



PFC Juan Garza: A Hero Who Led by Example

Private First Class Juan Garza was a United States Marine. His story is that of a hero, a real hero. The term is overused these days and has become trite, almost meaningless. But not when describing Juan Garza. Get to know him a bit before you learn his story. On December 26th, 2002, Juan married his high school sweetheart, Casey, only days before his Marine unit deployed to the Persian Gulf region to participate in combat operations as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was assigned to the 1st Battalion of the 4th Marine Regiment out of Camp Pendleton, California, a newly minted infantryman only recently graduated from the School of Infantry at Camp Pendleton.

In January of 2003, Garza found himself a new member of a rifle platoon en route to the combat zone. It wasn't long before combat would find him and his platoon. On April 8th Garza's platoon was given the mission of taking control of a bridge across the Diyala River, east of Baghdad. Never one to shy away from anything, and already having proven himself as fearless Marine in other combat missions, he volunteered to provide covering fire from a precariously positioned sandbagged bunker as the rest of his platoon attempted to maneuver toward the bridge. Garza repeatedly exposed himself to enemy direct fire as he protected his fellow Marines as they advanced toward the bridge by providing protective fire to the enemy's positions. His personal example and willingness to take great risk for his Marine brothers served as an inspiration to them and they were able to seize control of the bridge.

As the firefight was winding down, Garza moved from the bunker and with his back toward the enemy, he was struck by an enemy bullet that found its path through the protective layering of his flak jacket. Mortally wounded, repeated attempts to revive him were unsuccessful.

After returning to their base camp after the battle, Garza's platoon mates assembled to remember and honor him. Circled around a makeshift shrine fashioned from his flak jacket, rifle, and helmet, his platoon sergeant, Garza's appointed leader, said this of Private Garza: "He was the heart and soul of this platoon. Nobody was tougher or more courageous than Garza. We're going to miss you, Garza."

Private First Class Juan Garza wasn't the appointed, legitimate leader of that Marine platoon but he was a leader nonetheless. He led by example, he influenced others with his courage. He placed their needs above his own. Garza's story doesn't glorify war; it does glorify courage and heroism. Juan Garza led by serving.