

Services honor West Point grad

Officer killed in Afghanistan had brothers, father in military

Photo 1 of 2 | Zoom Photo +



Members of 1st Lt. Daren Hidalgo's family, left to right, sister, Carmen Spellman; brothers, Army Capt. Miles Hidalgo, West Point Class of '06, and Marine Capt. Jared Hidalgo; mother Andrea; and father Jorge, West Point Class of '81, as well as Lt. Gen. David Huntoon, stand at attention at the grave of Hidalgo, where his cremated remains were interred. Huntoon is the West Point Superintendent. JEFF GOULDING/Times Herald-Record

By Adam Bosch

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WEST POINT — On the day he was killed by an anti-tank mine, 1st Lt. Daren Hidalgo could have been recovering from surgery in the safety of a U.S. Army hospital.

The 24-year-old had been hit by shrapnel Feb. 4. A comrade in his platoon snagged a tripwire and set off a grenade that had been planted by Afghan insurgents. The explosion flung metal into Hidalgo's left leg.

He was given two options. Stay with his platoon, take antibiotics and suffer through the pain until his redeployment in five months. Or have the shrapnel surgically removed at a hospital in Germany and sit on the sidelines for at least two weeks.

"He opted to stay until redeployment and take a steady diet of antibiotics and painkillers," said his brother Army Capt. Miles Hidalgo. "He always cared deeply about his job and leading soldiers."

Sixteen days later, Hidalgo was killed by the mine as his platoon patrolled the Kandahar province of Afghanistan.

More than 200 family, friends and comrades saluted his bravery Monday as his ashes were buried with full military honors among generations of soldiers at the West Point Cemetery.

Hidalgo became the 81st West Point grad to be killed in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He posthumously was awarded the Bronze Star, the fourth-highest combat award in the U.S. Armed Forces, which is given for bravery, acts of merit or meritorious service.

Known as a super athlete and gregarious jokester, Hidalgo came from a military pedigree. His father, Jorge, graduated from the military academy in 1981 after emigrating from the Dominican Republic. His brother Jared, 28, is an active-duty Marine captain who served in Iraq. His brother Miles, 26, is now serving his fourth tour in Afghanistan.

All three brothers went into the infantry, a branch that practically guarantees troops a ticket to the front lines of war. It also makes for nervous parents.

Jorge Hidalgo said a question popped into his mind when two officers came to his home in Wisconsin last month.

"The big concern was that we knew one of them had gotten hurt," he said. "The question was which one."

It was Daren, the officers told Jorge and his wife, Andrea, as a chaplain opened a Bible. They started crying.

Jorge had talked to Daren only days earlier. The Hidalgos been trying feverishly to reach him since officials called to say Daren was hit by a grenade. Finally, Daren called with good news. He was fine. Nothing a champion high school wrestler couldn't handle.

He also told his father so much shrapnel had sunken into his leg that he was setting off metal detectors.

"We both told him we loved him so much, and to be careful," Jorge recalled.

His 22-year-old sister, Carmen Spellman, remembered when Daren asked her to hit a pretend turbo button on his car and then zoomed down the road to make her laugh. He won titles as a high school wrestler in Dallastown, Pa., and later became one of the best racquetball players on the East Coast.

At West Point, his leadership blossomed. Daren Hidalgo was the commander of company G4, known here as the "guppies." Many cadets he trained with still are at West Point.

On Friday, all of them — friends, family, soldiers — packed the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. Hundreds of them raised their voices and sang "Happy Birthday ..."

On the day of his funeral, Daren Hidalgo would have been 25.

abosch@th-record.com