



## **WAXIE Honors Purple Heart Veteran**

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By Donald H. Harrison

SANTA ANA -- Wounded Army National Guard Sgt. Ivan Garcia received a Purple Heart on Saturday, Sept. 8. The day before, Garcia's civilian colleagues at WAXIE Sanitary Supply in Santa Ana gathered to express their heartfelt relief that he had managed to come home to them alive from Afghanistan.

WAXIE's Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Charles Wax, along with key executives of the San Diego-based company, also received awards from the ESGR agency of the U.S. Defense Department for support of employees who serve in the National Guard and in the Reserves.

Garcia, who had worked in the Santa Ana and Ontario divisions of WAXIE prior to being called up for duty in Afghanistan, was the only one to survive a suicide bombing attack Oct. 29, 2011, on the armored "rhino" bus that carried himself, his best friend Sgt. Carlo F. Eugenio who was the driver, and 13 military and civilian passengers on a convoy route that went from camps to various bases located in and around Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul.

"It was a route that we had gone on many times before and we hadn't had a problem," Garcia recounted. "On this day, there was an SUV that was following us in a parallel lane and when our bus separated from the gun trucks, they just sped up, rammed us and detonated. And when it was detonated, it threw the bus up in the air, tossing it about 50 yards. When I landed I was still in my seatbelt -- there were seatbelts on my chair -- and I had body armor. But there were people in the back -- a mixture of military and civilian personnel and I think a Canadian soldier -- and they were all killed instantly."

Garcia, as bus commander, had been sitting in the front passenger seat, and the suicide bomber's vehicle came from behind on the driver's side. "I don't remember hearing the impact or nothing," Garcia said. "All I remember is the bus flipping over and turning, and then I realized what happened and by that time it was too late because everyone was already dead," he said.



In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, Garcia recalled, he unbuckled his seat belt and called for his friend who was the driver, "but he was gone and I didn't know where he was at. I turned around and went to the back of the bus to see if anyone was back there and that's when I noticed that everyone there was dead. There were 13 of them and my friend. People were killed by the blast and by the flames."

As he was clambering from his seat to the back of the bus, "the tank behind my seat caught on fire and I got the initial burst in the face. I tripped over everybody to get out, because it caught me by surprise, scared me. I fell down a couple of times and picked myself up, and I was stumbling out to find the exit, but by the time I got half way through the bus a second tank went off, and fully engulfed the truck. I don't know how I got out. I don't remember if I crawled or jumped out of the vehicle."

Upon extricating himself from the wreckage, "I was just sitting there myself for I don't know how long, but it felt like forever, because I was the only one there. All the gun trucks were separated from us, and all I could see were pieces of vehicles, ashes and a couple of dead bodies. One was an Afghan male, the other a soldier from the bus. I couldn't find anybody until I finally saw through a break in the smoke that there was a median and on the opposite lane, I saw my company commander's gun truck. I waited for a minute, to make sure that there wasn't a secondary explosion or an ambush, and I ran to the truck, and got their attention from there.

"A medic came and started performing first aid on me, started with my arms. He took off my boots and everything, put in an IV and they finally sent a Medevac truck to pick me up." He was taken by helicopter to a local air base, "and the last thing I remember was being put in the helicopter, that was it. I passed out in the helicopter."

He spent a few days in the air base hospital where at first, "because of my inhalation burns they couldn't stabilize me. My chest cavities were swollen and I couldn't breathe. They tried to keep me stabilized in an isolation chamber, in, I think, 80 degrees temperature for the burns, and then they moved me from there to Germany, where I was a couple of days and had my initial surgery and grafting. Then after a few days, I was transferred to San Antonio where I was in ICU for a couple of days." Several surgeries later he was moved to rehab at Fort Sam Houston, where his chief duty is to get better. His wife Paula and their children moved from California to Texas to be near him during his recovery.



Garcia was raised in East Los Angeles and Norwalk with parents who had immigrated from Mexico. His father worked as a tailor, and his mother worked in a hospice. He joined the Army after graduating from high school, and after completing his three-year-tour, joined the Army National Guard. At the same time he began a civilian career with WAXIE, working in the will-call area of the customer service department, and in the warehouse, first in Santa Ana and later in Ontario. During his time at WAXIE, he was called up by the National Guard three times -- twice to Iraq, and most recently to Afghanistan.

Jeff Roberts, WAXIE's President and Chief Operating Officer, recalled how Garcia's fellow employees rallied around his family during his three deployments, taking the children to favorite restaurants like Red Robin and making certain to include them in various company picnics and family get-togethers.

Since he was injured, Garcia said, "they have been the best, they have been with me for the whole thing, from when they first found out. I got emails from everybody every month asking how I am doing, and people were sending me care packages. I love this company, they are my extended family, my big family."

He said that both Charles Wax and Jeff Roberts, as well as co-workers in the Santa Ana and Ontario divisions of the company that serves nine western states, "were all there for me. They called me and kept posted on how my recovery was going, and they worried about me. I love these people, they are the best."

Michael Gould, a Sales Manager based in the Santa Ana division, had been in the Navy. After returning to civilian life he worked for a couple of companies before joining WAXIE. Having missed the camaraderie of military life, he said he was inspired when he came to WAXIE and saw how Garcia was supported by the company in his desire to perform military service. He decided to follow suit and became part of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Andrew Wiktorowicz of Las Alamitos, Chair of the California committee for the 40-year-old Defense Department unit known as Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), said the nation needs more companies like WAXIE that wholeheartedly support the military.

He presented "Patriot" awards to Roberts, Santa Ana General Manager Alice Sawaya, Ontario General Manager Chris Bohrisch, and Santa Ana Operations Manager Laura Maloney, whom, he said, willingly adjust their operations and take on extra work when



employees like Garcia and Gould leave for military service. The citation extolled each of them "for contributing to national security and protecting liberty and freedom by supporting employee participation in America's National Guard and reserve force."

Wax, as head of the regional company that employs more than 800 persons, was given a separate "Seven Seals" Award, representing seven branches of military service: Air Force, Air Force National Guard, Army, Army National Guard, Coast Guard, Marine Corps and Navy, in recognition of the company's supportive policies toward military personnel.

Accepting, he credited his late uncle Harry Wax and late father Morris Wax, who founded the company after World War II, for setting the example. Harry, who had been in the Seabees, created the company's WAXIE bee logo, which was inspired by the Seabees' logo, he said. Morris, who had been a Supply Officer for one of General George Patton's tank battalions during World War II, became active in San Diego as president of the USO and the Navy League. Among Morris's numerous friends in the military was Gen. Colin Powell, who was the last person to talk to Morris on the telephone prior to Morris's death in December 1996.

"As I reflect on everything today, I know my dad would be so proud, and when I think about it, it is an honor for Ivan and it is an honor for my dad. He instilled an interest in us to keep doing what we can for the military," Wax said. "We are very lucky and blessed to live in this great country, but without the military, the freedoms that we enjoy and take for granted every day, we wouldn't enjoy."

He promised that when it comes to support of the U.S. military, "we are always going to be there."

The ceremony had some special moments: Cadets from the Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy of Los Alamitos posted and retired the colors; Julia Vanderweil, granddaughter of Charles Wax, led the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner" at the beginning of the ceremony and "God Bless America" at the end; and Jeff Roberts led assembled employees, vendors and customers in a "Moment of Silence" for those who died on Garcia's bus as well as all others killed in action in America's military service.



**Pictured from left to right: Michael Gould, Charles Wax, Alice Sawaya, Ivan Garcia & Jeff Roberts. Photo by Jim McGinn.**



**Pictured from left to right: Jeff Roberts, Paula Garcia, Ivan Garcia & Charles Wax. Photo by Jim McGinn.**

*WAXIE Sanitary Supply is America's largest family-owned distributor of sanitary maintenance supplies. WAXIE is an industry leader in the distribution of quality cleaning chemicals, equipment, disposables, and accessories to the building service contractor, school, hospitality, healthcare, military, government, industrial, and retail markets. Based in San Diego, the company consists of over 800 dedicated professionals working out of Inventory Centers servicing the western United States including California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Colorado. WAXIE's GPS® Green Partner Support™ Program is a comprehensive approach to implementing an effective green cleaning program that protects health without harming the environment. Additional information about WAXIE Sanitary Supply may be obtained at [www.waxie.com](http://www.waxie.com).*