

Death in the Tall Grass: The Ia Drang Campaign at Landing Zones X-Ray & Albany: Seventh Cavalry Reorganized; 1st Battalion's Insertion into the Enemy's Lair; Holding the Line at X-Ray; Reinforcements: 2d Battalions of the 5th & 7th Cavalries; from X-Ray to Albany: Death in the Tall Grass: Ambush at Albany, a 16-Hour Bloodletting; the Ia Drang Alumni; 1st Cavalry Division's Annual Gathering

Death in the Tall Grass

Memorial Day Special – Sunday, 27 May 2012

Back in January of 1965 my two closest friends were among those who served as groomsmen when I was privileged to marry Jo Henra. I was a recent graduate of the University of Alabama's School of Broadcast Communications and had worked for the NBC affiliate in Montgomery for about six months. Bo Gaylard, my next-door neighbor, worked in the movie business. Jim Lawrence, a recent graduate of The Citadel, was a second lieutenant in the U. S. Army stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. The three of us grew up together in our small southern hometown of Troy, Alabama. We served each other as groomsmen in each of our weddings. We were avid baseball fans who abandoned our wives on occasion and went on our own fantasy camps to Florida for Spring Training. At various times, we either played, coached, or umpired baseball. Yet in the spring of 1965, although we were men legally, we were not men in reality. We three were still yet to face the raw realities of life although convinced at the time that we were on top of the world. Bo and I continued in private life but Jim owed the United States Government a four-year hitch in the Army. Circumstances would soon occur that would project him into adulthood far faster than his two civilian buddies.

In July 1965, the Pentagon announced that the 11th Air Assault Division would be renamed the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and it would take over the colors of that historic division that had distinguished itself in combat in the Korean War and in the Pacific theater in World War II.

By this time Jim was First Lieutenant and Executive Officer of Delta Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Cavalry, First Cavalry Division. The Seventh Cavalry was made infamous back in its horse cavalry days by Gen. George Custer whose entire command of over 250 men were massacred on the morning of June 25, 1876 on the banks of Montana's Little Big Horn River by the Dakota Sioux' Teton division led by Sitting Bull. Not a single U.S. soldier of the 7th Cavalry survived.

Now the Seventh Cavalry was back in business and on July 28, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson mobilized Jim's division. It was the first "build-up" of many that were to follow in Johnson's micromanagement of this war. Jim and other Rangers of the 1st Cavalry Division cast off aboard the USNS *Maurice Rose* from Charleston, South Carolina, home of The Citadel, on Monday, August 16, 1965. On that very same date the last elements of the 66th Regiment of the People's Army of North Vietnam left their base in Thanh Hoa \tän-hwä'\, North Vietnam, and headed south on foot.

The First Cavalry Division took one month to arrive at Qui Nhon \qwē-nyön'\, South Vietnam. It would take the 66th Regiment two months to cover five hundred miles on foot along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to a spot in the Central Highlands and a base camp established at Chu Pong Mountain.¹ Below it sprawled the Ia Drang valley. It would become the site of the first major engagement between the armies of North Vietnam and the United States.

Two battles would occur in this valley from November 14 through November 18, 1965. The first began on Sunday morning, November 14. The 1st Battalion of the Seventh Cavalry under Lt. Col. Harold G. Moore, Jr., ignited the conflict by surprising the North Vietnamese enclave's previously undiscovered location deep in the Central Highlands.

¹ More precisely a massif \mä-sēf': "the dominant, central mass of a mountain ridge, more or less defined by lengthwise or crosswise valleys" (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language: Unabridged*, 3d ed., s.v. "massif.")

The drama that unfolded in this initial battle is portrayed in the 2002 motion picture, *We Were Soldiers*. It is the screen version of an account of the battles published in 1992 by Colonel Moore and UPI journalist Joseph L. Galloway. Their book is the major source of information for this study.

Moore writes on page 16 of the Prologue:

This story is our testament and our tribute to 234 young Americans who died beside us during four days in Landing Zone X-Ray and Landing Zone Albany in the Valley of Death, 1965. That is more Americans than were killed in any regiment, North or South, at the Battle of Gettysburg, and far more than were killed in combat in the entire Persian Gulf War. Seventy more of our comrades died in the Ia Drang in desperate skirmishes before and after the big battles at X-Ray and Albany. All the names, 305 of them ... are engraved on ... Panel 3-East, of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and on our hearts.² (p. xvi)

Under orders from assistant division commander, Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles, and delivered to Lt. Col. Moore by 3rd Brigade commander, Col. Thomas W. Brown, the 1st Battalion of the Seventh Cavalry was ordered to take the battle to the enemy and kill him. According to Col. Moore:

I felt strongly that the enemy had been using the Ia Drang Valley as a jumping-off point for the attacks on Plei Me and likely had returned there to regroup and treat their wounded. The Ia Drang had plenty of water for drinking and for cooking rice. Best of all was its location on the border of Cambodia. The Vietnamese Communists came and went across that border at will; we were prohibited from crossing it. (p. 38)

The dominant terrain feature is the Chu Pong massif, rising to just over 2,400 feet, a jumble of mountains, valleys, ravines, and ridges that runs westward for more than fifteen miles, the last five of them inside Cambodia. North to south the massif measures between ten and thirteen miles. The limestone heights of the Chu Pong are full of springs, streams, and caves. Along the massif's north side runs the Ia Drang. (*Ia* means "river.") By the time it reaches the Chu Pong area it is swift and deep, and during the monsoon it is a raging torrent. (p. 43)

The newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) had already interfered with and changed North Vietnamese brigadier general Chu Huy Man's audacious plans to seize the Central Highlands. [Strategically, he who controls the Central Highlands controls Vietnam (p. 12).] Chu Huy Man's goal was to draw the American's into battle—to learn how they fought and teach his men how to kill them.

One understrength battalion had had the temerity to land by helicopter right in the heart of General Man's base camp, a historic sanctuary so far from any road that neither the French nor the South Vietnamese army had ever risked penetrating it in the preceding twenty years. My battalion, the 450-man 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry of the U. S. Army, had come looking for trouble in the Ia Drang; we had found all we wanted and more. Two regiments of regulars of the people's Army of Vietnam—more than two thousand men—were resting and regrouping in their sanctuary near here and preparing to resume combat operations, when we dropped in on them the day before. General Man's commanders reacted with speed and fury, and now we were fighting for our lives.³ (p. 4)

What transpired from Sunday through Tuesday was a bloody battle between a small force of 450 Army Airborne Rangers and 2,000 North Vietnamese regulars.

² Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young: Ia Drang: The Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1992), xvi

³ Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers*, 38, 43, 4.

The fighting was intense and unrelenting throughout but under the deft leadership of Col. Moore and Sgt. Maj. Basil L. Plumley, the 1st Battalion and reinforcements from the 2nd Battalion were able to establish and hold their command post at Landing Zone X-Ray. The leadership in the trenches became the source of legend. Captain Myron F. Diduryk and 2nd Lieutenant Rick Rescorla of Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion were instrumental in the defense of repeated Viet Cong attacks on X-Ray on the second day and night of the battle.

Col. Moore wrote of Diduryk, "He was eager and aggressive yet totally professional; over the course of three days and nights he would emerge as the finest battlefield company commander I had ever seen, bar none. Rick Rescorla esteemed himself not only at X-Ray but also at Albany. He left active duty in 1967 but continued in the Army Reserves until his retirement in 1990 as a colonel. Rescorla, British-born, earned a master's degree and a law degree at universities in Oklahoma. He went into corporate security work and became vice-president for group security for the Morgan-Stanley financial group. In a way Rick was on the front lines of the Islamic War as is reported by:

Scavetta, Rick. *Stars and Stripes*:

Born in Hayle, England, in 1939, Rescorla joined the U.S. Army in the 1960s and went to Vietnam as a platoon leader with the B Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry. In November 1965, his unit plunged into a battle at Landing Zone X-Ray, at the base of the Chu Pong, a 2,400-foot mountain in the Ia Drang Valley. He later survived a North Vietnamese ambush at nearby Landing Zone Albany that claimed the lives of 151 men in his unit.

During combat in Vietnam, Lt. Rick Rescorla would sing to his troops to keep their spirits high while under fire. As head of security for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in New York, Rescorla used the same tactics to calm co-workers as he led them from their offices during the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Rescorla survived battlefields in Southwest Asia, but he apparently was not so fortunate Sept. 11. Currently on the missing list, Rescorla was last seen in a 10th-floor staircase. He is credited with saving 3,800 colleagues, while sacrificing himself.⁴

These two men of Bravo Company of the 2nd Battalion were instrumental in enabling the 1st Battalion to endure fierce fighting during the night of 15 November and the early morning of 16 November. The exploits of these men are glorified in the Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers*. The movie shows an offensive action at the end of the movie that did not occur. However, those who survived the battle and who have seen the movie claim that but for this "Hollywood ending" the rest of the film depicts very accurately the battle at X-Ray.

Jim Lawrence told me in a telephone interview that he was asked by a reporter following the film's premier at Fort Benning if the movie was an accurate representation of the battle. He said that he responded by saying, "Yes, in every way but one ... there wasn't the smell."

The "smell" was a combination of literal blood, sweat, napalm, gun smoke, explosives, bombs, and the ever-intensifying stench of decaying bodies of the dead. Having repulsed repeated frontal assaults by the Vietnamese soldiers the killing ground was littered with nearly a thousand enemy dead. It was decided to evacuate all personnel who had been engaged in the conflict up to this point and replace them with elements of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Cavalry and the 1st Battalion of the Fifth Cavalry.

These replacements closed in on X-Ray about noon on the 16th. In the forefront of the column was PFC Jack P. Smith, son of radio and television broadcast journalist Howard K. Smith. Jack Smith wrote of what he saw in a 1967 article for the *Saturday Evening Post*:

⁴ Rick Scavetta, "Rick Rescorla: Memorial," *Stars and Stripes*, <http://rickrescorla.com/articles/stars-and-stripes/>.

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 1,000 rotting bodies out there, starting at about 20 feet, surrounding the giant circle of foxholes.⁵ (p. 195)

An unlikely combatant in the battle at X-Ray was Joe Galloway. In the thick of the conflict he was issued a weapon and he gallantly fought along with the Rangers in defense of the command post. On leaving X-Ray the afternoon of the 16th, Galloway commented to fellow journalist Charlie Black of the *Columbus* (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer*:

These are the greatest soldiers that have ever gone into a fight! There hasn't been any outfit like this before. It's something I wish every American could understand, what these kids did.⁶ (p. 197)

Col. Moore had promised his men that none would be left behind, meaning there would be no MIAs in the 1st Battalion. He kept his word. Of those under his command 79 were killed in action and 121 were wounded. None were missing. He estimated that 634 of the enemy were killed in combat and another 1,215 by artillery and air attacks. At 3 o'clock on the afternoon of 16 November, Col. Moore was the last man to lift off of Landing Zone X-Ray, leaving the area under the command of Lt. Col. Bob Tully and his 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry and Lt. Col. Robert McDade's 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry.

On the morning of the 17 November these two battalions were to exit X-Ray and march together toward Landing Zone Columbus. Short of Columbus, the 2nd Battalion was to peel off and head toward the northwest with Landing Zone Albany as its destination. The reason for these movements is not exactly clear according to General Moore in his book. It is assumed that there were three objectives with circumstances determining which would be executed: (1) Engage the enemy, (2) evacuate the area for the B-52 assault on Chu Pong Mountain; or (3) be picked up and transported back to An Khe air base.

The latter exercise was the one anticipated. No enemy was in sight from the battle of the previous three days. They did not expect to encounter the enemy on the march. They were wrong. Dead wrong!

As they advanced toward Albany they were coming closer and closer to an encounter with enemy soldiers. Just beyond Albany was a base camp established that included three battalions of the North Vietnamese army.

The 8th, 1st, and 3rd battalions were headquartered there. The 8th was a reserve battalion newly arrived off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were fresh, rested, and spoiling for a fight with the Americans.

As the American soldiers approached Albany they unfortunately burned some hooches – small grass huts – and this caught the attention of a Vietnamese recon team. Some were captured by Alpha Company which led the column and they were interrogated.

At this point the column lost unit integrity. They had been marching in file with Alpha Company in the lead followed in order by Delta Company, Charlie Company, Headquarters Company, and finally Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry. With the capture of the scouts a sequence of event occurred that led to one of the most deadly battles of the entire Vietnam War.

Alpha Company was ordered to stand fast by Col. McDade who radioed that he was going to come forward to interrogate the prisoners. On arrival, McDade called for all company commanders to join him at the head of the column. What happened next set the stage for the surprise attack that was about to commence.

⁵ Moore and Galloway, 195.

⁶ Ibid., 197.

Specialist 4 Bob Towles of Delta Company tells what happened farther back down the column: “Everyone dropped to the ground. I sat leaning against a tree facing the rear of the column. When the command group closed up, a gap of thirty to forty yards opened in the line of march. We lounged around smoking, just taking it easy. Then the mortar-platoon sergeant came up. He went directly to First Lieutenant James Lawrence, Delta’s new executive officer, to learn the situation. The sergeant left his gear behind when he walked over. He wore his web belt and packed a pistol, but carried no rifle and didn’t wear a steel pot. Lawrence put out the information that the head of the column took two prisoners. Others could be in the area.” (p. 226)

At this precise moment, on the brink of disaster, this is what was happening: Alpha Company was moving forward toward the Albany clearing. Colonel McDade and his battalion-command group were with Alpha Company. The other company commanders had left their companies, under orders, and were moving up to join McDade for a conference. The battalion was strung out along the line of march for a distance of at least 550 yards. The men of Delta Company were lolling around on the ground. Charlie Company had flankers off to each side but most were taking a break, sitting or lying down. George Forrest’s men at the tail of the column were in a wedge formation and also had flank security posted. The men of the battalion were worn out after nearly sixty hours without sleep and four hours of marching through difficult terrain. Visibility in the chest-high elephant grass was very limited.⁷ (p. 227)

Just after 1 o’clock P.M., McDade and his company commanders reached the Albany clearing. All the brass was at the head of the line and the entire contingent had North Vietnamese surrounding them. At about 1:07 small arms fire began. The Americans had marched right into the base camp of the newly arrived 8th battalion of the 66th regiment along with the 1st and 3rd battalions of the 33rd regiment. They had gotten the news the column was on the way to Albany from their recon team and had hurriedly organized an ambush.

The most savage one-day battle of the Vietnam War had just begun. The 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry had walked into a hornet’s nest: The North Vietnamese reserve force, the 550-man 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, had been bivouacked in the woods off to the northeast of McDade’s column. The understrength 1st Battalion and 8th Battalion were aiming their men toward the head of the American column.

While many of Colonel McDade’s troopers lay in the grass resting, North Vietnamese soldiers swarmed toward them by the hundreds. A deadly ordeal by fire was beginning in the tall elephant grass around Albany and along the column of American troops strung out through the jungle, waiting for orders to move. It was 1:15 P.M., Wednesday, November 17. By the time the battle ended, in the predawn darkness the next morning, 155 American soldiers would be dead and another 124 wounded. Those who survived would never forget the savagery, the brutality, the butchery of those sixteen hours. (p. 229)

The strategy used by the attacking Vietnamese army was employed by their battlefield commander Senior Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An:

I gave orders to my battalions: When you meet the Americans divide yourself into many groups and attack the column from all directions and divide the column into many pieces.

Viewed from the American side, the firefight began at the head of the 2nd Battalion column and swiftly spread down the east side of the American line in a full-fledged roar. (p. 230)

⁷ Ibid., 226–227.

The fact the commanders were absent from their companies when the fight started contributed to the confusion. It had the most effect on Charlie Company. Their commander Skip Fesmire was up at (Albany) and Don Cornett, the Charlie Company executive officer, was killed early on. They had no commander and they just disintegrated.

Colonel McDade wasn't getting anything from his people down the line. Charlie, Delta, and Headquarters Company weren't reporting because they were either dead or, in the case of Headquarters, didn't have any radios.⁸ (p. 234)

The battle was afoot and was waged in a relentless hail of bullets and hand-to-hand combat. Suddenly, the 1st Cavalry (Airborne) found itself in a time warp that was reminiscent of the trench warfare of World War I and Korea.

As the front came alive with intense firing, and no information came back to hi, (Bob) Towel's concern doubled:

"North Vietnamese troops shattered the foliage and headed straight for us, AK 47 rifles blazing, on the dead run. I selected the closest one and fired twice. I hit him but he refused to go down; he kept coming and shooting. I turned by M-16 on full automatic, fired, and he crumpled. I shifted to another target and squeezed the trigger. They kept pouring out of the wood line; we kept firing; then finally they stopped coming."

The lull didn't last long. Towles peered beyond the anthill toward the mortar platoon. "It appeared as if the ground was opening up and swallowing the mortarmen, they fell so fast, said PFC James Shadden. "A brown wave of death rolled over them and on into Charlie Company. Vietnamese intermixed with them. Then reality set in: The enemy held the ground beyond the anthill. The column was cut in half!

"Incoming gunfire drew our attention back to the tree line. The volume of fire became almost unendurable. Bullets peeled bark from trees. Vegetation disintegrated. I looked to Lieutenant James Lawrence for help. I saw his head violently recoil. He hit the ground.

"A second later I was spun around, then slammed into the dirt. I rose to my hands and knees and started down the line. Blood ran everywhere. Someone raised Lieutenant Lawrence and attempted to steady him. The firing continued." (p. 242)

Each and every man still alive on that field, American and North Vietnamese, was fighting for his life. In the tall grass it was nearly impossible for the soldiers of either side to identify friend or foe except at extremely close range. Americans in olive-drab and North Vietnamese in mustard-brown were fighting and dying side by side. It may have begun as a hasty ambush or a surprise attack, but within minutes the result was a wild mêlée, a shoot-out, with the gunfighters killing not only the enemy but sometimes their friends just a few feet away.

There would be no cheap victory here this day for either side. There would be no victory at all—just the terrible certainty of death in the tall grass.⁹ (p. 249)

Jim Lawrence was one of the 124 who were wounded at Albany. He recovered in an army hospital in The Philippines. He was awarded the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the Air Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal.

⁸ Ibid., 230, 234.

⁹ Ibid., 242, 249.

Today he is education director of the Alabama Center for Real Estate in the University of Alabama's Culverhouse College of Commerce. Almost every year on Veterans' Day weekend, he and the survivors of the Ia Drang Campaign gather in Washington, D.C. for a reunion. They conduct a vigil at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and observe in quiet remembrance the names inscribed on Panel 3-East.

For 37 years the memory of the two battles at X-Ray and Albany causes each of these men to revisit those chaotic six days in the sweltering jungles of Vietnam. They remember those whom they called friends who fell in the fray and many wonder, as surviving combatants often do, about why their friend was taken and they were left.

This is how General Moore describes the annual gathering in Washington, D.C.:

It's easy to forget the numbers, but how can we forget the faces, the voices, the cries of young men dying before their time? Between October 23 and November 26, 1965, a total of 305 young American soldiers were killed in combat in the Pleiku campaign. Their names march down the lines inscribed on Panel 3-East of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, each one a national treasure, each one a national tragedy. What would they have become, all of them, if they had been allowed to serve their country by their lives, instead of by their deaths?

Yes, there is an organization, the Ia Drang Alumni, our own Band of Brothers, and we have a dinner before Veteran's Day in Washington every November and a lunch wherever the 1st Cavalry Division Association holds its reunion each summer, for we find pleasure and healing in the company of the friends and comrades of our youth.

We begin by calling the roll, first reading the names of all those who fell and those who have joined them since. Then, one by one, we stand to call out our own names, ranks, military occupations, companies and battalions, and where we fought in the valley. There are no dues—those were paid in blood long ago—and no officers.

In the small, closed world of the military, great victories, great defeats, and great sacrifices are never forgotten. They are remembered with battle streamers attached to unit flags. Among the scores of streamers that billow and whirl around the flags of all the battalions of the 1st Cavalry Division there is one deep-blue Presidential Unit Citation streamer that says simply: PLEIKU PROVINCE.

We remember those days and our comrades, and long after we are gone that long blue streamer will still caress proud flags.¹⁰

¹⁰ Moore and Galloway, 346–47.