The Real Hal Moore

Interview of Lt. General Harold G. Moore by William F. Jasper

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Lt. General Harold G. Moore, the real-life protagonist portrayed by Mel Gibson in We Were Soldiers, talks with THE NEW AMERICAN about the movie, his book, and Vietnam.

Paramount Pictures
Looking back: As a lieutenant colonel, Harold Moore heroically led American troops to victory in the first major battle of the Vietnam War al Landing Zone X-Ray in the la Drang Valley, 1965.

Lt. General Harold G. Moore (Ret.) graduated from West Point in 1945, commanded two infantry companies in the Korean War, was a battalion and brigade commander in Vietnam, and later commanded the 7th Infantry Division in Korea. A master parachutist and Army aviator, he helped develop and launch the concept of the Air Cavalry in Vietnam. General Moore co-authored with Joe Galloway the best-seller, We Were Soldiers Once … and Young (now a major motion picture), the dramatic and moving account of the 7th Cavalry's epic action in the la Drang Valley in 1965, one of the Vietnam War's bloodiest battles. He was interviewed by William F. Jasper, senior editor of THE NEW AMERICAN.

TNA: First of all, General Moore, allow me to compliment you on a stunning and stirring achievement; your book provides an unflinching look at the horrors and heroism of war, a moving tribute to those who gave their all. Plus, it offers insights and revelations concerning the political decisions that caused our debacle in Vietnam, something that is desperately needed to counter the liberal-left revisionism that has dominated all media and academic commentary on the Vietnam War for more than three decades. It is one of the best I've read.

Moore: Thank you.

TNA: I understand that you were a consultant to the film. Did you go on location for the actual filming?

Moore: Actually my wife and I visited the sets at Fort Benning, Georgia, three or four times. And then we visited Fort Hunter Liggett in California, where the la Drang battles were recreated, twice, for three or four days each time. We probably viewed maybe a total of 4 or 5 percent of the total viewing. We were not there to be the boss or to offer running critiques. I was a consultant, which means that whenever they asked a question of me I answered it to the best of my ability. If I saw something that was grossly wrong, I would respectfully inform the director. Otherwise, I didn't look over his shoulder; nobody was looking over my shoulder during the fighting in the la Drang Valley.

TNA: Did you have input on the movie script?

Moore: Actually, I saw about five scripts, starting in 1995, when Randy Wallace got serious about wanting to do the movie. He sent me the screenplays and I marked them up and they got progressively better. But it really got good after Randall went to Ranger School for two weeks at Fort Benning and learned about Army culture, history, heritage, tradition, dos and don'ts. He's the only guy that I know of over the age of 50 who ever went through two weeks of Army Ranger School, which is the toughest course in the Army.

TNA: Early in your book you point out that because of political decisions, you went into battle at Landing Zone X-Ray in the la Drang Valley greatly under-strength. How much did this contribute to your disadvantage in battle and, ultimately, to the casualties you suffered?

Moore: Significantly. Lyndon Johnson wanted to get elected in his own right and he didn't want anything to happen that would sour the country on him. He was really a dove in hawk's clothing. Before we went to Vietnam, he ordered that no man with 60 days or less service [remaining] could be shipped out [to Vietnam]. And he didn't freeze discharges or enlistments, like President Bush did in the Gulf War. And so we went in under-

strength. Then, after a month in Vietnam, I began to have casualties from malaria, other tropical diseases, several guys got wounded. Fortunately, I had great non-commissioned officers, most of whom were regular army, which means they weren't up for discharge. And I did get a crop of young lieutenants before we went to Vietnam, so we had to train them up real fast, and the way you do that is tell them to listen to what their platoon sergeant tells them and keep their mouths shut unless they have a question. But the end fact is that when you get into battle with an under-strength unit, what happens is the non-commissioned officers unconsciously begin taking over and performing subordinate roles, like being a rifleman or a radio technician, instead of leading. The result is that I lost a lot of non-commissioned officers in LZ X-Ray because of that. Then I had 2nd lieutenants who took on the subordinate role of NCOs, and I lost a lot of lieutenants. So the impact is that it moves downstream when you go in under-strength. Somebody's got to do these jobs and it wound up being those NCOs and 2nd lieutenants.

TNA: Was this even more of a factor at Landing Zone Albany, where your sister battalion was decimated a couple days later? They had an even higher ratio of new recruits and replacements didn't they?

Moore: Yes. I was not in that battle, but from what I've read and heard, that's precisely what happened there as well. But don't get the idea that my battalion was a completely new battalion. I probably had 75-80 percent of the men I trained, which is significant enough that the unit personality and mentality that I trained into those guys — those great troopers — for 14 months was ingrained into them. And General Kinnard, the Division Commander, later told me in writing to the effect that "although I had many good battalions, I'm glad it was yours that ran into that rat's nest, because I don't know if any other could have survived." So, what I want to tell you is that we were a good group of men.

TNA: You recount the bitter anger and frustration that you and others in the military felt concerning the decisions in Washington to allow the Communist forces to have safe sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia from which to attack your positions and the gag orders that were placed on you not to mention these policies to the press or the public. As a result, much of the American public didn't know — and still doesn't know — that these sanctuaries were a fact and played a crucial role in the war's final outcome.

Moore: Well, those sanctuaries sure as hell were there. The fact is that Johnson would not let us follow the defeated enemy to his death or surrender in Cambodia; so he was allowed to regroup, reinforce, resupply, and redeploy. The fact is that we officers were forbidden to tell a reporter that, yes, we were fighting North Vietnamese, which we did anyhow, because it was the truth. The fact is that the enemy had sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, southern North Vietnam and northern South Vietnam. And by handing him these sanctuaries, Lyndon Johnson handed the enemy the tactical and strategic initiative. They could come out of those safe areas at their time and pleasure, take us on, and then go back into those sanctuaries to take care of their wounded, regroup, and get re-equipped. We were denied the tactical and strategic initiative by Lyndon Johnson. The lies and deception of the Johnson administration were so morally wrong, and the enormity of it all is just finally coming out.

TNA: A revealing account that you describe in the book concerns a briefing by your operations officer at LZ X-Ray, Matt Dillon, which you attended with General Westmoreland. When Captain Dillon mentioned that among the enemy dead they had found the body of what appeared to be a Red Chinese officer, Westmoreland blew up and insisted: "You will never mention anything about Chinese soldiers in Vietnam again!"

Moore: If you go to the library and pull up the New York Times for November 17, 1965, you will find on the front page a piece by Charles Mohr, in which he describes a briefing in Saigon where an American briefing officer told the press that one of these Chinese advisors had been captured in South Vietnam in this Pleiku campaign of 1965, and I believe they brought out a North Vietnamese prisoner of war who admitted that in front of the news media. And it's my suspicion that what happened after the article came out in the Times is that the White House sent what we call a "back channel" message to Westmoreland in Saigon telling him very sternly never to trot out any Chinese or mention their involvement. Johnson repeatedly said "we want no wider war." Remember that? So

this enraged him.

TNA: But you de facto already had a wider war: Russia and China were arming, supplying, training, and advising the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong, and both NVA and VC were operating out of Laos and Cambodia. So the war was already wider, the U.S. was just pretending otherwise.

Moore: Of course, that was part of [Johnson's] lies, part of the deception. Captain Dillon was just telling the truth, giving a briefing as he was supposed to. I think when Gen. Westmoreland jumped all over him, he was still smarting from the back channel from Washington. I've been back to Vietnam seven times in the last 11 years. I think it is pretty well known now that the Chinese advisors were on the North Vietnamese air fields instructing pilots, instructing anti-aircraft units that brought down so many of our bomber pilots. They had to be there; they had to teach them how to operate and shoot those surface-to-air missiles, which were as long as a telephone pole. They had to do all of that. I think there were probably also Russian advisors there. When I went to Hanoi in 1990, there were signs all over the place in Cyrillic — Russian. For clothing, books, directions, etc. And when I went back there a year later all those Cyrillic signs were gone. Which is when Hanoi was putting on the big push for normalizing relations with the U.S.

TNA: Your book mentions that when you interviewed General Giap, Vietnam's top general during the war, he denied there had ever been any Chinese advisors or presence in North Vietnam.

Moore: Well, those people lie all the time; that's normal for them. They are masters of duplicity. It's still a Communist country. They're scared to death of capitalism, of entrepreneurism. The Communist leaders still refer to the United States as the enemy. The Communist old guard knows that the younger generation — many of whom have been educated in the U.S. and Europe — are attracted to the freedom and prosperity of the West.

TNA: What was it like to sit across the table and interview General Giap, General An, and General Phuong in North Vietnam?

Moore: It was interesting, a uniquely interesting experience. I don't think many general officers of the U.S. Army have had that experience. I met several times in 1991 and 1993 with General An, who was my adversary in the Ia Drang Valley. We were trying to kill each other in 1965. We were both soldiers following the orders of the politicians. We brought our maps and our log books and openly discussed what had happened, the tactics and responses of both sides. It was interesting, and we became friends.

TNA: In your book, you record many instances of the North Vietnamese going through the battlefield executing the American wounded. From what I've read and from the many veterans I've interviewed, this was fairly standard practice by both the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army throughout the war. Was that their doctrine?

Moore: I questioned Generals Giap and An about that. They denied it; insisted it wasn't their doctrine. I don't know. I don't know how universal it was; I do know that it happened in the Ia Drang. It's easy for someone who's never been in the hell of battle, sitting comfortably and safely in an easy chair, to be very critical of the actions of soldiers in the field who have just been through a horrendous meat-grinding experience with their buddies being shot and blown to pieces. You don't know how you're going to react until you've been there. I know that I never killed any prisoners or wounded.

TNA: Both in the book and the movie, your commitment and your promise to your men, to bring them all home, dead or alive, comes through very strongly. Was that Army doctrine or was that purely Hal Moore?

Moore: No, that was not Army doctrine. I was very close to my men. When we were ordered to Vietnam in August 1965, I had been training my battalion for 14 months. I knew all my NCOs, my sergeants. We trained together intensely. We trusted each other, knew our lives depended on each other. We were a family of fighting men. Before we left for Vietnam, I gathered all my men on the parade ground at Ft. Benning, Georgia, just like in the movie, and I told them that we're going into battle far from home against a tough enemy on his own turf. I told

them: “Some of us are going to die — maybe me, certainly some of you. But I promise you this: If you go down, I’m going to bring you back. And if I go down, I hope you bring me back.” In later years, I’ve had many of my troopers tell me that that promise meant a great deal to them and helped them in battle, because they knew if they went down that they would not be left lying on the ground for the vultures, insects, and weather, but would be brought back to their families for burial. And I never lost a man in two wars, Korea or Vietnam. After the Ia Drang battle, I was promoted, made commander of a brigade of 3,000 men. We lost a man on the Bong Son Plain. He got separated from his unit. I turned out the whole brigade and we hunted for him for two days. We finally found him; he was dead, but we brought him home.

TNA: Hollywood films rarely treat Christianity favorably or depict main characters who are men and women of faith. We Were Soldiers features several scenes of you praying: with your children; with one of your soldiers; over your battlefield dead. As a soldier, was your faith and prayer important to you?

Moore: My prayer before going into battle was always for two things: I asked God to help me accomplish my mission and to accomplish it with as few as possible of my men getting killed and wounded.