

This Month in NCO History: Jan. 30, 1944 — Riding a Tank to Victory at Bougainville

By Pablo Villa, NCO Journal

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Staff Sgt. Jesse Ray Drowley Medal of Honor Recipient

When Staff Sgt. Jesse Ray Drowley arrived alone at an American camp on the Solomon Islands with a gaping wound in his chest, a missing eye and a shredded uniform, a junior officer threatened to court-martial him for abandoning his defense post. Instead, Drowley was put on the path to history.

On Jan. 30, 1944, Drowley was a rifle squad leader with B Company, 132nd Infantry Regiment, Americal Division, when he displayed the bravery that would earn him the Medal of Honor.

The Americal Division arrived on Bougainville on Dec. 25, 1943, as part of the Solomon Islands and New Guinea campaigns. The division was unique in World War II as it carried a name and not a numerical designation. It got its name from "American, New Caledonia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Caledonia)," the South Pacific island on which the unit was provisionally formed for defense in May 1942. Though officially known later as the 23rd Infantry Division, the Americal name remained.

A month after the unit's arrival, Drowley was assigned a defensive role with his company as a neighboring company launched an attack against Japanese defensive positions. The staff sergeant witnessed three wounded Soldiers from the neighboring unit collapse. Intense enemy fire prevented their rescue. That's when Drowley made a fateful decision.

According to his Medal of Honor citation, Drowley "fearlessly rushed forward to carry the wounded" one-by-one to cover. After moving two of the men to safety amid a hail of gunfire, Drowley discovered an enemy pillbox that American assault tanks had missed. The enemy fighters within were "inflicting heavy casualties upon the attacking force and ... a chief obstacle to the success of the advance."

The dire situation didn't deter him. Drowley directed another Soldier to complete the rescue of the third wounded Soldier. Meanwhile, he darted out across open terrain to one of the American tanks. Drowley climbed the turret and signaled the crew. He exchanged his weapon for a submachine gun and rode the deck of the tank while firing toward the pillbox with tracer fire. As the tank ambled closer to the enemy position, Drowley received a severe wound to the chest. He refused to leave his position for medical treatment, instead continuing to direct the tank's driver to the pillbox. He was shot again, losing his left eye and was knocked to the ground.

But Drowley remained undaunted. Despite his injuries, he continued to walk alongside the tank until it was able to open fire on the enemy pillbox.

But Drowley remained unshaken. Despite his injuries, he continued to train alongside the team until it was able to open fire on the enemy position and destroy it. In the process, American forces discovered another pillbox behind the first and destroyed it as well. With his mission finally completed, Drowley returned to camp for medical treatment. When he reached the safety of the American outpost, his platoon leader admonished him for leaving his post. But the reason he left was quickly learned, and he was eventually recommended for the nation's highest military honor.

Drowley was awarded the Medal of Honor on Sept. 6, 1944. After receiving the accolade, he was offered a commission and a chance to speak at war rallies, but Drowley declined and eventually left the service. He lived a quiet life for the rest of his years. In 1991, he told *The Spokesman Review* of Spokane, Washington, that he shied away from the title of hero.

"People say, 'What did you do to get the Medal of Honor?' You were only doing your job," Drowley said. "You're fearless, all right. You're so damned scared you're past fearless. But you're going to get killed if you don't do anything."

Along with the Medal of Honor, Drowley was also awarded the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Clusters and two Bronze Stars. He was the first American Soldier to be awarded the medal and the division's lone recipient for action in World War II. While recovering from his wounds at a hospital in Spokane, he met his future wife, Kathleen McAvoy. He returned to Washington after the war from his native St. Charles, Michigan. He operated a service station before working as a civilian employee at Fairchild Air Force Base. He retired in 1980.

Drowley died May 20, 1996. He was 76. He was buried at Fairmount Memorial Park in Spokane.