

**Contributions NCOs Made During
The Battle of Ia Drang Valley**

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On 14 November 1965, 450 brave men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, were ordered to air assault into the Ia Drang River Valley. Their mission was to search for, and destroy the enemy. Military Intelligence reported two regiments of North Vietnamese Army in the vicinity of Landing Zone (LZ) X-ray. The 1st Bn, 7th Cav did not know they landed in the backyard of a fully-trained enemy division.

LTC Harold Moore, the Battalion Commander of the 1st Bn, 7th Cav, issued the Operations Order on 12 November 1965. The battalion would air assault into LZ X-ray by 1030 hours on 14 November 1965. The battalion was only at 80% of its authorized strength, and two of its company's had just returned from a three day patrol. LTC Moore was given 16 Utility Helicopters (UH-1) to move his entire battalion, so it would take four lifts to complete the air assault. Each soldier carried one day of rations, 300 rounds of M16 ammunition, two fragmentation grenades, and each machine gunner 800 rounds of M60 ammunition. LTC Moore believed he could easily be re-supplied by air when needed. Military intelligence reported one regiment of North Vietnamese Army five kilometers northwest, and another regiment southwest of the LZ. There were also reports of a secret enemy base located 3 kilometers to the northeast.

Lead elements of the 1st Bn, 7th Cav, boarded their aircraft for the 14.3 mile flight into LZ X-ray. Within one hour of occupying the LZ, a fierce battle is underway between American air Cavalry troopers, and the aggressive 9th Bn, 66th Regiment, North Vietnamese Army. A 29 man platoon is ambushed and surrounded by an enemy force of 200. Outnumbered eight to one, LTC Moore began employing massive air and artillery attacks to hold off a determined enemy.

Before dawn the North Vietnamese Army launched an attack on Charlie Company's sector, requiring soldiers to use hand to hand combat.

The Forward Air Controller sent the codeword, "Broken Arrow" over the radio, and within minutes every available fighter bomber in South Vietnam headed to LZ X-ray to render support for an American unit being overrun. After a three hour battle that featured non-stop 105mm Howitzer fire, B52s, A/C 47 (Gunship) and a determined American infantry; LZ X-ray was in American hands.

The 105mm Howitzer, was a favorite support gun during the Vietnam. The guns served the Army well throughout the war, and were modified to improve mobility. A crew of eight operated the 105, and could be towed behind a 6x6 truck, or carried into position by helicopter. The weapon fired 3-8 rounds per minute, and handled a variety of ammunition, including High Explosive, Shrapnel Shells, and Beehive Cartridges, which contained thousands of small darts. The 105mm had a range of about 12,500 yards.

The B52 Bomber was designed in the late 1940s to carry nuclear bombs on long range missions to targets in the Soviet Union. The B52s performed well under difficult circumstances in Vietnam. Outfitted with conventional metal bombs, the B52 flew thousands of low altitude bombing sorties in North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The B52 proved instrumental in breaking up North Vietnamese offenses, disrupting supply lines, and bringing the communists forces to the negotiating table. Loaded weight 505,000lbs; maximum speed 595 mph; payload 60,000lbs of bombs; range 8,406 miles; crew of six.

On September 18th, 1965 the first AC-47 gunship was delivered to the Tactical Air Command, Forbes Air Force Base, Kan. The AC-47 was also known as "Puff the Magic Dragon," a reference to the seemingly unending sheet of flame and noise produced by the thousands of minigun tracer rounds pouring forth from the night sky directly onto the

helpless Vietcong below. From this spectacular display, the aircraft predictably came to be known as “Dragonships.”

One of the most publicized battles of the Vietnam War was the battle of Ia Drang Valley in late 1965. More than 24,000 tactical and 2700 B-52 strike dropped 110,000 tons of ordnance in attacks that averaged over 300 sorties per day. During the two and one-half months of combat in that tiny area, fighters were in the air day and night. At night, AC-47 gunships kept up a constant chatter of fire against enemy troops. During darkness, AC-47 gunships provided illumination against enemy troops. The C-47 with its low-wing, monoplane design utilized conventional landing gear with retractable front wheels and fixed tail wheel. Its two Pratt & Whitney 1,200 horsepower engines produced a top speed of 220 mph and a maximum range of 1,500 miles. Other characteristics included maximum cruising speed of 185 mph at 9,480 feet, initial climb rate of 18.7 feet per second and service ceiling of 23,950 feet. Wing span was 95 feet; length was 64 feet 5.5 inches; and height was 17 feet. The plane weighed 16,971 pounds empty and 26,000 pounds fully loaded which provided a payload of more than 7,000 pounds, although it often exceeded its rated carrying capacity. The three-man crew consisted of a pilot, co-pilot and crew chief.

In June 1965, the 1st Cavalry Division began training and testing for airmobility operations since this was a new concept. Training was conducted by platoon-size and company-size elements, than later battalion-size and brigade-size elements. Soldiers were trained in heliborne tactics and techniques along with air assault operations, both new to the soldiers of the division. Platoon leaders trained squad and fire team leaders to adjust artillery and mortar fire.

This training the NCOs received proved well when Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry lost every officer in the platoon. An NCO was able to call indirect fire on the platoon's position to prevent his platoon from being over-run.

Although there were no Medal of Honor recipients, there were plenty of heroes that fought bravely in the battle of Ia Drang Valley.

Specialist Willard F. Rarish, a 24 year old native of Bristow, Oklahoma was an assistant squad leader. During an attack by the North Vietnamese Army, Specialist Rarish fired his M-60 machine gun until he ran out of bullets. After he ran out of bullets for his M-60, he stood up under enemy fire and began firing his .45 caliber pistol. Specialist Rarish was credited with stopping the enemy attack. The next day over 100 dead enemies lay next to Specialist Rarish foxhole. He was awarded the Silver Star.

Sergeant Ernie Savage was part of the ambushed platoon on LZ X-ray. After loosing the platoon leader, platoon sergeant and first squad leader, Sergeant Savage took charge and called in and directed indirect artillery fire on top of his platoon's position. His actions saved the lives of the rest of his platoon.

Sergeant First Class Charles Bass, who had just returned from a 12 month tour in Viet Nam, volunteered to go back with the 1st Cavalry Division as the operations NCO. Sergeant First Class Bass could have retired but knew his experience would help save lives, paid the ultimate sacrifice with his life.

During the initial air assault into Ia Drang Valley, the aircraft flew in a heavy trail left formation. In a heavy trail left, the distance is doubled between the first and third aircraft. The reason they could have chose to fly this formation could have been the space at the landing zone or because of the enemy situation.

The Viet Nam war created more demands on the Noncommissioned Officer and had a greater impact upon the NCOs role and status than any other previous conflicts in American history. Tactical operations depended upon small unit leaders on platoon sergeants and squad leaders. The NCOs were developed and built on experience in warfare, but still had no formalized institutional training. Vietnam proved to be a junior leader's war with decentralized control. Much of the burden of combat leadership fell on the NCO.

The first sergeant was proud of the unit and, understandably, wants others to be aware of his unit's success. For the first time, the title of address for this grade is not sergeant, but first sergeant. There is a unique relationship of confidence and respect that exists between the first sergeant and the Commander not found at another level within the Army. He is the provider, the disciplinarian, the wise counselor, the tough and unbending foe, the confidant, the sounding board, everything that we need in a leader during our personal success or failure.

During the Vietnam era, the platoon sergeant was affectionately referred to as the "Plat-Daddy", and although the term has since faded, the role remains that of the "Father of the Platoon." The sergeant first class served as the platoon sergeant or may serve as the NCOIC of the section with all the attendant responsibilities and duties of the platoon sergeant. Whether platoon sergeant or sergeant first class, this is the first level at which the term senior NCO properly applies. The platoon sergeant or sergeant first class generally has 15 to 18 years or more of military experience and is rightfully expected to bring that experience to bear in quick, accurate decisions that are in the best interest of the mission and the soldier. The platoon sergeant was expected to embody all the traits of a leader. Watching a successful platoon sergeant operate on a daily basis is an unforgettable experience. There, he is training the platoon

or section in their collective tasks; he is checking maintenance; he is planning, executing; perpetual motion; a blur; the personification of a military leader and "hot stuff."

The battle of Ia Drang Valley demonstrated the might and power of the American airmobile infantry, weapons, and duties of the United States Army. Although badly outnumbered, they used all the assets available to them to defeat the enemy.