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Teamwork and grit earn ROTC cadets an invite to West Point championships

Keith Hamm
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Beating 19 teams from schools across California, Nevada, Hawaii and Guam, UC Santa Barbara's Army ROTC Surfrider Battalion won the Ranger Challenge regional competition in February at Fort Hunter Liggett.

The victory earned the team a historic first for UCSB — an invite to New York to compete in the championship event, the Sandhurst Military Skills Competition, held at U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

"A lot of preparation, hard work and team cohesion came together for us to succeed at Fort Hunter Liggett," said team captain Nicolas Gandolfo, a third-year environmental studies major. "Countless early morning and weekend hours dedicated to skills training, working out and team strengthening got us to where we are. I think what makes this team special is our chemistry. We understand how to motivate and push each other."

At Sandhurst, the UCSB cadets will test their teamwork, physical stamina, marksmanship, navigation, first aid and other skills against 47 teams from across the U.S. and 17 countries. The competition runs May 2–3.

In related news, two teams of UCSB cadets are training for the annual Bataan Memorial Death March. Now in its 36th year, the marathon-length race honors the 1942 Battle of Bataan casualties and survivors and the brutal 65-mile forced march of U.S. and Filipino captives as they were moved to prison camps by Japanese soldiers. Participants race in boots and carry 35-pound rucksacks.

“We have spent almost every Saturday morning since November training,” said Lia Kubitschek, a third-year biology major, who co-captains the team with third-year communications major Jonathan Saenz. “We’re focusing on endurance, mental toughness and team cohesion.”

Last year, UCSB finished with the fifth fastest time, besting more than 30 teams from across the country. The event, held at White Sands Missile Range, a U.S. Army military testing site in New Mexico, takes place on March 22. On March 15 in Santa Barbara, a virtual Bataan team will march Refugio Road, which begins at sea level roughly 15 miles east of the UCSB campus. The roundtrip covers 13 miles and more than 4,000 feet in elevation.

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All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.