

***By Kerri Long***

***The Julesburg Advocate***

Army 1st Sgt. Aaron Beckman's teachers used to tell him he and his classmates would need to know our country's geography and state capitals some day.

Yeah, right, he thought. At what point would he need to recite such trite information?

He found out more than a decade after his 1996 graduation from Julesburg, Colo., High School that he did, in fact, need it during Day 3 of the U.S. Army's 2009 Non-Commissioned Officer of the Year competition.

The four-day, three-night competition began with the 12 competitors dropped off in the wilderness of the Grafenwoeher Training Area in Germany.

The competitors were tested physically and mentally day and night. They would move 12 to 15 miles to a new location each night.

"Three days into it, I got kind of loopy," Aaron said.

That's when he was told to take a pencil and piece of paper and draw a two-dimensional representation all 50 states and their capitals.

Aaron pictured the U.S. beginning in the Northwest. He had a pretty easy time moving through the west with familiar grounds, but when he reached the East Coast, where the states are so small and condensed, he had a little bit of trouble.

Still, he did quite well with all the states, even remembering 45 capitals in this test, and exceptionally well overall—winning the solo title as 2009 Non-Commissioned Officer of the Year.

Aaron, who was an NCO academy leader in Germany at the time, was honored at an awards luncheon in Washington, D.C. He and his family also received a VIP trip to Hawaii.

The annual NCO of the Year contestants are chosen at the company level with a recommendation from a supervisor. The candidate's general military knowledge is tested with a basic proceeding in front of a board of senior non-commissioned officers. The initial stages are rudimentary and basic, and the challenges become more daunting as the candidate moves beyond Non-Commissioned Officer of the Month, Quarter, and Year boards.

Now stationed at Washington state's Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Aaron, a senior listed advisor to the commander, is responsible for the accountability, training and daily operations of the company. He ensures his commander's guidance is met on a daily basis.

He loves the everyday adventures he encounters in the Army.

"I see something new each and every day and build bonds with people," Aaron said. "It's not your normal 9-to-5 job. Each day's a new challenge."

He enjoys seeing the world and moving to a new base every three or four years.

Aaron, who enlisted after high school, has been to war zones—he served in the first ground

forces in Kosovo in 1999; in Iraq in 2003; and Afghanistan in 2011-12. He also has been to a number of other countries, including the Balkans, Baltic countries, Italy, Korea and Kuwait.

Of everything he learned from the different cultures and experiences, the partnerships he derived and the knowledge he gained from international militaries stand out the most. He has noticed how much NSF has grown in the past 12 years, and he feels a sense of accomplishment helping other countries thrive. He notes how the old Soviet block countries broke away from the former Soviet mentality, developed themselves and adopted more American ideals when it came to military forces.

“America’s not going to go to war again without partners,” Aaron said. “If we don’t understand how these other countries fight and how they operate, we won’t be successful. The more people we have out there—the more partners—the less we have to do.”

While he can retire in a few years, he plans to re-enlist. The combat engineer wants to finish his college degree in civil engineering and someday transition to the civilian side.

Aaron, who grew up on a farm near Venango, values his upbringing.

“You can always tell people who grew up in the Midwest,” he said. “They are the hardest-working, most down-to-earth, friendly people you’ll ever meet. They are wholesome, good and honest. They bring to the fight what a lot of city folk don’t.”

Aaron noted several of the NCO of the Year competitors had Nebraska roots. He said people from our region do their jobs and then some. They see when others need help and they offer a hand, as evidenced in our community during the flash floods.

Now with three school-aged children, his eyes have been opened that not every school and every classroom is like what he was used to in Julesburg.

“I want my kids to have the same benefit of small classrooms and caring teachers as I did,” he said. “Unfortunately, they don’t put military bases on small Midwestern farms.”

Aaron and his wife, Jasmin, a former pediatric nurse and stay-at-home mom who now works as a newborn baby photographer, have three children. Christopher, 11, loves art and playing the cello. Hailey, 8, takes after her father with her quick mind and an enjoyment of bugging people and being the center of attention. Jayden, 6, loves video games more than anything else.

His mother, Joyce, continues to live on the farm near Venango and works as a nurse in Grant. His sister, Megan, and her husband live in Lincoln, where she works for a pharmaceutical testing company and he is a railroad engineer. Another sister, Alanna, who is engaged, also lives in Lincoln, and is completing her internship to be a doctor.

Brother Darrick also serves in the military. He graduated ROTC from Creighton University and Georgetown University Medical School, and is an internal medicine doctor in the Air Force stationed at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska. He and his wife, Christine, expect their first child, a girl, in February.

Their cousins are in the military as well—one as a black hawk mechanic in special forces; the other is an Air Force C-5 Galaxy airplane pilot.

Aaron’s late father, Dwight, a farmer and mechanic at Stone Motors in Julesburg for years, volunteered as an enlisted maintenance MCO, working on the CH-47 Chinook helicopters during the Vietnam War.

Dwight’s brother, Phil, also volunteered for the Vietnam War as an instruction engineer. There was a six-month overlap where the brothers served together.