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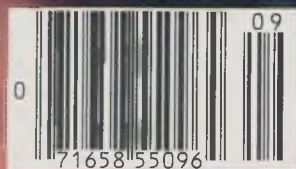
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CRISIS IN CENTRAL AMERICA:

SOF JOINS THE BATTLE
IN NICARAGUA, HONDURAS AND
EL SALVADOR



16 EXTRA
PAGES

“IF YOU WANT A GOOD FIGHT...”

UPI Combat Correspondent Joins the Cavalry

Text & Photos by Joe Galloway

Editor's Note: When SOF first received Robert Oles' two-part series on the Plei Me/Ia Drang Valley/Chu Pong Mountain campaign (see "Bloody Ia Drang" and "Winning One for Gary Owen," SOF, March, April '83), we immediately began searching for an eye-witness account to accompany it. Executive Editor Bob Poos recalled that Joe Galloway, then a UPI reporter/photographer, had been at LZ X-Ray all during the battle there. He contacted Galloway, who consented to do an on-the-spot report. Due to his busy schedule, Joe couldn't get it in until just before final deadline. We felt the piece was so good that it shouldn't suffer being cut to fit in the April issue. So here it is now.

LIKE all good war stories this one began simply enough.

In the early fall of 1965, sitting with the Marines in Da Nang, I persuaded Tiger Switch to patch me through to Puma Switch and on through several other pieces of the exasperating military communications net to the UPI bureau on Ngo Duc Ke Street in Saigon.

After four or five months of sloshing around through paddies and running along ridges with the Marines in I Corps, I was no longer a green war correspondent. I knew the difference between incoming and outgoing, had seen men die on both sides and had walked an eerie hilltop in Quang Ngai Province where every man of a Vietnamese Marine battalion and four American advisers lay dead in their fighting holes.

I was also being eaten alive by paddy foot and crotch rot and my plea to the boss was for a change of scenery and altitude. A few weeks in the cool, dry central highlands, working out of MACV Headquarters in Pleiku, was just what the doctor ordered. Besides, with the recent arrival of the 1st Air Cav at Anh Khe there would be some good features to write as the newcomers started working their territory.

I caught the milk run, a clapped-out old C-123 that hauled anything and everything, including reporters, from Da Nang north to Hue-Phu Bai and then back south to Pleiku. The milk-run bird only ran in a straight line

when it was taking you somewhere you didn't really want to go.

From the airstrip at Camp Holloway I hitched a jeep ride over to MACV where I found the public information officer (PIO), Capt. Larry Brown, a cordial host dispensing bunks in his animal room, or mosquito heaven as we also called it, where the command chaplain sat in on a nightly poker game and was widely accused of rattling his beads when drawing to inside straights.

From MACV I could hop back to Holloway to visit a host of fellow Texans who jockeyed helicopters. Bob Oualline, a good pilot from Arkansas Pass, introduced me around and the groundwork was laid.

Working out of Pleiku, I made occasional runs to check on progress at Anh Khe with the First Team. From a somewhat rocky start — I can recall reflecting one evening on the inexperience of troops who suddenly dove for cover when the duty VC sniper opened up during nightly showings of old *Combat* television segments — the Cav was settling in pretty well, getting its choppers on line and flexing its muscles.

By October, everyone smelled trouble in II Corps.

By early October 1965, everyone could smell trouble in II Corps (south of I Corps). The ARVN forces were light, scattered — and scared. The American field presence was mostly scattered in isolated Special Forces camps with names like Plei Me, Dak To, Dak Sut, Dak Pek and MACV compounds in Pleiku and Kontum.

Gen. William Westmoreland was more than a little concerned. He warned Washington that the communists were poised for an all-out offensive to cut South Vietnam in two. We had all read Bernard Fall's books, and the sight of those white stone markers where French *Group Mobile* 100 was ambushed and annihilated in the

Mang Yang Pass between Anh Khe and Pleiku was enough to raise the hair on the back of our necks. It was only 12 short years since Vo Nguyen Giap's regulars ate up GM 100 and now another North Vietnamese army was building for battle in the highlands.

Unknown to us at the time, Hanoi the previous June had established the B-3 Western Highlands Front under direct North Vietnamese control. The NLF, the Viet Cong, had nothing to do with this. Maj. Gen. Chu Huy Man, a member of the Hanoi Central Committee, was in field command and he held no brief involving people's war. Man intended to use the dry season to knock out those bothersome Special Forces camps and blind American eyes to his buildup and troop movements as he moved to put pressure on the thin ARVN line.

For the past year, regular North Vietnamese regiments had been training and undergoing indoctrination under a policy laid down by Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh that envisioned head-to-head combat with the Americans. Gen. Thanh believed he could so bloody them that political pressure at home would end their troop buildup. Giap had his doubts, but let Thanh go ahead.

The base area for Gen. Man's forces and headquarters would be near Chu Pong Mountain and the Ia Drang River valley, astride the Vietnam-Cambodian border. With supplies and men pouring down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Gen. Man's three PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) regiments assembled and readied themselves for battle — the first full North Vietnamese division to swing into action since Dien Bien Phu.

When everything was ready, Gen. Man set his troops on the march. His first target would be Plei Me Special Forces camp on National Route 6C — a road that was more a memory than a national highway. Plei Me camp's 400 Montagnard mercenary defenders and their families and the dozen American Green Berets who led them were resupplied entirely by air.

On the evening of 19 October, the 2,200 men of Gen. Man's 33rd PAVN Regiment slipped out of tunnels and launched wave attacks against the barbed-wire barriers sur-



Project Delta's Executive Officer fields two handsets at once while directing air and artillery strikes around besieged Plei Me Special Forces camp.

rounding the triangular camp. Surprised defenders poured fire on the attackers, blunted attempts to penetrate the wire and held firm until daybreak on the 20th when air support from Pleiku and Da Nang could be called down on the surrounding brushy hills.

The first helicopter to try and make it into Plei Me that morning was ripped apart by heavy anti-aircraft fire from tripod-mounted Chinese versions of the .50-caliber machine gun. Their sights were crude but they closed Plei Me to all but the most daring chopper pilots. This was to be no hit-and-run affair.

As tac air plastered the hills with napalm and high explosives (HE), PAVN gunners made the planes fly through a curtain of fire and downed several A1E Skyraiders and one B-57 Canberra bomber.

Ammo, food and water were being parachuted in — but the camp was small, the fire intense and more often than not the defenders stood helplessly as bundles of goodies dropped into enemy laps.

II Corps commander, Gen. Vinh Loc, was persuaded — with difficulty — to dispatch an armored relief column large

enough to bull through the inevitable ambush — only after his American counterparts, Gen. Stanley (Swede) Larson of Field Force Victor (FFV) at Qui Nhon and Gen. Harry W. O. Kinnard, CO of the 1st Air Cav, guaranteed him that the Cav would also dispatch forces to reinforce and secure Pleiku. By 23 October, the ARVN armored column — 16 tanks, 15 APCs and 1,200 men — moved cautiously down Route 6C toward Plei Me and a Cav Brigade task force was on its way to Pleiku.

Ten miles down the road, the 32nd PAVN Regiment sprang its expected ambush on Vinh Loc's relief column. With artillery support, the ARVN circled up the wagons and hunkered down for a tough fight that night and most of the next day. With American encouragement and support, the ARVN column did not break and run as usual. The 32nd PAVN wasn't finding it as easy as they expected.

Meanwhile, Plei Me camp was getting a new commander and some stiffening of its own. Maj. Charles Beckwith — who commanded the Special Forces Delta Teams —

and a hand-picked squad were helilifted into the vicinity of Plei Me at night and then crawled through the rings of PAVN troops. Just before dawn they dashed through the wire in a hail of automatic-weapons fire.

We had drawn straws for the few places on Beckwith's mission and I had lost. I stood on the tarmac at Holloway so goddam mad I couldn't talk. As I stalked the flight line I ran into one of my fellow Texans and explained my problem. He commiserated and allowed as how he was sort of interested in getting a look at the action.

The next morning he said words to the effect of "Screw the Army and those sitreps that say you can't fly into Plei Me. Let's go." We went.

(When then-Col. Charlie Beckwith led the raid into Iran [see "Who Dares Wins," SOF, June '79], I pulled my photo file to find some snaps of him, and ran across the first sight I had of Plei Me camp. I shot the picture and even today it scares me. The chopper was laid over on its side, diving through PAVN machine-gun fire. Its open door frames the besieged camp. Mortar bursts are raising clouds of choking red dirt. Smoke from napalm and artillery bursts rises from the jungle.)

My buddy dropped the chopper into Plei Me. I jumped out before the skids hit. It was the first chopper they had had on the ground in a long time and in seconds it was stacked full of wounded and old Tex was pulling pitch like a madman and making obscene gestures at me. Seconds later a Special Forces sergeant tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Son, Maj. Beckwith wants to see you and he sure is mad. He's the fellow over there jumping up and down on his hat."

The Beckwith tirade began: "I need ammo, water, food, medevac, reinforcements. I need everything. And the Army, in its wisdom, sends me a fucking reporter. Well, you ain't a reporter no more. You are a corner machine-gunner."

Then Charlie stopped, grinned, drew a breath and asked who was that crazy SOB that flew me in on that chopper. "I need more pilots like him."

Two sleepless nights later, the ARVN relief column arrived to break the siege of Plei Me. With it came the inimitable Bob Poos, my friendly competitor from the Associated Press. I asked what took him so long and got the standard two-word reply.

Late on 25 October, Gen. Man pulled back his two regiments, leaving behind a reinforced battalion to maintain some pressure on Plei Me. Suddenly the sky filled with more helicopters than I had ever seen at one time. The First Air Cav had arrived. I said my goodbyes to Charlie Beckwith, accepted his offer of an M16 and ammo, then joined a column of troops marching through the moonscape around the battered camp. The bombing left trees stripped and twisted. Your nose told you the enemy had died by the hundreds. The stink of death filled the air.

One more strange image lingers from the Plei Me defense. Maj. Beckwith's execu-

tive officer was a strapping six-foot, six-inch southern black. He juggled three radios through the fight, coordinating air and artillery strikes and guiding the relief task force in safely. Suddenly he held out the handset of one of his PRC-10s and told Beckwith, "Charlie, the President wants to talk to you."

Beckwith responded, "The president of what, for Christ's sake?" The XO grinned big and shot back, "Charlie, the man says he is the President of the United States."

It was Lyndon B. Johnson himself, patched through a dozen Tiger Switches with the reddest of priorities to talk to His Boys in His War. While mortars thunked and napalm cannisters whoofed and an air supply drop floated down, Charlie Beckwith was told how proud his President was and how well he was defending the frontiers of freedom.

Charlie interspersed the conversation with a few "yessirs" and finally was allowed to get back to fighting the war.

Meanwhile, Gen. Westmoreland flew up to Nha Trang and told Swede Larson that maybe they ought to give Harry Kinnard and the Cav their head with orders to "find, fix and destroy" Gen. Man's PAVN.

I headed back to Pleiku to file my stories, ship my undeveloped rolls of film, bathe and change uniforms, and sleep in one of Larry Brown's bunks.

Gen. Kinnard knew exactly who could carry out the job of finding and fixing the PAVN and turned the task over to Lt. Col. John B. Stockton and his 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry recon unit.

As the battered 33rd PAVN struggled to reach the supposedly safe rear area around Chu Pong Mountain, Stockton's choppers buzzed all over the formerly secure valleys and Cav infantry units leapfrogged over the hills with their batteries of 105mm howitzers slung below the Chinooks. Together, they kept the 33rd on the run and away from its caches of food, ammo and medical supplies. In the process, the Cav troopers captured intact the PAVN regimental hospital and valuable documents detailing the 33rd's supply caches and march routes. All routes pointed toward Chu Pong and the Ia Drang Valley and by 3 November, Stockton decided to insert a recon platoon into an LZ on the slopes of Chu Pong for a night ambush.

That evening all hell broke loose. The 66th PAVN Regiment felt secure and safe in its base area. One of its battalions moved along a well-beaten trail, the men laughing and talking as they walked through Capt. Charles B. Knowlen's 19 men hidden in brush behind their claymore mines. The Vietnamese even stopped to cook rice for supper within smell of the ambush platoon.

Knowlen waited until the North Vietnamese were back on the move and held off until the heavy-weapons platoon got in his kill zone. He was afraid the rising moon would soon reveal his position so he touched off his claymores and laid a wall of rifle and M79 grenade fire into the ranks of the stupefied communists.



By the time 1st Air Cavalry arrived at Plei Me, surrounding landscape had become a "moonscape" from repeated shelling and airstrikes aimed at attacking North Vietnamese.

In two minutes, Knowlen's men were hotfooting it back to LZ Mary where two other ambush platoons had been alerted to get back to patrol base and things were buttoning up for trouble. In that LZ also waited Charlie Black, one of the finest combat correspondents to grace the battlefields of Vietnam or any other war. (See "Charlie Black," SOF, April '83.)

"Twenty men and they ambush a whole goddam battalion," Black would later tell me. "Jesus, it was beautiful. You should have been there."

Within two hours the mauled PAVN battalion, minus heavy weapons, had located the patrol base and begun its probes. The battle was joined. Helicopter gunships roared in to pour rocket and machine-gun fire into the North Vietnamese. By 0130, Stockton fed in the rest of A Company with groundfire riddling each chopper as it dropped into the LZ.

The LZ stood off two more communist attempts to overrun it before first light when Stockton airlifted the rest of 1/8 Cav into it.

If the American commanders had had any lingering doubts, they now knew for certain there was a third PAVN regiment in the area.

On 9 November Gen. Kinnard rotated his forces, moving the fresh 3rd Brigade under Col. Brown in to replace the 1st. Kinnard ordered them to focus operations east of Plei Me. The maneuver confused the North Vietnamese commander and he decided to have another shot at Plei Me, this time using the 66th Regiment. The 33rd had to be reorganized as a composite battalion (only 800 effective troops were left after the opening rounds of the campaign).

Col. Brown set up 3rd Brigade headquarters in the old French tea plantation at Catecha. A sign planted outside the ops tent identified the operation as "Shiny Bayonet."

As his troops fanned out for recon and medcap visits east of Plei Me, I hooked on with Lt. Col. Harold G. (Hal) Moore's 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, who were headed up the hills.



Medic treats wounded trooper near Col. Hal G. Moore's CP at LZ X-Ray during Ia Drang Valley battle.

My memory is of one of those awful, hot afternoons spent hacking and crawling through some of the meanest wait-a-minute briar patches and the most aggressive red tree ants you'd want. Once, it took us two hours to cover maybe 200 meters.

Just before nightfall, Moore waved the battalion across a narrow but chest-deep mountain stream of ice water and then we buttoned up with a cold can of C-rats, no fires, no smokes, no lights. I would later spend three years in Russia and endure 50-below-zero cold but I would never be colder than that night at 6,000 feet, wet and shivering inside my poncho.

At daybreak I pinched off a chunk of C4 explosive from my emergency stock and fired it to boil the fastest cup of coffee in the Western world. Then I looked around to see 1/7, including Col. Moore, all busy shaving in their tin pots. If I had any lingering doubts that this unit ran just a bit differently and with a lot more pride they were taken care of when Moore walked over and suggested that if I was attached to them I could damn well shave too. I did.

Later we would march into a curious and remote Montagnard village so far from civilization and the news that one old man emerged from the longhouse on stilts, hastily buttoning up a tattered old army coat and happily waving the French tricolor flag. He was sure that his brethren of decades ago had kept their promise and returned. I'm not sure we ever adequately explained the situation to his satisfaction.

Later I lifted back to Pleiku, shipped film and stories and then heard that on the night of 12 November the Brigade HQ at the tea plantation had been heavily probed. I hitched back out.

I talked to a sergeant who almost single-handedly had broken the attack. He had been squatting in a foxhole near the dirt airstrip, loading M16 clips for his outfit. The good sergeant had about 150 loaded clips stacked in his hole when the flag went up and the bad guys started assaulting across the open airstrip. His hole filled with empty brass as he slid the selector to rock 'n' roll and knocked them down like crazy. He burned up that M16 in a good cause. When he finally quit firing, the flash protector fused into a lump over the end of the barrel.

I decided to stick around and see if there would be a rerun that evening — and Brown's staff told me that Hal Moore's 1/7, which was doing perimeter guard that night, would be lifting into a new operation the next day. Brown said I could hitch a ride in his command chopper shortly after the LZ was secured.

I wandered on down to the perimeter, found a squad that welcomed the company and dug myself a foxhole beneath one of the teabushes. The troops were grouching that they had been warned to be careful about the bushes because the French owners would bill the U.S. government \$25 for each one damaged or destroyed, and \$125 for each rubber tree in the plantation over on the next hill. The planters had been down yelling

about the damage from last night's scrap.

As we broke out the C-rats, I asked the man in the next hole what the date was. "The 13th" was his reply.

"It's my birthday," I told him. He laughed, wished me a happy one — and flipped me his can of pound cake. We agreed it was one hell of a place to spend your 24th birthday.

The next morning, after a spooky, sleepless but quiet night, I went down to watch Moore's troops load up and begin lifting off for the assault at the base of the Chu Pong massif. Moore had selected LZ X-Ray for the assault because it was the biggest of three possible landing zones, able to take between eight and 10 choppers at a time.

After artillery and gunship prepping, Moore's lead company hit the LZ just before 1100, with Moore and his command group coming off the first chopper.

Moore set up his command post (CP) in the middle of a patch of ant hills — six to eight feet tall and hard as concrete, these ant hills were a prominent feature of the terrain — in a copse of trees. Elephant grass obscured the view. Some dry waist-deep creek beds ran along the northwest side of the LZ. One hell of a defensive position but so far the bad guys weren't defending.

On the mountainside above the LZ, PAVN regulars had spotted the landing, figured it for company size, and their commander from previous experience of the Cav's leapfrog operations reckoned that further reinforcements were not likely to be coming. He decided to send two battalions from the 66th Regiment and the 33rd Regiment's composite group down to wipe out the Americans.

So far no action. I hung close to the ops tent back at the tea plantation.

Capt. Tony Nadal's Alpha Company was lifted in even as Bravo Company troops were flushing and capturing a weary Vietnamese who had been lost in the brush. The prisoner told Col. Moore that there were at least three PAVN battalions in the area.

Moore decided to send platoons from Bravo on up the northwest ridge to snoop around. They had gotten barely 100 meters when things started to pop.

Lt. Henry Herrick's 2nd Pln. pushed ahead although North Vietnamese rushing down the mountain trails drove a wedge between his platoon and the flanks, and snipers in the trees and ant hills were beginning to chew on the Americans. The brunt of the growing PAVN assault fell directly on Herrick's platoon.

Moore today says the communists were surprised to find the Cav troopers still moving ahead when they were hit. The PAVN commander was also surprised to find that most of a Cav battalion, 1/7, had been lifted right onto Gen. Man's doorstep. PAVN Field Front reacted by ordering the 8th Battalion of the 66th Regiment to reverse its march toward Plei Me and return to help cover the base camp from the surprise assault.

Meanwhile the air lift was bringing in



CIDG troops and Special Forces men rush to recover supplies after one of the few successful air drops at Plei Me during the siege. Most drops landed behind North Vietnamese lines.

Charlie Company and the lead elements of the weapons company. This time the PAVN were in the tree line shooting the choppers full of holes. What had been a cool LZ was now hotter than hell.

Moore moved Nadal's company up to assist the besieged Bravo units just in time to run headon into what one survivor would later call "all the gooks in the whole damn world."

Artillery and tac air were hammering the terrain while the PAVN were using their potato-masher grenades, mortars and those nasty little rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).

Back at the tea plantation, the ops tent was getting noisy and busy and I was pressing Col. Brown for my promised ride into action. Brown also wanted a firsthand look at the situation, so we headed off in his chopper for X-Ray.

A 25-meter circle of death and destruction.

When Brown told Moore he was overhead and wanted to land, Moore told him no way. Choppers were downed and men killed in that last lift and the LZ was simply too hot. As I looked out the left side of the chopper, trying to make sense out of the smoke and confusion below, an A1E Skyraider screamed below us trailing smoke and fire and slammed into the forest.

No parachute.

Brown reluctantly ordered the chopper to turn around and leave X-Ray, dropping me off at LZ Falcon where the supporting artillery batteries were located and where I stood

a better chance of hitching onto a medevac or supply chopper.

By 1500, Moore had radioed Brown, asking for at least another rifle company for reinforcement — while up the mountainside Lt. Herrick's Lost Platoon held desperately to a 25-meter circle of death and destruction. They were surrounded and whoever moved got hit. Herrick went down. The PAVN overran the machine gun providing covering fire and turned the gun around to use on the surviving Americans.

The dying Herrick handed command over to Sgt. Palmer, but within seconds a grenade blast killed Palmer. Another sergeant moved to take Palmer's place and died instantly of a bullet through the head. Sgt. Clyde Savage then took command, grabbed the radio and walked the artillery in until he had drawn a curtain of shrapnel around the platoon.

Helicopters managed to get some desperately needed ammo and water into the LZ at late afternoon.

Moore ordered another desperate effort to relieve the Lost Platoon up the ridgeline. Leading one of Tony Nadal's platoons, Lt. Joe Marm ran into PAVN entrenched in one of the ant hills. He tried to take them out with a LAW rocket and then, in desperation as the PAVN machine gunners were picking off his men, Marm stood up and charged the position with a grenade. As he mopped up the last few survivors with his M16 a sniper round smashed his jaw. Marm's bravery would win him the Medal of Honor but that afternoon it failed to clear a path through to Herrick's platoon.

As night fell, Moore ordered both the stalled companies to pull back to the perimeter, and informed Savage that he and his



First Lt. Walter J. Marm, Jr. won Medal of Honor for a single-handed assault on PAVN position while attempting relief of cut-off platoon. Photo: U.S. Army

men would have to make it through the night on their own.

The reinforcements — Bravo Company of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cav — lifted into the LZ at dark.

Back at LZ Falcon, I ran into the familiar figure of Capt. Matt Dillon, Moore's ops officer and a man I had chatted with on that hike into the hills: "Matt, I've got to get in there."

He shook his head but when I kept after him he said he would put it to Col. Moore. In the ops tent Dillon got on the radio and

told Moore that he was coming in with a final load of ammo and water in two choppers: "And that reporter Galloway wants to come along." Moore responded that if I was that crazy and there was room on a chopper to let me come.

Shortly after 2000, 14 November, we lifted off LZ Falcon bound for X-Ray. I sat on a stack of cases of ammo and hand grenades. The rest of the load was C-rats and plastic five-gallon containers of water.

We came in low and fast and on the way down I saw flashes of light up and down the

mountainside that I was sure were muzzle flashes. Dillon saw them too but reckoned they were signal lamps to guide PAVN reinforcements down the mountain to the killing ground. Either way the sight was not reassuring.

We grazed the trees dropping into the LZ and then were on the ground bailing out into the darkness. I grabbed the boxes I had been sitting on and threw them out. In seconds the supplies were out, wounded on and the pilots hauling out.

A gruff voice came out of the dark as Dillon and I stood up. "Watch where you walk. There are a lot of dead bodies around and they're all American." That was my introduction to Sgt. Maj. Basil Plumley of Columbus, Ga. It was his battalion and those were his dead.

Plumley guided us to the patch of ant hills and trees where Moore's CP was located. Fires lit the distant slopes of Chu Pong. Artillery rounds came in with that strange sound that always reminds me of freight trains moving by at a distance.

Hal Moore shook my hand and pulled me down beside him. "I don't know why you wanted to come but you're here and you're welcome. Things are tough and they're likely to get a lot tougher."

Moore told me of Herrick's platoon up on the ridge and said they and we would spend the night in a ring of artillery fire to keep the PAVN off our backs. Flare ships were on call and Puff the Magic Dragon would be around to hose the bad guys with his miniguns.

The CP group had their backs against a decent-sized ant hill. Nobody was dug in except the Vietnamese Kit Carson scout who had burrowed into that ant hill until not even his boot soles were visible — and happily remained there for the rest of the battle.

I picked me out a nice tree and leaned back against it, watching and listening and loading some clips for Charlie Beckwith's M16. Sometime between midnight and 0300 I dozed off and the last thing I recall was Sgt. Maj. Plumley draping his poncho liner over me. That great grizzly bear — veteran of three wars — tucking me in like one of his grandsons. When I awoke I was almost buried beneath a layer of leaves, twigs and branches cut out of the trees overhead by passing shrapnel.

Up on his ridge, Clyde Savage had walked the arty right up on top of his thin lines and hunkered down. He found he was in a good spot to keep an eye on the PAVN as they organized their attacks against the LZ and he took some pleasure in adjusting the 105 battery fire to scramble things up for the PAVN every chance he got. Beginning around 0345 the Lost Platoon had to fight off a series of PAVN charges signalled by bugle calls.

Down below we stirred in the darkness. Col. Moore was hoping that elements of 2nd Battalion, 5th Cav, poised at LZ Victor, could lift in to reinforce at daybreak. No such luck.

Just before 0700 8th Battalion, 66th PAVN, hit the southeast sector, slamming into Capt. Robert Edwards' Charlie Company. Although Edwards called for reinforcements, Moore held off committing his slender reserves in Charlie's sector, suspecting the PAVN might be hoping he would do that. Hal Moore was right. By 0715 another PAVN battalion was knocking on our eastern door, and half an hour later yet another tried the western sector.

We were catching it from three sides and those little RPGs were whizzing into the LZ and around the CP with monotonous regularity.

Suddenly in the middle of this, a Cav trooper across the LZ got up, wearing only a white T-shirt and fatigue trousers, and began walking slowly straight across the open LZ while bullets kicked up dirt around him and the RPG explosions rocked him. We screamed at him to get down or go back and finally our calls got through over the noise of battle. Slowly he turned to walk back and we could see that his back was shredded by shrapnel. The aid station was next to the CP and the stunned trooper was simply taking the shortest route.

Matt Dillon and I were both thinking on the same theme this morning: Up until now the greatest tradition of the 7th Cavalry had been built at a place called the Little Big Horn with Col. George C. Custer in circumstances uncomfortably similar to those we now found ourselves in.

About this time I was busy trying to see just how flat I could make myself and cursing the buttons on my fatigue jacket for costing me the edge. I felt a size-12 boot toe in my ribs and looked up to see Sgt. Maj. Plumley standing tall and grinning big: "Son, you can't take no pictures laying down there on the ground."

I decided Plumley was right. I also decided that our chances of coming out of this alive were somewhere between slim and nothing and with Plumley for an example I decided I would just as soon get mine standing up. I got up, ignoring the fire sweeping over us, and began taking pictures.

Midmorning of the 15th we got a lull. Air and arty had been making things hot for the PAVN. Or maybe it was rice time. I walked out to the edge of the LZ. A trooper jumped out of a mortar pit about 25 meters away and dashed in my direction, diving beneath a bit of brush. All I could see was two eyeballs under the helmet. "Joe Galloway. Are you Joe Galloway from Refugio, Texas? Don't you know me, man? It's Vicente Cantu from Refugio."

And so it was. We came from the same little oil and ranching town in south Texas. Graduated from high school in the same year, 1959.

In the blessed lull we stole five minutes for a class reunion. "Joe, this is bad shit. But if I make it I go home in two weeks. I'll be in Refugio for Christmas." He did and he was.

While the lull lasted, I walked another 20 or 30 meters and squatted down to talk to



UPI Combat Correspondent Joe Galloway at Da Nang Press Center complete with tools of the trade: a Nikon 35mm camera with zoom lens and the Carl Gustav 9mm Model 45 SMG, better known as the Swedish K.

some troopers dug in in some elephant grass; then as the sound of firing began picking up, I headed back to the CP. As I reached the anthill I heard someone in the command group scream, "My god, he's unloading on us. Stop him, stop him!"

The Air Force officer handling forward air control began yelling into his mike and I looked up to see a Skyhawk nose up and a nice fat cannister of napalm separate and begin loblollying end over end straight at us. We froze. Quit breathing.

Nothing to do now.

The cannister went right over the CP and exploded between us and the troopers I had just been talking with minutes before. There was a wall of fire and then I could see our men dancing in that fire and hear their screams over the fire noise. As the blaze

faded to burning grass several of us ran into it. Someone told me to grab this man's feet and help haul him back to the aid station. When I grabbed him the meat over his ankles twisted away in my hand.

Twenty meters and the CP would have been gone with CO, XO, air controller, artillery controller. And one reporter. Those burned men in the aid station would scream for hours. All the morphine in the world wouldn't have stopped them. Most of the water we had brought in the night before still lay out in the LZ grass. It was partly to get away from those screams that I got up and made two trips out to haul water back to the aid station.

During another lull that morning, one platoon from 2/7 airlifted into the LZ and went straight into battle reinforcing Charlie



Combat-weary trooper from 1/7 awaits orders to move out at end of battle of Ia Drang Valley.

Company. The rest of 2/7 hiked overland from LZ Victor and two of its companies immediately moved out with Herren's men to find and extract the Lost Platoon.

Strangely unopposed they finally reached Savage's small group and told them it was okay to get up. Sgt. Galen Gungum recalled, "We thought he was nuts. Not one of us got up." Over 70 North Vietnamese bodies were piled around the platoon's perimeter.

With reinforcements in hand Col. Moore pushed our lines out 100 meters. The expansion uncovered hundreds of the dead from both sides intermingled in the elephant grass, giving mute testimony to the vicious hand-to-hand fighting that had taken place.

That afternoon Matt Dillon passed the word to keep an eye on Chu Pong Mountain for a spectacular show. On schedule 24 B-52 stratoforts from Guam laid a carpet of 750-pounders on that mountain and permanently rearranged some landscape.

That night we settled in to a quieter evening. A few light probes to keep everyone alert. But Gen. Man wasn't through with us yet. Five of his best battalions had been broken against LZ X-Ray and the 7th Cavalry. Although PAVN had spotted the platoon that came in by helicopter they apparently missed the arrival of most of 2/7 Battalion by foot. Down the mountain they came for one more big shot and again the defenders' fire along with tac air and artillery chewed them up.

Before dawn Col. Moore had Dillon radio around and get an ammo count from the companies. Everyone was fairly fat, especially the new arrivals. Moore had Dillon order every man to take two clips, select for full-auto and "shoot whatever the hell you don't like the looks of out front of you."

On signal everyone opened up. Moore's hunch paid off. A company of PAVN was crawling up on the perimeter. They thought they had been discovered when the

shooting started and jumped up, launching their attack prematurely. Alert troopers with their clips laid out in front of them cut the hapless North Vietnamese to ribbons. Later we found some of those PAVN still lying in the grass where they had been crawling, shot right in the tops of their hats. On other parts of the perimeter wary troopers shot up the treetops and bagged several roped-in snipers, waiting for good shooting light.

Thus was born the "Mad Minute" in Vietnam combat. Hal Moore later would say that he thought it would be a good way to build confidence in his troops — and a good way to clean up the perimeter by fire

**"Son, you can't
take no pictures
laying down!"**

rather than sending recon units out for the PAVN to chew on.

Later that morning the rest of 2/7 marched in and Brigade HQ radioed that the boys from 1/7 could march for home.

As the fresh troops and reporters marched in, they looked at Hal Moore's men with wonder and amazement. When a few rounds roared in the newcomers hit the dirt. We were long past that. It was only background noise.

Hal Moore came over. He grabbed my shoulders. "You go back and tell the world how well we fought and died here. Go tell them." Tears cut trails through the red dirt on both our faces.

Later Moore would send a message to my boss. "I knew what I was doing there. I'm a professional soldier and it was my job. But I couldn't understand what Galloway was

doing there. He was a civilian. He didn't have to be there. But there he was, propped up against that tree with that M16 across his lap."

Just before I joined 1/7 in grabbing a chopper bound for Camp Holloway, Lt. Col. Robert McDade, who was commanding 2/5 and part of 2/7, suggested that I march on up the valley with his unit. "We're going to go catch what's left of them." I shook my head, told McDade I had to go file my story of the last three days, and warned him to watch his ass because there was still more than enough PAVN out there to go around.

McDade's battalion would march into a PAVN ambush strung out over a mile-long column in heavy elephant grass and thousands of ant hills. A debacle would ensue, a battalion would be broken and cut to shreds. But that is another story.

In the final analysis, the men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, policed up the battleground at LZ X-Ray. We had won the first meeting of American regulars and North Vietnamese regulars.

Back at Camp Holloway, Gen. Westmoreland walked down the ranks of 1/7 troopers shaking hands. Medals would shower down. A Presidential Unit Citation would be added to 1/7's flag. Lt. Col. Harold G. Moore of Bardstown, Ky., would be promoted to full colonel and given command of his own brigade. Early the following year — 1966 — in Operation Masher/White Wing, Moore would march his troops into coastal valleys where the Viet Cong had reigned untouched for 15 years.

Wherever I happened to be hanging my pack, Moore would send word to come on back to Anh Khe because he was onto something I might be interested in. I always went and it was always interesting.

Half a dozen times Moore and I would be sitting in some mess hall or bar and overhear some officers moaning aloud about some 10-day operation that had been a walk in the sun and wondering why they couldn't get in a fight.

Moore and I would grin and walk over to inform them that we had a six-figure map coordinate for a place we guaranteed they could get all the action they wanted.

Later in 1966 one Cav unit indeed heli-lifted back into LZ X-Ray and promptly got in one hell of a fight.

Back in Anh Khe, Sgt. Maj. Plumley composed a little barracks ditty that encompassed one lesson we would never forget:

"We have met the boys from the North;
They came to fight and not to play."

I would spend another decade in Asia and return to Vietnam for tours in 1971, 1973 and again in 1975 for the end of the whole mess. I would pound the jungles in lesser-known conflicts in Indonesian New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand and Bangladesh. None of it would match the intensity of those three days in November 1965.

It was the fight of my life.

I salute those who fought there and fell there. They are my brothers. ✕