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Medal Likely

Local Soldier Didn't Want To Be Hero

BY JOSEPH GALLOWAY

PLEIKU, South Viet Nam (UPI) — Sgt. Maj. Basil Plumley didn't want to be a hero. He could have run the other way when the burning flare landed in the middle of the ammunition dump.

But he didn't.

And now the Columbus, Ga., soldier of the 1st Cavalry Division has been recommended for the nation's highest military combat award — the Medal of Honor.

The enemy flare was burning fiercely when it landed in the middle of the supply dump. The ammunition would have blown up at any moment.

Plumley, a huge bear of a man, charged into the stacks of explosives and, using his bare hands, picked up the flare and hurled it away to a safe distance.

His hands and arms were burned, and he will carry the scars for life.

Doing His Job

Plumley did not want to be a hero. He just did his job. It happens that way.

None of the men of the trapped platoon wanted to be heroes, but they were. There will be medals for the cavalrymen, both to those alive and dead. At least three recommendations for the Medal of Honor are being sent in.

Plumley's is one of them.

It was a night of hell when the outnumbered 1st Cav. platoon was trapped for 30 hours earlier this week on the slopes of Chu Pong Mountain by fanatical regulars of the North Vietnamese Army.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES ARMY, VIETNAM
APO San Francisco 96307

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 2175

27 December 1965

AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

1. TO 320. The following AWARD is announced.

PLUMLEY, BASIL L. RA35425274, SERGEANT MAJOR E9 United States Army
Hq Company, 1st Bn, 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div, APO US Forces 96490 (An Khe)

Awarded: Silver Star

Date action: 16 November 1965

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Reason: For gallantry in action: Sergeant Major Plumley distinguished himself by heroic action on 16 November 1965 while defending a command post in the Ia Drang Valley, Republic of Vietnam. The command post was being savagely attacked by an unknown number of Viet Cong. Hostile small arms and automatic weapons fire was coursing steadily and relentlessly into the forward command post and aid station area which was approximately 150 meters from the line of contact. At approximately 0500 hours at the height of the savage attack, a flare, still burning landed in an open box of fragmentation hand grenades in the pile of small arms, mortar, and other ammunition less than ten meters from the battalion command group. Sergeant Major Plumley, voluntarily and unhesitatingly rose up in the face of intense small arms and automatic weapons fire, dashed to the burning flare, lifting it with his bare hands out of the box of grenades and threw it. He then extinguished the flare with his feet as well as other small fires which it had ignited around the ammo area. Sergeant Major Plumley's valorous and extremely courageous action performed under fire with complete disregard for his own personal safety, undoubtedly prevented the complete ammunition supply from exploding. His gallant actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Authority: By direction of the President under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 9 July 1918.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:

JOHN D. MCCLAUGHLIN
Colonel, GS
Chief of Staff

James D. Clifton
JAMES D. CLIFTON
1st Lt, AGC
Asst Adj General

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By now the Air Force C-123 flare ship *Smoky the Bear* was overhead and its crew was kicking out parachute flares nonstop. We halted artillery illumination to conserve it for later use, if needed. Myron Diduryk wrote: "The illumination proved to be of great value. It gave us the ability to see and place effective small arms fire on the enemy. I could see the enemy formations as they assaulted in my sector. My forward observer was able to see the targets and place effective artillery fire on the enemy. The enemy would wait until the flares burned out before attempting to rush our positions. While the flares were illuminating the battlefield, the enemy would seek cover in the grass, behind trees and anthills, or crawl forward. Low grazing fire prevented the enemy from penetrating, but some managed to get within five or ten yards of the foxholes. They were eliminated with small arms and hand grenades."

In the midst of this bedlam a blazing flare under an unopened parachute streaked across the sky and plunged into the ammunition dump near the battalion command post. It lodged in a box of hand grenades, burning fiercely. Without hesitation, Sergeant Major Plumley ran to the stacks and with his bare hands reached into the grenade boxes and grabbed the flare. Plumley jerked the flare free, reared back, and heaved it out into the open clearing. He then stomped out the grass fires touched off by the flare, in and around the ammo crates.

Over on the perimeter Rescorla's men fought on. "Our M-79s switched to direct fire [fire delivered to a visible target] and lobbed rounds out between seventy-five and a hundred yards. Still the shadowy clumps moved closer. RPGs and machine guns crackled and they blasted at us from the dark line of ground cover. Across the open field they came in a ragged line, the first groups cut down after a few yards. A few surged right on, sliding down behind their dead comrades for cover. An amazing, highly disciplined enemy. A trooper cursed and pleaded in a high-pitched voice: 'Goddammit, stop the bastards!'"

For the next thirty minutes the field artillery, four batteries of twenty-four 105mm howitzers firing from LZ Falcon just over five miles away and from LZ Columbus just three miles distant, domi-

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."

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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