

When he enlisted in the Marines right out of high school, Cardona recalls, "I just wanted to be a complete badass. The [Marine] recruiters were the most in-shape and you know, the most squared-away. You see all that and you're just like, "Man, I want to be like that guy."

A Marine's Story

Luis Gallego Cardona, 22, of Hamden is a freshman mathematics major at Southern Connecticut State University. Originally from Colombia, Cardona moved with his family to Stamford in 1996. He joined the Marine Corps after graduating high school. As a machine gunner in the Marines, he was deployed to Iraq in September 2008 for five months, before heading to the wilds of Afghanistan in the summer of 2010, where the majority of his combat experience took place. He returned home last February.

This is his story.

A lot of people, I guess, don't agree with war. But the way I look at it is we're making a change in the world, in one small way.

It's one of those things where I didn't really care what the policies were, or what the government was telling us to do. It was more of me. And most of us, we felt like we signed up for a job, and that required us to do whatever was asked of us.

In my platoon there were about 46 of us. My unit was called Combat Logistics Battalion 2. We lived out of our trucks. Everywhere we went our trucks were where we ate, where we slept, where we rested, where we'd be most relaxed.

My job was to provide security for convoys bringing supplies to different bases across Afghanistan. I was in charge of mission planning, supplies and gear going on missions. We would load all the supplies, make sure weapons were clean. We took turns navigating the vehicle.

You took a couple of days to get the gear together, a couple of days to deliver.

Travel distance depended on where we had to go. The most was more than 80 miles, which would take us four to five days to cover. On average it'd probably be about one mission a week.

Our role is kind of like teaching [Afghani security forces]. Our job there is to train them and show them how to fight the Taliban; teaching about schools, infrastructure and the economy; how to get supplies from Point A to Point B. One of the things that was preached was to not give the [appearance] that we were a conquering force.

The realities [of war compared to what civilians imagine]? Not even close. Nothing can get you prepared for that kind of experience, to be honest. I mean, you can sit there and watch as many war movies as you try and, I don't know. It's a lot different in real life.

BY JESSICA GIANNONE

The on-the-ground reality of two little-reported wars through the eyes of a young Hamden Marine

For one, I wasn't expecting myself to [have to accept] that I might actually die. I think that was a very special moment — when you convince yourself that you might die. Not a lot of people, I don't think, can say that they agree that they're gonna.

You know that you might not make it past the day. You accept it. When you get to that point it really reveals your character, in a way. It shows who you really are.

I told myself if I'm gonna die, I'm gonna go with a bang. I'm not gonna die getting shot in the back. I'm going out blazing hot. If you're gonna die, you're gonna die honorably. [Once you accept the possibility of death] you're able to do your job with less fear. You don't have to worry about "Oh, I'm getting killed" because you've already accepted it. That's what I call my "Rambo moment" — it's when you feel like Rambo.



Cardona's unit assembled and delivered supplies across some of the most dangerous terrain in the world to far-flung units across the Afghan countryside.

I didn't have the fear of getting sent [into combat]. My expectations going in, I thought I was going to see the world, get to travel and get to go to cool places like Thailand. What I actually got was two deployments [to Iraq and Afghanistan]. I wanted to see combat, and unfortunately I got more than I asked for.

I wasn't expecting myself to kind of stay as cool-headed as I had originally thought I would be under such chaos. I think before you see combat your expectations are just what you see in the movies, and that's kind of what my expectations were. You know, you see your enemy, you see who you're shooting at, you see the house-to-house type of fighting. And in reality, most of the time you don't see who's shooting at you. You're fighting an invisible enemy when it comes to IED [improvised explosive devices, a/k/a roadside bombs]. Those things can set off at any time. You really don't know when to expect it.

There are a lot of signs [of concealed explosives]. There could be markers, like a stacked pile of rocks. That usually was a pretty good indicator that there was an IED there. Disturbed dirt obviously is one of the easiest. I was looking for either disturbed dirt or stacks of rocks, and 99.9 percent of the time I was right. We saw a lot of people in the cities. But as soon as you broke off into the desert

where we traveled, it's like wild country. There are no roads. The terrain is very, very hard to maneuver through — a lot of loose sand that the vehicles easily get stuck in. I've seen vehicles flip over in front of me on huge hills, like tumble down. We were towing one vehicle and I remember it catching on fire.

There's always a threat of IEDs. You get attacked more in the remote locations in Afghanistan than you do in the city, just because in the city there's a bigger presence of us and the Afghan police. Once you get out more into the middle of nowhere, where there's less condensed population, it's kind of like there is no law; there is no rule.

That's where we got into our firefights from these random villages in the middle of nowhere where the mountainside is. They like to shoot a lot from the mountains. After the first time when you shoot back and you feel like you actually have a fighting chance at survival, you're a lot more comfortable. It doesn't freak you out as much. Getting shot at is just like any other day on the job.

When you're on the road you don't keep track of time. You lose track of time. You're doing the same thing for hours and hours. You're sitting on a truck just driving through the desert. You're hungry, you're tired, you're sleepy, you're irritated,

you're on edge. There was no sleeping. There was nothing but naps.



Iraq was a completely different experience compared to Afghanistan. One of the biggest differences was the combat; in Iraq I saw none. In Iraq I did my actual military occupational specialty of supply administration. I was in a team that was in charge of managing over \$30 million of equipment. We oversaw the logistical side of the battalion as far as ordering supplies and shipping them out to all the other small bases.

My highlight of Iraq was when I got to visit Baghdad. This was a huge deal because the Marines operated in the Al-Anbar province, which is completely different than Baghdad. I was sort of "forced" into this situation. As it turns out, our unit had about \$5 million worth of equipment that belonged to the Air Force. The only way to hand over this equipment was to deliver it in person. I showed up to work, got told to pack for three days and go to the flight line. The flight line was where helicopters and aircraft took off. I was put on an Osprey (V-22 helicopter) to Baghdad with nothing but the name of some Air Force captain who I was to deliver this gear to.

When I landed I was the elephant in the room. First of all, there are practically

no Marines in Baghdad. Everything was operated by Army or Air Force. I was pretty screwed. Wasn't sure where to go to sleep, eat or where to get started looking for this guy. Lucky for me there was another Marine sergeant and captain who were there doing the same thing. They were able to get a vehicle and helped me do everything I needed to do to turn the equipment in.

In Afghanistan, most of the time we had we spent working. I don't think we ever got bored. Our free time was spent cleaning our weapons. We would eat food, listen to music, play cards. We'd clean the truck, resupply for the next trip, I'd make sure my ammo count was good.

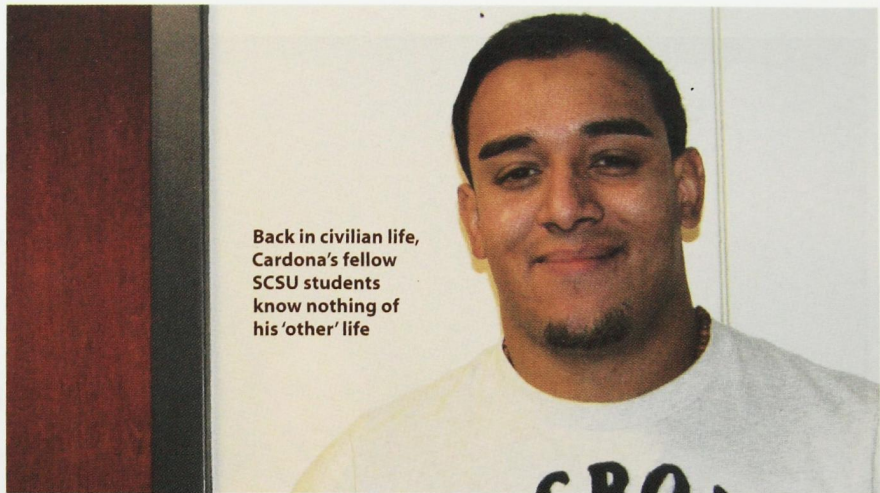
The best way we coped was making fun of each other. My ritual was to play the song "Cookie Jar" by Gym Class Heroes every time before we left friendly lines. I got hooked on the song, and it just put me in a good mood; kind of a relaxed mood to start off.

My biggest priorities were to take care of [fellow Marines] and take care of myself. My biggest fear was not making it back home. The day that my sergeant lost his leg, that was the first time I saw anything like that. It was specifically scary because everything was combined into one.

I woke up to sounds that I will remember until the day I die: "[Convoy vehicle] White 4 is hit!" There was a lot of screaming and a horrible smell of burning human flesh. The armored doors had been completely blown off the vehicle. As my eyes slowly took the image of [my sergeant's] body, I came to notice something was not right; his leg was hanging by flesh just below the knee. The smell and sight of that alone almost made me throw up, but I kept it together for him as I knelt down and started talking to him.

It was like a 20-minute event, but I tell you that it felt like three hours of just constant fighting, and everything you could possibly think could go wrong did go wrong — when the gun got jammed, the fact that we were inside of a village, the fact that there were still [cooking] pots outside, which is a horrible sign because that just lets you know that people are nearby. You don't really know. It could be kids and women; it could be Taliban; it could be just innocent civilians that got forced into the situation.

Personally, I was one of those guys that if a choice came between losing a leg or



Back in civilian life, Cardona's fellow SCSU students know nothing of his 'other' life

getting killed, I would have opted to just get killed. I guess my faith was weak. I didn't want to survive without a leg. That was my biggest fear, just ending up like that. I don't think I could live like that. I don't know if I consider myself tough enough to get out of bed every morning with a disability like that.

It's scary and sad seeing someone die. The first time it felt as if the wind had been knocked out of you. You're speechless in a way. You wonder about their life. You wonder what path they took to get to where they are now. It's really a sad, sad time to see somebody struggling like that and knowing that you can't do a damn thing about it. Seeing somebody climbing out of a burning truck with no legs, and watching them flop ten feet in the air to the bottom and just try to drag their way out. When you see that, you're just — you're speechless. Some of that stuff is just the worst type of terror you could possibly imagine. You never forget the smells, you never forget the sounds, you never forget the way you feel when something like that happens.

The first time [I was shot at] we were on a mission, and I remember hearing these little snaps outside of the vehicle. And that's when they started hitting the window. I remember telling myself just control your breathing, relax. You do whatever you can to make it worth it. That moment [when] you realize that you're gonna die, the best way to describe it is you think about all the things you've done in your life and try to convince yourself you had a good life. I think the biggest fear of dying comes with all the things that you didn't do. Once you accept [that you might die] you feel clear-headed — freer in a way. At first you don't want to believe it. It doesn't seem real that this is actually happening to you. For me it

was just one thing that goes through your head: either kill or be killed.

To be honest, what kept me going was envisioning myself going to school [and] doing something with myself — to be somebody.

I know that deep down I feel like I've made a change. I guess we just have to wait and find out if it was for the good or for the worse. I'll find that out once we pull out of Afghanistan. If the country succeeds in being independent and taking care of their own, then I would feel like I had succeeded; like I played a small part in that. I'm kind of just waiting to see how everything plays out. I think as an enlisted Marine, I got to see very small window of the whole picture.

I guess I would say don't believe what's on the news. It's not always accurate. In Afghanistan you talk to the civilians and you learn about how the way of life used to be when the Taliban ruled and how it is now with us being there. A lot of the people there are actually happy. That's what makes the job. That's what I envisioned my job being and that's what I tell people that I did. To be honest, I just wanted to be a complete badass. The [Marine] recruiters were the most in-shape and you know, the most squared-away. You just kind of see all that and you're just like, 'Man, I want to be like that guy.' I think I decided my sophomore year of high school [to enlist]. I really didn't have anything going on after high school. I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps. He is in the Army, stationed in North Carolina.

The Marines are different. It would be in our egos, our spirit, our tradition and

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Mamma Mia!, the hit musical featuring songs from Abba, is the story of a daughter's quest on the eve of her wedding to discover the identity of her father, which brings three men from her mother's past back to the Greek island they last visited 20 years ago. 8 p.m. January 20, 2 @ 8 p.m. January 21, 1 @ 6:30 p.m. January 22 at **Palace Theater**, 100 E. Main St., Waterbury. \$70-\$50. 203-346-2000, palacetheaterct.org.

In Chekhov's profound comedy **The Seagull**, years of petty squabbles and thwarted love affairs breed miserable hilarity in the countryside: lovers and artists alike struggle with memory, forgetting and moving on. Alexandru Mihail directs. 8 p.m. January 24-27, 2 @ 8 p.m. January 28 at **University Theatre**, 222 York St., New Haven. \$20-\$10. 203-432-1234, drama.yale.edu.

A new production of Shakespeare's **Macbeth** reexamines the Old World tale of murder and ambition in a New World setting. A senior project of Yale College drama students Katharine Pitt, Sam Lasman and Jaime Biondi. 8 p.m. February 2-3, 2 @ 8 p.m. February 4 at **Whitney Humanities Center Theater**, 53 Wall St., New Haven. Free. Registration. 203-432-1308, yaledramacoalition.org.

A world premiere by Christina Anderson, **Good Goods** is an otherworldly love story of the (dis) possessed. Amid the cluttered shelves of a family-owned general store in a small African-American community that appears on no map, four lost souls reunite. Partnerships dissolve, alliances shift and romances ignite as a tragic accident unleashes the town's mysterious history. Tina Landau directs. February 3-25 at **Yale Repertory Theatre**, 1120 Chapel St., New Haven. \$73-\$54. 203-432-1234, yalerep.org.

Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You and **The Actor's Nightmare**. The two one-acts by

Christopher Durang are a parody of the stereotypical Catholic-school classroom and a comedy about the plight of a stranger who is suddenly pushed onstage to replace an ailing actor. February 3-19 at **Eastbound Theater**, 40 Railroad Ave. South, Milford. \$17 (\$15 senior/students). 203-382-0969, milfordarts.org.

The Yale School of Drama presents **Julius Caesar** by William Shakespeare. Ethan Heard directs. 4 p.m. February 9, 4 @ 8 p.m. February 10, 4 p.m. February 11. **Iseman Theater**, 1156 Chapel St., New Haven. Free. Registration. 203-432-1234, yaledramacoalition.org.

Shrek the Musical, based on the Oscar-winning DreamWorks film, brings the hilarious story of everyone's favorite ogre to life onstage, featuring 19 all-new songs. 8 p.m. February 10, 2 @ 8 p.m. February 11 at **Palace Theater**, 100 E. Main St., Waterbury. \$68-\$48. 203-346-2000, palacetheaterct.org.

The Timid Jester: A Night of Improve, Comedy & Song featuring Shakesperience Productions' resident actors and special guest performers together with the audience in a series of improvisational scenes and stand-up comedy. 6 p.m. February 10 at **Shakesperience Productions**, 117 Bank St., Waterbury. \$10. 203-754-2537, shakesperienceproductions.org.

In the world premiere musical **February House**, George Davis tries to create his own utopia in a small house in Brooklyn in the 1940s by bringing together some of the greatest and most colorful minds of a generation (W.H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Benjamin Britten and Gypsy Rose Lee). The artists discover new ideas exploding at every turn as they find love, friendship and their own artistic voices in a time of war. The score mixes elements of classical operetta, jazz, and musical comedy with modern folk-pop. Davis McCallum directs.

February 15-March 18 at **Long Wharf Theatre**, 222 Sargent Dr., New Haven. \$52-\$42. 203-787-4282, longwharf.org.

For Vincent Didonato, the family's metal-casting shop that he runs would hardly seem the perfect place to meet Ms. Right. But that is exactly what happens when a bunch of résumés from several comely New York actresses start pouring into his "casting" office. Finding one young waitress too irresistible to let slip away; he sets up an "audition" for a fictitious film. Mistaken identity and hilarity soon ensue as show business and sheet metal collide in the **Centennial Casting**. February 16-March 11 at **Seven Angels Theatre**, 1 Plank Road, Waterbury. \$35. 203-757-4676, sevenangelstheatre.org.

Based on the Robert Louis Stevenson classic, this stage adaptation of **Treasure Island** brings pirates and parrot-puppets to life with song and dance, treason and treasure-seeking. A Choate student production. 7:30 p.m. February 16, 2 p.m. February 19 at **Paul Mellon Arts Center**, 333 Christian St. Wallingford. \$15 (\$10 12 and under). 203-697-2398, choate.edu.

The Deadly Seven. Shakespeare's Purgatorio showcases scenes and monologues from Shakespeare based on the Seven Deadly Sins. Characters Falstaff, Cleopatra, Richard III, Shylock, Queen Margaret, Angelo and Richard II are portrayed to embody Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, Avarice, Wrath, Lust and Pride. An ensemble of seven actors appear in multiple roles. 8 p.m. February 16-19 at **Davenport-Pierson Auditorium**, 248 York St., New Haven. Free. Reservations. yaledramacoalition.org/deadly-seven.

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courtesies. Being a Marine is more than just putting on a uniform and going to boot camp. It's a brotherhood that you can't really explain to people. To me it feels like the Marines are a more tightly knit group of warriors.

I know I've changed as a person, but I haven't been able to figure out in which ways. You appreciate the little stuff more. When I came in, I went in as a little scrawny kind of having any other the leadership traits. You come out twice as better as you went in. Being on my deployment pushed me above and beyond my extremes. It makes me stronger in the sense that I know what I'm capable of. I don't tell people that I shot people — you know, firefights and stuff like that. I don't tell people that. I just focus on the changes that we made — the stuff that doesn't make the news. ❖

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