

Testing her mettle

Sierra Vista sergeant sets high standards

By **Coty Dolores
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SGT. LISA MORALES OF FORT Huachuca's Network Enterprise Technology Command (NETCOM) is a woman on a mission.

The command post node team chief of Company A, 40th Expeditionary Signal Battalion, 11th Signal Brigade is the first female to win at the U.S. Army Forces Command level and the first female noncommissioned officer to be named NCO of the Year for FORSCOM (U.S. Army Forces Command).

A four-year Army warrior, the Sierra Vista native graduated from Bisbee High School a year ahead of schedule, and just celebrated her 23rd birthday in September.

She goes now to the highest level of competition – the Department of the Army NCO and Soldier of the Year Competition held this month (October) at Fort Lee, Va. Sgt. Morales is among 26 Warrior-Soldier finalists representing 13 U.S. Army major commands in a face-off to test their skills and knowledge.

To date, Sgt. Morales has won a string of six competitions that include physical training, land navigation, warrior tasks, written essays, and written and oral board tests.

At 5-foot-4, 115 pounds, Sgt. Morales admits she sometimes is underestimated by fellow Army competitors.

"You can tell what people are thinking when they look at you and I can see they don't think of me as a threat, but after the competition starts you can see they start to get worried. I had one guy who would call me 'Cupcake' at the start but afterwards he was like, 'Whoa!'," she says, laughing. "It takes really hard training, a lot of it. But I've always tried to do my best, regardless. That's the attitude I brought into the Army."

Though Morales admits she "played Army" with her three sisters and one brother as a youngster, she hadn't planned on an Army career until she got a call from a recruiter.

"I was working at American Express after high school and a recruiter called me. My brother had decided to join the Army and I thought I might like it, too," she says.

Her brother, Stephen Chaires, joined after Lisa and is now stationed in Iraq.

Her mother, Susan Ochoa, wasn't "very happy" when she learned what 19-year-old Lisa decided to do, but once she entered the Army she became "very supportive," Morales says.

Even with the two NCO of the Year accolades under her belt, the spunky female warrior is training hard for the ultimate competition in October.

The Fort Lee competition is both physically and mentally grueling. As part of the Army Physical Fitness Test, contenders do as many push-ups and sit-ups as possible during two-minute increments, and a timed two-mile run.

They also do a written exam on general military topics, write



an essay on an assigned topic, qualify on M-4 rifles, negotiate day and night Urban Warfare Orientation courses using only a compass and a map, and participate in Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills that include on-site Combat First Aid and Unexploded Ordnance tasks.

Each warrior is then evaluated by two, six-officer Command Sergeant Major Boards judging each soldier's appearance, military bearing and Army knowledge.

"It's an honor to represent NETCOM and Forces Command as the first female NCO of the Year for both organizations. I feel so proud and accomplished to have been able to make it this far in the competition," she says.

"These competitions push both soldiers and NCOs to their limits, both mentally and physically," Morales says.

And there's much gained beyond the spirit of competition, she adds.

"We're able to increase our depth of military knowledge and basic skills. We learn our values and strengths (and) we're better at the culmination of the competition – whether we win or lose – due to the mental and physical preparation we put forth to prepare to compete."

She says Latinos – and "especially Latinas" should see joining the Army as a road to improving themselves and the Latino population in general.

"I believe the Army makes you a better, stronger person overall. And for all Latinos, this is the time we need to come together and be stronger as a whole. To help accomplish that, I do suggest Latinos join – and yes, especially women!" ■