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# U.S. News & World Report

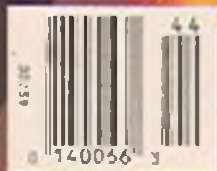
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► SPECIAL REPORT ◀

# VIETNAM STORY

Twenty-five years ago, soldiers of the U.S. 7th Cavalry fought the first major battle of the war. It forever changed the course of the conflict. An eyewitness account



TION  
1965

USE Dimensions



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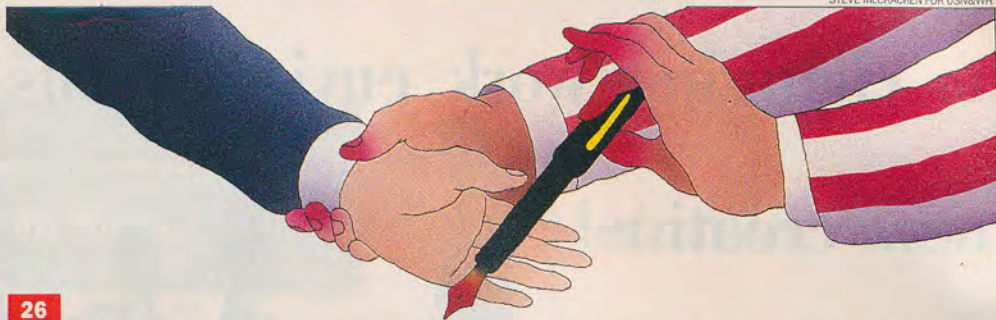
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JOSEPH L. GALLOWAY

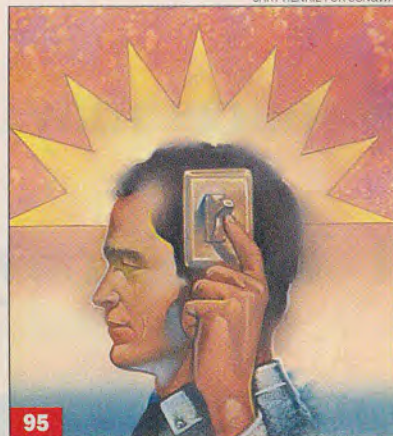


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**Vietnam Story.**

Troopers of the U.S. 1st Cavalry evacuate their casualties from the Ia Drang Valley in November, 1965. Their costly victory over a large North Vietnamese force convinced American policymakers that U.S. soldiers and helicopters could win, and made Vietnam, irreversibly, America's war

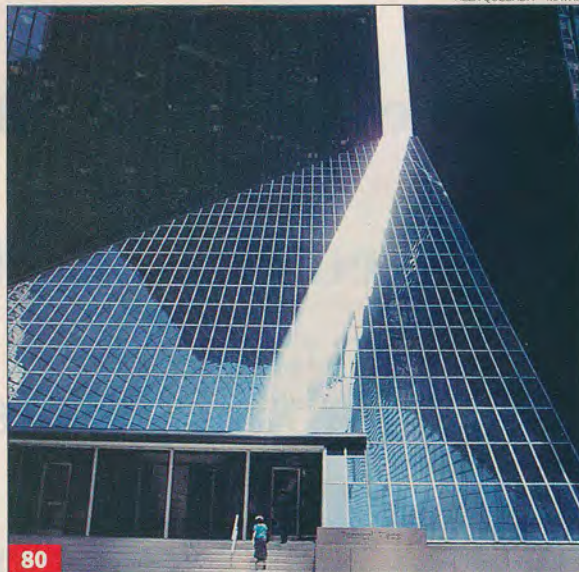
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**Gloom and boom towns.** The economic downturn is devastating urban America, but some cities still shine

COVER: Photo by Charlie Archambault for USN&WR Inset photo by Jacques De Selliers—SIPA

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# Fatal Victory

*U.S. soldiers fought their first major battle in Vietnam a quarter-century ago. Its lessons were ignored, forever changing the war*

**T**wenty-five years ago next month, America plunged into its first major battle of the Vietnam War in a remote valley of the Central Highlands. The American reinforcements that Gen. William C. Westmoreland had so urgently sought to stave off disaster in South Vietnam, the superbly equipped 1st Air Cavalry Division, and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's brave foot soldiers of the 325-B Division of the People's Army of Vietnam fell upon each other in the eerie, unpopulated Ia Drang Valley. Outnumbered 7 to 1, a battalion of the 7th U.S. Cavalry withstood a dozen human-wave attacks in three days and two nights at the killing ground they called Landing Zone X-Ray.

Before the North Vietnamese retreated to Cambodia in late November, 1965, more than 2,000 Vietnamese and 234 Americans were killed. But the victory proved to be a fatal one, for it helped convince the generals in Saigon and the policymakers in Washington that U.S. soldiers, using the air cavalry's search-and-destroy tactics, could hunt down the enemy, grind him up and win the war that America's South Vietnamese allies were losing. Four days after the Ia Drang fighting ended, Westmoreland cabled Washington that he now faced a conventional war and that only American troops could stand up to the North Vietnamese.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was less optimistic: After reviewing the results of the Ia Drang battle he sent President Lyndon Johnson a secret

memo warning that even if the U.S. tripled the number of troops it sent to Vietnam, it would have no better than a 50-50 chance of winning the war. He was ignored. After the Ia Drang, Vietnam was, irreversibly, America's war.

"Ia Drang . . . was a milestone," wrote William P. Bundy, then assistant secretary of state for East Asia, in an unpublished memoir for the State Department archives in 1972. "It appeared to confirm the importance of . . . search-and-destroy . . . and that American forces were especially effective in this role—a contrast that became more vivid when on November 28 a large South Vietnamese unit was ambushed and cut to pieces in the Michelin plantation northwest of Saigon."

General Giap knew better. "After the Ia Drang battle we concluded that we could fight and win against the cavalry troops . . ." the legendary Giap told *U.S. News* (see page 48).

"We had a strategy of people's war. You had tactics, and it takes very decisive tactics to win a strategic victory. You planned to use the cavalry tactics as your strategy to win the war. If we could defeat your tactics—your helicopters—then we could defeat your strategy."

Giap sent almost a million of his countrymen to their deaths, but time and the patience of the American people ran out long before North Vietnam ran out of soldiers. The victory in the Ia Drang Valley degenerated into a decade of bloody frustration that sent 58,000 Americans home in shiny aluminum Army-issue caskets, ruined one



Colors of the 1st Cavalry



Death in the valley. Cavalry troopers carry a

President, deeply scarred another and turned the nation against itself.

The danger was visible at the time, to those willing to see. Defense Secretary McNamara and others were startled when Westmoreland told them that in addition to the 220,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam or on the way in late 1965, he would need 200,000 more in 1966 and probably another 200,000 by early 1967.

McNamara flew to Saigon November 28 for an after-action report on the Ia Drang. In a secret memo to Johnson, dated November 30, he said Vietnam had reached a turning point: "We have but two options, it seems to me. One is





slain comrade across the football-field-size clearing called Landing Zone X-Ray. Each side paid dearly to test the other

to go now for a compromise solution and hold further [U.S.] deployments to a minimum. The other is to stick with our stated objectives, and with the war, and provide what it takes in men and matériel." He added a somber and accurate forecast: "We should be aware that deployments of the kind I have recommended [600,000 by 1967] will not guarantee success. U.S. killed-in-action can be expected to reach 1,000 a month and the odds are even that we will be faced in early 1967 with a 'no-decision' at an even higher level."

Stanley Karnow, in his book *Vietnam: A History*, reports that at a secret White

House conference in mid-December McNamara again pressed his point. "What you are saying is that no matter what we do militarily, there is no sure victory?" President Johnson asked. "That's right," said McNamara.

Bundy says McNamara's alternative—freezing the U.S. buildup and negotiating a settlement—was never seriously considered. The other option—a major buildup in 1966 and stepped-up bombing of the North—"was readily accepted by the President, and . . . came to be understood as the basis for all discussion."

McNamara's pessimism continued to grow but, recalls Harry McPherson,

White House counsel at the time: "McNamara was still providing the President with an enormous amount of detailed, optimistic information . . . that this thing was working." Only at a farewell lunch in February, 1968, says McPherson, did McNamara tearfully talk of the "futility" of the war.

While McNamara kept his doubts to himself, the U.S. too often lost, covered up or ignored the lessons of the Ia Drang—that the North Vietnamese soldier was brave and tough, that it would cost more American lives than anyone believed to defeat him and that it would be impossible to crush the North Viet-



## SPECIAL REPORT

name Army so long as it could escape into Cambodia. The first lesson came before the battle was over, when a 400-man battalion was cut to pieces after it blundered into an ambush in a place called Landing Zone Albany.

The White House wanted a victory, not a lesson. "We were very concerned then that if we got some significant military demonstration, something that would consolidate the home front, that there was a feeling that this thing just might work — that we could go for the long haul," says Bundy.

Neither the military commanders in Vietnam nor the politicians in Washington were about to let a North Vietnamese ambush deprive them of the victory they needed. The morning after the debacle at Landing Zone Albany, a briefing officer laid a memorandum on the President's desk that said: "The press this morning is reporting heavy U.S. casualties as a result of a Communist ambush of a unit of the 1st Cavalry near Plei Me. The headquarters of the 1st Cavalry Division has sent in an official report stating this is erroneous." In Saigon and Pleiku, stone-faced briefers denied there had been an ambush. It was, they insisted, "a meeting engagement," and although 155 Americans had been killed, casualties had been "moderate" and the Americans victorious. Of a hundred such victories and a thousand such lies, defeat was born.

After the "meeting engagement," the North Vietnamese disappeared into Cambodia, and while Johnson was prepared to make Vietnam America's war, he was not ready to let American soldiers pursue the enemy across an international boundary. "I suppose from a strictly military point of view, going into Cambodia would have been a net plus," says Wil-



A muffled drum. McNamara warned LBJ of a Vietnam stalemate

liam Bundy. "But there was a good deal more at stake. We were trying to preserve a facade of Cambodian neutrality."

That facade eventually crumbled, and most of the other lessons of the Ia Drang had to be learned more than 550,000 times a year, every year. President Johnson refused to declare a state of emergency or to extend enlistments and call up the Reserves. Instead, he limited the Army tour of duty in Vietnam to 12 months (13 months for Marines), ensuring that the war would be fought by an endless stream of newcomers. The enlistments of many Ia Drang veterans expired within weeks; the rest were gone within six months, and their training and experience went with them.

**Broken back.** The war was fed by a river of half-trained draftees and shake-and-bake lieutenants—many of them fine soldiers but all of them condemned to be dropped piecemeal into combat units with no institutional memory of what had gone before and no concern for what would come after. The backbone of the Army, the career sergeants, were ordered back to Vietnam again and again, until they were killed,

wounded or quit the Army in disgust.

"It may be a terrible thing to say, but it might have been better in the long run if we had lost this first battle, as we did the first major battles of World War II and Korea," says military analyst Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., who was an infantry company commander in Vietnam. "Those first defeats made us understand that we were in danger of losing the war and that concentrated our efforts."

The Ia Drang made headlines only briefly while the decisions that shaped the war were made secretly in Washington and Hanoi. No

TV cameras were on hand at Landing Zone X-Ray—only one young war correspondent with a 35-mm Nikon camera, two notebooks and an M-16 rifle. (His account of the battle begins on page 36.)

In November of 1965, few Americans were thinking very deeply about their country's slow-motion drift into war. Only the faintest early warnings of a coming earthquake registered on social seismographs. Martin Luther King, Jr., marched at Selma, Ala., Watts burned and, on October 15, poet Allen Ginsberg led 10,000 protesters in an antiwar march in Berkeley. Republican Senator Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois said the sight was "enough to make any person loyal to this country weep." "Doctor Zhivago" and "The Sound of Music" packed the nation's movie houses. London contributed the miniskirt, bell-bottom pants and the Beatles' movie "Help!" The kids rocked to "A Hard Day's Night" while their elders hummed "It Was a Very Good Year." America in 1965 was a lot closer, spiritually, to 1959 than it was to 1969. Perhaps 1965 was a good year, but it was the last good one for a long time. ■

BY JOSEPH L. GALLOWAY

### America's first battles

America's nine wars have all been shaped by their first major ground battles, five victories and five defeats. (There were two first battles in World War II, one in North Africa and one in the Pacific.)

- **Long Island:** Aug. 27, 1776. Outnumbered by the British, poorly trained colonial forces ran away from the enemy.

- **Queenston Heights:** Oct. 13, 1812. The British easily defeated the New York militia alongside the Niagara River.

- **The Rio Grande:** May 8-9, 1846. The U.S. easily won two battles against Mexico at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.

- **First Bull Run:** July 19, 1861. The Federal Army was whipped by the Confederates at Manassas, Va.

- **San Juan Hill and El Caney:**

July 1-2, 1898. Americans defeated the Spanish in Cuba in these two decisive battles.

- **Cantigny:** May 28-31, 1918. The Americans beat the Germans, showing the importance of keeping infantry within range of artillery support.

- **Buna:** November, 1942-January, 1943. Americans and Australians defeated the Japanese on the coast of New Guinea.

- **Kasserine Pass:** Jan. 30-Feb.

22, 1943. The American Army was badly beaten by Rommel's battle-hardened Afrika Korps.

- **Task Force Smith:** July 5, 1950. North Korean tanks ripped through a poorly armed U.S. unit outside Osan.

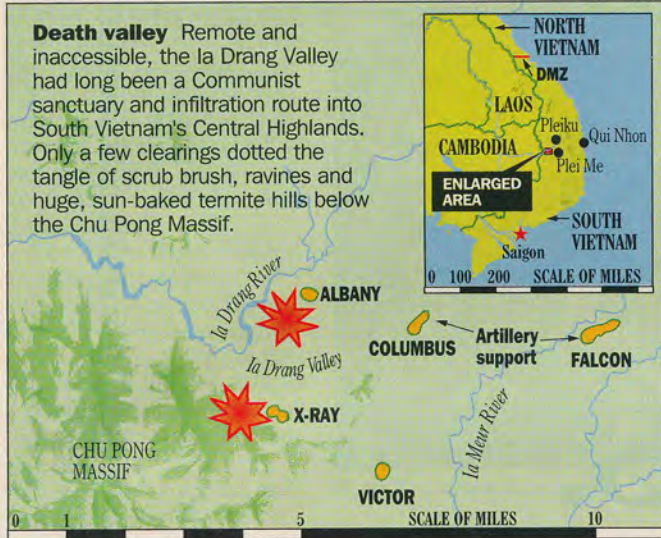
- **Ia Drang Valley:** Nov. 14-20, 1965. American forces won a costly victory over North Vietnamese regulars.

USIV&WR—Basic data: America's First Battles by Charles Heller and William Stofft



USN&WR

**Death valley** Remote and inaccessible, the Ia Drang Valley had long been a Communist sanctuary and infiltration route into South Vietnam's Central Highlands. Only a few clearings dotted the tangle of scrub brush, ravines and huge, sun-baked termite hills below the Chu Pong Massif.



# Vietnam Story

*The word was the Ia Drang would be a walk. The word was wrong*

BY JOSEPH L. GALLOWAY



As the sun rose on Nov. 14, 1965, a clear, hot Sunday, four U.S. Army helicopters flew, as unobtrusively as such machines can, across the rugged Ia Drang Valley in South Vietnam's Central Highlands. Below them was a wild and desolate place that in normal times offered a living only to elephants, tigers and a few Montagnard tribesmen. Lt. Col. Harold G. Moore scanned the terrain intently, scribbling notes and marking his maps. He was about to lead the U.S. 7th Cavalry on its most audacious charge since Lt. Col. George A. Custer led his troopers to the Little Bighorn 89 years earlier.

Like Custer, Hal Moore had no use for timidity or half measures. The lean, blond Kentuckian, a 43-year-old graduate of West Point, Class of '45, demanded the best from his men and gave the same in return. Behind his back, the 457 officers and men of the 1st Battalion of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), sometimes called Moore by Custer's nickname, "Yellow Hair." It was a soldier's compliment, and Moore took it as such.

Moore was hunting big game in the tangle of ravines, tall elephant grass and termite hills around the base of Chu Pong Massif, a 2,401-foot mountain whose forests stretched 5 miles into Cambodia. A month earlier, the 2,200-man 33rd People's Army Regiment—part of the first full North Vietnamese Army division to take the field since the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954—had attacked the camp at Plei Me, a vital listening post astride the road to Pleiku, the provincial capi-



**A helicopter war.** Specialist 4 Vincent Cantu races to load a dead

tal. Saigon and Washington feared that if the North Vietnamese overran Pleiku, Route 19 to Qui Nhon on the coast would be wide open, and South Vietnam could be cut in two. But one of the North Vietnamese commanders, Maj. Gen. Huong Minh Phuong, told *U.S. News* in a recent interview that the attack on Plei Me was launched only to bait a trap for the inevitable South Vietnamese relief column. The ambush almost certainly would have succeeded but for one new and, for the North Vietnamese, very troubling development.

For years, the U.S. Army had sought to free foot soldiers from the tyranny of terrain. Its solution was the helicopter, the ungainly bumblebee that had made a limited debut in Korea. Equipped with the durable UH-1D Huey and its cargo-carrying cousin, the Chinook, and bearing the colors of the 1st Cavalry Division, the first sky troopers had arrived in Vietnam from Fort Benning, Ga., in mid-September to make the battlefield a three-dimensional nightmare for the enemy.





cavalryman aboard a waiting Huey. Choppers were the troops' lifeline

So when the South Vietnamese ventured out to relieve Plei Me, they had moved under an umbrella of howitzers lifted into position by the Chinooks. When the North Vietnamese sprang their ambush, the South Vietnamese had—uncharacteristically—fought like hell. The North's commander, Gen. Chu Huy Man, withdrew toward the Ia Drang, a sanctuary so far from any road that no enemy had ever dared penetrate it. But with the arrival of the air cavalry, no place was safe. It ferreted out North Vietnamese food caches, underground hospitals, even headquarters. "You jumped all over, even into our rear area," says General Phung. "You created disorder

among our troops. You made it very hard for our commanders to keep up with the plan. They were very anxious about the psychological effects of your helicopters and artillery leapfrogging among these green troops."

Hal Moore and his boss, brigade commander Col. Thomas "Tim" Brown, had seen a red star marking Chu Pong Mountain, 17 miles northwest of Plei Me, on an intelligence map at division headquarters. "What's that?" they had asked. "A big enemy base camp," came the reply. Their eyes lit up. For four long days, their men had been beating the brush east of Plei Me and finding nothing but vicious red tree ants, thorny "wait a minute" vines and jungle so dense that, at times, a battalion was lucky to move 200 yards in an hour. They persuaded their bosses that it made more sense to go where the enemy was.

Operating on what Brown later described as "strong instincts and flimsy intelligence," Moore was about to hit the jackpot. His battalion of 28 officers and 429 men—four officers and 199 men short of full strength—was about to attack two regiments of North Vietnamese regulars, or more than 3,000 very good soldiers.

Moore's target area contained only three clearings where helicopters could land. One was so small that only two could land at a time; a second was filled with tree stumps. That left a big clearing that Moore designated Landing Zone X-Ray. It could take eight choppers, but it was located directly beneath Chu Pong Mountain. If the North Vietnamese were occupying the high ground, Landing Zone X-Ray could be a death trap. As the battalion assembled at pickup points around Plei Me Camp, the word was that

X-Ray would be one more little walk in the sun and then home to base camp for hot food and cold showers. The word, as usual, was wrong.

At 10:17, two batteries of 105-mm howitzers—12 guns that had been deposited by Chinooks in a clearing 6.2 miles east of X-Ray—began firing on X-Ray and, as a diversion, the two other clearings in the area. After 20 minutes, the barrage stopped and helicopter gunships poured .30-caliber machine-gun fire and 2.75-inch rockets into the woods nearby. At 10:48 the first eight Hueys landed at X-Ray.

Moore jumped out of the first helicopter with Sgt. Maj. Basil

**U.S. News** Senior Editor Joseph L. Galloway was the only civilian correspondent at Landing Zone X-Ray. He hitched a helicopter ride to the battlefield on the first night of the fight, riding atop crates of hand grenades. One day past his 24th birthday, the young United Press International correspondent was savoring his only present, a front-row seat at the biggest battle of the war. Galloway left Vietnam in 1966, vowing never to return, but was sent back in 1971, 1973, 1975 and 1990.



## SPECIAL REPORT

Plumley, radio operator Specialist 4 Bob Oullette and a Vietnamese interpreter close behind. Plumley, a laconic West Virginian, was on his third war. He was what young paratroopers admiringly call “a four-jump bastard”—one of the few men who had survived all four World War II combat parachute jumps made by the 82nd Airborne Division. He had jumped again in Korea with the 187th Airborne.

The lead elements of Capt. John Herren’s 119-man Bravo Company ran toward the tree line, firing their rifles, while the second wave of choppers landed. Moore now had nearly 100 men on the ground, but it would be 35 minutes before any of the 16 Hueys assigned to him could return with more troops. If the landing zone came under attack, Herren was his most experienced company commander. He had run Bravo for 18 months, and he knew his men and his business.

Moore already was rewriting the rules of helicopter assault landings. Rather than spread his men in a thin circle around the clearing, he kept most of Herren’s troops concealed in a clump of trees near the center of the landing zone, ready to react to any threat, and he sent four six-man squads 100 yards in every direction. Within 30 minutes they captured a prisoner. The straggler said he was a deserter who had been hiding in the brush for five days. His next words were chilling: “There are three battalions on the mountain who want very much to kill Americans but haven’t been able to find any.”

By now the rest of Herren’s men and the first men from Capt. Ramon A. Nadal II’s Alpha Company had landed. Tony Nadal was a West Point classmate of Herren’s and an Army brat, the son of Col. Ramon A. Nadal, West Point ’28. He had already served in Vietnam with the Special Forces, and when he had heard that the 1st Cavalry Division was headed over, he had driven to Fort Benning and pleaded for a job. Hal Moore made Nadal his intelligence officer, and on the voyage across the Pacific, Nadal had lectured the battalion on what was waiting for them. He got his company in October.

Moore believed what the prisoner was saying. He told Herren to push his men toward the mountain, paying particular attention to a finger of high ground that jutted out toward the landing zone. He told Nadal to get ready to move his Alpha Company toward the mountain on Herren’s left, just as soon as enough of Capt. Robert Edwards’s Charlie Company were on the ground to guard the landing zone.

### ENGAGEMENT: Walking in Custer’s footsteps

**DAY 1** By 1:30, Capt. John Herren’s men were under attack by about 250 troops, and he radioed that his 2nd Platoon, on the right, was in danger of being cut off. The platoon was commanded by Lt. Henry Herrick, a red-haired Californian fresh out of Officer Candidate School who had joined the division along with a gaggle of other green lieutenants a month before it sailed for Vietnam. In October, after a soldier drowned when

Herrick ordered a river crossing without a safety rope, his platoon’s senior man, Sgt. Carl Palmer, had complained to Herren: “Something has to be done about the lieutenant or he’ll get us all killed.” Herrick was, in the words of an OCS classmate, “a balls-to-the-wall kind of guy—a hard charger.”

This time, Herrick charged too hard. As his platoon trotted up the finger of land, the young lieutenant spotted a few enemy troops. The North Vietnamese fled and Herrick swung his 27 men in hot pursuit. Within minutes, they were more than 125 yards to the right of the rest of Bravo Company. Seconds later, they ran straight into 150 North Vietnamese headed down the mountain from the west. Herrick’s platoon, which the headline writers would name “the Lost Platoon,” was quickly surrounded. With help from one of Nadal’s platoons led by Lt. W. J. “Joe” Marm, Herren pushed to within 75 yards of Herrick’s position before being driven back. Americans were dropping, wounded and dead, in the dry grass all around.

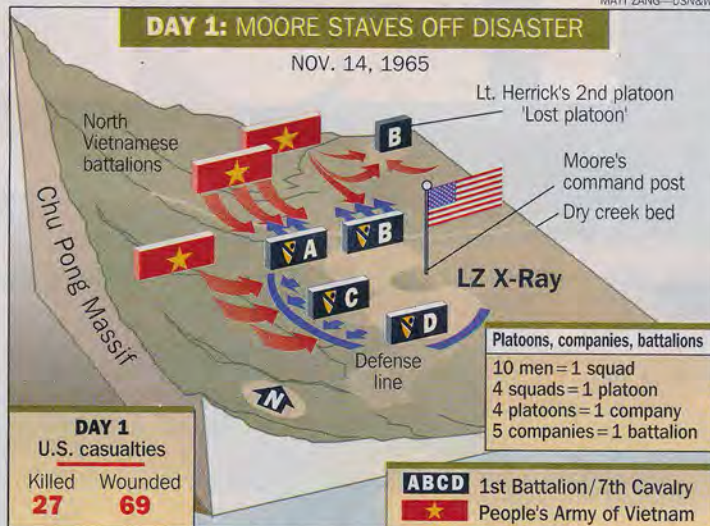
Below on X-Ray, Moore urgently called for air, artillery and helicopter-gunship strikes on the North Vietnamese at-

tack routes down the mountain and sent the rest of Nadal’s men up to reinforce Herren. As Nadal moved toward Herren’s left flank, he ran into 100 to 150 North Vietnamese charging down a dry creek bed—a natural highway that led off the mountain straight to the heart of the landing zone. “They’re PAVN [People’s Army of Vietnam],” the Vietnam veteran yelled into his radio. These were no black-pajama guerrillas pouring off the mountain. They were North Vietnamese regulars in khaki battle dress, their pith helmets camouflaged with clumps of elephant grass. Most were armed with Soviet-made AK-47 rifles, and all carried big pouches full of wooden-handled “potato masher” hand grenades. They also had Maxim heavy machine guns and RPG-2 shoulder-fired rockets.

Bill Beck, a 22-year-old machine gunner from Harrisburg, Pa., was in Nadal’s company. “We were left of the dry creek bed, about 30 yards, and moving forward toward Chu Pong,” he recalls. “I heard Bob Hazen, the radio operator, yelling about Lieutenant Taft being hit, that he was hit in the neck and bleeding to death. I could see Hazen leaning over Taft when a North Vietnamese blasted him from behind, and I saw his radio explode into pieces.” A handsome 6-footer from Highland Park, Ill., 23-year-old Robert Taft was the first young lieutenant to die in the Ia Drang Valley.

Out in the landing zone, the choppers were bringing in the first men of Bob Edwards’s Charlie Company. A native of Trenton, N.J., Edwards had entered the Army straight from Lafayette College, where he had finished at the top of his ROTC class. He was, in Hal Moore’s view, “a superb and very perceptive leader—aloof and strictly business.”

Moore was deeply worried about his left flank. Lieutenant Herrick’s charge far to the right seemed to have confused the enemy commander; the North Vietnamese attacks were now shifting to the left, and Moore had to shift with them. He ran into the landing zone under heavy fire, grabbed Edwards at the helicopter door and “yelled at him to *run* his men toward the mountain, tie in with Nadal’s company on the right and



**Lost platoon.** Herrick's men are cut off; Herren and Nadal are beaten back. Bob Edwards's C Company gets on line just in time



get ready to be attacked in strength." The young captain sped off in the direction Moore pointed, waving at his 106 men to follow. Within a few minutes, they had found cover or scraped shallow holes in the woods just off the landing zone. A minute or two later, a wave of more than 550 North Vietnamese slammed into the thin line of waiting American riflemen.

Moore and Sergeant Major Plumley had been in constant motion on the battleground and the landing zone, shifting newly arriving troops to where they were needed most. When a new flight arrived, Moore stood in the open, guiding the helicopters to the safest landing spots. "After giving Edwards his orders, I was walking along the line by the creek bed when the firing around my head took on a distinctly different sound—like a hell of a lot of bees," Moore remembers. "I felt a firm hand on my shoulder. It was Sergeant Major Plumley, shouting above the noise of the guns: 'Sir, if you don't find some cover you're going to go down, and if you go down we all go down.'" Moore reluctantly moved to the waist of the figure-8 clearing and set up his command post behind a big termite hill.

Landing Zone X-Ray was now, as the pilots put it, "very, very hot." Maj. Bruce Crandall was in charge of the 16 helicopters assigned to the mission. He and his 6-foot-6 sidekick, Capt. Ed "Too Tall to Fly" Freeman, along with their wingmen, brought reinforcements, ammunition and precious water, and they carried out the wounded. If Moore said it was O.K. to land, they landed. Crandall flew two choppers this day—his first was crippled when it hit a line of trees hauling wounded out of the battle. Crandall vividly recalls one flight: "I saw a North Vietnamese firing at us from just outside my rotor blades [20 feet away]. After taking on wounded, I pulled pitch [lifted out] in a hurry. I had three dead and three wounded, including my crew chief, who was shot in the throat."

Hanoi's Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap says his soldiers learned how to fight the U.S. helicopters in the Ia Drang, and perhaps they did. But they did not have the weapons on hand to apply those lessons—the Chinese-made heavy anti-aircraft machine guns that, if they had been deployed on Chu Pong Mountain, could have closed Landing Zone X-Ray. With their rifles and light machine guns, the North Vietnamese took a toll of American aviators, but during three days of battle only two of Crandall's helicopters were disabled—and both were put back in service after the fight. Later in the war, however, the lessons the North Vietnamese learned at X-Ray would take a heavy toll.

Up on the mountain, Henry Herrick's Lost Platoon was desperately clinging to a 25-yard circle atop a slight rise. The North Vietnamese overran one of the Americans' two M-60 machine guns. Sgt. Ernie Savage says, "I heard Sergeant Hurdle down there cursing, even over the noise of the firefight. He was famous for that. 'Motherf----. Sonofabitch. Sonofabitch,' I heard him holler. And then they threw grenades in on him." Sgt. Paul Hurdle, the platoon's weapons-squad leader, had survived the retreat from the Chosin Reservoir in Korea and had blown the last bridge behind the retreating Marines, but he did not survive this day. The enemy turned Hurdle's machine gun around and

began using it on the Americans. Herrick was mortally wounded. His last words to Savage were: "I'm glad I could give my life for my country."

Command of the 2nd Platoon passed to Sgt. Carl Palmer. Specialist 4 Galen Bungum, who had left a dairy farm in Hayfield, Minn., for the Army, says that on the way up the mountain Sergeant Palmer said: "Bungum, I'll be 43 years old tomorrow, but I don't believe I'll live to see it." Within minutes of taking over, Palmer was shot in the head. Savage and the others laid him behind a log. Shortly afterward, an American hand grenade taken from the slain machine-gun crew sailed over the clearing and exploded beneath Palmer. He died instantly. The mortar forward observer, Sgt. Robert Stokes, assumed it was his turn to take charge, stood up and said: "We've got to get out of here." He was shot through the head and killed instantly.

Command of the Lost Platoon fell to Ernie Savage. A 21-year-old buck sergeant from McCalla, Ala., he had been with the battalion more than two years and was field smart and cool under pressure. He grabbed Stokes's radio and called artillery fire down in a very tight circle. By then, eight of the Lost Platoon's 27 men were dead and 12 wounded.

**Mid-afternoon.** Specialist 4 Vincent Cantu of Refugio, Tex., had only 10 days left in the Army when he landed in X-Ray. The local draft board had called him up the day before John Kennedy was assassinated, ending Cantu's fling as lead guitarist and vocalist for the Rockin' Dominoes, a local band whose theme song was "Born to Lose." Now an 81-mm mortar gunner, Cantu was riveted by the deadly drama around him. "We were so close our mortar tubes were pointing almost

straight up. The pleas over the radio were desperate. We could all hear Sergeant Stokes, our forward observer, with the trapped platoon. By 2:30 or 3 p.m., it seemed like half the battalion was either dead or wounded. I remember rolling this dead soldier in a poncho. He was face down and when I turned him over I saw the lieutenant's bars on him. I snapped. I thought: These rounds don't have any regard."

By now, Capt. Ray LeFebvre's Delta Company was arriving at Landing Zone X-Ray. LeFebvre had served an earlier tour and was fluent in Vietnamese. Because of that, he had been tapped for a staff job in civil affairs at division headquarters. Like Tony Nadal, he had turned up on Hal Moore's doorstep begging for a rifle company. "Something's going to happen," LeFebvre had said. "I want to be in on it." He got his wish. "I started to unhook my seat belt when I felt a round crease the back of my neck," LeFebvre remembers. "I turned to my right and saw that my radio operator had been hit in the left side of his head. I grabbed his radio and jumped out . . . I fired two magazines of M-16 ammo at the enemy, then I was hit." LeFebvre was in action approximately 10 minutes; in that time, he and four men around him killed 25 North Vietnamese.

Out near the dry creek bed, machine gunner Bill Beck was doing double duty while his best friend, Russell Adams, poured fire on the enemy. Beck alternated between patching up wounded Americans and firing at the North Vietnamese with a notoriously inaccurate .45-caliber automatic pistol. He



**Moving out.** The heat and the dust made war in the scrub brush and elephant grass of the Ia Drang hellish and deadly

PETER ARNETT—AP



## SPECIAL REPORT

spotted Captain LeFebvre, "moaning, his hand blown apart and his thigh equally bad." Beck bandaged him up and yelled for a medic. LeFebvre was hauled back to the landing zone, where the battalion intelligence officer, Capt. Tom Metsker, wounded in the shoulder, helped him onto a waiting helicopter. Metsker was hit again and killed at the chopper door.

Back on the line, Beck heard someone scream, "Adams is hit." He ran forward to find his fellow Pennsylvanian lying beside his silent machine gun. "The side of his head was a mess. He was trying to talk to me but nothing was coming out. His helmet lay in front of me with a bullet hole in it, and I turned it over. It seemed like Adams's entire brain fell out in front of me. I was horrified. I screamed over and over for the medic."

Beck took over his friend's machine gun. He was now holding the battalion's left flank, directly in the path of the enemy. Alone, mumbling every prayer he could remember, Beck stopped them. "They were shooting at me, bullets hitting the ground beside me and cracking above my head. I was firing as fast as I could in long bursts."

Landing Zone X-Ray was shrouded in thick smoke and dust. "It was a bedlam of men yelling and screaming in English, Vietnamese and Spanish, a constant roar of rifle and machine-gun fire punctuated by the shocking explosions of bombs, artillery shells and rockets," Moore says. He was on the radio to the 3rd Brigade commander, Col. Tim Brown, asking for reinforcements. Brown had a company on alert.

**Late afternoon.** At about 3:45, Moore ordered Nadal's and Herren's companies to pull back, to evacuate their wounded and dead and to prepare for an attack, preceded by air and artillery barrages, to rescue the Lost Platoon. It began at 4:20. But the enemy had moved forward and dug shallow foxholes; snipers had climbed into the treetops. "We stood up, got out of the trench and the whole world exploded," recalls Lt. Dennis Deal, one of Herren's platoon leaders. "Men were dropping all over the place. The assault line first went to their knees, and then to a crawling position."

Deal's platoon was pinned down by machine-gun fire from a termite hill when suddenly Deal saw "someone get up and charge, just like in a John Wayne movie." Deal adds: "He ran 25 yards across the open ground while all of us were crawling—the firing was so intense. I saw him throw a grenade behind a termite hill, wait for it to go off, move around to the rear of the termite hill and empty his rifle. Then he fell to his knees. I said to myself: Please get up, whoever you are, don't be hurt."

It was Lt. Joe Marm, another Pennsylvanian who was Nadal's favorite junior officer, another of the batch of green lieutenants who had joined the battalion that summer. Marm had first tried to take out the enemy machine gun with a shoulder-fired light antitank (LAW) rocket. Later, he said he charged the machine-gun nest simply "to get the job done and save time." He destroyed the gun and killed a dozen North Vietnamese operating and protecting it. As he mopped up the last of the enemy, a sniper round smashed into his face and out through his throat. The medics performed a battlefield

tracheotomy. Marm survived to receive the Medal of Honor.

Nadal says, "By this time, all my platoon leaders had been killed or wounded and a number of my squad leaders killed." Herren's men gained only about 100 yards; Nadal's moved forward 150. It was now 5:40, and Moore reluctantly ordered them to pull back again. The artillery batteries had no smoke shells but offered to substitute white-phosphorus shells—the fearsome "Willie Peter" rounds that scattered tiny flaming fragments and laid down a choking cloud of white smoke.

Down on the critical left flank, Edwards's Charlie Company was relatively unhurt but the field in front of it was littered with North Vietnamese bodies. Delta Company had joined the thin line, and the reinforcements that Moore had requested—120 men of Bravo Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry under Capt. Myron Diduryk—began arriving shortly after 5 p.m. Sgt. John Setelin, a 21-year-old Virginian, was with them: "As the chopper dropped in, I caught a glimpse of men in khaki, and I thought we must really be desperate if we are bringing in guys without giving them time to change into their

fatigue uniforms. Then I realized their rifles were pointed at us; that was the enemy. When we jumped out, people were firing down on us; the gooks were up in the trees."

**Nighttime.** By 7 o'clock, Moore had his men digging in. For the first time, the Americans encircled the entire landing zone. Until now, Moore had thrown every man he had into a broad semicircle facing the mountain. The back side of X-Ray had been wide open, but, fortunately, no one had come knocking.

The wounded got immediate attention from medics, more from the battalion surgeon's men at Moore's command post, then were

flown as quickly as possible to a clearing station at Camp Holloway in Pleiku set up by C Company of the 15th Medical Battalion—"Charlie Med." Capt. George Kelling, who ran Charlie Med, recalls: "It was often a race against time to get blood into the soldier faster than he was losing it, while the surgeons tied off the bleeders. We threw caution to the wind and often gave a patient four intravenous cut-downs—with four corpsmen squeezing the blood bags as hard as they could. It was not unusual for the patient to go into convulsions as a reaction to the rapid infusion of so much cold blood. But the alternative was to let him die."

By dark, all the wounded had been evacuated and the dead collected at Moore's command post; ammunition and water had been distributed; mortars and artillery had been calibrated to fire on a tight ring just 25 yards outside the American lines. Moore now made the rounds. "Morale was high," he remembers. "We knew we were facing a tough enemy. We had lost a lot of good men, but we had stopped them."

Up on the slopes of Chu Pong, the Lost Platoon was on its own; Sergeant Savage had been told that there would be no rescue tonight. He and his men could hear the North Vietnamese talking and took some comfort from radioing instructions that brought artillery fire down on the voices. During the night, with the wounded pressed into service, too, Savage's platoon withstood three North Vietnamese attacks, including one launched by eerie bugle calls from the mountain above.



**The boys in khaki.** Few prisoners were taken. General Giap's peasant soldiers stood and died in the American firestorm

COURTESY LT. GEN. HAROLD G. MOORE



## SPECIAL REPORT

After 10, Crandall and Freeman finally shut down their helicopters at the Turkey Farm, a temporary chopper pad near Pleiku, 37 miles northeast of X-Ray. They and their fellow pilots had flown nonstop since 6 a.m. "When I tried to get out of the aircraft, it caught up with me — my legs gave out, and I fell to the ground vomiting and shaking," Crandall recalls. "It took 15 gallons of water to wash the blood out of my first ship, more for the second one I flew that day." Moore's battalion had lost 27 dead and 69 wounded, leaving it with 13 officers and 326 men. The artillerymen at Landing Zone Falcon had fired 4,000 rounds in support of Moore's men at X-Ray.

### FIX BAYONETS: Holding the thin green line

**DAY 2**

By first light, at 6:30, Moore ordered his companies to send out scouts to check for enemy infiltrators and snipers who might have crawled up to the American

lines during the night. The scouts from Charlie Company ran into trouble barely 100 yards forward of the line, on the left.

Some 300 North Vietnamese, heavily camouflaged and crawling on hands and knees, attacked. The scouts were taking casualties as they tried to pull back. Sgt. Robert Jemison of Columbus, Ga., recalls: "The patrols sent out early saved us from being surprised. They came running back, yelling, 'They're coming, Sarge, they're coming. Lots of 'em.' Our machine guns and rifles cut them down."

Pfc. Willie Godboldt was hit and yelled for help. Jemison was leaving his hole when the platoon commander, Lt. John Geoghegan, stood up, saying, "I'll go." Geoghegan was shot in the head and killed. He was an honors graduate of Pennsylvania Military College. He had deferred his Army commitment for two years to earn a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1964 had married his college sweetheart. John and Barbara Geoghegan spent the next year working for Catholic Relief Services in Tanzania. Their daughter, Camille, was born two months before he left for Vietnam.

At 7:15, Delta Company had come under heavy attack, and X-Ray was under pressure from two sides. "Hand grenades were exploding all around us," recalls Sgt. Warren E. Adams. "One fell in the mortar guys' hole. Sergeant Niemeyer threw a leg over it and his leg was blown off. Nobody else was hurt. I decided the grenades were coming from an anthill nearby, so I grabbed my radio operator and took off with a grenade in each hand and we cleaned up six or eight Vietnamese."

Specialist 4 Willard Parish, 24, of Bristow, Okla., was a Charlie Company mortarman, but this morning he manned a machine gun. "I looked to the front, and it seemed like the North Vietnamese were growing out of the weeds," he remembers. "The training took over. I just fired that weapon, totally unaware of the time, the conditions. I remember a lot of noise, a lot of yelling, air strikes. Then quiet." When he ran out of machine-gun ammunition Parish stood up with a .45-caliber automatic pistol in each hand and kept shooting. Lat-

er, they counted more than 100 enemy dead in front of his machine gun. Parish was awarded the Silver Star for valor.

By now Captain Edwards was urgently calling for reinforcements. As Nadal sent one of his platoons to help Edwards, the North Vietnamese charged Nadal's own position. The landing zone was now being hit from three sides. Machine-gun fire swept over the landing zone and through Moore's command post. The colonel's radio operator, Bob Oullette, a bespectacled young French Canadian, slumped over. The crusty medical-platoon sergeant, Thomas H. Keeton, walked over: "I thought he'd gone to sleep. I kicked the hell out of him, told him to get off his ass and help us load the wounded. I picked up his helmet and a bullet fell out of it. It had knocked him cold."

Moore asked for more reinforcements; brigade commander Col. Tim Brown had Alpha Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry on alert.

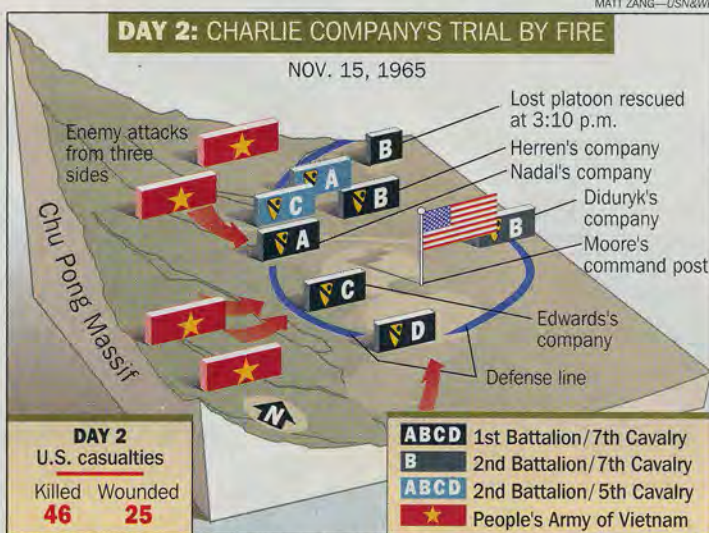
The North Vietnamese were pressing their attack against Edwards's Charlie Company. "I stood up to observe better

and saw the North Vietnamese at a distance of 150 yards, a very large force," Edwards recalls. "I saw a couple of them in hand-grenade range moving toward us. I threw a grenade and was shot under the arm and in the back. I didn't lose consciousness, but I couldn't stand up." Though badly wounded, Edwards remained in command for 3 more hours, until the attack was finally beaten off. Then his radio operator, Ernie Paolone, who was also wounded, dragged him to the aid station. The 1st Platoon commander, Lt. Neil Kroger, 24, was found dead in his foxhole, surrounded by four North Vietnamese he had killed with his bayonet. A fifth, strangled to death, was in the hole with him, with Kroger's hands locked around his neck.

At around 8, with the North Vietnamese pressing their attacks against Edwards's Charlie Company and Nadal's Alpha Company, the Delta Company antitank platoon, which had traded in its unneeded antitank weapons for six .30-caliber M-60 machine guns — each with a full four-man crew and triple the usual load of ammunition — came under heavy attack. The three M-60 machine guns of the reconnaissance platoon also had been added to that sector of the line. "They picked the wrong place," Moore says. "Adams's machine guns chewed them up; they were killing guys 700 or 800 yards out."

But Landing Zone X-Ray was in grave danger of being overrun. The mortar men, set up in pits near Moore's command post, were firing both their 81-mm mortars and their rifles and were taking heavy enemy fire. One mortar was hit and knocked out. At least two others grew so hot from rapid firing that there was danger of a shell cooking off — exploding before it left the tube. Water was scarce, so the sergeants and their gunners stood and urinated on the mortars to cool them.

Moore now ordered the reconnaissance platoon, his last reserve, to counterattack into the Charlie and Delta Company sectors, and he called in the helicopters carrying the Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, reinforcements. He then pulled Diduryk and one of his platoons back into reserve, on alert to reinforce any section of the line that crumbled.



**Hand-to-hand combat.** Edwards's men hold. The Lost Platoon is rescued and D Company's nine machine guns do a deadly job



Moore called for all his units to mark their locations for the pilots overhead and the artillery observers by throwing colored smoke grenades. Air Force Lt. Charlie Hastings, the forward air controller, says, "On the second morning, I used the code word for an American unit in trouble and received all available aircraft in South Vietnam for close air support. We had aircraft stacked at 1,000-foot intervals from 7,000 feet to 35,000 feet, each waiting to receive a target." Two more batteries of 105-mm howitzers were deposited in Landing Zone Columbus, 2.5 miles from X-Ray, putting a total of 24 artillery pieces in support of Moore. As all that blessed relief rained down, an accident came perilously close to wiping out Moore and his command post. An Air Force F-100 Super Sabre jet mistakenly dropped two canisters of napalm into the area. Moore was shouting at Hastings, the air controller, to call off the F-100 pilot's wingman, who was about to release his napalm, too.

Sgt. George Nye of the 8th Engineer Battalion had come in with a small demolition team to help Moore's battalion. "Two of my people, Pfc. Jimmy D. Nakayama and Specialist 5 James Clark, were a few yards away, and Colonel Moore was hollering something about a wing man and I looked up," Nye recalls. "There were two planes, and one had already dropped his napalm. Then everything was on fire. Nakayama was all black and Clark was all burned and bleeding." Nakayama died. Three days later, Nye learned that Nakayama's wife had given birth to a baby girl on the day her husband was killed. Soon afterward, orders came through approving Nakayama's reserve commission as a second lieutenant.

Just after 9 a.m., with the Alpha Company reinforcements arriving, Moore shifted Diduryk's men into the battered line held by what was left of Edwards's Charlie Company. Sergeant Setelin remembers crawling along that line finding foxhole after foxhole filled with dead Americans. By 10, the enemy attack had been beaten off. Edwards and his men had held.

**Afternoon.** Three hours later, Moore ordered all four companies on the line to move out 300 yards to the front and police the battleground. Dead North Vietnamese and their weapons littered the area. Some enemy dead were neatly stacked behind the termite hills; thick trails of blood marked where others had been dragged away. More than 40 dead Americans were recovered and evacuated. What was left of Charlie Company was pulled out of the line.

Earlier in the day, the brigade commander, Colonel Brown, had moved the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Cavalry, led by Lt. Col. Robert Tully, to Landing Zone Victor, 2 miles from X-Ray, and told them to reinforce Moore. By noon, they were closing in on Moore's position, and what they saw stunned them. Sergeant Adams was on the line when the first of Tully's men marched in. "My God, there's enemy bodies all over this valley," the newcomer shouted. "For the last 30 minutes, we've been walking around and over and through bodies."

Moore now ordered a two-pronged attack — by two companies of Tully's men across the slope of Chu Pong and by Herren's Bravo Company to rescue the Lost Platoon. Herren's men reached the knoll at 3:10. "When I got there I walked over

to where Henry Herrick was lying dead," Lieutenant Deal recalls. "It seemed so unnatural for my friend to be lying stomach down with his face in the red dust. I looked away; I did not want to remember him that way. But I have." Sergeant Savage had not lost a single man after taking command, despite a long night and day of attacks. When Herren's men told them that it was safe to get up, not one of them moved for 5 minutes. "They just stared at us in disbelief," Deal says.

**Nightfall.** With his reinforcements, Moore beefed up the lines. His tally showed that on Day Two his battalion had lost two officers and 44 men killed, three officers and 22 men wounded; the four line companies were down to eight officers and 260 men. Charlie Company had started the day with five officers and 102 men and ended it with no officers and 45 men. A bright moon rose in a clear sky before midnight and lighted the battlefield.

## CHECKMATE: Driving off the enemy



**Chow and ammunition.** A wounded trooper awaits evacuation amid the stockpiled supplies cluttering Moore's command post

**DAY  
3**

At 4:22, an estimated 300 North Vietnamese attacked Capt.

Myron Diduryk's sector from the southeast. Diduryk, 27, a native of the Ukraine who had emigrated to the United States at age 12, was, in Moore's words, "the best battlefield company commander I've ever known, including myself in Korea."

Diduryk had prepared for the possibility of a night attack. His men were dug in deeply, two to a foxhole, and the holes were spaced to provide interlocking support. Before nightfall Diduryk and his artillery observer, Lt. William Lund,

had registered the artillery ranges so the 105-mm howitzers at Landing Zones Falcon and Columbus could fire instantly. Now, by the light of parachute flares kicked out of an Air Force C-123 overhead, Diduryk's men poured rifle and machine-gun fire on the attacking North Vietnamese while Diduryk and Lund directed artillery fire back and forth across the killing zone. The North Vietnamese broke and ran.

Nine minutes after the first attack, they tried again, this time with about 200 men. Again, American artillery and rifle fire chewed them up. The attack shifted to the southwest. The North Vietnamese were thrown back a third time.

"I heard bugles blowing," says Specialist 4 Pat Selleck, a 24-year-old rifleman from New York City. "I saw, in the light of the flares, waves of the enemy coming down off the mountain in a straight line. The company was shooting them like ducks in a pond." Twice during the attacks, Moore's reconnaissance platoon had carried huge loads of ammunition out to Diduryk's men. Less than 2 hours later, at 6:27, the North Vietnamese attacked again, this time directly at Diduryk's command post. Now, in less than 15 minutes, the attackers were dragging off their dead. Diduryk had only six men lightly wounded, but the field in front of him was piled with enemy dead. Diduryk would return to Vietnam for another tour of duty with the 1st Cavalry. In the spring of 1970, in another landing zone, he was killed by a sniper.

Moore now invented something that would be widely used



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for the rest of the Vietnam War. Finding that his companies had plenty of ammunition, he ordered every man on the line, on a signal at 6:55, to shoot anything in front of their lines that worried them. When this "Mad Minute" of random firing began, 50 North Vietnamese leapt up 150 yards forward of Alpha Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry. The North Vietnamese had been sneaking up and assumed the firing meant they had been spotted. They were shot down. Elsewhere along the line, the "reconnaissance by fire" killed six other North Vietnamese, including two snipers shot out of the trees. A third sniper was spotted an hour later trying to climb down and get away. He, too, was killed.

At 9:55, Moore ordered the nine companies now on the line to move forward 500 yards. Within the first 50 yards, Diduryk's men came under heavy fire. Moore pulled them back and called in artillery and air bombardment that killed another 27 of the enemy. The rest of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry, under Lt. Col. Robert McDade, now began arriving at X-Ray from Landing Zone Victor. Specialist 4 Jack Smith, now an ABC-TV correspondent, later wrote: "The 1st Battalion had been fighting continuously for three or four days, and I had never seen such filthy troops. They all had that look of shock. They said little, just looked around with darting, nervous eyes. Whenever I heard a shell coming close, I'd duck but they kept standing. There must have been about 1,000 rotting bodies out there, starting at about 20 feet, surrounding the giant circle of foxholes."

McDade's and Tully's battalions were to relieve Moore's men at X-Ray, but Moore did not hand over his position until every company had accounted for every one of its men. Long ago, at Fort Benning, he had promised his battalion that he would never leave a man on the battlefield, never permit one man to be carried as "missing in action."

In three days and two nights, his battalion and attached units had lost 79 killed and 121 wounded. The enemy had lost an estimated 1,300 dead. Approximately 400 American air sorties had been flown in close support, the artillerymen at Landing Zones Falcon and Columbus had fired some 18,000 shells, and helicopter gunships had fired 3,000 2.75-inch rockets. Before Moore's men left, they were treated to one last spectacular. Shortly after noon, Chu Pong erupted as 24 Guam-based B-52 strategic bombers, for the first time in history, bombed in close support of troops on the ground.

Finally, Moore gave the O.K., and the helicopters began lifting his men out of the valley. Hal Moore, the first man on the ground, was the last man of his battalion to leave. In the cockpit of the helicopter that carried him away were his old pilot buddies Bruce Crandall and Jon Mills. After they landed at Camp Holloway in Pleiku, Moore checked to make certain his men were being taken care of and then rejoined the pilots. "Where can we get a drink around here?" he asked. Crandall and Mills pointed to a small officers' club nearby. Inside, they ordered gin and tonic, but the bartender refused to serve them, pointing disdainfully at Moore: "He's too dirty."

Moore unslung his M-16 rifle and laid it across the bar; Crandall and Mills sighed and pulled out their .38-caliber pistols. "You've got exactly 30 seconds to get some drinks on this bar or I'm going to clean house," Moore said through clenched teeth. They drank, and when it dawned on the crowd who their unwashed and unwanted guest was, they drank for free.

To this point, the Ia Drang Campaign had been a magnificent feat for the cavalry. But before the fighting ended another 155 Americans would die in the Ia Drang Valley.

### AMBUSH: Blundering into disaster

**DAY 4** On the morning after Moore's battalion left X-Ray, with another massive B-52 raid planned on Chu Pong, the two battalions that had relieved Moore's men—Bob McDade's 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry and Bob Tully's 2nd Battalion of the 5th Cavalry—were ordered to march to two nearby landing zones. The brigade commander intended to continue maneuvering to block the enemy's

retreat and to destroy him.

Tully, an experienced commander, marched his men out of X-Ray the same way they had arrived: Two companies abreast with artillery fire pounding the brush ahead of them. In less than 2 hours, his men covered the 2½ miles to Landing Zone Columbus. But McDade, who only three weeks before had been the division's personnel officer, had not commanded troops in 10 years. Staff officers needed a battalion command in order to make colonel, and Maj. Gen. Harry W. O. Kinnard had given McDade his battalion, but not without reservations. He

had sent his personal aide, Maj. Frank Henry, to serve as McDade's second-in-command and to "keep things going till McDade could get his feet wet."

As Tully, who had left first, neared his objective at Landing Zone Columbus, he radioed McDade and offered to have his artillery specialist relay the correct coordinates to McDade's artillery man so that McDade's men would have the same protection on the way out of X-Ray. McDade said it wasn't necessary and moved out.

McDade's lead unit, Alpha Company, was deployed in a wedge formation, and the rear guard—a company borrowed from the 1st Battalion of the 5th Cavalry—was also properly deployed, but those in between marched single file with little regard for security. Some men had gone two days and nights without sleep, and during their frequent stops they sprawled, exhausted, in the grass.

The 8th Battalion of the 66th People's Army Regiment was taking a rice break at midday along the Ia Drang River when scouts reported that the Americans were approaching. McDade's lead unit captured two prisoners, and the Americans halted for 20 minutes while they were interrogated. That permitted the enemy commander time to set up a hasty L-shaped ambush. The North Vietnamese planted their machine guns atop the termite hills and raced through the jungle, drawing the long leg of the L alongside the Americans.



**Myron Diduryk's moment.** Delta Company easily beat off the enemy's last attacks. Hal Moore hands over a now silent battlefield



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As their mortars opened fire, the North Vietnamese regulars maneuvering alongside the American column wheeled and attacked. In the center of the column, Charlie Company took the worst of it, losing 20 killed and many more wounded in the first minute. Some men fired wildly in every direction and another company complained it was being hit by friendly fire. At that point, as the enemy pressed the attack, McDade apparently believed that what was happening was a shootout between Americans. Lt. S. Lawrence Gwin wrote that McDade radioed orders for everyone to cease fire.

A bad situation got worse. By now, the North Vietnamese were in among the Americans and up in the trees. Anyone who moved got shot. Major Henry and the artillery observer got on their radios and began calling in artillery and air bom-

bardments. That prevented a massacre, but with the column stretched out for almost 1,000 yards in the tall grass, the artillery shells and napalm that killed the North Vietnamese also killed Americans. The lead unit, Alpha Company, had spread out around the edge of the clearing before the attack and lost two platoons, 50 men, in the first minutes. It would emerge from Albany with only 20 men left out of 100. Charlie Company, which set off from X-Ray with 110 men, lost 50 killed and 50 wounded.

In late afternoon, Diduryk's Bravo Company, which had left X-Ray with Moore's men, was pulled out of Pleiku and dropped by helicopter into Albany. The cocky veterans of X-Ray drew a perimeter around the clearing and lent courage to the shaken defenders. Another company of the 1st Battalion of the 5th Cavalry marched from Landing Zone Columbus toward the tail end of McDade's half-mile-long column.

### A TALK WITH GENERAL GIAP

## 'There are limits on power'

**T**he man who walks briskly into the Government Guest House in Hanoi looks more like a kindly old grandfather than one of the great warriors of the 20th century. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the man who led an army of peasants against Japan, France and the United States, is 80 this year. Giap, who taught history before he made it, wears his years lightly, as he does his faded green Army tunic with its four stars. He smiles and laughs, pausing to peel bananas for his guests, talking of war and remembrance.

Retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Harold G. "Hal" Moore and U.S. News Senior Editor Joseph L. Galloway asked Giap about the Ia Drang battle and the war with the United States. Excerpts of his remarks:

When I heard the news of the coming of the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry, I predicted that they would use very modern tactics, that this would be very important strategically. This was a highly mobile division, with a high degree of flexibility, capable of launching sudden attacks supported by heavy firepower. But the Americans didn't understand that we had our soldiers almost everywhere; that it was very hard to surprise us. When we heard the helicopters, we went on alert and prepared for battle wherever you landed. Being on the spot, everywhere, was the best mobility of all.

Even advanced weapons have weaknesses. We had our choice of weaknesses. You staged bombing raids in advance of your landings. During that time our soldiers were in their tunnels and bunkers and took

ple's war, waged by the entire people. Our battlefield was everywhere, or nowhere, and the choice was ours.

George Ball wrote an interesting book called *The Discipline of Power*. In Vietnam, your commanders never realized that there are limitations on power, limitations on strength. I read Neil Sheehan's book [*A Bright Shining Lie*], and what I learned was that the most intelligent of men can do the stupidest things.

My deep impression was that the American weapons were very high-tech, very advanced, but the final decisive factor is the people. And that was true in the [Ia Drang] campaign. We had trouble with supplies of water and food. We had no helicopters. Our people had to forage in the jungle for food and drink water from the streams. But our foot soldiers had to be very intelligent, very creative and make their own way.

You ask about Dien Bien Phu: We didn't have any air or armor, and our artillery was smaller than that of the French. Afterward, President Ho Chi Minh joked about this. He liked to say, "At least, General Giap did not lose any planes or tanks at Dien Bien Phu."

At the end of a 90-minute interview, Moore slipped off his wristwatch and presented it to Giap, calling it a small gift "from one old soldier to another." Giap cupped the watch in both hands, visibly moved. Then he turned and embraced an old enemy who, suddenly, was as surprised and moved as Giap was.



Old enemies. Generals Giap and Moore discuss the Ia Drang

very few casualties. When your armed helicopters came we were still in our shelters. Only when the helicopters brought your troops did we emerge, and only then did we start shooting. You Americans were very strong in modern weapons, but we were strong in something else. Our war was peo-



## SPECIAL REPORT

During the afternoon and night, the North Vietnamese roamed the battlefield, killing and being killed in desperate, isolated little incidents. Specialist 4 Jack Smith, who lay wounded in the grass, wrote that the enemy ran around "screaming with glee when they found one of us alive . . . Every few minutes, I heard some guy start screaming 'no, no, no, please,' and then a burst of bullets."

Division headquarters seemed oblivious to the debacle. General Kinnard and his second-in-command, Brig. Gen. Richard Knowles, later said the brigade commander, Colonel Brown, had not alerted them. Brown said he could get no coherent report from McDade. "We had ample resources at hand to reinforce Albany—Hal Moore's men would have gone in a minute—but no one asked," says General Kinnard.

## SILENCE: Counting the cost

**DAY  
5**

When the sun rose, McDade's battalion had lost 155 killed, 125 wounded and at least five men missing in action. A lieutenant stood in front of Specialist 5 Jon Wallenius, a Bravo Company mortar observer, and asked for volunteers to bring in the American dead. First they brought in the whole bodies; then the pieces. Wallenius and the others dragged the ghastly cargo to waiting Chinook helicopters, stacking the last one full to the ceiling. "When we raised the tail ramp, blood poured through the hinges," he says.

Landing Zone Albany was abandoned a day later, and four days after that, one of the Americans missing in action, Pfc. Toby Braveboy, a South Carolinian of Creek Indian descent, staggered into a clearing and, with his bloody undershirt, waved down a passing helicopter. Braveboy had been badly

PHOTOS BY LINDA L. CREIGHTON — USA&WR

### THE BOYS OF 1965

## Where have all the young men gone?



A quarter of a century has passed since the epic battle in the Ia Drang Valley. The boys of 1965 are now the

middle-aged men of 1990:

■ **Lt. Gen. Hal Moore**, 68, retired from the Army in disgust in 1977 when, as deputy chief of staff for personnel, he was ordered to dilute recruiting standards and assign women to duties that would endanger them in wartime. He and his wife Julie divide their time between homes in Auburn, Ala., and Crested Butte, Colo. Moore camps, climbs and skis the Rockies and runs 5 miles every morning to keep fit.

■ **Basil Plumley**, 70, retired from the Army as a command sergeant major on Dec. 31, 1974, after 32 years, 6 months and 4 days on active duty. He worked an additional 15 years as a civilian employe at Martin Army Hospital at Fort Benning, Ga., and, on September 28, retired again. He has a new bird dog and an itch to tramp through the woods.

■ **Ramon A. (Tony) Nadal**, 54, re-



**A charge into history.** Hal Moore, now and then. He demanded the best and gave the same

tired from the Army as a colonel in 1981 and is vice president of human resources at Carlisle SynTec Systems in Carlisle, Pa.

■ **Ernie Savage**, 46, retired from the Army as a sergeant first class in 1982, after 20 years. He works at Fort Benning, Ga., evaluating Army Reserve training.

■ **Bruce Crandall**, 57, retired in 1977 as a lieutenant colonel. He is the city public-works manager of Mesa, Ariz.

■ **Ed (Too Tall to Fly) Freeman**, 62, is still flying, as chief pilot for the U.S. Department of the Interior in Boise, Idaho. He retired as a major in 1967.

■ **Joe Marm**, 48, is a colonel with 26 years of service. He is senior

Army adviser to the 79th Army Reserve Command in Willow Grove, Pa.

■ **John Herren**, 56, retired as a colonel in 1985. He is a civilian specialist on NATO affairs for the Defense Department and lives in Bethesda, Md.

■ **Galen Bungum**, 47, left the Army in April, 1966, and went home to Hayfield, Minn. He operated a dairy farm until 1988, when he sold his cows and took a job in town with IBM. Bungum grows soybeans and corn on his 161-acre farm.

■ **John Setelin**, 46, left Vietnam with three Purple Hearts. He makes his home in Glen Allen, Va., and is a master gunsmith

for the American Historical Foundation in Richmond, Va.

■ **Vincent Cantu**, 49, left the Army in December, 1965. He is a bus driver in Houston, and never went back to his music.

■ **Russell Adams**, 49, helps run the family dairy farm on 500 acres outside Shoemakersville, Pa. He is partly paralyzed as a result of his wounds. He married in 1988, and he and his wife had a baby girl last year.

■ **Bill Beck**, 47, went home to Steelton, Pa. He is now a freelance commercial artist in Harrisburg. He and Russell Adams are still best friends.

■ **Jon Wallenius**, 47, got out of the Army in August, 1966. He



wounded on November 17, played dead while the enemy executed others near him and then crawled off to a creek bed. On the third day, the last man in a squad of North Vietnamese troops passing by spotted Braveboy lying in the brush against the bank and turned, raising his AK-47 rifle to finish him off. Braveboy lifted his shattered left hand in supplication, shaking his head. "He was so young, just a boy, not more than 16 or 17," Braveboy recalled afterward. "He walked away."

### EPILOGUE: Delivering the sad news

The guns were silent at last. But 12,000 miles away, in Columbus, Ga., the sleepy Southern town outside Fort Benning, the tragedy was just beginning to unfold. It was early in the war, and the Army had not yet formed the casualty-notification teams that later delivered and tried to soften the terrible news. The telegrams were simply handed over to taxi

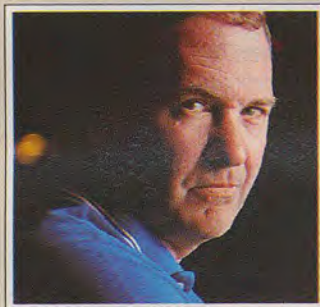
drivers to deliver. Some women collapsed at the sight of a cab pulling up outside; others huddled inside, refusing to answer the knock.

Lt. Col. Hal Moore and his men had done their duty in the Ia Drang Valley. Now Julia Compton Moore—the daughter of an Army colonel, the wife of a future Army general and the mother of two sons who would follow their father to West Point—would do hers. Julie Moore knocked on too many doors in the flimsy thin-walled apartment complexes and trailer parks around Columbus—grieving with the women, comforting the children and wondering when the taxicab might come to her door. She never forgot one very young, Hispanic widow, pregnant with a baby who would come into this world fatherless. Julie Moore attended the funerals of all her husband's men who were buried at Fort Benning.

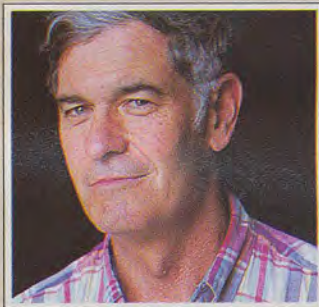
If you want to know the true cost of victory in the Ia Drang, ask Julie Moore. ■



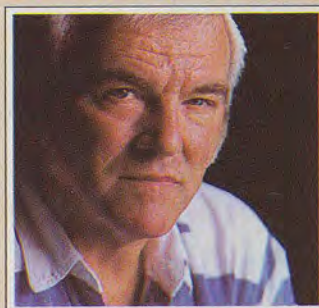
**Tony Nadal.** *An Army brat*



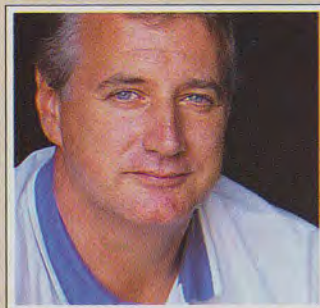
**Joe Marm.** *Medal of Honor*



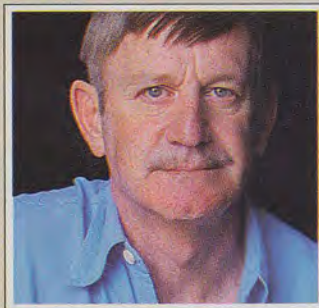
**John Herren.** *Calm and cool*



**Galen Bungum.** *Farm life*



**Bill Beck.** *A good friend*



**George Nye.** *Finding peace*

### Clinton Poley *Ackley, Iowa*

**S**ome might ask why haven't I forgotten about Vietnam after all these years. Every night I rub a towel over all my scars and see them in the mirror. I think of all those guys killed in action, wounded in action and their friends, their relatives and all those altered lives. How could I forget?

In a way, I never feel as bad as when I'm feeling good. I may hear a beautiful song or see a bird or some beautiful scenery, and I think of all the guys who aren't here to enjoy those things. They never owned a microwave oven, never saw man walk on the moon.

It's not so much what we went through as it is knowing what the other guys went through: They died dirty. They died hot, hungry and exhausted. Some died trying to hold in their intestines. They died thinking that their loved ones would never know how they died. They died among ants, scorpions and snakes. They hadn't lain on a mattress in two or three months or even had a cold drink.

I'm so proud to have been there and so proud of the guys who were there with me. I fought for this country and now I own and farm 120 acres of my country. To me that seems proper, and just, and so right.



teaches physical and earth sciences at Venice (Calif.) High School and lives in Lawndale.

■ **Robert Edwards**, 52, retired as a colonel in 1983. He is the assistant borough manager of Dublin, Pa.

■ **Dennis Deal**, 48, left the Army as a captain in December, 1967. He is an accountant and lives in Pittsburgh, Pa.

■ **Camille Geoghegan**, the daughter of Lt. John Geoghegan, turned 25 this year. She works for a bank in Washington, D.C., and belongs to In Touch, an organization that helps friends and relatives of the 58,000 who died in Vietnam contact each other.

■ **George Nye**, 50, served 4 years, 8 months and 10 days in Vietnam, most in the Special Forces. He was evacuated with wounds on Jan. 5, 1970, and spent 18 months in Army hospitals. Nye retired as a sergeant in June, 1975, and lives in Bangor, Me. He spends his days hiking and fishing the Maine woods "where I find some peace."

■ **Warren Adams**, 60, retired as the best-educated command sergeant major in the Army in 1968. Assigned to spy on students in Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Austria in Vienna, a master's degree in history at the

University of Austria in Innsbruck and a Ph.D. in psychology from Munich University. He owns a property management firm in Tampa, Fla.

■ **Robert Jemison, Jr.**, 59, retired as a sergeant first class in 1976, after 24 years service. He spent 32 months in the hospital recovering from wounds suffered in the Ia Drang. Jemison works part time as a security guard in Columbus, Ga., and says, "Each night I go back to Vietnam to fight that same battle over and over."

*The names of 234 men killed in the Ia Drang are engraved on Panel 3-E of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.*