



This Month in NCO History: Sept. 2, 2006 — Soldier Goes from Tragedy to Triumph

By Pablo Villa

For Mark Dodge, a former Army sergeant, the ninth month of the year brings forth a gamut of emotions. He has experienced tragedy in September. He has also felt the elation of a dream lived.

Dodge was in the Army from April 2000 to January 2004, assigned to the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, at Fort Myer, Va. As part of “The Old Guard,” Dodge took part in military funerals at Arlington National Cemetery and other notable ceremonies nationwide.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Dodge was at the Pentagon filing documents for a security clearance to the White House when news of the terrorist attacks unfolding in New York flashed across TV screens in the facility. But no one knew another hijacked plane, American Airlines Flight 77, was headed for the headquarters of the Department of Defense.

At 9:37 a.m., the jetliner struck the western side of the Pentagon, killing all 64 of the plane’s occupants and 125 people in the building. Dodge and the rest of The

Old Guard stationed nearby at what is now Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall immediately leaped into action. Initially, Dodge helped move survivors to triage tents. After the fires in the building were extinguished, the unit was tasked with sifting through the rubble to find survivors and recover victims’ remains.

“You’d come across stuff you wish you wouldn’t, stuff you couldn’t imagine seeing,” Dodge said in 2006 of the experience.

The experience left Dodge suffering with post-traumatic stress. He eventually decided to halt his Army career and focus on goals he had previously abandoned. The first was reconciling with his estranged father, Howard Dodge, who divorced the younger Dodge’s mother, Toni Inserra, and was largely absent from his son’s life since he was an infant. Dodge did just that, beginning to build a relationship with this father before leaving the Army as an NCO in 2004.

Dodge next set his sights on college, but he didn't want to enroll at a university simply to be a student. He wanted to play football for a top-tier school.

In high school, Dodge had been an all-state wide receiver in Nevada. He joined the Army after he didn't receive an offer to play college football. But even though six years had passed since he last set foot on a field in competition, Dodge was not discouraged. He added 20 pounds to his 6-foot-2-inch frame that tipped the scales at 200 during his Army career, and he went on a strict diet. He wrote several schools, but did not hear back from any of them.

Undeterred, Dodge enrolled at Feather River Community College in Quincy, Calif. The Golden Eagles play in the Golden Valley Conference of the California Community College Athletic Association. In the fall of 2004, at the age of 23, Dodge started at inside linebacker. His ability to chase down ball carriers received the attention of several Division I programs. In 2006, Dodge accepted a scholarship offer from Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, citing the school's rich military traditions as a big reason for his decision.

On Sept. 2, 2006, nearly five years since the attacks that left an indelible mark on his psyche, Dodge had something of a cathartic moment.

In front of more than 70,000 fans at the Aggies' Kyle Field against The Citadel, Dodge saw his first action as a Division I college football player with 2:57 left in the 1st quarter. On his first play, Dodge displayed the same strength and fortitude that helped him succeed in the Army. From his inside linebacker position, Dodge followed a sweep play to his right, blew past a blocker and tackled a Citadel running back for a loss. One play later, Dodge forced a fumble that his Aggies recovered to spur a 35-3 blowout win.

"This is more fun than I can ever dream of," Dodge said after the game. "One bad day here is a lot better than a very good day overseas."

Dodge won the starting position the following week. He played linebacker for two seasons for Texas A&M and finished his Aggie career with 168 tackles, two interceptions and two forced fumbles. In 2007, he received honorable mention on the All-Big 12 team.

Today, Dodge lives in San Antonio with his wife and son. ■



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

