

# MP's actions in Afghanistan save lives, earn Silver Star

By Don Kramer  
Fort Lewis' Northwest Guardian

Equal parts instinct and training demonstrated by a military police team leader saved the lives of scores of people in 2007 near the provincial capital of Jalalabad in Afghanistan.

That NCO received the Silver Star July 14, 2008, in front of his company and family at Fort Lewis, Wash.

Sgt. Michael A. Espejo Jr. of the 66th MP Company switched from Good Samaritan to combatant Sept. 27, 2007, the instant he realized the Afghan policeman he had stopped to medically assist was an insurgent who wore a suicide vest under his clothes.

In the process, he protected the lives of his squad mates, two State Department civilians accompanying the patrol and a number of local citizens in the area.

Espejo and the rest of 1st Squad, 1st Platoon, 66th MP Company, were returning from a combat logistics patrol outside of Forward Operating Base Torkham when they came upon the smoldering wreckage of a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device that was later determined to have been prematurely detonated. An apparent Afghan National Police officer lay nearby, struggling to regain his senses after the blast.

Espejo went to his aid while another team leader ran for medical supplies.

As he helped the "policeman" to his feet, Espejo felt suspicious bulk under the man's clothes around his chest and torso. At the same time, Espejo saw a wire coming from the man's sleeve into one hand.

"I threw him off of me, and started backing away from him," Espejo said.

He took cover and ordered the insurgent in Pashto and English to raise his hands. At first, the bomber complied, but dropped his arms and moved his hands together as if to detonate the bomb. At that point, Espejo fired his weapon, delivering

a killing shot that prevented the insurgent from taking the lives of the Soldiers and civilians in the vicinity.

In the aftermath, explosive ordnance disposal personnel spent hours defusing the bomb and lending perspective to the incident.

"[EOD] took great pains in recovering it," said Capt. Christopher Hormel, commander of the 66th MP Company. "They had the robot out there cutting it off. They said it was the largest one they had seen."

The I Corps commanding general sees the event as a symbol of the skills necessary in the complex and confusing environment of the war on terrorism.

"Sgt. Espejo's actions ... perfectly capture the essence, the prototype of an American Soldier in a counterinsurgency," said Lt. Gen. Charles H. Jacoby Jr. in his remarks before he pinned on the Silver Star. "Sgt. Espejo noticed an apparent friend, an ally, wounded on the side of the road and in need. Just as he would do for any American Soldier, Sgt. Espejo moved to that individual to provide aid and pro-

tection, (demonstrating) a willingness to trust and take risks."

When he recognized the threat, Jacoby said, "he deftly reversed roles from the concerned friend to the determined combatant. This distinction is vital in a counterinsurgency fight."

Despite the chaos of the battlefield, Jacoby said Espejo was "instantly able to observe, assess and act, transforming from a perceived ally's best friend into a hostile insurgent's worst enemy. It's exactly what we need of every Soldier and every leader in the fight that we're facing today."

It was an important day for the unit as well as Espejo, his commander said.

"Everybody is proud of him," Hormel said. "His actions on that day, being level-headed and keeping his wits with him during the whole event, saved everybody's life and everybody knows it."

"I've got lots of heroes like that in the formation," Hormel said. "This one, the circumstances were such that we were able to highlight it. But I've got a whole unit of nothing but heroes."



Photo by Don Kramer

Sgt. Michael A. Espejo Jr. of the 66th Military Police Company receives the Silver Star on July 14, 2008, from Lt. Gen. Charles H. Jacoby Jr., commanding general of I Corps and Fort Lewis, Wash., as Espejo's wife, Rosa, and Command Sgt. Maj. Frank Grippe, I Corps command sergeant major, look on.