

Chemical Soldier Rises to the Top

By Second Lieutenant James Lee



During the annual Fort Lewis Army Ball on 14 June 2007, the 23d Chemical Battalion proudly watched as one of its own—Specialist Blanca Cedeno—was selected as the 2007 I Corps Soldier of the Year. Specialist Cedeno attended countless boards, perfected her warrior tasks and skill sets, and immersed herself in military academics to emerge as the top Solider.

Selection for Soldier of the Year is a career-altering distinction—an honor that singles out a Soldier not only for mission accomplishment and Class A accoutrements but for sterling exemplification of the Army values, particularly selfless service. Sergeant First Class Carlos Cerritos, Specialist Cedeno’s platoon sergeant said that “The highest standards aren’t put on them by others . . . The Soldier engenders them from within.”

Although Specialist Cedeno’s actual time in the Army will be short, her journey has been long. Born and raised in the Dominican Republic, her original ambitions in the tourist industry changed when she relocated to the United States. “Everything happened so quickly—9/11, Army commercials, calling my recruiter,” said Specialist Cedeno.

Despite having U.S. residency prior to moving to Massachusetts, Specialist Cedeno’s English was rudimentary, at best. At 35, she was also much older than the average enlisted Soldier. “I focused twice as much [and] worked twice as hard to be the same as everyone else, to do something as simple as receiving orders,” said Specialist Cedeno. Out of necessity, she became acutely observant and attentive to detail. Her English improved; and coupled with her work ethic, she quickly distinguished herself from her peers. Specialist Cedeno started noticing Soldiers half her age trying half as hard and not meeting the standards, which sparked her confidence and added a competitive edge. She spent her free time running long distances and reading field manuals. “Once she started going to boards,” said her squad leader, Staff Sergeant Antonilius Davis, “there was no stopping her.”

Despite the publicity and awards for being selected as Soldier of the Year, Specialist Cedeno’s achievements remain personal. Her father, Mark Antonio Cedeno, served in World War II with the 101st Airborne Division. Her brief visits to the United States as a teenager were with her father to attend reunions for the 101st. She credits him with her desire to be part of a team, her discipline, and her belief that true character reveals itself on the job. “He (her father) died before I joined (the Army), when I was much younger,” Specialist Cedeno said, “I feel close to my father by being a good Soldier.”

Specialist Cedeno went on to compete in the U.S. Army Forces Command Soldier of the Year competition at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where she placed as first runner-up. The competition featured tests on drill and ceremony, battle focus, and weapon assembly. Upon returning to her unit, Specialist Cedeno was awarded the Army Commendation medal, a dress blue uniform, a gold watch, an antique musket, and numerous gifts and monetary prizes. And through it all, Specialist Cedeno did not lose sight of future challenges. “I am not satisfied with what I’ve learned and accomplished,” she stated matter-of-factly, “I am still not even half the Soldier that I want to be.”

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