



NCO earns Soldier's Medal

By Sgt. Linsey Branford
Multi-National Corps-Iraq Public Affairs

After an improvised explosive device ripped through his vehicle in Baghdad, Staff Sgt. James Rivera needed medical attention, and he needed it quick. It was 1st Sgt. Joshua Pentz who saved his life that day in Afghanistan in 2004 by using his combat lifesaver skills and calling for a medevac. Nearly five years later, Rivera was the one saving the life of another – an action that earned him the Soldier's Medal Dec. 22, 2009.

In the first 12 hours after arriving to Baghdad's Victory Base Complex in May 2009, Rivera and his friend noticed a vehicle veering toward a lake.

"I kept telling my buddy, 'it looks like he's going to go in the water' and then he did," said Rivera, a Woodberry Heights, N.J., native serving as the VBC convoy support team noncommissioned officer with the 81st Quartermaster Company, 593rd Sustainment Brigade, from Fort Lewis, Wash.

Rivera immediately dove in after the sinking vehicle, disregarding his own safety. He was able to drag the driver out of a window of the submerged vehicle and get him to safety until a medical team arrived.

"Staff Sgt. Rivera saved (the driver's) life at great risk to his own. That is exactly what we expect of our noncommissioned officers, placing someone above himself," said Lt. Gen. Charles H. Jacoby, Jr., commanding general of Multi-National Corps-Iraq.

Before pinning on the medal, Jacoby took a moment to tell the story of the Soldier's Medal, awarded to any person of the Armed Forces of the United States or of a friendly foreign nation who, while serving in any capacity with the U.S. Army, distinguished himself or herself by heroism not involving actual conflict with an enemy.

"This really is an honor," Jacoby said, as he prepared to place the medal on Rivera's lapel.

Rivera joined the Army in February 2002, after serving as a

life support technician in the Air National Guard.

"I always wanted to be a Soldier. At first, I joined the Air Force for the education, but I just really wanted to be in the fight," he said.

He had his chance when he deployed to Afghanistan with the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division (Light) in 2004. It was there that he provided support to safeguard coalition forces and destroyed the enemy during a

conflict on Aug. 12, 2004. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for Valor. Rivera, serving as a machine gunner, was struck by an IED that caused severe shrapnel wounds to his face and leg; he received a Purple Heart.

Pentz, the first sergeant who saved his life after the blast, will always be one of his heroes, he said.

"He's one of the first NCOs I ever looked up to. He taught me everything I know, and he represents everything the Army stands for," Rivera said.

Taking a cue from Pentz, Rivera strives to provide his junior Soldiers with the same knowledge and mentorship he received.

"As an NCO, you have to care not just about Soldiers, but also about how you look and how you carry yourself," he said. "I always tell my guys to do their best no matter what. If you can't be trusted to do the small things, how can they trust you to do anything else?"

In 2005, the 25th Infantry Division (Light) recognized Rivera's achievements during Operation Enduring Freedom and selected him to be the statue model for a memorial honoring the fallen at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. Rivera's likeness represents a modern-day Global War on Terrorism Soldier, and in the memorial, is standing and paying homage and final honors to a fallen comrade at

the site of a Soldier's cross.

"They call me a hero, but I'm a patriot. The true heroes are the ones who did not make it back home," Rivera said.



Photo by Master Sgt. Mark Woelzlein

Lt. Gen. Charles H. Jacoby, Jr. (left), commanding general of Multi-National Force-Iraq, awards Staff Sgt. James Rivera the Soldier's Medal Dec. 22, 2009, at Camp Victory's Al Faw Palace in Baghdad, Iraq.



Photo courtesy 25th Infantry Division

Staff Sgt. James Rivera served as the model for the modern-day Global War on Terrorism Soldier (in bronze) seen in the memorial statue at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.