

NARRATIVE

MAJOR BRUCE P. CRANDALL

MEDAL OF HONOR

Major Bruce P. Crandall ... [SSN deleted] ... Commanding officer "A" Company 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) US Army Vietnam distinguished himself on 14 November 1965 in landing zone X-Ray in the battle of the Ia Drang Valley. Where, at great risk to his life, he committed numerous acts of exemplary heroism displaying exceptional devotion to duty and superb concern for his fellow soldiers, which resulted in helping save a historic US battalion on the battlefield. Major Crandall provided a tremendous display of leadership by example and fearlessly courageous when he voluntarily flew his unarmed helicopter through a gauntlet of enemy fire on flight after flight delivering desperately needed ammunition, water and medical supplies into one of the most hotly contested landing zones of the war, totally ignoring the almost unbelievably extreme risk to his life, while serving as Commanding officer and flight leader of a flight of 16 helicopters supporting the 1st Battalion of the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Division. This unit, taking some of the heaviest casualties of the war, out of water and fast running out of ammunition, was engaged in one of the fiercest battles of the Vietnam war against a relentlessly attacking, highly motivated, vastly superior force of approximately two regiments of North Vietnamese Army Infantry, determined to over-run and annihilate them.

On his lift unit's fourth flight, the second 8-helicopter element came under enemy fire while landing in the LZ. Several helicopters were hit and one was later grounded due to the damage inflicted. The battle on the ground intensified greatly as enemy forces were attempting to over-run the LZ. The area was soon covered by a cloud of dust and smoke created by a rain of bombs and ordinance delivered by Air Force fighter bombers; rockets from the Aerial Rocket Artillery; and, a constant barrage of 105 artillery, all landing within a short distance of the landing zone. Soon the unit on the ground was in great danger of being over-run.

On Crandall's next lift, his first element of eight helicopters with Crandall in the lead landed almost on top of enemy soldiers in the landing zone. Some were as close as 20 to 30 yards from the helicopters which came under direct, intense fire. Major Crandall's helicopter as the lead, took the brunt of the fire and the most casualties, having one infantryman killed and two

officers wounded before they could exit the helicopter. The crewchief on his helicopter was also seriously wounded by a round through the throat. A round in the head wounded the pilot of another helicopter further back in the flight. Soldiers departing the helicopters were being hit and killed. Others were taking up firing positions almost immediately after departing the helicopters. The first evacuation of casualties by the lift unit took place on this lift as Major Crandall, in spite of all that had taken place, stayed on the ground to ensure four wounded were loaded on his helicopter. The flight crews demonstrated their nerve and skill as every hit helicopter was flown out of the LZ and back to Plei Me where four of the eight involved in the lift had to be grounded due to hits that made them unflyable. Crandall's 16 helicopters was now down to 11 flyable.

The situation on the ground during Crandall's next flights was critical. The aggressively attacking enemy troops were well armed with Soviet-made AK-47 rifles, hand grenades, Maxim heavy machine guns and RPG-2 shoulder-fired rockets. They also had light and heavy mortars. The defending American battalion only had control over an arc covering the west side of the landing zone and the perimeter on that front was never more than 100 to 200 meters from the helicopter touchdown area. A cutoff platoon remained separated for over 24 hours despite costly attempts to recover them. Almost all defenders were nearer the 100 meter distance on the western side. The east side of the LZ was virtually undefended until after 1700 hours that afternoon. Every flight by Crandall was made within 100 meters of the attacking enemy and into a landing zone where it was unknown and unsure to him who would have control.

As soon as this 5th lift exited the LZ, the Infantry Commander closed the landing zone to further helicopter lift operations. The second element of eight helicopters from the fifth lift was diverted back to Plei Me although these troops were critically needed in the LZ. More and more enemy troops were joining the battle on the perimeter of the LZ, quickly building up to a strength estimated to be seven times that of the defenders. At the same time, friendly forces were being depleted by a growing number of wounded and dead, suffering among the highest number of casualties by a US unit in the war to that date.

The Infantry Commander wrote these words referring to the time after the 5th lift: ***"a bond had been welded between the Infantry and their rides, the Huey pilots and crewmen. Now the strength of that bond would be tested"***

in the hottest of fires. If the air bridge failed, the embattled men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry would certainly die in much the same way George Armstrong Custer's cavalymen died at the Little Bighorn - cut off; surrounded by numerically superior forces, over-run and butchered to the last man. I asked Bruce Crandall's brave aircrews of Alpha Company, 229th Aviation Battalion for the last measure of devotion, for service far beyond the limits of duty and mission, and they came through as I knew they would ... even before I asked, Bruce Crandall had already decided to begin doing everything that had to be done."

The Infantry Commander was quite accurate in his description. Major Crandall initiated and continued leading a flight of two to deliver the ammunition and supplies into the "Hot" LZ throughout the day and into the night without needing any request from the supported battalion. He also began, and continued, the medical evacuation of all the Infantry's casualties after Med Evac refused to perform their mission, this too without any request. The Battalion Commander was fighting a tremendous battle for survival and certainly was not concerned about why the helicopters were coming in with the critically needed ammo, water and medical supplies nor what motivated them to take out the wounded. He was mainly concerned that it was happening! The important factor is that on that day the Infantry and Aviation team of helicopters worked and worked well!

Out of 31 helicopter loads of ammo and supplies brought into the LZ after it was closed, Crandall's flight of 2 helicopters brought in 28. Out of the approximately 78 WIAs evacuated, Crandall's flight carried out approximately 70. These numbers are only approximate because some WIAs became KIAs in flight or later in the system. For example, two of the first four evacuees died before reaching Plei Me and medical help. Of the two other helicopters that made an attempt to deliver ammo into the LZ while it was closed, one was shot down in the LZ after taking 11 rounds in the engine. Another helicopter crashed in the LZ late in the afternoon during the effort to bring in the remaining unit personnel of D Company that were waiting at Plei Me. This brought to 8 the number that were out of action.

After departing X-Ray after the 5th lift, Major Crandall, convinced that the unit on the ground was in the process of being over-run and would critically need ammunition to survive, dispatched two helicopters from the second element to Pleiku to load as much ammunition as they could carry and get back to Plei Me as fast as possible. He had decided to try to get a separate

one-time flight of two helicopters full of ammunition into X-Ray and asked his flight crews for volunteers to make this extremely dangerous flight with him. Captain Ed W. Freeman was the only one to answer the call. He stepped forward with his skill and unlimited courage to make certain that their helicopter team would ensure X-Ray was not a repeat of the Little Big Horn. (Captain Freeman has received the Medal of Honor for his actions.) Every pilot, including Major Crandall and Captain Freeman knew the circumstances surrounding LZ X-Ray. They also all knew the vulnerability of the helicopter; the high probability that the mission would result in the loss of one or both helicopters; that the enemy would likely be in the LZ in even greater force than on the previous lift; that the enemy gunners would be concentrating their fire on only two ships this time; and, that the helicopters lacked the M-60 machine guns that were supposed to be on each helicopter and, therefore, they had absolutely no means to defend themselves if it became necessary as it almost surely would. It was the hottest LZ any of the aviators had ever seen. Yet knowing all of this, as well or better than anyone, Crandall still initiated the mission and Freeman went along as his wingman.

Once the 2 ship team was organized and while Major Crandall's gear was being transferred to another undamaged ship and both were being loaded with ammo, Major Crandall briefed the ranking section leader to standby with the remaining helicopters and to be prepared to execute further lift missions as directed by their battalion or by him. He then contacted his battalion to request replacement helicopters if any were available. He also asked them to get a Pathfinder team to Falcon for him to lift into X-Ray in order to relieve LTC Moore from having to personally control the helicopter operations into and out of the LZ. This done, his 2 ships departed for X-Ray. Upon arrival at X-Ray he contacted LTC Moore with the unexpected information that they were inbound to X-Ray with 2 helicopters loaded with ammunition and would attempt to deliver it if there was a critical need. The colonel acknowledged his growing need for ammunition and that the LZ was still very hot. He suggested they land in a small 2 ship area that he had selected near the battalion CP. This site was further away from where the heaviest fighting was taking place in the LZ and relatively safer at least for the time being. This two-ship area was the only landing zone used from that point onward for the rest of the day.

The helicopters came in through a hail of fire, landed and off-loaded their cargo. Although the intent of the flight was only to get ammunition into the beleaguered unit, it became obvious to Major Crandall, once he was on the

ground, that there were numerous seriously wounded with a critical need to be evacuated. Without hesitation he signaled the Infantry to start loading WIA. In order to do this, Crandall and his wingman had to remain on the ground, risking the intense enemy fire, longer than normal because these casualties were, in many cases, being loaded by other wounded and the crewchiefs and gunners from the helicopters. A problem that further endangered the helicopters became obvious at this time. There was a lack of the usual number of ground troops available to help unload ammo and/or to help load wounded. Almost every able-bodied man was on the defensive line fighting to save the LZ.

Over-loaded with wounded and coming out of the smoke and dust-filled area, Major Crandall's helicopter struck trees with its rotorblades but due to his superb flying skills, he was able to nurse the helicopter back to Plei Me where upon landing, this helicopter was grounded for the rest of the day. Crandall once again was forced to change helicopters and would be flying his third different helicopter of the day.

Major Crandall, recognizing that there was still a dire need for ammo in the LZ, initiated a second flight into X-Ray. On this lift, the helicopters again came under intense fire. On the ground, the battalion S-2 wounded himself and helping to load other wounded, was shot and killed in the doorway of Major Crandall's helicopter. It became clear to Major Crandall, on this flight, that more ammunition was critically needed but that medical evacuation was also a great priority. He decided that all future flights would be made the shorter distance to the Artillery base at LZ Falcon. All ammo resupply and med evac flights operated out of there for the rest of the day and into the night.

On his first flight to Falcon, Major Crandall contacted two Division Med Evac helicopters and instructed them to follow his next flight into X-Ray and to land where he and his wingman did for the safest place in the LZ. It was also the closest point to the wounded collection point in the LZ. Evacuation of casualties was the Division Medical Evacuation unit's mission, not the lift helicopters. Crandall knew that their trained medical crews could much more effectively treat the wounded than his men. On this lift, after landing under fire and unloading their ammunition, Crandall's two helicopters quickly departed, clearing the way for the Med Evac. They approached and the lead Med Evac helicopter landed and started to load wounded. At this time, the second Med Evac helicopter was hit by enemy fire and both

helicopters aborted their mission. Crandall's flight immediately returned to the LZ through the enemy fire and brought out wounded left by them. From that time on for the rest of the day and night, the Med Evac refused to fly into the LZ because it was too "hot". From their aborted flight on, Major Crandall took on the Med Evacs mission and medical evacuation of wounded took on an equally important role as ammunition resupply on his 2 ship missions. Crandall's flights now continued between Falcon and X-Ray carrying in the Pathfinders, water and ammo as fast as they could be loaded and unloaded in each LZ. After six flights, Major Crandall's two helicopters ran short of fuel and had to return to Plei Me to refuel before returning to action.

During the last of his flights before refueling Crandall was informed that the two helicopters sent to Pleiku for ammunition were now returning to Plei Me with their loads. They were directed by Major Crandall to deliver their loads directly into X-Ray. This decision was made because the situation in the LZ was still very critical and Crandall did not want to delay the action until he had refueled and the ammo was transferred to his 2 aircraft. The section leader of these two helicopters, realizing the great danger he was putting his two crews in, opted to have the helicopters land at Plei Me and he took over the lead of this flight. These two helicopters made their approach into X-Ray through intense fire and after unloading ammo and loading several wounded, started their departure. At that time, the number two helicopter, which had taken about a dozen hits, had to execute a forced landing back in the LZ near the perimeter. The section leader in the lead ship immediately reversed course back into the hot LZ, picked up the downed crew and wounded, and departed the area for Pleiku.

When Major Crandall reached Plei Me to refuel, he learned that his battalion had provided a flight of 4 helicopters to help offset his downed ones and that all of his lift pilots had volunteered to restart the Infantry lift into X-Ray. They were soon to lift the remaining infantry unit waiting at Plei Me and carry in a reinforcing company, B/2/7th. LTC Moore was contacted and, critically needing the troops, opened the LZ and cleared the flights. While making the first of these troop lifts, one of the replacement helicopters was downed in the LZ after striking trees and making a hard landing. Once the troop lift of the last of the 1/7th troops from Plei Me was completed all the helicopters except Crandall's two, flew to join up with B Co. 2/7th Cav. Crandall and his wingman immediately returned to their two-ship ammunition-and-wounded flights out of LZ Falcon. At approximately 1700 hours the two once again rejoined the main lift element to bring the

reinforcements into X-Ray. On this lift, troopers in the helicopters reported snipers were in the trees and firing down on them as they exited the helicopters. Although the flight received some ground fire, no helicopters were lost or put out of commission on this flight or the next.

As soon as these reinforcing flights were completed, around 1800, the lift unit was released from further support to return to their base at Pleiku. Crandall decided to stay in the Falcon area with his 2 helicopters, correctly anticipating a continuing need in X-Ray for med evac, medical supplies, ammunition and water. These two flew additional flights between 1800 hours and their final and 14th such flight bringing in the battalion staff, Joe Galloway, and the last load of ammunition for the day. They finally returned to their base at Pleiku, refueled and shut down for the night at approximately 2230 hours. Crandall and Freeman had been in the air 14 hours and 30 minutes of the 16 hours and 30 minutes that had passed since their initial takeoff from Pleiku at 0600 that morning. The two helicopters had each flown a total of 22 flights into the LZ; 14 on their volunteer flights after the LZ was closed; and, 12 after the Med Evac had aborted their mission and refused further flights due to the enemy fire. They had carried out approximately 70 wounded and had remained in support of the Infantry unit until they were sure every wounded soldier was evacuated and every need of the unit was met.

Crandall still had great concern that the unit on the ground might not survive the night, and might not have the capability to hold off the much larger and determined enemy force. Upon arrival back at Pleiku base, he put his entire unit on alert to be ready to go again when, and if, needed.

On every early flight Crandall's two helicopter crews expected, or feared with good reason, that the enemy would be there to greet them rather than the friendlies. Important to the challenge to the aviators, as any experienced helicopter pilot will tell you, were the limitations in the LZ, which forced all flights to come in and exit over the same route time after time. This route, for much of the day, was completely undefended by the troops on the ground. On every flight, Crandall's helicopters had not only to worry that the enemy may have infiltrated or gained control over his landing area, but also, that the enemy would have automatic weapons or anti-aircraft weapons set up and waiting for them. The enemy had excellent observation points

overlooking the LZ on the mountainside from which they could observe the landing area and undoubtedly could see the helicopters long before they landed. Crandall had every reason to expect that the enemy would, at some point in the day, be waiting for them.

Further, Intelligence reports indicated that this enemy unit had a heavy anti-aircraft capability. Had this capability been brought into play it would have been devastating to the helicopters. Finally, there was serious concern, to the aviators, about friendly fire with so much activity in the area from so many different sources.

The one way in, one way out limitation was mandated because the lift helicopters had to avoid as much as possible flying over the enemy; flying on the Artillery gun target line; flying in the path of the Aerial Rocket Artillery and 229th gunships making their gun runs; and, flying in the path of the Air Force, Navy and Marine aircraft carrying out close air support air strikes. Doing this left only the east-southeast approach and the east-northeast departure routes. Aside from the flight restrictions, there were periods when the smoke and dust made approaches and departures difficult and visibility very limited.

Crandall never delayed a single flight into the LZ at anytime during the day. He knew he did not have the luxury to “wait until the LZ quieted down.” Waiting might result in even greater risks and a hotter LZ. The unit on the ground was almost out of water and was fast running out of ammunition, and they and their wounded did not have time for him to “wait.”

Major Crandall's flights were an important, if not critical, factor in the survival of the 1/7th Cavalry on 14 November. The Infantry Commander wrote, ***“if there had not been so many Huey flights under heavy fire into the smoking volcano of LZ X-Ray bringing us ammo and water and carrying out our wounded ... we in that field would have gone down.”*** This would have resulted in the loss of this battalion and the greatest number of deaths suffered by any US unit during one battle during the Vietnam war.

Crandall's actions were far above and beyond the call of duty and his mission responsibilities. His mission, and that of his unit, for the Infantry on 14 November was solely to lift the unit into LZ X-Ray. The Infantry battalion had two helicopters from B Company, 229th AHB assigned throughout the day, operating under the control of the 1/7th S-4, for all

supply activities including ammo, water and medical supplies support. These two helicopters were never used in X-Ray after the LZ turned hot. The Med Evac mission was certainly not his until he took on the responsibilities after the assigned unit refused.

Undoubtedly, the most authoritative and detailed description of the battle in X-Ray and Major Crandall's actions that merit this country's highest award, aside from the eyewitness accounts contained in this recommendation, are to be found in the book We Were Soldiers Once and Young, co-authored by LTG Moore and Joe Galloway. Their first-hand account also contains input from many of the personnel who fought in the battle. ...

Major Crandall's dedication to duty; devotion to his fellow soldiers; outstanding acts of valor; conspicuous gallantry; and, superb bravery, while time after time ignoring the extreme threat and risk to his life, were far above and beyond the call of duty or mission and set a superb standard of courage, determination and leadership for all of his peers and certainly merits the award of the Medal of Honor.