



Houston, TX
The Silver Star

Staff Sergeant Omar Hernandez

Army SSgt. Omar Hernandez traveled a long, hard road on his way to earning the Silver Star.

Hernandez, 27, came to the United States from Mexico with his family when he was 6 months old.

He joined the Army Reserve at age 19 as an engineer, and went to Iraq for the first time in February 2003. He switched to the regular Army in March 2004 as an infantryman and was promptly sent back to Iraq. He earned his citizenship after his second Iraq tour.

Hernandez was deployed for the third time in November 2006, as part of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division out of Fort Bliss, Texas. The unit has since changed its name to 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division.

Five months into the deployment, Hernandez and other 4-1 soldiers moved from Forward Operating Base Kalsu in Iskandariyah to Baghdad, where they were assigned to Joint Security Station "Maverick" in Ghazaliya, a primarily Sunni Baghdad neighborhood.

June 6, 2007, was supposed to be a rare day off for Hernandez, a team leader in charge of mentoring four Iraqi police recruits.

Instead, he and another team leader were ordered to take their Iraqi counterparts out on a census patrol.

Four American soldiers and nine Iraqis went out on the mission.

No sooner had they set off on foot, they got ambushed, right outside the JSS.

In the blink of an eye, two Iraqi police were shot: one in the back, the other in the leg and arm. They both collapsed, bleeding, in a T-shaped intersection.

As Hernandez turned to return fire with his M-4, he too was shot, in his right thigh.

"I didn't really feel it too much at the time," he said. "I just felt a lot of pressure on my leg. You know, like Forrest Gump — where he goes, 'Somethin' jumped up and bit meeee,'" Hernandez drawled.

The bullet "bit him," all right. It entered through the back of his thigh, narrowly missed his femoral artery, and exited the front, taking 30 percent of his quadriceps along with it.



But right then, all Hernandez was focused on was his Iraqis, lying vulnerable in the street, as the enemy fire got heavier.

TEXT CONTINUED

"I couldn't let anyone die out there, exposed like that," Hernandez said. "They were under my command. I didn't want anybody under my command to die."

He dashed into the intersection, grabbed the nearest Iraqi by the arm, and dragged him 15 feet to safety behind a wall as the three U.S. soldiers on the opposite side of the street laid down cover fire.

Then Hernandez ran back for the second Iraqi, straddled him, grabbed the bleeding man's protective vest under the armpits, and with one heave, levered the Iraqi up onto his shoulder.

Then he made his second mad dash for the wall.

"At the time I was Superman, so I didn't know whether he was heavy or not," Hernandez said.

Once the Iraqis were safe and receiving treatment, Hernandez began returning fire. Finally, he accepted medical treatment himself.

If Hernandez had not scooped the wounded Iraqis off the street, the outcome would have been grim, Lt. Matthew Allen, 25, platoon leader for 2nd Platoon, Company B, 177 Armor Regiment and executive officer for Hernandez' company at the time, told Stars and Stripes.

"In the position that they were in, had they been left without cover, whoever was shooting could easily have hit them a couple more times and finished the job," Allen said.

Hernandez learned he would receive the nation's third-highest military award in February, and "I almost did a back flip," Hernandez told Stripes.

"For a common person like me to get something like that — it means a lot, and it means a lot to my family."

But not as much as the Army, he said.

"I love the Army, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world," Hernandez said. "If they were to give me \$20 million for me to get out, I don't think I'd take it."

By Lisa Burgess, Stars and Stripes, July 3, 2008