

WE WERE SOLDIERS ONCE . . . AND YOUNG

IA DRANG: THE BATTLE THAT
CHANGED THE WAR IN VIETNAM

LT. GEN. HAROLD G. MOORE (Ret.)
▪ and JOSEPH L. GALLOWAY ▪

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lead F-100 and were on a direct line for the right side of the command post where Sergeant George Nye and his demolition team were dug in in the tall grass. The jets were on a very low pass. I couldn't do anything about those first two napalm cans, but I had to do something to stop the pilot of the second plane, who was aimed directly at the left side of the command post, from releasing his two canisters. If he hit the pickle switch [bomb release button] he would definitely take out Hal Moore, Captain Carrara, Sergeant Keeton, Captain Dillon, Sergeant Major Plumley, Joe Galloway, Captain Whiteside, Lieutenant Hastings, our radio operators, radios, medical supplies, and ammunition, and the wounded huddled in the aid station. The nerve center—the life center—of this battalion would be instantly killed in the middle of a cliff-hanger battle for survival.

I yelled at the top of my lungs to Charlie Hastings, the Air Force FAC: "Call that son of a bitch off! *Call him off!*" Joe Galloway heard Hastings screaming into his radio: "Pull up! Pull up!" Matt Dillon says, "I can still see the canisters tumbling toward us. I remember thinking, 'Turn your eyes away so you won't be blinded.' I put my face into a reporter's shoulder to hide my eyes. Was Joe Galloway's. I could hear Good Time Charlie Hastings shouting into his radio: 'Pull up!' The second jet did. The napalm from the first hit some people and some ammo caught on fire. Sergeant Major Plumley jumped up to put out the fire around the ammo. I ran out into the LZ to put an air panel out."

Sergeant Nye says: "Two of my people, PFC Jimmy D. Nakayama and Specialist 5 James Clark, were on the other side of me, several yards away. Somebody was hollering and Colonel Moore was standing there hollering something about a wing man, and I looked up. There were two planes coming and one of them had already dropped his napalm and everything seemed to go into slow motion. Everything was on fire. Nakayama was all black and Clark was all burned and bleeding."

Galloway: "Before, I had walked over and talked to the engineer guys in their little foxholes. Now those same men were dancing in the fire. Their hair burned off in an instant. Their clothes were incinerated. One was a mass of blisters; the other not quite so bad, but he had breathed the fire into his lungs. When the flames died down we all ran out into the burning grass. Somebody yelled at me to grab the feet of one of the charred soldiers. When I got them, the boots crumbled and the flesh came off and I could feel the bare bones of his ankles in the palms of my hands. We carried him into the aid station. I can still hear their screams."

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Sergeant Keeton, in the battalion aid station, quickly shot Nakayama and Clark up with morphine but it gave little relief. They were horribly burned. Their screams pierced the hearts of every man within hearing. Both soldiers were evacuated, but PFC Nakayama, a native of Rigby, Idaho, died two days later, on November 17, just two days short of his twenty-third birthday.

Says Sergeant Nye: "Nakayama was a real friend of mine. A good kid. Used to call me China Joe. He caught me one time with a Chinese girl and that nickname stuck with me through the whole war. I called him Mizo. In Japanese that meant 'Rain God.' The day he died his wife had their baby. A week after he died his reserve commission as a lieutenant came through. Every damned guy on Landing Zone X-Ray was a hero, but the real heroes were guys like Nakayama. I lost good people in there; they gave their all. Every time I hear a helicopter I get all watery-eyed. It's hard to explain."

Back in the command post, our Air Force FAC, Charlie Hastings, was stunned by the tragic consequences of the misplaced air strike. Hastings recalls, "After the napalm strike Colonel Moore looked at me and said something that I never forgot: 'Don't worry about that one, Charlie. Just keep them coming.'"

Shortly after the napalm strike, an enemy soldier staggered and stumbled into the clearing from behind Bob Edwards's far left flank. He had no weapon, was severely wounded, and, judging by his black uniform, was evidently a member of the H-15 VC Battalion. Staff Sergeant Otis J. Hull, a thirty-year-old native of Terra Aha, West Virginia, and one of his recon platoon men ran to the enemy soldier and brought him into the command-post aid station for medical treatment. He died before we could evacuate him and was buried in a shallow grave nearby.

The battle in the Charlie Company sector raged on. Most of Kroger's men were down. A handful, like Arthur Viera, had escaped the enemy execution squads and were hunkered down in positions where the heavy close-in fire support shielded them. Over on the far right, Lieutenant Lane's platoon was having a hard time of it—perhaps because they were just to the left of that creekbed highway that led into our positions. Sergeant John Setelin: "The air strikes and the artillery