



# United States Army Criminal Investigation Command

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## *Answering the Call*

### **CID Agent Saves Swimmers, Awarded Soldier's Medal**

By Colby Hauser  
CID Public Affairs

**QUANTICO, VA** November 12, 2013 – On November 4, 2013, in his last official act as the special-agent-in-charge of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command's Puerto Rico CID office, Special Agent James Spalding humbly received the Soldier's Medal, the Army's highest decoration for valor not involving combat, before his fellow Soldiers, civilians, family and friends.

Had it not been for the heroic actions of Spalding, six-foot seas and an unrelenting undertow would have claimed the lives of a vacationing Canadian couple December 22, 2012, at the Flamenco Beach resort destination in Culebra, Puerto Rico.

"I never thought I would receive such an award in all my life," he said. "It was really unexpected, but to be recognized and have received this award was truly an honor."

Eleven months ago on what had initially started out as a pleasant day of family fun quickly escalated into a life or death situation, for both the distressed couple and Special Agent Spalding, as they learned how unforgiving the ocean can truly be.

"I had just met back up with my wife and her mom when my wife heard someone yelling for help," Spalding said. "It was kinda hard to hear so I ran down the beach trying to see who was yelling."

"That's when I saw them," he said.

The vacationing couple had been caught up in an aquatic tug-o-war between an oppressive rip tide pushing them across the cove and a powerful undertow pulling them out to sea. No longer able to fight, their only hope for survival would be in someone answering their calls for help.

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At the beach that day, there were no lifeguards, no emergency or rescue personnel, just patrons, pets, and a willing and able CID Special Agent.

Spalding sprang into action, diving headlong into the treacherous waters, battling the tide on his way to the precarious pair. This first attempt was met by the same devastating undertow and pounding six-foot seas that had imperiled the couple, forcing him to return to shore. However, the Kentucky native was determined to reach them.

He quickly retrieved his life jacket and swim fins, which he had been using earlier in the day while snorkeling, and swam back out into the violent waters. His wife, who was six months pregnant with their second child at the time, pled with other beachgoers to aid in the rescue, but to no avail.

Spalding said that upon reaching the husband he gave him the life jacket and told him to use it for flotation and swim to shore.

“Once I made it to the husband and made sure he was okay, I could see his wife in the tops of the waves being pulled out further,” he said. “She was barely above the water floating on her back.”

After battling through the current and taking in some seawater, Spalding finally reached the woman. At this point, both he and the woman are exhausted and bobbing like a pair of corks in a hot tub. That’s when Spalding’s military training kicked in.

“When I reached her I told her not to panic and to just let me swim to her and not to grab me,” he said. “Then outta nowhere, I started to remember my in-processing briefing from Hawaii back in 2004 where they taught us how not to fight the current but to swim at an angle back to shore.”

“The gravity of the moment of something like that doesn’t really kick in until afterwards, but when you’re in it you remember all kinds of stuff,” he added.

Hooking arms with the distressed swimmer from Vancouver, Spalding plotted his diagonal course and successfully swam her safely back to shore where they were both happily greeted by their worried spouses.

Following Spalding’s actions on that December day, Col. Tom Byrd, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Military Police Group (CID), U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, said that as

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the enormity of what James has done began to circulate, it became apparent to his chain of command that he was worthy of the Soldier's Medal.

"The chain of command reached out to the Canadian couple and asked them to write a letter highlighting the events of that day," Byrd said. "The letters are moving and powerful testimonials to the absolute heroism of Chief Warrant Officer James Spalding."

"They can be summarized in a quote from the husband who said: 'If not for the actions of Mr. Spalding on 22 December 2012, my wife and I would not be alive today,'" he said.

The Soldier's Medal has been awarded by the U.S. Army since 1927 and is the highest honor a Soldier can receive for an act of valor in a non-combat situation, considered to be equal to or greater than the level which would justify an award of the Distinguished Flying Cross if the act occurred in combat. Coincidentally, the first two recipients were awarded the medal for saving people from drowning.

For the men and women of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, commonly referred to as CID, their mission is clear: the never ending pursuit of truth, striving to make the Army stronger by bringing those few in the ranks who commit crime or those who commit crime against the Army to justice.

Special agents are some of the most highly trained criminal investigators in law enforcement and are recognized Federal law enforcement officials. Adaptability has always been a hallmark of a CID special agent. Serving a population of more than 1 million Soldiers, civilians, contractors and family members – both at home and deployed — their mission is crucial.

Although Spalding will be transitioning from active duty at the end of 2013 in order to pursue a new opportunity as a civilian within the Federal law enforcement community, he continues to serve his fellow Soldiers, civilians and family members as a U.S. Army Reserve CID agent.

"On 22 December 2012 James did exactly what the CID motto states: 'Do what has to be Done,'" Byrd said.

For more information on Army CID visit [www.cid.army.mil](http://www.cid.army.mil)

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Col. Tom Byrd, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Military police Group (CID), U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, presents the Soldier's Medal to Special Agent James Spalding, a CID special agent with the Puerto Rico CID Office, November 4, 2013. Spalding was awarded the medal for saving the lives of two Canadian citizens from drowning at Flamenco Beach in Culebra, Puerto Rico. (U.S. Army photo by Jose L. Lopez, Fort Buchanan Public Affairs)