



## This Month In NCO History

### Oct. 3, 2009 — A Battlefield Pledge Honored On The Gridiron

*By Pablo Villa*

**I**t was easy to lose sight of former Sgt. Daniel Rodriguez earlier this month on the sideline of Memorial Stadium on the campus of Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina.

The 5-foot-8, 180-pound Rodriguez was cloaked in an orange hooded smock and was difficult to single out of the rain-soaked mass of mammoth Clemson Tiger football players who were taking on the Notre Dame Fighting Irish on Oct. 3 in a highly anticipated college football contest between two Top 25 teams. Why Rodriguez was present during Clemson's 24-22 win was apparent — he was a special teams star and wide receiver for Clemson from 2012 to 2014. He just missed making the St. Louis Rams' 53-man roster in September.

But it was more than football prowess and a prime-time matchup that drew Rodriguez to his former school. The date was significant for another reason, the anniversary of a day when Rodriguez's diminutive — by football standards — frame stood out in gallant fashion.

On Oct. 3, 2009, Rodriguez was involved in the Battle of Kamdesh, one of the deadliest skirmishes for U.S. forces during their involvement in Afghanistan. The fight occurred at Combat Outpost Keating near the town of Kamdesh in the Afghan province of Nuristan. In the pre-dawn hours, a hail of gunfire descended on the outpost, which sat in a narrow valley surrounded by the Hindu Kush mountains near the Pakistani border. A force of about 400 Taliban fighters assaulted the compound from five vantage points in the mountains.

COP Keating was defended by 50 American Soldiers, an Afghan National Army unit and its two Latvian Army trainers. The American Soldiers, assigned to B Troop, 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, had been at the outpost since May. Having faced enemy fire almost daily in the difficult-to-defend complex, the Army had planned its closure. The all-out attack Oct. 3 hastened those plans.

As insurgents targeted the outpost's mortar pit with a barrage of bullets, others nearly overwhelmed every other spot within the football-field sized compound from their positions in the mountains. A simultaneous attack was carried out on nearby Observation Post Fritsche, which cut off support to COP Keating for most of the day. Taliban forces breached COP Keating and inflicted casualties within an hour of the attack. They wouldn't be completely driven back until late in the afternoon.

The American Soldiers and their allies fought fiercely in defense of COP Keating, killing an estimated 150 Taliban fighters. Later in the day, OP Fritsche was secured and able to provide indirect support. Overhead, two U.S. Air Force F-15E fighter bombers helped coordinate airstrikes. Eventually, COP Keating was secured.

Eight of the 50 U.S. Soldiers defending the outpost were killed and 27 were wounded in the battle, which lasted 12 hours.

One of the wounded was Rodriguez. A bullet penetrated his shoulder and shrapnel shredded his leg and neck. Like other Soldiers in the unit, Rodriguez stayed in the fight throughout the day despite his wounds. Afterward, a bevy of awards for valor were awarded to survivors of the battle. Two of them — Staff Sgt. Clinton L. Romesha and then-Spc. Ty Michael Carter — were awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. Rodriguez was awarded a Purple Heart and Bronze Star Medal with valor device for his actions. But the recognition didn't offer consolation for the loss of fellow Soldier and close friend, Pfc. Kevin C. Thomson. Rodriguez befriended Thomson upon arriving at COP Keating. Weeks before the Taliban attack, the pair made a pledge to each other that they would pursue their dreams after leaving the Army. The assault ended those dreams for Thomson and left Rodriguez distraught.

The following year, Rodriguez was discharged from the Army, ending a four-year career that included tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He enrolled at Germanna Community College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, three months after returning home. But the rigor of classes couldn't ease the scars of combat. Rodriguez turned to drinking to cope with his diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. The following fall, he decided to make good on a promise he made to his friend in the rugged Afghanistan mountains.

"I felt like I'd been given this second chance at life," Rodriguez told ESPN in 2012. "I don't want to waste it. I don't want to waste the oxygen that somebody died for me to have."

His dream was no small feat — Rodriguez wanted to play football at a Football Bowl Subdivision school. He began the journey to the longshot goal by working out three times a day and sticking to a strict diet. A friend helped Rodriguez create a video showcasing his speed, quickness and soft hands to distribute to coaches throughout the country. Clemson coach Dabo Swinney stood out to Rodriguez among the 50 coaches who contacted him. In the summer of 2012, he scrambled to get his transcripts and eligibility requirements in order to enroll at Clemson that fall and join the football team as a walk-on.

Rodriguez's determination came to fruition. He played in 37 consecutive games for the Tigers through three seasons. He scored his only touchdown on a 2-yard end-around play against The Citadel in 2013. His college career was dotted with various awards for players who display inspiration and merit.

After graduating in December 2014, Rodriguez went unselected in the National Football League Draft the following spring but received an invitation to play with the St. Louis Rams. He suited up for all four of the Rams' preseason games but was eventually cut from the final 53-man roster. Despite falling short on NFL aspirations, Rodriguez served as an inspirational story in the run-up to the 2015 NFL regular season. He took to Twitter after his release to encourage others to chase their dreams and cherish the time it takes to reach them.

"I'll never see this as a failure or opportunity wasted. I encourage all to pursue what you love and make the most of your life on this earth," Rodriguez wrote.

He returned to his alma mater this month to promote coming book-signing events for his co-authored tome, *Rise: A Soldier, A Dream and A Promise Kept*. He also discussed the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America Heroes Gala in New York City, a November event at which he will be honored.

Rodriguez currently lives in Hermosa Beach, California. The movie rights to his story have been sold to TriStar Productions. ■

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