

Fort Jackson NCO awarded Soldier's Medal after life-saving reaction

By Fort Jackson Public Affairs Office

Three to five seconds. That's how long it takes for an M67 hand grenade to explode after the last of three safety features has been disabled.

Last July, a Soldier's quick reaction ensured that no one was hurt during a mishap at the Fort Jackson, S.C., Remagen hand grenade range.

For his actions that day, Staff Sgt. Mercedes Amaro of Company B, 4th Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment, and an instructor at the Remagen range, was awarded the Soldier's Medal on July 2, the highest decoration for heroism in a non-combat incident.

When Amaro and a Basic Combat Training Soldier stepped into bay four of the live grenade area on July 31, 2009, everything appeared to go according to plan. The Soldier had trained with dummy grenades and was prepared for her turn at the live range.

"That day, I didn't think anything was going to happen," Amaro said.

But right before the Soldier was supposed to throw her first live grenade, something went wrong.

"When she went to throw, she turned toward her left [at bay three]," Amaro said. "In bay three, there was another Soldier and another cadre [member]."

Realizing that the Soldier was going to throw straight at the other Soldiers, who had their backs turned toward bay-four, Amaro reacted within a split second.

"I slapped [the grenade] out of her hand," Amaro said. "It fell between us. I yelled, 'Grenade!' ... I picked [the Soldier] up, threw her out [of the bay] and landed on top of her."

Amaro said he is proud of receiving the award. He said he credits his four combat tours and his training for his quick reaction.

The instructor in the adjacent bay, Staff Sgt. Mike Derry, said he did not immediately realize the danger when he got

instructions from the observation tower to get down.

"I got down, and then I heard an explosion and thought, 'That doesn't sound right,'" Derry said. "If [Amaro] hadn't stopped [the Soldier], I would have had a bad day."

Derry, who like Amaro is a combat-experienced infantryman, said he did not expect to be involved in a situation like this when he reported to Fort Jackson.

"I came from an infantry unit," Derry said. "I've been hit by five roadside bombs. I thought I'd get a little bit of reprieve from explosives."

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Ethridge, Remagen's none commissioned officer-in-charge, witnessed the events from the range's observation tower.

Ethridge said two different dangerous incidents happened at the same time: The Soldier turned to throw the hand grenade to the adjacent bay, and the hand grenade dropped in the pit.

"It was just two incidents on top of each other that made it worse than it normally would be," he said.

After learning what happened at the range, Lt. Col. Richard MacDermott, commander of the 4th Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment, did not hesitate to endorse Amaro's nomination for the Soldier's Medal.

"It was just a great action by a great Soldier, and I'm proud of every member of the cadre out there. I'm confident that they all would execute that," MacDermott said. "Taking care of the Soldier first and then himself, just putting the Soldier's welfare in front of his own — that says a lot about the type of man he is."

Derry shared a similar sentiment.

Amaro "totally deserves it," Derry said. "He had an option. He didn't have to do it. He would have been safe. That [Soldier] wouldn't have been safe."



Photo by Susanne Kappler

Staff Sgt. Mercedes Amaro, right, Company B, 4th Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment, explains how to properly grip a hand grenade to Pvt. Francesca Vukas, Company F, 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment. Amaro was recently awarded the Soldier's Medal for preventing injuries during a training mishap at Remagen hand grenade range on Fort Jackson, S.C.