

# Grabbing the reins of glory

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**B**UDIGEN, Germany – “Half way down the trail to Hell” is the first line in the adopted cavalry song, “The Fiddler’s Green”. It is also the best descriptive phrase for the 48-hour Spur Ride, a grueling test of skill and endurance, hosted by the 1st Squadron, 1st U.S. Cavalry of the 1st Armored Division.

Troopers selected for this challenge set their sights on becoming Spur Holders, a time honored and glorious tradition of the U.S. Cavalry. Spur candidates must rank corporal or above, have been assigned to the squadron for six months or more and have attended at least one major maneuver exercise. As part of a squad, the candidates must be qualified on their assigned primary crew weapon systems and hold an expert qualification with their individual weapons. Finally, candidates are interviewed by the Spur Committee and must present a typed report on a military subject, ranging from battle vignettes to security reconnaissance. And, of course, the candidate must complete the Spur Ride successfully.

“This is the final stage of leadership certification within the squadron,” stated Capt. John F. Blankenhorn, Comanche Troop commander and Spur Ride OIC. “As NCOs, these soldiers are expected to be nothing less than the best leaders and be able to perform under adverse and stressful situations. They need to be able to communicate effectively and they absolutely need the heart and the drive to succeed in the Spur Ride.”

The candidates of 1-1 Cav’s Spur

A candidate is “smoked” by Stetson-topped, spur-clanging Spur Holders.

Ride negotiated a series of challenging, and often body- and mind-numbing lanes designed to test the mettle and fortitude of the four teams and 37 troopers. Squad leaders and their soldiers were tirelessly hounded by Stetson-wearing, spur-clanging lane Spur Holders who tried to throw the squads off-balance and wear them down. Teamwork was the only answer to many of the scenarios, according to Staff Sgt. Edward Bowen, Spur Holder and lane NCOIC for Apache Troop.

Through pouring rain, bone-chilling cold, thick mud and an ambush-

filled night, the soldiers’ endurance was whittled away little by little. As endurance ran out, so did the number of soldiers still left on the morning of the second day of trials. The troopers had dwindled steadily during the night from 33 to 27 candidates. The only way through the rest of the Ride was to maintain high morale, good discipline and unwavering esprit de corp.

The only other way out was to yell, “I quit!”

The history and tradition of the cavalry spurs goes back to the knights of medieval Europe. Squires who



*Above:* Spur candidate Sgt. Michael McQuown reaches precariously for candidate 2nd Lt. Anthony Marinos, during the rope-bridge lane. *Below:* Candidates 2nd Lt. Patrick Bunch and Staff Sgt. Paul Perez work together to build a radio antenna. *Below right:* Spur Holder Staff Sgt. Anthony Jennings examines the injured knee of candidate Sgt. Fernando Chavez. *Below far right:* Spur Holder 1st Lt. Kliff Zannis “bites his tongue” as he watches the candidates from Apache Troop on the weapons lane.



were chosen for knighthood had to master horsemanship and weapons and prove their leadership and courage before being worthy of the king’s sword.

On the American western frontier, new recruits at cavalry posts trained into expertise with saber and horse. New soldiers were given the nickname of “shave-tails” describing the mounts they rode, which had shaved tails, indicative of training status. In the end, when the soldier proved his

proficiency with his saber and rifle as a mounted soldier, he was awarded his spurs, according to Blankenhorn.

From the armored men-at-arms of kings to the dusty hard-charging professional U.S. Cavalry horsemen of the western territories, spurs epitomized crossing the threshold from new recruit to mounted warrior.

At the end of the challenge, 23 more troopers are fitted out in spurs and riding into U.S. Cavalry history.

