

# The Outpost

## Never Underestimate a Sergeant

By Lt. Gen. Daniel P. Bolger, U.S. Army retired

Where do we get someone like him?" The Iraqi colonel was pointing at a U.S. Army battalion command sergeant major. The combined American-Iraqi element had just wrapped up a hot fracas on the edge of Sadr City, and the good sergeant major had, as usual, kept everyone moving forward by his usual method: "Follow me." The hostiles shot too high—the typical AK-47 spray-and-pray drill. Led by their sergeant major, the Americans aimed low and hit. And the Iraqi colonel was duly impressed.

"You don't just crank a guy like the sergeant major out of a six-week course," the American commander offered. "Someone like him reflects 20 years of hard experience, tough military schooling, and a tradition that goes back to



Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Basil L. Plumley

through the ranks to sergeant major, Plumley just knew his country was at war and he wanted to do his part. He was 6 feet 2 inches tall and solid as the granite

This was how Plumley went to war. He fought in all the major airborne operations: Sicily, Salerno, Normandy and Holland. Like his fellow glidermen and paratroopers, he also fought on the ground after the initial landings and was right there holding the line in the Ardennes campaign, the great Battle of the Bulge. At some point, Plumley reclassified as infantry and earned the first of three Combat Infantryman Badges.

When World War II ended, Plumley stayed in. He went to jump school—the glider era was over—and became an NCO. In his second war in five years, now-Sgt. Plumley gained his second Combat Infantryman Badge jumping into Munsan, Korea, with the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team in 1951. He also fought at Pork Chop Hill in 1953, where he met a captain named Harold G. “Hal” Moore. Wounded four times in two wars, Plumley had done his share and then some.

By 1965, Americans were beginning to deploy to a new war in distant Vietnam. Plumley had 23 years of service. He didn't have to go. But when now-Lt. Col. Moore asked Plumley to serve as the battalion sergeant major of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, there was no hesitation.

Never talkative, Plumley said what needed to be said and

little else, he let his example speak for him as the battalion plunged into pre-deployment training. Plumley and fellow Korean War veteran Moore saw eye to eye: hard on the practice field, easy on the battlefield. They led their men through

During the Vietnam War, Gen. George A. Custer led a sizable portion of the regiment to death at the Little Big Horn. That's

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They had found the enemy, and they had finished him.

Plumley earned a Silver Star (his second) in the Ia Drang fighting. He never talked about it much. In retirement, he'd hang up on inquisitive journalists and historians. He died in October 2012 at the age of 92.

When Hollywood made a movie about the battle (*We Were Soldiers*, 2002), gravel-voiced Sam Elliott portrayed Plumley. If anything, the film underplayed Plumley's heroic leadership. The movie had a lot of America asking the same question as that Iraqi colonel near Sadr City. Where do we get someone like him? From the heart of America, of course. It was that way 50 years ago. It's true today, too. ★