BU grad is 2012 Soldier of the Year

By Adam Klinker
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In his three-year Army career, Sgt. Saral Shrestha has seen his share of action. There was basic training. There was a deployment to Afghanistan in 2011. And over four days last year, Shrestha took part in the Army’s Best Warrior Competition, the culmination of many months of competing to become the 2012 U.S. Army Soldier of the Year.

If the physical challenge of the contest wasn’t enough, Shrestha and the other 11 competitors faced one of the more grueling obstacles in the final element of the competition — standing before six command sergeant majors and the sergeant major of the Army brass for a lightning-round quiz bowl.

Anything was fair game, Shrestha said, from passages in the non-commissioned officers’ creed to articles in the Army Code of Conduct or field and technical manuals. Army songs. Knowledge on the U.S. Constitution. Even the current faring of sports teams was fair game.

As the seeming minutiae piled up, Shrestha buckled down.

“Everything you could imagine,” he said. “I introduced myself and then they just started drilling me. They asked me what’s going on with the NFL, with basketball.

They said, ‘You have a name tag on your uniform, what’s the measurement of that?’ I just happened to know those answers.”

And in the end, the 2011 Bellevue University graduate’s wide knowledge of all things Army resulted in his being named the 11th U.S. Army Soldier of the Year — the tip of the spear of more than 800,000 active duty soldiers.

“It was about the total soldier concept,” said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III of the competition. “We stressed them mentally as well as physically. We challenged them on their creative and critical thinking skills while under pressure. Each one (who competed) should be very proud of what they achieved to get to this place.”

Shrestha said he measured the accomplishment in the whirlwind it whipped up around him.

“It’s four days long and I didn’t have five minutes to really stop and think about it,” he said. “It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. It was exhausting. You’d be eating and then you’d be running. You’d be asleep at 2 a.m. and they’d simulate 50-caliber rounds and grenades going off and 50 people are outside injured in a mass casualty and you’ve got to give them first aid. It was crazy.”

Since then, however,
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Shrestha has had a moment to meditate on his accomplishment and the long road it's been to his particular path of glory.

A native of Kathmandu, Nepal, Shrestha said he'd always had a desire to serve in the military and was set to join the ranks in his native land before his mother insisted he first get an education.

As a 17-year-old, he wound his way to Bellevue in 2006 to begin work on a bachelor's degree in computer information science networking, but always kept a weather eye on the Army.

"My mom wanted me to come over here and get an education," he said. "And I'm glad I did.

"I'm glad I came to Bellevue and got that experience and I'm glad it all happened when it did."

Because just as Shrestha was wrapping up his coursework at BU on a student visa and without a path to citizenship or permanent residency, the government opened up the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest program, setting Shrestha on a course to become not only a naturalized citizen, but to fulfill his ambition of military service.

Enlisting in the Army in September 2009, Shrestha completed basic training on Nov. 24, 2009 and was naturalized the very same day in front of thousands of his comrades in arms and their families.

"It was one of the best days of my life," he said. "The military was always my true passion, always what I wanted to do."

"To be able to do it and become a naturalized citizen in that setting was an incredible experience."

After basic combat training and advanced individual training, Shrestha was assigned to the 3rd Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, N.C. in April 2010. He was deployed to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom from March 2011 to August 2011.

Shrestha's mechanical and technological acumen came in handy along the way.

"I worked mainly with generators and vehicles," he said. "Basically, anything that moves, I'm working on it."

An ability with languages was also put to good use.

In addition to his native tongues - Nepali, a lingua franca in Nepal, and Newari, another widely-spoken dialect in the country - Shrestha speaks Urdu, a major language in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Hindi, the most widely spoken language in India.

And he's also entirely fluent in English - right down to his flat Midwestern accent.

"People think I should talk with a different accent," he said.

"But I always say, 'I'm from Nebraska. What do you want me to sound like?'"

In 2012, having amassed some 20 awards and citations, including two meritorious service medals, three commendation medals and the Army Good Conduct Medal, Shrestha was tapped to take part in the competition for the Army Soldier of the Year.

It started small, at the platoon level, with such basic tests of skill and endurance such as the number of push-ups and situps a soldier could do in two minutes and gradually progressed through the command structure to include more mentally and physically rigorous tasks, including simulated combat crises and the navigation of noncombat issues, combined with the ability to express oneself in writing.

Among the challenges included handling troops in the field and also helping a female soldier through a sexual assault.

"The idea is that as NCOs, we should know these things and what the right course of action is," Shrestha said. "From combat to the non-combat side of things."

Shrestha said not all of the credit lies in his perseverance and determination. Instead, he said it can be parcelled out to a wide support system that kept him going through the competition.

His wife, Elisha, was a major beam in that support.

"I kept telling him he was going to win," Elisha Shrestha said. "I'm really proud of him."

Shrestha said the few times he was able to contact his wife during the four-day warrior competition were some of the brightest moments, but he said the thoughts of everyone who helped him get to the final victory also kept him going.

"Every time I think about it, it seems like such a long time ago, but it wasn't," he said.

"It's a humbling thing because this achievement was not just me.

"It's the people who trained me, it's my family and my wife who made this happen. It's a big honor and I don't have enough words to explain what a big deal it is to make this happen."

Shrestha