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Cody presents safety awards to 41st Fires Bde.

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41st Fires Bde, PAO

Three Rail Gunners received recognition from the Army's vice chief of staff Aug. 14 when the general also presented a safety award to brigade leadership in the 41st Fires Brigade conference room.

In addition to presenting the brigade's Chief of Staff, Army, Exceptional Organization Safety Award, Gen. Richard Cody presented the three Soldiers with the Guardian Safety Award for responding quickly to a humvee fire in front of Adnon Palace, Baghdad.

"You're the best in the Army right now at safety," Cody said, before presenting the awards.

The three Soldiers, Staff Sgt. Jason Trahan, Sgt. Christopher Fernandez and Spc. Alex Mecca were part of the then-brigade commander's personal security detachment.

On a routine trip to the palace Sept. 3, 2006, so Col. Allen Batschelet could meet with community leaders, most of the members of the team had gone into a nearby restaurant to cool off.

About an hour after arriving in the International Zone, Mecca, who was monitoring the radios and keeping the weapons and other sensitive items secure, noticed flames coming out of one of the team's truck's engines.

After the fire extinguisher was spent, Mecca ran into Michael's restaurant to alert the rest of the crew. Fernandez grabbed another extinguisher to hold the flames at bay while Trahan started removing the ammunition from the vehicle.

Fernandez and other Soldiers in the area started helping Trahan remove ammunition, and the

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Soldiers continued trying to fight the fire for about 30 minutes.

"The fire suppression system didn't work," Trahan said. "It seemed to make the flame bigger."

When the fire couldn't be stopped (later tests revealed some of the extinguishers used weren't of American origin), Trahan opted to move everyone and everything away from the vehicle.

"If the ammo would have started to cook off, it would have been a (serious) accident," said Trahan, the air-space command and control room-missioned officer, Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 41st Fires Bde. The Soldiers all modestly claim

they didn't do anything extraordinary, just reacted naturally and regret not having the opportunity to finish putting out the fire before higher authorities arrived.

"We trained for it," said Mecca, a combat medic in HHB, 41st Fires Bde, who worked as a firefighter and paramedic before joining the Army. "In the course of training, you have to plan for all contingencies involved and fire would obviously be one of the worst."

Fernandez, a brigade command group driver who earned the Silver Star in Operation Iraqi Freedom II, said the reaction was instinctive.

"What do you do when you see a fire? You put the fire out," Fernandez said, adding he also wanted to protect

his equipment in the vehicle.

The quick thinking displayed by the Soldiers that day reflected the training standards that resulted in the brigade earning the Exceptional Organization award, the first brigade to do so.

While deployed, the Army's first deployed fires brigade set the bar high in safety training and enforcement, said Kenneth Dickerson, brigade safety officer.

Before any convoy left camp each vehicle crew went through extensive checks to ensure the readiness of all electronic warfare, radio and other equipment. The crews also had to conduct rollover, recovery and escalation of force drills. As a result, Dickerson said, the brigade's Soldiers were able

to drive as many road miles as other units, with few incidents.

The efforts paid off. The brigade's safety program in led to a deployment without any Class A or B accidents.

The success was a result of everybody working together, Dickerson said.

"Leadership was taking responsibility for safety of Soldiers and Soldiers taking responsibility for themselves," Dickerson said.

A phrase the brigade's former deputy commander, Lt. Col. Timothy Daugherty, liked to use sticks out in Dickerson's head.

"The liked to say 'accidents don't happen when leaders are around,'" Dickerson said.