business and a fixture at all the main events.



On a more somber note, we mark the passing of Lee Damon in this issue. I didn't know Lee well, but his wife Joyce always helps with things and serves as our Service Officer.

Airborne! All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

<https://www.the-canopy.org>

Chairman's Message

Hope everyone has plans to be with their loved ones this Thanksgiving. It's the beginning of the festive time to really give thanks and reflect on this past year. Remember those that are deployed and won't be with their loved ones. If I had the chance, I'd be at a Mess Hall for my Thanksgiving meal. I'm doing the next best thing and going to Shades of Green (Military Resort) in Disney World and eating with the service members and their families there. I know it'll be great.

Now the Christmas Party is upon us. Our meeting for December 14th is our Christmas Party at the VFW Post 8083, 12:00 pm. We've got 30 paid for this event. I was hoping for 40 but if for some reason you're still on the fence come anyways. I'll order extra meals. Be ready to socialize and have a cold one! It should be lots of fun with plenty of surprises and things to do. Joyce Damon, Linda Hall and Hope Alger will be working hard with setting up tables and decorations. If you can come early Saturday Dec 14, it would greatly be appreciated. We couldn't get in the day before because the VFW is having their Fish Fry Dinner the night before our Party. We'll have a great raffle for 3 baskets of super items. If things work out one of the baskets will have a retail value of \$400. The other two will be worth \$100 and \$50 respectively. Bring some money for the raffles. Someone will win these baskets and other prizes. Tickets will be \$2.00 for one ticket or \$5.00 for three. This will be another of our fundraisers to complete the year. Additionally, we will sell tickets for a 50/50 drawing. Good luck! Dan Marrin will be playing for us out of the goodness of his heart. He's an infantry soldier so I like him instantly. I've known him for a few years now and he plays for military groups for free. What a deal. The Chapter will take care of him and his wife's meal. I haven't heard from the JROTC Color Guard so I'm standing by. Nov 30 is the deadline for meal tickets however your money is always welcome. Hope to see you on the manifest for Dec 14. (TOT) Time On Target is 12:00 p.m. See you there.



Airborne!

Tony Alger, Chairman, North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter

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Remembering Lee Damon

Leland Harmon Damon Jr.

SEPTEMBER 24, 1936 – OCTOBER 26, 2024

Lee was a former Chairman and Chaplain for our chapter. He served with the 11th Airborne and 508th RCT. Lee is survived by his wife Joyce, our chapter Service Officer, seven adult children, and many grandchildren and great grandchildren.. Lee Damon was a lifetime member of our Chapter and the 82nd Airborne Association. He will be buried at a later date at the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell FL.

Lee joined the Army in 1958 and became a paratrooper in 1959. He and his family are truly an Airborne family. His brother was a member of our Chapter a few years back. Lee's wife has been the Service Officer for 12 years and his granddaughter has been to many meetings helping with activities a few years ago. Joyce Damon said Lee's service was held at 1pm on Saturday, November the 16th at Fellowship Baptist Church, 10500 US HWY 27, north of Ocala.



Inaugural Best Redleg Competition



Photo by Judith Oman, Ft. Sill Public Affairs

Ft. Sill, OK – The US Army Fires Center of Excellence held its first ever Best Redleg Competition. The week-long competition was held during the second week of May, 2024. Events were held to determine the best cannon crew, fire direction center, and fire support team (FIST) across the army. Of particular interest to The Canopy was the best FIST part of the competition.

The FIST teams were made up of three members, a fire support officer (FSO), a fire support noncommissioned officer (FSNCO), and a forward observer (FO). These billets are typically occupied by a lieutenant, a staff sergeant, and a buck sergeant. In typical operations, the FSO works with a maneuver company commander to plan fire support tasks and ensure the commander knows what assets are available. The FSNCO serves as the senior fire support expert on

the team. The FSNCO will train and mentor the junior members of the team and serve as the fire support coordinator on missions deemed to need that level of expertise. The forward observer is a skill level 2 position. The 13F MOS has historically had a shortage of sergeants and it's not uncommon to see the rank of specialist or even private first class on a forward observer.

We were able to interview the 82nd Airborne Division's FIST team led by Fire Support Officer 1LT James and Fire Support NCO SSG Curillo. The Canopy caught the team during day zero of the competitions while they were getting situated in their barracks. The team was asked about their existing experience, the last time they were at a course at Ft. Sill, and any special training focus they used to prepare.

Each of the team members had some previous experience in fire support roles – surprising for the lieutenant. The FSO was previously an assistant battalion FSO for 5th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment (5-73). The FSNCO and FO were also previously in 5-73. Of note here is the FSNCO and FO had since been reassigned and were with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment and 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment now. The FSO and FO both indicated they were last at the schoolhouse within the last two years.



82nd Airborne Division FIST team. Photo by Angela Turner, Fort Sill PAO

The 82nd team were all in the recon FIST and competed for the best FIST in the division and won. From that 10-man team, three were selected to compete. At the time of the competition, the recon FIST had been disbanded and sent to support different maneuver units throughout the division.

To train and prepare for the competition, the team did a few extra things beyond normal training. Medical tasks, expert soldier badge weapons tasks like the Mark 19 and .50 cal operations. Field expedient antennas were covered – using copper wire for instance. Focused in-depth on the joint fires observer tasks. The digital systems were uncommon to the team, so

they spent some time getting familiar during the arrival day. The most unusual thing they trained were the two mentioned at the top – medical and weapons training.

To prepare for curveballs, the team trained for unusual equipment. The schoolhouse equipment was a bit dated versus the 82nd items. For the combat vehicle identification, they studied combat vehicles from countries beyond just Chinese and Russian origin. The team expressed some concern about the digital systems. They also mentioned a task for camouflaging a HMMWV – something they never do as dismounted airborne troops.

I asked the team about terrain sketches. A fire supporter, by doctrine, should draw a terrain sketch any time they are in a static position. The terrain sketch contains the view from the observer's perspective and will have distance and direction information for notable terrain features. I wanted to ask about this because some FISTers are good at them, most are terrible. I ask the team if they've been practicing terrain sketches and who they would say is their Rembrandt. The FSO quickly says their FO is the best at these. He says he usually relies on those guys to draw them rather than doing them himself.



An observer's terrain sketch. Photo by Cpl. Patrick Crosley, 15th MEU

The other dusty corner of FIST doctrine I asked about was crater analysis. By using stakes, a compass, and some 550 cord, a well-trained fire supporter can determine the time of munition that made the impact and the direction to the point of origin. Asked if the team practiced or trained on crater analysis, the FSNCO replies that he has

looked over the material and become the expert for their team.

At the conclusion, I ask the team to tell me how they feel about their prospects. The FO replies he's confident about the whole competition and is excited to see the specific events. The FSNCO says he's excited to show their expertise. He highlights the team's physical fitness. The FSO describes the mystery of the events coming to the competition but says all his questions were answered during the day-one activities. He says the team may not be an expert on one thing but they are like a Swiss Army Knife and that's what they want to see in the competition. The more he interacts with the cadre, the more confident he feels. The FSO wraps up by saying the team is in great shape and expects to win.

The Canopy was also fortunate enough to speak with the 75th Ranger Regiment about their Best Redleg Team. We first spoke with the Regimental Fires Cell a few weeks before the competition.

We spoke with MSG Ian Pletch, the Regimental FSNCO. The team was from 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. The FSO was C Co., 3-75 FSO. The FSNCO is currently serving as the C Co., 3-75 FSNCO. The FO is a ranger tabbed specialist from the team. The 75th doesn't have cannons or FDC, so only a 13F team is being sent. The team they sent was selected from a smaller competition between the best team from each of the battalions. Unfortunately, 2nd battalion is in their MLAT training and 1st battalion was just off their "component cycle". The regiment aimed to get the team to have 4 weeks of focused training before the 2 weeks needed for the competition. This 6 week requirement meant that only the 3rd battalion would be available. Regardless, the team being sent was the best team within the 3rd battalion.

MSG Pletch describes two written exams that will be part of the FIST competition. A joint fires observer written exam and a fire support knowledge written exam. MSG Pletch says the 3rd battalion FSNCO, SFC Ryan, is handling the training for their team. SFC Ryan previously competed in

the Best Ranger Competition and is using a similar model for the Best Redleg Competition.



A soldier uses a PFED. Photo by Tech. Sgt. Efron Lopez, 3rd A/V Squadron

For exotic equipment, MSG Pletch says the PFED and LFED were two examples of digital call for fire equipment that was not in use in the 75th. There are none of those allocated to the regiment. I ask MSG Pletch if he should focus on things like that, a weak spot, or to focus on their existing strong points. He says at this point, two weeks out, they will just take the hit on that and continue to dominate on the strong points.

MSG Pletch tells me the team was out in the mountains working on field expedient antennas and training for the ruck march currently. He says the team is focusing on physical stuff as well right now, to be sure to be the best.

I ask him about doctrinal pieces that may be in place. Specifically company level and higher fire support coordination. The regiment typically operates in platoon or smaller elements. MSG Pletch says they aren't as comfortable in that area but they are experts in CAS and experts in their skill level 1 tasks. He says the team has been practicing company level planning to be sure to understand that part.

I asked MSG Pletch about terrain sketches. He says that has actually been a focus of their training. He says during the mortar exercises in the training cycle and beyond they have been focusing on terrain sketches.

Asked if there is anything else to share, MSG Pletch says he is excited to compete. The regiment doesn't get to compete in many "Big Army" exercises. He's very excited to have the

Ranger Regiment show up and set the standard for what a forward observer should be. The forward observers in the regiment are the best of the best. They are experts in fires – non-kinetic, kinetic, surface-to-surface, and air-to-surface. The regiment has just won the Army's best ranger competition, best warrior competition, and now they are ready to perform.

During day one of the competition, I have the opportunity to call and talk with the 75th's team. The FIST team is led by Fire Support Officer 1LT Jared Jackson and FSNCO SGT Keegan Reimer. I ask the same questions that I asked the 82nd's team about experience, composition, and specific training.



The FSO was previously a well-regarded company FSO with the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. He was last at a Fort Sill school about 4 years prior. The FSNCO, SGT Reimer, is a platoon JTAC with C 3-75. His entire career has been with 3-75, from RTO to FO to platoon JTAC. SGT Reimer was last at a Fort Sill school a bit less than a year ago. The FO, Specialist Andy Helmanan, was also with C 3-75 – his first assignment.

I ask the FSO to describe the selection process. A few months before the competition, there was a battalion level Best FIST competition. The events included similar tasks as the Best

Redleg, but skewed more toward ranger-specific tasks. There was originally a ranger regiment best FIST planned, but the operations tempo prevented it. As discussed before, the regimental fires chose the 3rd battalion based on unit availability. Prior to the competition, the FSNCO and FO both won individual awards for best platoon JTAC and best FO respectively.

In terms of training that is unique to the competition, the team has gone more into standard army artillery. The ranger regiment has no artillery and instead relies on close air support and organic ranger mortars. To compensate, they have focused on learning about artillery specifics. They focused on learning the doctrinal aspects of fire support and away from the ranger-specific tactics, techniques, and procedures they normally use.



An LLDR, the first 'L' is for lightweight. Photo by 1st Lt. Stephanie Snyder, 25th Infantry Division

The team also trained for exotic equipment. The FSO described equipment that is assigned to conventional light infantry, but not available in the ranger regiment. The LLDR, as an example, was a testable event for the competition. The team had a very hard time getting an LLDR to train on. They had to open a banded and sealed LLDR that was banded and sealed in the year 2002 – twenty-two year priors!

I ask the team about terrain sketches and who they feel is their Rembrandt. The FSO affirms they have been working on terrain sketches – he says it was quite painful at first but the team is improving. He doesn't think any of them really

stand out as terrain sketch experts. He describes everyone as making mediocre terrain sketches.

For crater and impact analysis, the team says they have not trained on it beyond a thirty minute class once. They heard it may be included in the testing, but given the scope of the tasks they were expected to train on, some things had to be cut from the training schedule. The team chose to focus on their strengths.

At the end of the interview, I ask the team for their feelings about the competition. The FSO is sure they will dominate. They are prepared and ready physically, tactically, technically and just ready to get it started.

The event went off well with the Ft. Sill Public Affairs Office posting updates to social media throughout the competition. You can search for "Best Redleg Competition" on your search engine of choice and find videos and pictures.

In the end, the 75th Ranger Regiment took home first place for the 13F category of the competition. It's not surprising given the quality of the average ranger and the team's focus on training ahead of the competition. I search exhaustively for the final leaderboard on DVIDS, on Fort Sill's website, on the US Army website, and around social media. Without the final tally to include here as a reference, I can only say that the 82nd Airborne Division FIST team performed poorly. They were not even in the top five.

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Ft. Benning, GA, airborne graduation November 2001. Photo provided by Ron Dahlgren.

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