

Vietnam War

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Date: January 18, 2025



Vindicating Our Veterans

by William F. Jasper

Reprinted with permission from THE NEW AMERICAN magazine, March 25, 2002

After decades of defamation, caricature, and disregard, *We Were Soldiers* pays homage to America's Vietnam warriors for their heroism and sacrifice.

Paramount Pictures

Calm under fire: Mel Gibson as Col. Hal Moore and Sam Elliott as Sgt. Maj. Basil Plumley during the bloody fighting at Landing Zone X-Ray. Captain Paul P. Winkel, who listened to the real-life battle over the radio, said: "The infantry radio channel sounded like an old war movie. Colonel Moore, Trojan 6, came across calm and commanding. His voice rang with courage and sound judgement. It made men of boys in X-Ray that day. 'OK, understand your situation ... keep steady ... we are going to drop artillery all around you.... Just walk back with the artillery and you will be OK. Hang in there.'"

It was known as the Valley of Death: the Ia Drang Valley, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. On November 14, 1965, some 450 men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Air Cavalry Regiment rode into that valley — and into one of the bloodiest battles of the Vietnam War. While most Americans went about their daily business oblivious to the savage struggle unfolding that Sunday morning 12,000 miles away, the "Sky Soldiers" of the 7th Cavalry were locked in mortal combat with more than 2,000 regulars from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). The ferocious ordeal raged for two days and nights and ranged from hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and rifle butts to massive artillery, rocket, and mortar barrages and horrendous bombing runs by F-100 Super Sabres and B-52s.

The 7th Cavalry (Airmobile) was a new unit, testing the Army's innovative battlefield concepts of air assault through helicopter deployment of troops. Their outfit bore the same name as the ill-fated horse cavalry commanded by General George Armstrong Custer, and the men of the 7th Air Cav soon had ample reason to believe that the Ia Drang would be their Little Big Horn. It may have turned into just such a massacre, but for the exceptional leadership of the 1st Battalion's tough and brilliant commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. "Hal" Moore.

Moore retired as a lieutenant general in 1977 with 32 years' service. He later co-authored, with Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young*, the gripping best-seller about the harrowing battle of his 1st Battalion at Landing Zone X-Ray, and the even deadlier conflict at nearby Landing Zone Albany, where his sister battalion, the 2nd, was cut to pieces. The book portrays in stunning, inspiring, and gut-wrenching detail the extraordinary valor with which the troopers of the 7th Cavalry faced the hellish meat grinders that were LZs X-Ray and Albany.

Courtesy Lt. gen. Harold Moore (Ret.)

Paramount Pictures

History and Hollywood: Col. Hal Moore in a 1966 photo taken at the Battle of Bong Son Plain. Mel Gibson in *We Were Soldiers* as Col. Moore at the 1965 Battle of the Ia Drang.

Both General Moore's 1992 book and the recently released film depiction of it, *We Were Soldiers*, by writer-director Randall Wallace, capture with searing vividness acts of breathtaking bravery and supreme sacrifice overlaid on the appalling chaos, horror, stench, and carnage of all-out battle.* But this is not just another war story, as Moore and Galloway note in the prologue to their best-seller. It certainly does not glorify war. Rather, and strange as this may sound to some, it is a love story. Indeed, as the authors point out, "on the more important levels this is a love story, told in our own words and by our own actions. We were the children of the 1950s and we went where we were sent because we loved our country."

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The authors write unashamedly of their love of country, something that millions more Americans rediscovered in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Moore and Galloway write:

We went to war because our country asked us to go, because our new President, Lyndon B. Johnson, ordered us to go, but more importantly because we saw it as our duty to go. That is one kind of love.

Another and far more transcendent love came to us unbidden on the battlefields, as it does on every battlefield in every war man has ever fought. We discovered in that depressing, hellish place, where death was our constant companion, that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other, and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers. In battle our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around. We held each other's lives in our hands and we learned to share our fears, our hopes, our dreams as readily as we shared what little else good came our way.

No Greater Love

Deadly sanctuary: The fierce battle of the Ia Drang (inset star) took place near the border of Cambodia, where the U.S. government allowed Communist forces to have sanctuary.

"Greater love hath no man than this," said Jesus, "that a man lay down his life for his friends." On this basis, the story of the men of the Ia Drang is, most assuredly, a towering love story. This love was exemplified many times at Landing Zones X-Ray and Albany, as in the case of Specialist Calvin Bouknight. Lt. Dennis Deal recounts what happened as three platoons from Alpha and Bravo companies attempted to rescue Lt. Henry Herrick's platoon, which had been badly mauled and cut off from the rest of the battalion. Before the rescuers could break through to the lost platoon, they were themselves nearly overrun. "There were at least fifteen of our men, wounded and dead, out front," said Deal. "At this point, Specialist 5 Calvin Bouknight rose from cover, ran over, and began administering aid to the wounded. He succeeded in treating four or five of them, always by placing his body between the continuous sheets of heavy fire and the man he was treating. Bouknight was mortally wounded less than five minutes after he began performing his stunningly heroic act."

Staff Sergeant Charles V. McManus sacrificed his own life by jumping on a grenade to save the lives of several of his platoon members. Lieutenant Jack Geoghegan, likewise, gave his life for another. Gen. Moore says of Geoghegan's sacrifice:

His platoon sergeant, Robert Jemison, Jr., saw him go down trying to help a wounded man. "Willie Godboldt was twenty yards to my right. He was wounded, started hollering: 'Somebody help me!' I yelled: 'I'll go get him!' Lieutenant Geoghegan yelled back: 'No, I will.' He moved out of his position to help Godboldt and was shot." Just five days past his twenty-fourth birthday, John Lance Geoghegan of Pelham, New York, the only child of proud and doting parents, husband of Barbara and father of six-month-old Camille, lay dead, shot through the head and the back, in the tall grass and red dirt of the Ia Drang Valley. PFC Willie F. Godboldt of Jacksonville, Florida, also twenty-four years old, died before help ever reached him.

The names of Lieutenant Geoghegan and PFC Godboldt are listed beside each other on Panel 3-East of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., along with 303 other young American soldiers killed in that campaign in Pleiku Province. Geoghegan, one of the main characters in *We Were Soldiers*, is poignantly portrayed as a courageous and highly idealistic young officer and father by Chris Klein. In one moving scene, Geoghegan is in the hospital chapel contemplating the birth of his new daughter when Moore (played by Mel Gibson) comes in. The young father is understandably torn between his duty to country and his fear of leaving his newborn fatherless should he die on the battlefield. Moore, himself the father of five, understands fully, and suggests that they put it in God's hands. They kneel right then and there and do precisely that.

Acts of Valor

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Faith, family, fortitude: In the movie, Moore (Gibson) prays with his children before leaving for Vietnam. In the

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midst of the battle (right), Moore prays the 130th Psalm over his slain troopers: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Lord hear my voice...." The real-life Hal Moore told THE NEW AMERICAN that before going into battle, he always "asked God to help me accomplish my mission and to accomplish it with as few as possible of my men getting killed and wounded."

Paramount Pictures

Sergeant Jemison, mentioned above, was a seasoned veteran who had helped fight off five Chinese divisions at Chipyeong-ni in the Korean War. Shortly after Geoghegan went down, Jemison "took a single bullet through his stomach but kept on fighting," Moore records in his book. A few minutes later Jemison got up to throw a smoke grenade to mark friendly positions for the artillery and air strikes. In doing so, he "was hit again, this time knocked down by a bullet that struck him in the left shoulder. He got up, more slowly now, and went back to firing his M-16. Jemison fought on until he was hit a third time." The bullet struck his right arm and also shattered his M-16. "Another bullet cut off the metal clamp on my chin strip and knocked off my helmet," the sergeant recalled. "It hit so hard I thought my neck was broke. I was thrown to the ground. I got up and there was nothing left. No weapons, no grenades, no nothing."

Lieutenant Joe Marm was awarded the Medal of Honor for his valor above and beyond the call of duty. As he pushed toward the trapped platoon, he spotted an enemy machine gun nest behind a termite hill pouring devastating fire onto both of the Bravo Company platoons. "After failing to knock it out with a LAW rocket and a thrown grenade, he decided to deal with it directly," says Moore. "He charged through the fire, tossed a hand grenade behind the hill, and then cleaned up the survivors with his M-16 rifle." He had taken out 11 enemy soldiers, but in the process took a bullet to his neck and jaw. "Joe Marm saved my life and the lives of many others," said Lt. Dennis Deal. Lt. Marm's selfless act of bravery is depicted in *We Were Soldiers*, but, as with so many similar deeds portrayed in the film, the viewer must constantly remind himself that this isn't some make-believe incident dreamt up by a Hollywood script writer. This is the real thing.

The courage of these warriors on the ground was matched by the helicopter pilots who were their lifelines in the sky. Major Bruce Crandall (played by Greg Kinnear in the film) and Captain Ed "Too Tall" Freeman (Mark McCracken) repeatedly flew through the jaws of death to ferry out the mangled troopers and to supply the besieged battalions with water, ammo, and medical supplies.

Captain Joel Sugdinis "watched with awe" as the dauntless aviators time and again dared the torrents of lead, risking everything for the wounded in Landing Zone Albany. "I remember thinking they were the bravest pilots I had ever seen," he said. "They were sitting ducks and I fully expected to see them shot down at any moment.... You could see the tracers. The aircraft didn't hesitate a bit. They landed, loaded and were gone in seconds."

Getting at the Truth

In the opening scenes of *We Were Soldiers*, the narrator tells the viewer that this is about a battle that America "does not remember, in a war it does not understand." "My hope," General Moore told THE NEW AMERICAN, "is that this film will bring honor and respect to Vietnam veterans." Thanks to both the book and the film, the forgotten heroes of the Ia Drang inferno have been immortalized and some of the stigma that veterans of the Vietnam War have been unjustly forced to bear has been removed.

In *We Were Soldiers*, America may find a worthy starting point to begin unraveling the multi-layered encrustations of myths, lies, and deceit that have so confused and misled Americans about this conflict for four decades. The film is not a polemic aimed at righting all those wrongs. Some of the aggravating political issues underlying the conflict are mentioned in passing, but the movie aims more at the human level, at paying homage to the men who bled and died serving their country and one another. In this it succeeds admirably, and that is no small matter.

For far too long the more than three million veterans of Vietnam — from all our military services — have had to abide the vicious calumnies and caricatures of their critics in the media and academia and the seeming

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indifference or antipathy of the American public at large. They have been alternately depicted as incompetent idiots incapable of defeating a pitiful Third World army; as dope-smoking degenerates; or as brutal, genocidal criminals. This ongoing malicious smear of those who served their nation honorably has been a source of enduring bitterness.

Heroism on the Homefront

Paramount Pictures

Brave wives and widows: Mrs. Moore (right), played by Madeleine Stowe, and the other wives of the 7th Cavalry, demonstrated the same mettle as their valiant husbands.

Julia Compton Moore, the general's courageous and gracious wife, figures prominently in the book and the film, providing an important tribute to another group of largely invisible heroes: military wives and widows. It takes incredible fortitude to charge enemy machine guns. But they also are brave who are left behind to keep hearth and home and family, fearfully anticipating the dread news from the battlefield. As the casualties from Landing Zone X-Ray mounted, the Army was unprepared. It responded to the crisis in the cold, impersonal way of a massive bureaucracy. Wives and families were insensitively informed of the deaths of their loved ones by telegrams delivered by taxi cabs: "The Secretary of the Army regrets to inform you...." Understandably, seeing a taxicab pulling up in front of one's home was sufficient to cause many a knee to buckle and heart to faint.

Completely beside herself at the Army's utterly callous approach, Mrs. Moore had the telegrams delivered to her house and agonizingly informed and comforted the bereaved families. In the movie, Madeleine Stowe, as Mrs. Moore, and the actresses portraying the 7th Cavalry widows provide a profoundly moving face of war that is rarely seen on the screen.

Mrs. Moore told THE NEW AMERICAN that she was pleasantly surprised by the many positive reviews of the movie, but is still amazed at the cynicism of some liberal reviewers: "They knock the movie or the script dialogue because they say it is too straight, too square, the characters are too perfect. Well, I know those people in the movie and that is the way they were and are. They come from a totally different culture and background and viewpoint than the reviewers. These soldiers and their families really did believe in God and family and duty, honor, country. They really were willing to give their lives, and many of them actually did. And there are still many Americans who have those same beliefs and values."

One reviewer, for instance, took umbrage with, among other things, the line in the movie where a dying Lieutenant Henry Herrick softly and proudly tells his buddies, "I'm glad I could die for my country." The reviewer saw this as offensively maudlin and false. But Sergeant Ernie Savage, who was there at Herrick's side amidst the blood and gore, says it is true. According to Savage, "He was lying beside me on the hill and he said: 'If I have to die, I'm glad to give my life for my country.'" And we should thank God that there are still men like Lt. Herrick, like Nathan Hale, who hold those "maudlin" sentiments; that is what has kept us free.

Lessons for Today

Understanding the truth about the Vietnam War should not be viewed as simply a matter of personal interest for members of the Vietnam generation and those with partisan and ideological axes to grind. As George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The Vietnam War claimed 58,000 American lives, along with 300,000 American wounded. The toll of dead and wounded among the the Vietnamese — on both sides — was much, much higher. But the death toll for all of Southeast Asia — North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia — shot up dramatically when "peace" was declared and those countries were subjected to Communist "liberation."

Are we in danger of repeating the same dangerous and costly errors? We are already far along that same slippery slope. In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, American military forces have been dispatched to Afghanistan, the Philippines, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and other exotic, far-flung venues. Operations in the "war on terrorism" have been rapidly multiplying and expanding in scope. Statements from

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President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and other officials have been preparing the American public for what the administration says will be a “very long war,” indicating that large numbers of U.S. troops may be stationed in these distant lands for years, even decades.

Such statements are, undoubtedly, sweet music to the ears of General Vo Nguyen Giap, who commanded the Communist PAVN in Vietnam and, now in his 90s, still occupies the top post in the Communist People’s Republic of Vietnam. Decades ago General Giap enunciated the Vietnamese strategy of luring the enemy into a long war of attrition. “The enemy will pass slowly from the offensive to the defensive,” said Giap. “The blitzkrieg will transform itself into a war of long duration. Thus the enemy will be caught in a dilemma: He has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and political means to fight a long-drawn-out war....”

Vietnam continues to name the United States as its enemy, even as it sidles up to us for aid and trade. The same can be said for China, Russia, Iran, the PLO, and many of the “former” satellites of the Soviet Union now posing as independent nations of the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.).

Treachery at the Top

It is important to understand that Gen. Giap’s strategy for a “war of long duration” succeeded not because of brilliant generalship on his part, but because of unconscionable political decisions on our part. America’s top military leaders not only believed that the Vietnam War was winnable but that it could have been won quickly (see “Myth #1,” page 24).

However, the war was not won because President Lyndon Johnson and his advisors would not permit the military to win it. President Johnson’s secretaries of state and defense, Dean Rusk and Robert Strange McNamara, respectively, were key saboteurs of every military effort. Instead of following the advice of our military experts, the Johnson-Rusk-McNamara clique followed Gen. Giap’s advice for our defeat. They gave Gen. Giap’s forces sanctuaries that they would not allow our pilots to bomb or our troops to enter in pursuit.

General Moore was familiar with these restrictions, as was every U.S. fighting man in Vietnam. “Those of us who commanded American soldiers in the opening days had already undergone one crisis of confidence in the political leadership’s commitment to the struggle when President Johnson refused to extend enlistments and sent us off to war sadly understrength and minus many of our best-trained men,” said Moore in his book. “Now, in the wake of the Ia Drang, American political determination was tested again, and again found wanting.”

“We knew for a fact,” said Moore, “that the three North Vietnamese regiments that we had fought in the Ia Drang had withdrawn into Cambodia. We wanted to follow them in hot pursuit, on the ground and in the air, but we could not do so under the rules of engagement. Washington had just answered one very important question in the minds of Hanoi’s leaders.”

U.S. Army Center of Military History
Paramount Pictures

Into the jaws of death: Army photo (above) shows helicopters dropping Air Cavalry troops at “hot” Landing Zone X-Ray. Pilots like Major Bruce Crandall (played by Greg Kinnear, right) repeatedly defied death to bring aid to their besieged comrades at arms.

Lieutenant General Harry W.O. Kinnard, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, was likewise furious that the White House was shackling his troops, even as it made statements for public consumption to make it appear that the administration was pursuing an aggressive military policy. Kinnard said: “I was always taught as an officer that in a pursuit situation you continue to pursue until you either kill the enemy or he surrenders. I saw the Ia Drang as a definite pursuit situation and I wanted to keep after them. Not to follow them into Cambodia violated every principle of warfare.... But the decision was made back there, at the White House, that we would not be permitted to pursue into Cambodia. It became perfectly clear to the North Vietnamese that they then had

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sanctuary; they could come when they were ready to fight and leave when they were ready to quit.”

Kinnard continued: “When General Giap says he learned how to fight Americans and our helicopters at the Ia Drang, that’s bulls***! What he learned was that we were not going to be allowed to chase him across a mythical line in the dirt. From that point forward, he was grinning. He can bring us to battle when he wants and where he wants, and where’s that? Always within a few miles of the border where his supply lines were the shortest, where the preponderance of forces is his, where he has scouted the terrain intensely and knows it better than we do.”

Pattern of Betrayal

In the movie *We Were Soldiers*, Mel Gibson as Moore says, “This is Korea all over again. Don’t we ever learn?” Apparently not. Korea was a repeat of even earlier betrayals in China. Serving as deputy undersecretary of the U.S. Department of State when our ally Chiang Kai-shek and all of China were being betrayed to Mao Zedong’s Communists was none other than Dean Rusk. He worked closely with the identified Communists in our government who were helping Mao by giving him sanctuaries and prohibiting Chiang from aggressively combating the Reds. During the Korean War, Rusk persuaded President Harry S. Truman to give the North Korean Communists and their Red Chinese sponsors sanctuaries in Manchuria from which they could strike American forces and then return to safety. Rusk also persuaded Truman to fire General Douglas MacArthur, who had already whipped the Korean Communists.

Courtesy Lt. gen. Harold Moore (Ret.)

Like a rock: Col. Moore (left) and Sgt. Maj. Basil Plumley four days after the Battle of Landing Zone X-Ray. Plumley, a seasoned WWII-Korea combat veteran and hard-as-nails trainer of men, was a steadying influence in the midst of the battle.

Unfortunately, Dean Rusk was not alone. Rusk, like Robert McNamara and hundreds of other prominent Americans subverting America’s foreign and defense policies while serving in both Democrat and Republican administrations, was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Known variously as the “Park Avenue State Department,” the “American Establishment,” and the “Wise Men,” the CFR has become the de facto ruling force in our federal government.

In his 1979 book *With No Apologies*, the late Senator Barry Goldwater stated: “When a new President comes on board, there is a great turnover in personnel but no change in policy. Example: During the Nixon years Henry Kissinger, CFR member and Nelson Rockefeller’s protégé, was in charge of foreign policy. When Jimmy Carter was elected, Kissinger was replaced by Zbigniew Brzezinski, CFR member and David Rockefeller’s protégé.” More recently, we could point out, Bill Clinton’s managers of foreign policy, Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright, both CFR members, have been replaced by George W. Bush’s foreign policy manager, Colin Powell (CFR).

Goldwater accurately noted that “the Council on Foreign Relations and its ancillary elitist groups are indifferent to Communism. They have no ideological anchors. In their pursuit of a new world order they are prepared to deal without prejudice with a communist state, a socialist state, a democratic state, monarchy, oligarchy — it’s all the same to them.”

And in their pursuit of a new world order the CFR one-worlders have intentionally mired us in one no-win war after another. If they are not stopped, they will do the same with the war on terrorism.

- Moviegoers are cautioned that *We Were Soldiers* is rated R for graphic war violence and language.