

Fire Watch: Col. Paris D. Davis and His Decades-Long Wait for the Medal of Honor

Drew F. Lawrence

Nearly 60 years ago, now-retired Colonel Paris Davis did something remarkable. He was a Green Beret, one of the first Black officers to join the elite [Special Forces](#). And on June 18, 1965 as dawn was breaking over the rice paddies of Binh Dinh province Vietnam, Davis, his Special Forces team, and an inexperienced company of South Vietnamese soldiers started taking heavy machine-gun fire from Viet Cong fighters -- hundreds of fighters.

During a 19-hour battle, Davis saved three Americans under his command, disobeying two direct orders from a superior officer to do so, crawling through mud and human waste to rescue them. He killed more than a dozen enemies using all manner of weapons, including engaging in hand-to-hand combat. He was wounded at least eight times in the process, and was the last American to step off the battlefield that day.

How could a soldier like Davis who exhibited that type of heroism suffer the fate of having the paperwork for the nation's highest military honor lost -- and not just once, but twice?

The answer, according to historians, his family and friends is clear -- racism. Davis, a Black officer leading an elite force who had disobeyed a superior during the height of the Civil Rights movement could well have been a symbol for those striving for equality in that era.

[Army](#) officials were hesitant to blame discrimination, but acknowledged Davis had waited far too long, declaring their admiration for the acts of courage he had performed in 1965.

Join host Drew F. Lawrence as he explores Davis' legacy through the eyes of his friends, family and of course, the retired Green Beret himself.

Main Topics

- Drew F. Lawrence interviews Col. (ret.) Paris D. Davis, [Medal of Honor](#) Recipient -- his family, friends, and Army officials.
- Drew F. Lawrence discusses Col. (ret.) Davis' story with military historian Neil Thorne. Thorne reproduced Davis' Medal of Honor paperwork, helping push for the retired Green Beret's honor at the White House last week.
- Co-host Rebecca Kheel and Military.com's Army reporter Steve Beynon discuss the Army's new brand: Be All You Can Be

Additional Resources

- [Black Special Forces Veteran Close to Being Awarded Medal of Honor After Decades of Roadblocks](#)
- [Black Special Forces Officer to Receive Medal of Honor After Decades of Delays](#)
- [Paris Davis, Black Green Beret in Vietnam, Finally Awarded Medal of Honor at White House](#)

Listen, rate, and subscribe!

[Spotify](#)

[Apple Podcasts](#)

[Google Podcasts](#)

Transcript:

SPEAKERS

President Joe Biden, Ron Deis, Neil Thorne, Steve Beynon, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Weimer, Drew Lawrence, Regan Hopper, Phil Donahue, Maj. Gen. Patrick Roberson, Col. Paris Davis, Rebecca Kheel

Drew Lawrence

Knowing what you know today, what would you go back and tell then-Captain Paris Davis on June 18 1965.

Col. Paris Davis

Make sure you are wearing your boots and you have some food. And you and you do what you did. Paris Davis.

Drew Lawrence

Nearly 60 years ago, now-retired Colonel Paris Davis did something remarkable. He was a Green Beret, one of the first Black officers to join the elite Special Forces. And on June 18, 1965 as dawn was breaking over the rice paddies of Binh Dinh province Vietnam, Davis, his Special Forces team, and an inexperienced company of South Vietnamese soldiers started taking heavy machine gun fire from Viet Cong fighters -- hundreds of fighters. During a 19-hour battle, Davis saved three Americans under his command, disobeying two direct orders from a superior officer to do so, crawling through mud and human waste to rescue them. He killed more than a dozen enemies using all manner of weapons, including engaging in hand-to-hand combat. He was wounded at least eight times in the process, and was the last American to step off the battlefield that day.

Phil Donahue

What did you say when the [Air Force](#) colonel from the airplane ordered you out of the area?

Col. Paris Davis

Well, I told him, 'Sir, I'm just not going to leave. I still have an American out there.'

Phil Donahue

And what did he say?

Col. Paris Davis

He told me to move out. And I just disobeyed the order.

Drew Lawrence

That was Davis on the Phil Donahue Show in 1969, explaining the attack -- and the disobeyed order -- that would eventually lead him to earn the Medal of Honor last week. He would only earn that honor after a decades-long push from supporters and fellow service members who questioned how the Army lost Davis' Medal of Honor paperwork. How could a soldier like Davis who exhibited that type of heroism suffer the fate

of having the paperwork for the nation's highest military honor lost -- and not just once, but twice? The answer, according to historians, his family and friends is clear -- racism. Davis, a Black officer leading an elite force who had disobeyed a superior during the height of the Civil Rights movement could well have been a symbol for those striving for equality in that era. Army officials were hesitant to blame discrimination, but acknowledged Davis had waited far too long, declaring their admiration for the acts of courage he had performed in 1965. Last week, on the eve of his Medal of Honor ceremony, I interviewed those supporters, Army officials, and Davis himself about his actions and the long push for the 84 year-old to finally get his dues.

For Military.com, my name is Drew Lawrence -- it is March 10th, this is Fire Watch and join me as we explore the fight and the legacy of Colonel Paris Davis.

Last Thursday, the day before President Joe Biden draped the Medal of Honor around retired Colonel Paris Davis' neck in a White House ceremony the Army put on a media day in a bustling hotel near the Pentagon.

Army officials, teammates Davis served with, members of his family, and of course, Davis himself were there. There was a collective exhale among the attendees -- Davis was finally getting this honor after 57 years of supporters fighting to do so. Davis and those supporters numbered in the dozens. Regan Hopper, his daughter calls them the team and all of them recounted the perils the young Captain faced in 1965. Davis ran into peppering gunfire and mortar attacks to save Master Sgt. Billy Waugh, Staff Sgt. David Morgan, and Spc. Robert Brown, who -- unbeknownst to Davis at the time -- was lying face up in a rice paddy with a head injury alive. Regan Hopper said he didn't discuss that day in the household while she was growing up, only opening up about it as the push to get him the honor reached a fever pitch.

Regan Hopper

When we talk about it, he doesn't really like to be called a hero. He wants to be called a soldier. When I heard him talk about it more recently, he sort of gets a little bit distant because he's remembering that he couldn't bring everyone home, he lost half his team that day...he was giving us these just graphic details of how he had to, you know, get his arms underneath and the blood, just pouring and making the body slippery. And in just having to re- you know, reinforce his grip with bullets flying...is heart wrenching for me. I didn't even really want to know that sight of dad. To really understand what your father's eyes have seen is scary and terrifying.

Drew Lawrence

Beneath the reverence and ultimately the relief, was a solemn recognition of the struggle that it had taken for Davis to get there -- starting with the refused order which was given by a superior officer flying in a helicopter high above the battlefield.

Ron Deis

Well you know, I was the junior member on the special forces team. I was 22 years old. That was my first [deployment](#). So I probably did appreciate the gravity of having him do something like that as much as some of the other career soldiers...

Drew Lawrence

This is Ron Deis, the youngest surviving member of Davis' Special Forces Team explaining an encounter he had with one of the three men Davis saved on that June 1965 day.

Ron Deis

But what I was more engaged with that evening is one of the members on the team that was on the ground

with Captain Davis was a gentleman named David Morgan, David Morgan. That evening, when he got back in camp, he had leeches all over his body from being pinned down in the rice paddy. And, and how we took leeches off back then we'd light a cigarette and then we would burn the head of the leech and then he would let go when I took...I think I took 17 leeches off of Sergeant Morgan's back that night. But Sergeant Morgan said to me, when he was telling me about what went on that day out in the field. He said, I think Captain Davis deserves a medal of honor for what he did today. And that really resonated with me, I never forgot it in all these years.

Drew Lawrence

It sounds like you kind of believed it, then right that he deserved the Medal of Honor.

Ron Deis

I did.

Drew Lawrence

Why, in your mind, did it take so long for this day to happen?

Ron Deis

I just imagined what would happen. If paperwork for the Medal of Honor ended up on my desk. It would be almost an honor to process that and the only conclusion that I can come to -- and that he was nominated twice -- the only conclusion I can come to is that he was Black.

Drew Lawrence

That was the answer that members of Davis' team gave me that day. Regan Hopper, unsure of whether to point the blame at the Army overall -- an organization that she and her father love.

Regan Hopper

I don't think the collective body would have ever stood for this. I think it was a few cowards that did this horrible, cruel deed that kept the world from knowing who my dad is, the American hero that he is, in the truest sense of the word. And we could have used another hero, the African American community could have used another hero to look up to to help inspire us to look for those opportunities, and to look for that purpose. And we missed out.

Drew Lawrence

I asked the man himself about this. The refusal of the order and what that meant during the civil rights movement. And I went back to his 1969 interview with Phil Donahue to do so. I want to talk a little bit about the Phil Donahue interview again, because in 1969, he asked you, you're a black man who was in command position of an all white outfit.

Phil Donahue

And you risked your life and your career when you refused to leave your men behind. That could have been the ballgame couldn't. Do you understand why I would raise that point? Do you mind that I raised the point.

Col. Paris Davis

Well, not really, because it's, it's something that you're, you're aware of all the time, you know, black, white,

the race problem, domestic issues. But I think one of the good things about a war or any type of crisis, like Vietnam is the fact that people that are committed to it, jail, they come together, there's no race their hell in the dark. Brown is just as Black or White is anyone else so their- bodies are human beings that were a kin. Not ethically, but by virtue of being American citizens, being Americans.

Drew Lawrence

So I want to ask you that same question. Now, over 50 years later. And I'll add, if that could have been the ballgame. Why did you do it? And would you have done anything differently?

Col. Paris Davis

Two things really stand out. Number one, the reaction to the questions or the statements that were being made to me, is what I call stacked helicopters. Number one, the person who was telling me, giving me all these orders was up here, and I'm down over here. And so he had the prerogative to tell me to leave the man right there -- in a helicopter -- to pick him up. I said that's not going to work. And when I insisted that I wasn't going to leave, you know, I can remember him saying, very succinctly, 'I wish I was down there.' And I can remember saying to myself, there's a lot of room down here. He never came down. And although I was reprimanded, it may have kept me from the general officer list. But that's it. And so I just let it go. And you can't hold on to stuff like that. If you don't let it go it'll just tie you in knots.

Drew Lawrence

Would you have done anything differently?

Col. Paris Davis

Kicked his ass if he came down there...

Drew Lawrence

After the funny quip, though Davis got serious after I asked him what took so long.

Col. Paris Davis

Yesterday and I got a call from a general -- didn't give his name...And he has the same question...he said it was just racism. This is a general talking. Didn't get his name. He said he just wanted to call because he had heard so much about that. And he says, 'God dammit, if something lasts that long, and no one takes a liking to giving an answer or reason -- and you're black -- I think racism.' Didn't give me his name, he just hung up. He just and that's probably my answer too. As I said before, one of the great things about being Paris Davis, there are other times when other people speak for you, just like that general did yesterday.

Drew Lawrence

Coming up, I speak with Neil Thorne, an Army veteran and volunteer military historian who painstakingly recreated Colonel Davis' Medal of Honor paperwork -- an act that finally helped push the Pentagon and the White House to recognize the retired Green Beret and his heroism last week. He's going to put Davis' story in the context of the times, plus we'll here from current Army officials about his story too. Take a listen. All right, Neil, thanks for joining us here on Fire Watch. I wanted to just start with how long you've been doing this: helping veterans get the awards that they deserve. And you talked about teams, how many people help you work on these awards.

Neil Thorne

Really, each one is award-specific. But when it comes to a team, it's an independent, it's each individual award, and what that award needs. So for example, all the eyewitnesses, I would call team members, because they are involved. And they're required part of the packet. So they're involved in creating an eyewitness statements and getting them notarized, which is a key requirement. The commander's those that still exist, they're a key component of the team. Because they have to sign on the DA Form 638, which is a nomination for award for the packet. And then in the case of some of these more recent ones to where we needed to bring out not just we needed to create the packet plus bring out general public awareness on it. So we've brought on PR people, lawyers, Jim Moriarty, excellent lawyer, plus, he comes with an entire team of graphics folks, database folks, all those that that fill in all those needs for a major effort like this.

Drew Lawrence

Obviously, this is a lot of work, right? It's a lot of work, you put in a lot of work this team puts in, why do it? Why is it important?

Neil Thorne

It's each each one of these medals and awards. Every single one that down to an article is capturing a piece of US history. And it's locking that piece of history and through its narratives and citations into something that is permanent. It's taken the recognition of valor that otherwise would not be recognized and never remembered, and preserving it into perpetuity.

Drew Lawrence

And what was it about Colonel Paris Davis' case that made you take it up, or made it leap out to you, as you were going through all these awards.

Neil Thorne

The first thing when they when the folks that were working on it, before me, they contacted me because they'd heard some of the work I was doing. And at first I was agreed to take a look and advise on it. And one of the first things you do with any medal or award effort, is you pull all of the relevant paperwork. So you get the veteran to pull all of their military service records. Plus, in the case of a Medal of Honor DSC, where the National Archives may have those records in their files before that. And what really set off alarms and whistles to me that something wasn't right, was when I pulled Colonel Davis' Medal of Honor packet from the National Archives and it was not a Medal of Honor packet at all. What it was and what they call, his Medal of Honor packet was a 1969 hearing into his medals and awards. And in that hearing, it contained official testimony from his commander, Billy Cole, at the time back in '65 stating that he had prepared a Medal of Honor packet for Colonel Davis. And from there, that would go in copies going out it would have gone to Saigon...went to the Pentagon and it would just spread out and the number of copies at that point. There was nothing. There was nothing other than that hearing. We had National Archives searching for it. We had the Army searching for it. I was searching for it. Jim Moriarty was looking for it. It didn't exist, which well, so this is this is his recreated Medal of Honor packet -- it's huge -- and the original one had been roughly the same size. It's not something that just gets lost. And that 1969 hearing concluded with a statement that the original 65 had been lost or destroyed. A new substantive packet can be created. That was never done. It was either never done or attempted and draft again.

Drew Lawrence

That hearing in 1969, that was a result of an investigation from the first packet that was lost in 1965. Right?

Neil Thorne

Correct.

Drew Lawrence

And so it was then submitted again in 1969.

Neil Thorne

And it was ordered to be created and submitted. Now, whether those orders were carried out, we found no evidence of it either being carried out, because there was nothing after that other than the order to redo it.

Drew Lawrence

So it was, quote, unquote, lost twice. How likely is that to happen with Medal of Honor paperwork?

Neil Thorne

Not likely, because it's a big deal. When it hits that clerk's desk. It's a big deal, and it's a big packet, so that it would be lost is highly unlikely. More likely, it was trashed.

Drew Lawrence

Davis and his supporters believe that the paperwork was lost due to discrimination at varying scales between each of them. The week before I spoke to Thorne, I asked Army leaders -- Major General Patrick Roberson, and Command Sergeant Major Michael Weimer -- whether discrimination played a role in Davis not getting the Medal of Honor sooner.

Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Weimer

You just have to acknowledge our history. I mean, it was a real thing is there, which is why I think his story is so much more unique.

Drew Lawrence

That's Command Sgt. Major Weimer, he's the senior enlisted leader for the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and the incoming Sergeant Major of the Army. After he speaks, you'll hear Maj. Gen. Roberson, the deputy commanding general of Army SOCOM. Like Davis, both are [Green Berets](#).

Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Weimer

...History over time, and you can literally walk the redemptive timeline on how...when we changed, when we evolved when we integrated, and so so I'm proud of where we've come. But I absolutely acknowledge where we came from.

Drew Lawrence

Is the only trying to find out why his Medal of Honor recommendation was not processed or lost or whatever happened to it twice.

Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Weimer

Honestly, I don't know exactly how they're addressing that.

Maj. Gen. Patrick Roberson

Yeah, I don't know. I think the Army is very focused on the fact that, hey, he's getting this, let's celebrated it.

Drew Lawrence

I asked Thorne about what the Army leaders said about whether racism played a role.

Drew Lawrence

I'm wondering what what do you think, what is your assessment?

Neil Thorne

I think it played a part. You look at the times: it was 1964. We just had the Civil Rights Act through 1965, you had Selma occurring. You had all sorts of tensions, racial tensions at that time. And the military is a sub segment of the greater population. There is going to be spill over animosity in there. And from what I've talked to with some of the soldiers of that time period, they acknowledge that. But is there anything in the records that say, 'Hey, it was trashed at not trying because he was black?' No, no, there isn't a smoking gun. But you just have to look at the context of when that was put in. And being one of the first African American Special Forces officers, I do know that there was animosity against him. But the people who served directly with him, officers and enlisted under him, describe him to a tee, every one I've asked. And they said he's the best commander they ever served under. But then on the outside of that the story gets a little bit different... minorities have served our nation for a long, long time, since the beginning. And I think because of the racial disparities that we've seen in our history, coupled with the service and the valor, many of those racial groups, because not all of them started off as inquiries into African American veterans, but also others and also of various religious backgrounds, too. So that it's a slow burn. I think that's a good description, because it's been a long time that we as a melting pot have been fighting together, and yet, not treating everyone the same.

Drew Lawrence

I also think it's important to point out that the president, President Joe Biden himself, recognized that discrimination played a factor in Davis generally being in the Special Forces

President Joe Biden

The Green Berets, like our country, then weren't free from discrimination either. People pulled Paris aside to warn him, 'Are you sure you want to join? There aren't a lot of people like you look like you in this outfit.' Well remember, this was only 14 years after President Truman desegregated our military. Only 14 years later. Paris didn't listen to them. And thank God he didn't...

Neil Thorne

Well, I knew I knew he was among the first African American Special Forces officer just from the time that he was commissioned and went in. So it's, it's there, it existed. And I'm hoping that cases like this can help bring people together. So it doesn't happen again.

Drew Lawrence

And all of this said, the event at the White House was obviously a special one with Colonel Davis in his pink and greens, and an address from the President. What did that day, which was a culmination of nearly 60 years mean for you? And for Davis, and his family and the dozens of supporters who helped make it happen?

Neil Thorne

I think it was, I think it was very rough on Colonel Davis. Any of these cases are rough on the recipient, because it's an emotional roller coaster the entire time you're working on it, you'll get to one goal line, such as Secretary of the Army or Secretary of Defense, and all the little sub branches that are in there that are reviewing these packets. And you think you're really there only to get kicked back again. Oh, it was it was a final, the final justification that that even though we knew all along that that, you know, he deserved the Medal of Honor, it was it was that final acknowledgement by the US government that he did too. And that was absolutely incredible. Everybody, all the all the Army and all of the troops that were there supporting him were absolutely incredible. You know, they acknowledged the issues of the past, but also it gives hope for the future. A lot of hope in the future I think.

Drew Lawrence

Stick around because up next is our reporter roundtable, with my co-host Rebecca Kheel and Army reporter Steve Beynon who will help us explain the Army's newest ... well, not so new... [recruiting](#) slogan. Be All You Can Be.

Rebecca Kheel

Hi everyone my name is Rebecca Kheel, co-host of Fire Watch and congressional reporter for Military.com. Welcome to our reporter roundtable. Here's what you may have missed since our last episode: An extension of the Korean War Memorial in Washington D.C. etched thousands of errors permanently in stone. Now, the Korean War Veterans Memorial Wall of Remembrance -- a \$22 million project unveiled last summer -- is getting attention from Congress where bipartisan lawmakers are calling on the Pentagon to address why spelling mistakes for names of those who died in the conflict made it to the final blueprints, let alone the National Mall. Veterans and service members who helped with the evacuation of Afghanistan in August 2021 testified to Congress in harrowing detail this week about the horrors and heartbreak they experienced. The House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing was the first in what is expected to be a series of hearings in the GOP-led panel's probe into the messy exit from America's longest war. [Space Force](#) Guardians can expect the service to roll out a new fitness pilot plan as soon as next month. The service previously promised to unveil a new holistic wellness program last year, which included wearing fitness trackers like Apple Watches or Fitbits to track exercise and sleep. Now the service might see some of these things tested out. As always, joining me is my co-host Drew Lawrence. And with us today is Military.com's Army reporter Steve Beynon. Welcome, thanks for being here.

Drew Lawrence

Steve, I hear you come with good news: the Army is finally letting us Be All We Can Be. This is the services' new slogan unveiled this week but it's a recycle from decades ago -- why did it change and can you explain where exactly this motto came from?

Steve Beynon

Yeah, I mean what's what's old is new again, the Army has really been struggling with a coherent message for at least a decade. But the new ad goes back to be all you can be. It was a slogan used in the 80s and 90s. At the Army says all its marketing research just kept coming back to that just being the best it's ever...the best thing it's ever done, and they couldn't come up with anything better. It's sort of how the Army recently went back to World War II [uniforms](#) for their dress uniform. They're just, you know, their perspective. Sometimes the old stuff just simply works. And this new ad focuses on combat being in the field. Folks I talked to sort of behind the scenes on making this stuff. You know, they said the idea of pitching those sexy technical jobs sounded cool, at the time a few years ago, but the Army simply they can't compete with the IT sector or really any civilian job outside of entry level work. So the Army's just going back to what it can offer. It's a place that is objective, objectively unique. So it's sort of leaning into its strengths, soldiers in

the field, guns, camouflage, that's something that the IT sector can't get somebody.

Rebecca Kheel

Steve it sounds like, you know, as you talked about this new branding, that you're alluding to recruiting and the fact that the Army failed to make its goal last year, it fell short about 15,000 soldiers. There's some evidence it's on the upswing now. But I want to ask, is this campaign gonna work?

Steve Beynon

Yeah. So let's just pretend this is the greatest campaign the army has ever done. And every Gen Z person you show loves it, and it's going to go to this recruiting station magically right after saying it. Let's just pretend that's the scenario, right? The problem is, how do you actually reach Gen Z? No one is no 17, 18, 19 year old is going to the Army's YouTube page. They're not watching TV. The Army does do advertising on streaming services like Hulu and Peacock. They do do some advertising on Instagram. But the Army can't use Tik Tok. Tik Tok can't be used by government entities because of you know, it's a Chinese company and they're concerned about all the data collection Tik Tok does do on people's phones. But that is where Gen Z is added. The Tik Tok has 50 to 80 million active users in the US and not using Tik Tok for advertising and trying to reach that younger audience is probably equivalent to not doing television commercials in the 90s.

Drew Lawrence

Well, Steve, I believe that you can be all you can be.

Steve Beynon

Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, yeah, we can do that. Now. The Army has given us all permission to be all be all we can be.

Rebecca Kheel

Okay, well, I will guess I will head to my nearest army recruiting station. Thank you so much for joining us, Steve. And thanks to our audience, as always for tuning in. Be sure to tune in next time.

Drew Lawrence

Thank you so much for listening to this special episode of Fire Watch. Thank you to our guests, Neil Thorne, Col. Paris Davis, his family, Army officials and his other supporters. Thanks also to my co-host, Rebecca Kheel and Army reporter Steve Beynon. Credit to executive producers Zachary Fryer-Biggs and Amy Bushatz. If you liked this episode and want to let us know, give us a rating -- wherever you get your podcasts. And as always, thanks for listening.

Story Continues

© Copyright 2024 Military.com. All rights reserved. This article may not be republished, rebroadcast, rewritten or otherwise distributed without written permission. To reprint or license this article or any content from Military.com, please submit your request [here](#).