

Honored for heroism

Corporals risked lives to save others

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Sgt. Randy Roedema was just a few days away from being a father when he set out to patrol a vast and mostly empty zone in the desert last year, near Rawah in Iraq's Anbar province.

The 25-year-old from Denver may have never lived to see his daughter, Juliannah, if it wasn't for one of his Marines, then-Lance Cpl. Moses Cardenas.

Cardenas, a 20-year-old from California, saved the sergeant's life during a toe-to-toe firefight with insurgents, actions for which the Corps recently awarded him the Silver Star, the nation's third-highest honor for bravery in combat.

It was Aug. 2, 2007, when the Marines from 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion were driving across the open desert near the Syrian border. When they saw a fuel truck in the distance, the Marines stopped the truck and demanded that the men get out.

Almost immediately, the five men in the truck, wearing ankle-length shirts and cloth head-dresses, began firing on the Marines.

Cardenas began firing his M249 Squad Automatic Weapon. It was a startling moment for the Marine, on his first deployment. He'd seen pop shots before but never experienced face-to-face combat.

"This was an all-out firefight — we see the enemy and they see us," Cardenas recalled. "It's either he dies or I die."

Within seconds, an enemy round killed Lance Cpl. Christian Vasquez, another 20-year-old Marine from California, who served alongside Cardenas. Roedema also went down, shot several times and unable to walk.

That's when Cardenas, from his position behind the Light Armored Vehicle, darted out into the open more than 50 meters, reaching for the loop on Roedema's vest.

"I remember grabbing him and telling him, 'You're going to go home and see your daughter,'" Cardenas said.



MARINE CORPS

Cardenas said. "I pulled him by his flak and dragged him with me back behind the vehicle."

"I knew that I was in a pretty vulnerable spot. I was thinking I was going to get shot or that I could die," he said.

Cardenas did get shot, twice.

"One just grazed the top of my neck and the other went in the front of my neck, by the shoulder area, by the clavicle, and came out the back."

"I felt it instantly. I felt the impact, I didn't feel the pain. I knew I'd been shot, but I just didn't know exactly where," Cardenas said.

But while rounds continued to ping off the LAV, Cardenas' adrenaline kept him engaged. He pulled Roedema to safety behind the vehicle, then dropped down to continue firing his SAW.

After a few moments, the five

men from the fuel truck were dead. "As soon as I heard the last round go off, I rolled over. That's when the pain kicked in, once the adrenaline stopped. I was in so much pain I couldn't move."

"I was thinking about my brothers — the sergeant and Lance Corporal Vasquez. The other thing in the back of my head was 'Are [the insurgents] all dead?'"

Moments later, several corpsmen arrived and began treating the wounded Marines.

Cardenas spent a few more months in Iraq, but that firefight stands out as the most intense moments of his first deployment, he said.

On a plane flight back to California in October, Cardenas and Roedema talked about that day in the desert.

"He said, 'Hey, you saved my life.' And I said 'Hey, you trained



CPL. RAY LEWIS/MARINE CORPS

Cpl. Ian Dollard wears the Silver Star he received March 21 during a ceremony at Marine Corps Air Station Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif. Dollard was wounded while rescuing his platoon commander from an enemy ambush in Iraq on June 24, 2007. Left, now-Cpl. Moses Cardenas, a scout with 1st Marine Division, stands next to Sgt. Randy Roedema II, a chief scout, during a March 28 awards ceremony at Camp Pendleton, Calif. Cardenas was presented a Silver Star for actions that saved Roedema's life in Iraq. He was promoted to corporal on April 2.

me," Cardenas recalled.

After arriving home, Cardenas met Roedema's wife and daughter, who was born four days after the gunfight in the desert.

"I saw his wife and his daughter, and it was when they thanked me, that's when it really hit me hard."

During the award ceremony March 28 at Camp Pendleton, Calif., Cardenas said he thought about Vasquez.

"I'm just sad that he's not here today," he said.

Cardenas was promoted to corporal April 2 and plans to deploy to Iraq again this fall.

Another Silver Star

A week earlier, the Corps also awarded a Silver Star to Cpl. Ian Dollard, 21, of 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, at a ceremony at Twentynine Palms, Calif., on March 21. The Marine was honored for running into enemy gunfire — and getting shot — to save his wounded platoon commander, 1st Lt. Paul M. Brisker.

It was June 24, 2007, when Dollard, a fire-team leader, left For-

ward Operating Base Rivera with Brisker and other Marines for a patrol in Saqlawiyah, Iraq, west of Fallujah.

There had been several car bombs in the area, and the Marines stopped to check a dump truck when insurgents began shooting at them.

It appeared to be machine-gun fire, and one Marine was wounded almost immediately. Dollard was behind a Humvee, providing suppressive fire for those treating the wounded Marine.

Brisker was on the radio calling for a quick-reaction force, and he stepped out of his vehicle to get a better look at the wounded Marine.

Then a bullet struck Brisker in the back, just underneath the plate in his vest, and he dropped to the ground.

The shot came from a second position the Marines had not noticed.

"That's when Dollard ran over to him. He knelt down and started applying first aid and asking him if he was OK," said Staff Sgt. Marc Navai, the platoon sergeant.

"When he saw that rounds were coming from a different direction, he moved and blocked the lieutenant from getting hit by any more rounds. He was using himself as the cover and kept applying first aid," Navai said.

While helping his commander, Dollard was shot three times. Two rounds struck his upper body, but his flak vest stopped them. As he dragged the officer into a Humvee, he was shot a third time — in the leg.

"He refused to take medical attention until we got back to the FOB. Then he said, 'Oh, by the way, I got shot, too.' And he said it just like that — he was leaning against a desk and he said 'Oh, by the way, I got hit,'" Navai said.

Navai immediately began working on a citation for Dollard.

"That's what a Silver Star is all about," Navai said. "He got hit three times and he still stayed with the lieutenant. He put himself between enemy fire and his platoon commander."

Dollard and Brisker were airlifted out of Iraq. Dollard returned about six weeks later, after his leg fully recovered.

Brisker did not return before 2/7 left Iraq, about eight weeks after the gunfight.

Dollard plans to leave the Marine Corps in June and return to his home in northern California. He's considering becoming a police officer.

Until then, he'll work as a life-guard at Twentynine Palms. □