

SPECIALIST ARIO SANCHEZ

HHC, 75th Ranger Regiment

CSM Doug Russell Award 2002 Recipient



A native of Salinas, Puerto Rico, SPC Sanchez graduated from Stella Marque High School. He attended West Mar University for one year on a baseball scholarship before transferring to Ponce Paramedical College where he trained for and became a certified paramedic. SPC Sanchez enlisted in the Army in 1999 as an Imagery Analyst, completing his Advanced Individual Training at Fort Huachuca. He later graduated from the Defense Intelligence Agency Collection Manager's Course. In 2000, SPC completed the rigorous Ranger Indoctrination Program and was assigned to the MI Detachment of the 75th Ranger Regiment where he served as an integral part of the regimental staff.

SPC Sanchez emerged as one of Task Force SWORD's foremost experts on aerial surveillance operations in support of Special Operations forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in the fall of 2001. An Imagery Analyst, SPC Sanchez flew aboard the P3 ORION Surveillance Aircraft on twelve different combat missions between 15 October and 19 November 2001, accumulating 112 flight hours, including 72 hours over hostile territory in Afghanistan.

During these missions, SPC Sanchez directed the ORION's electro-optical, infrared, and synthetic aperture radar sensors against Task Force SWORD ground targets in Helmand, Kandahar, and Nimruz provinces. These targets included military barracks, equipment dispersal sites, airfields, bunkers, roads, and bridges. During five missions, SPC Sanchez scrutinized the desert airstrip at Bibi Terra which, as Objective RHINO, became the target for the first parachute assault by Army Rangers in over a decade, on 19 October 2001. Sanchez personally flew over RHINO aboard the ORION the night of the airborne raid, providing real-time enemy updates to ground force commanders as well as distant early warning of emerging threats.

In each mission, SPC Sanchez functioned as an adjunct member of the aircrew, responsible for identifying Taliban positions, directing cameras, and matching sensors to individual targets. His specialized training equipped him to advise pilots on the best flight angles to capture imagery of armored vehicles hidden within buildings and under canvas tents. On every flight, SPC Sanchez helped the US Navy crew to exploit the full potential of their airborne surveillance platform in support of Task Force SWORD ground actions.

After each mission, SPC Sanchez wrote detailed accounts of his observations for Task Force SWORD. On several occasions, he presented video footage and still photography of targets to the Regimental Commander and staff, briefing senior leaders on his analysis and conclusions.

Widely respected for his expertise in ORION intelligence and surveillance operations, SPC Sanchez was repeatedly requested to represent TF SWORD aboard flights by the P3 detachment commander as well as the J2 collection manager. The British Army's liaison officer to Task Force SWORD asked for Sanchez' participation on an early surveillance flight that covered British targets.

On the ground, Sanchez' contribution to the success of Rangers in Afghanistan was no less notable. Acting as the Ranger Regiment's senior imagery analyst, a position normally held by an experienced staff sergeant, SPC Sanchez requested and minutely interpreted the imagery produced for every Ranger objective in Afghanistan and Pakistan during ground combat operations. Much of the imagery was derived from national technical means. SPC Sanchez devoted hours to careful, detailed study of the pictures. He identified tanks, armored vehicles, air-defense weapons, and artillery pieces overlooked by higher-level interpreters.

SPC Sanchez carried his imagery mission to the grass roots, briefing numerous Ranger squad leaders on their tactical targets from his own terminal. In the process, he acquainted a rising generation of infantry noncommissioned leaders with the promise and potential of US imagery systems in the 21st century. Ultimately, Sanchez' reading of subtle clues in newly-created trails and kicked-up sand helped the Regiment develop a remarkably accurate estimate of enemy locations and numbers at Objective RHINO – one that helped to ensure that appropriate military force was applied at the right places and times during the Rangers' successful mission there.

No other member of the 75th Ranger Regiment did more to ensure the P3 flights met the intelligence and surveillance needs of US ground forces in southern Afghanistan during 2001. Perhaps more than any other soldier of his rank, SPC Sanchez played an indispensable role in ensuring the success of Ranger combat operations during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.