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The Medal of Honor

Staff Sgt. Drew Dix and the Battle of Chau Doc

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Fifty years ago on January 16, 1969, President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the Medal of Honor to then-Staff Sgt. Drew D. Dix for his actions at Chau Phu, Chau Doc Province, Republic of Vietnam (RVN). This article explains how Dix, 5th Special Forces Group, exhibited characteristics between 1967 and 1968 that were later codified in the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Creed.¹

The NCO Creed provides an azimuth for U.S. Army NCOs, outlining the values expected to guide the Soldiers who form the backbone of the Army. Dix's *leadership, professionalism, competence, initiative, and tactical proficiency* earned him the respect of his superiors, the soldiers of the Vietnamese provincial reconnaissance units (PRUs) whom he trained and led in the field, and the U.S. Navy SEALs who helped recapture the city of

Chau Phu from enemy forces from January 31 to February 1, 1968. The words used in the NCO Creed closely mirror descriptions of Dix by his superiors, peers, and subordinates.²

In September 1950, the U.S. Army established the Military Assistance Advisory Group - Indochina, in Saigon, to support anti-communist forces in Southeast Asia, and the first U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers arrived in 1957.³ U.S. advisors supported the RVN, or South Vietnam, for over two decades.⁴ Troop levels increased considerably in the early 1960s, and conventional U.S. combat battalions began arriving en masse in March 1965.⁵ Throughout the war, Special Forces units supported large-scale combat operations by conducting long-range reconnaissance, surveilling the movement of supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and advising and



Staff Sgt. Drew Dix continued to lead Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units and U.S. Navy Sea, Air, Land teams (SEALs) in the days following the Battle of Chau Phu, securing the allied victory. (Photo courtesy of retired U.S. Army Maj. Drew Dix)

training indigenous irregular troops.⁶

The war intensified throughout the 1960s, and U.S. troop levels rose to 480,000 by early-1968, as the American-led effort inflicted heavy losses on enemy forces.⁷ From November 1967 to January 1968, the North Vietnamese (NVN) sent 35,000 men, and 61,000 tons of equipment down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to resupply the communist-controlled National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF or Viet Cong [VC]). Subsequently, the VC and NVN launched their largest attack of the war, the Tet Offensive, on January 29, 1968.⁸ Over 85,000 VC and NVN participated in the first wave of the attack, invading almost 300 cities and most of the provincial capitals in South Vietnam.⁹

Early on the morning of January 31, an estimated two VC battalions moved into Chau Phu, capital of Chau Doc province, in the Vietnamese-Cambodian border region of the Mekong Delta. In Chau Doc, as in most of the Mekong Delta, allied

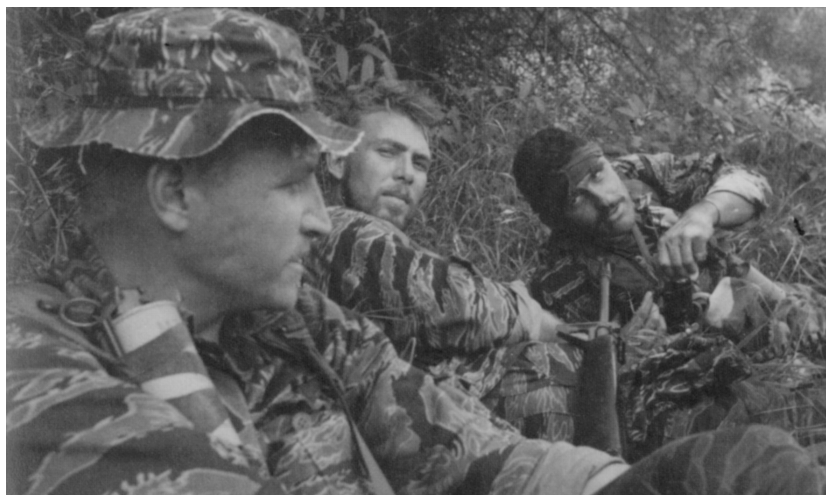
forces were largely unprepared for the assault.¹⁰ Surveillance conducted by Dix's PRUs, however, suggested an attack of some kind was being planned, allowing them to react quickly when it came.¹¹ Over the course of 36 hours, Dix coordinated and led RVN forces, as well as U.S. Navy SEALs who had been operating in the area. Together they recaptured strongholds around the city, and rescued U.S. and Vietnamese civilians who were hiding from or being held captive by the VC.¹²

The eyewitness statements submitted with Dix's Medal of Honor nomination provide insight into how his values shaped actions performed before, during, and after the battle that were key to retaking and holding Chau Phu, a city of 25,000 people.¹³ Dix arrived in Chau Phu in October 1967, and built a reputation among his leadership, the PRUs, and the SEALs as a highly competent Soldier and a strong *leader*. James N. Tull, a foreign service officer serving as the provincial senior advisor, noted that Dix, the lone American training and leading the PRUs, demonstrated "impressive *courage and leadership*" on "repeated missions involving great hardship and personal risk" in the months preceding the Tet Offensive.¹⁴

Further Reading:

[Staff Sgt. Drew Dix's Medal of Honor Citation](#)

During that time, Tull came "to accept [Dix's] personal courage and *professional skill* as something normal." The senior advisor noted that Dix unhesitatingly followed orders, and often took *initiative* in organizing and undertaking perilous missions. Tull trusted Dix's *tactical proficiency*, his courage and commitment, and his decision-making. His training and experience led to *professional competence*, and Dix's effective preparation



Staff Sgt. Dix earned the respect of his peers in the months and days leading up to the battle of Chau Phu. Dix (center) and two members of U.S. Navy SEAL Team Two rest after engaging the enemy during the reconnaissance operation they were conducting when the Viet Cong initially invaded the city. (Photo courtesy of retired U.S. Army Maj. Drew Dix)



This map depicts the Ho Chi Minh trail, a logistics route used by the North Vietnamese to send men and supplies into the southern part of the country. Once there, supplies and personnel were dispersed throughout South Vietnam. Guerrillas regularly operated on both sides of the nebulous border between Vietnam and Cambodia in the vicinity of Chau Phu, in the Mekong Delta. (Graphic provided by the U.S. Army Special Operations Command History Office)

of the PRUs gave him a highly-capable, experienced team that had no hesitation in joining him in combat.¹⁵

At the time of the initial VC assault on Chau Phu, Dix was leading an eight-man team from U.S. Navy SEAL Team Two, and 10 members of the PRU, on a reconnaissance patrol into enemy-controlled territory along the Bassac River.¹⁶ Ten hours into the mission, having already engaged enemy forces, Dix's team received a distress call informing them that the city was being overrun.¹⁷ Dix then led the reconnaissance team in SEALs' 32-foot fiberglass PBRs (patrol boats-river) back to Chau Phu where they landed under fire and fought their way back into the city.¹⁸

The PRUs, a well-trained force of 137 men, followed when Dix took the lead in expelling the insurgents from the city. They also provided crucial intelligence on the location of VC strongpoints, information that was critical since Dix and his team were not present during the enemy assault.¹⁹ Accounts of the battle suggest that conventional Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops put up little resistance to the initial attack. While a variety of factors contributed to their reluctance to engage the VC, it is noteworthy that Dix's presence, and his *leadership* of the PRUs, eventu-

ally motivated the hesitant ARVN to engage the enemy.²⁰ Over the course of two days, Dix repeatedly organized small teams of PRUs and SEALs to rescue civilians, assault VC strongholds, and recapture strategic areas that the ARVN could then hold.²¹

Dix's *leadership* was further demonstrated when, late in the battle, he maintained enough discipline and presence of mind to stop an assault on a friendly position. Faulty intelligence reports from the tactical operations center suggested that the ARVN Military Security Service Headquarters was occupied by VC forces; however, the South Vietnamese Army still held the building. In the midst of a firefight, Dix noticed a conspicuous absence of activity around the target building, and had his team hold their fire. Exposing himself to enemy fire from other areas, Dix reconnoitered the building, identified the friendly forces, and called off the assault.²²

Afterward, Tull noted that Dix's performance "on numerous occasions" in the weeks following the Battle at Chau Phu was "characterized by conspicuous gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty."²³ His proven *leadership, professionalism, competence, and tactical proficiency* resulted in Dix being chosen to lead additional SEAL-PRU reconnaissance missions essential to securing the victory. SEAL eyewitness accounts echo Tull's depiction of Dix's leadership on subsequent operations.²⁴ Ultimately, the U.S.-RVN counterattack and follow-on operations in Chau Doc, as in the rest of South Vietnam, repulsed the VC offensive by mid-1968.²⁵

The brevity required in a Medal of Honor citation may give the impression that an individual instinctively responded to the most challenging circumstances in the most honorable manner. While that is true, a Soldier's character is forged over time, and his or her habits shape their ability to confront difficult circumstances. U.S. and RVN forces accomplished a difficult, dangerous mission, and retook Chau Phu in 1968. They were able to do so largely because they were effectively trained by Staff Sgt. Drew D. Dix, and they were willing to do so because the respect they held for his *leadership* inspired them to organize a counterattack and drive the enemy from the city.²⁶ Dix's performance at Chau Phu was characteristic of a consummate professional who lived by the values later codified in the NCO creed. ■

Further Reading: [The NCO Creed](#)

Notes

1. Drew D. Dix enlisted in the U.S. Army in July 1962. After serving as an enlisted soldier, and NCO, he was commissioned on September 6, 1969, and retired as a major in 1982. For more information see: Drew Dennis Dix, Service Record. Copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Dix, Service Record.
2. The Creed was first introduced in NCO courses at Fort Benning, GA in 1974, and formalized in 1985, to explain the values expected of non-commissioned officers in the force today. Association of the United States Army, "History of the NCO Creed," <https://www.ausa.org/history-nco-creed>, (accessed December 18, 2018).
3. Ronald H. Spector, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam- Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1985), 115; Colonel Francis J. Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961–1971* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2004), 4.
4. Vietnam, then French colony of Indochina, was split in two (North and South) at the Geneva Conference in 1954. The Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed in the southern part of the territory after a referendum in 1955. Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2018).
5. Fredrik Logevall, "The Indochina wars and the Cold War," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crises and Détente* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 293-296; Jeffrey J. Clarke, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam-Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 85.
6. The 'Ho Chi Minh Trail,' was a well-developed logistical network that ran from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia, with offshoots into South Vietnam. The communist insurgency in South Vietnam was sustained by troops, trucks, weapons, ammunition, and other materiel that flowed along the trail. Erik B. Villard, *United States Army in Vietnam-Combat Operations: Staying the Course, October 1967 to September 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2017), 23.
7. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2007), 324; Villard, *Staying the Course*, 257-258.
8. Villard, *Staying the Course*, 259, 281; Clarke, *The Final Years*, 291.
9. Villard, *Staying the Course*, 260-261.
10. Villard, *Staying the Course*, 359.
11. Drew Dix, *The Rescue of River City* (Fairbanks, AK: Drew Dix Publishing, 2000), 12, 28.
12. Captain John Paul Fischer, eyewitness statement in SSG Drew D. Dix Medal of Honor Nomination, Dix Service Record, (hereafter Fischer Eyewitness Statement). See: Major General (MG) Charles J. Timmes, U.S. Senior Advisor, IV Corps, Vietnam to Department of the Army, Recommendation for Drew D. Dix Medal of Honor, Dix Service Record.
13. Dix, *The Rescue of River City*, 8.
14. LTC Bynum P. Westall's testimony corroborates the account given by James Tull. James N. Tull, Province Senior Advisor, Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, Chau Doc Province Office, eyewitness statement, Dix Service Record, (hereafter Tull Eyewitness Statement); LTC Bynum P. Westall Eyewitness Statement in SSG Drew D. Dix Medal of Honor Nomination, Dix Service Record, (hereafter Westall Eyewitness Statement); In his autobiography, Dix notes that he worked with the SEALs on a separate occasion "a few weeks" before the battle. Dix, *The Rescue of River City*, 25.
15. Tull Eyewitness Statement; Westall Eyewitness Statement. In the prologue to his autobiography, Dix notes that it was his training which prepared him for his time in Vietnam. Dix, *The Rescue of River City*, 3-4. Dix attended basic combat training, advanced individual training, and airborne school in 1962, and Jungle Warfare School in 1965. He was a Military Policeman (95B) when he attended the Special Forces Communications Noncommissioned Officer Course in 1967. Dix Service Record.
16. Dix, *The Rescue of River City*, 30.
17. Harry R. Humphries, U.S. Navy, SEAL Team 2 (No Rank Given), eyewitness statement in SSG Drew D. Dix Medal of Honor Nomination, Dix Service Record, hereafter Humphries Eyewitness Statement; HM1 Guy R. Nixon, U.S. Navy, SEAL Team 2, eyewitness statement in SSG Drew D. Dix Medal of Honor Nomination, Dix Service Record, (hereafter Nixon, Eyewitness Statement.)
18. Humphries Eyewitness Statement; Francis F. Thornton, Jr., U.S. Navy, Asst. Seal Advisor (No Rank Given) eyewitness statement in SSG Drew D. Dix Medal of Honor Nomination, Dix Service Record, (hereafter Thornton, Eyewitness Statement); Dix, *The Rescue of River City*, 240.
19. Fischer Eyewitness Statement; Dix, *The Rescue of River City*, 23.
20. Humphries Eyewitness Statement.
21. Humphries Eyewitness Statement; Thornton Eyewitness Statement; Nixon Eyewitness Statement.
22. Thornton Eyewitness Statement.
23. Tull Eyewitness Statement.
24. Humphries Eyewitness Statement.
25. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 324, 366-367.
26. Westall was direct in attributing victory to Dix's actions. He wrote, "I believe that the inspired actions of Dix, supported by the SEALs and the PRUs, were the deciding factors in saving the Provincial Capital of Chau Doc." Westall Eyewitness Statement.

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