

# Last Man Out

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*Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore of Crested Butte told his men: "I'm going to be the first man on the ground in any big battle we go into, and I am going to be the last one out."*



By John Moore, The Denver Post

For three days in 1965, Lt. Col. Harold G. Moore fought and won the first great battle of the Vietnam War and changed the course of history. Outnumbered 10 to 1, the first battalion of the 7th Air Cavalry not only survived but managed to send the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) into a temporary retreat.

But when a relief battalion arrived, the commander refused to leave. The officer he had put in charge of tracking the 79 dead and 121 wounded as they were being airlifted out had unsettling news. Somewhere out there, amid the knifelike elephant grass where more than 1,000 enemy dead had been left to rot in the 110-degree heat, was Thomas C. Pizzino of Hopedale, Ohio.

Moore would not leave him there. Three months earlier at Fort Benning, Ga., he had promised his men that none would be left behind on a jungle battlefield. Later, helicopters were so full of dead and wounded men that blood drained out of the cracks in the fuselages.

"I've always been a strong believer that you bring

home your men. If they are dead, you go get them. You bring them back," Moore said during an interview at his home in Crested Butte. "I had told my men that I'm going to be the first man on the ground in any big battle we go into, and I am going to be the last one out. I'm going to bring you all home, and if I go down, I hope you'll bring me home."

Moore and a company of about 50 men, feeling their first relief from the imminent possibility of death for the first time in 72 hours, went back out, crawling on hands and knees to the spot where Pizzino had been fighting, and recovered his body.

"No one thought twice about doing that," said Moore.

The next day, the battalion that replaced Moore's was ambushed, and 70 percent of the Americans were killed or wounded. The fourday death toll rose to 234 Americans and 3,561 North Vietnamese.

"Hi. I'm Hal Moore."

That's how the retired three-star general modestly greets strangers at the Queen of All Saints Catholic Church potluck dinner in Crested Butte. Not that there are many in the town of 1,085 who don't already know Moore and his wife of 51 years, Julie, who have blended into the fabric of the community since moving here in 1977 at the urging of former Secretary of the Army Howard "Bo" Callaway. The same cannot be said of the bright yellow 1976 International Scout they use to get around town.

Moore is 79, has had two hip replacements, a broken back and wears two hearing aids. But just try keeping up with him. He skis cross-country three times a week, hikes, fishes and quotes Aeschylus. Everyone here knows him as an avid outdoorsman and devout parish-

ioner. Not everyone knows him as a true American hero.

His home sits halfway up the side of Mount Crested Butte amid condos and ski chalets, but it's easy to spot from the bottom by the gigantic American flag he flies from his back deck each day. Dwarfed by the red, white, and blue are three much smaller flags, tattered and gray. Outside an impeccably maintained home with military memorabilia and more than 1,500 books, the withering little rags are the only things that seem less than perfect.

Life here could not be more unlike the battlefield he left 14,000 miles behind 36 years ago, but has never left his mind.

"I don't think a day passes that I don't think about that battle," said Moore.

On Nov. 14, 1965, Moore's mission in Vietnam was a lot more clear than the overall objective of his nation. "My instructions that day were to find the enemy and kill them," Moore said.

In July, President Lyndon B. Johnson had ordered the Air Mobile Division to Vietnam, thus introducing to warfare the transport of military troops by helicopter. Johnson would do little else, in Moore's opinion, to ensure the success of the U.S. soldiers, and many of the men who went to their deaths there died understanding only one cause.

"Troops in battle don't fight for what some president says on TV," Moore said. "They don't fight for mom, the flag or for apple pie. They fight for one another. They fight to stay alive. And they become brothers for life."

Moore's first job in the Ia Drang River Valley was to secure a tiny helicopter landing zone so that the enemy could be engaged. The area was called LZ X-Ray. Moore had no idea that when he touched down at the jungle base of the Chu Pong mountain that he was being dropped into the center of hell.

"I had very little information about how many enemy were in the area," Moore said. They were everywhere. Moore's men captured two unarmed North Vietnamese who told him the dense mountain was filled with soldiers who wanted very much to kill Americans, but couldn't find any.

X-Ray was so small, helicopters could only drop 80 of Moore's 429 men at a time, once every 35 minutes. The PAVN had 2,000 veteran soldiers on the ground and in the trees, and 6,000 more were just a half-day's march away.

Within 30 minutes of Moore's arrival, long before all of his men could mass, one of the most savage battles in military annals began. The 29 men who would come to be known as the Lost Platoon were tricked into advancing 200 yards from X-Ray and were cut off by the PAVN. All but seven of the Americans were dead or wounded before they could be rescued the next day. "I ordered my men to eliminate that platoon, but they met with fierce resistance," PAVN Lt. Gen. Nguyen Huu An later said. "I suppose that when they had to choose between life and death, the Americans chose life."

On Day 2, X-Ray was dangerously close to being overrun. "You could hear the screams of men calling for medics, calling for their mothers, wounded men screaming in three languages," Moore said. "When you are in a situation like that, surrounded by noise, smoke, dust, screams, explosions, machine guns, hand grenades, people dropping all around and bullets whizzing around you like a swarm of bees, you have to remain cool and calm. If you ever think you might lose, you've already lost."

Moore yelled "Broken Arrow" into his radio, a command ordering every available fighter bomber in South Vietnam to come to his aid, and the sky soon turned into a sea of fire. But two U.S. planes were given the wrong coordinates, and the fiery napalm bombs they dropped burned some of Moore's men alive.

Joseph Galloway was a 23-year-old UPI reporter who managed to get himself dropped by helicopter into X-Ray holding a camera in one hand and a rifle in the other. He could see three American soldiers in the flames. He voluntarily raised up under fire to help drag in one of the soldiers, but the flesh of the ankle came off in his hands. The other two survived.

The air power gave the PAVN nowhere to hide, and it turned the battle around. By the next day, the enemy had retreated to the other side of the Chu Pong mountain in Cambodia, knowing U.S. policy would keep them

from crossing the border. "When that battle ended, I knew we had accomplished something historic," Moore said. "I knew it would be cause for critical decisions to be made in Saigon and in Washington and in Hanoi."

The slaughter of the relief battalion the next day was precipitated by a decision not to chopper the soldiers out of X-Ray but to make them walk 3 miles through enemy territory toward another U.S. landing zone called Albany.

But the U.S. government proclaimed total victory, ignoring the casualties at Albany. The U.S. was convinced its helicopters and other air support were unbeatable, even though 6,000 choppers would be downed in the war. The PAVN learned the strategy for combatting air power was mass and constant movement, and they were prepared to accept any human cost. Ultimately, the battle at X-Ray guaranteed a long, bloody, unwinnable war.

The next day, Julie Moore was gathered back at Fort Benning with other 7th Cavalry wives watching ABC News. She knew something in the celebratory report was amiss. "I was so stunned at seeing my husband with tears in his eyes that I could hardly speak," she said. "But those sergeants who died were his brothers and the privates his sons. No man can lose that many family members and not weep.

"Guilty."

That's how Moore feels today, 36 years after he won the battle of X-Ray. "When your men die and you don't, you feel guilty," he said. "You are their leader."

Moore never has stopped caring about the men who lived and died at Ia Drang, and he vowed then they would not be forgotten. "In the end, when we walked across the enemy dead and picked up his weapons," Moore said, "I knew that I had to write the story of these great soldiers who fought against such odds."

For a decade, Moore and Galloway interviewed soldiers and family members and traveled to Vietnam to talk with leaders of the PAVN.

The result was the 1992 best seller, "We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young," which is being made into a film by Randall Wallace ("Braveheart") starring Mel

Gibson.

"Hal Moore has a combination of toughness and warmth that I haven't experienced in anybody before," Wallace said. "And he has enormous enthusiasm and a tremendous love of life that I found extraordinary in a general. However you cut it, the Army is an institution about developing efficient ways to kill other people. It's ultimately intended to save lives, but it's still a weapon of destruction. To find a man in it who has such reverence for life is extraordinary. I think General Moore has more reverence for life than many ministers I've met."

Moore's book is required reading at West Point. It celebrates the heroism of his men, but not the war itself. "I like to think that Hal and I have written one of the great antiwar books of our century," said Galloway. Moore believes passionately the Vietnam War was a mistake, as is any military effort where America's vital interests are not at stake. The price in American lives is simply too high.

"In my view, the two great tragedies of the 20th century are the decline of morality and the Vietnam War," Moore said, pondering the imponderable. "Think about it: Ten years. 58,000 names on that wall. All those hearts broken, families shattered ..."

Galloway said the ultimate lesson is that "war is unimaginably horrible. Be careful where you send your sons and daughters, because there are people out there ready to kill your children."

Moore has been back to Vietnam seven times, and in 1991 he met with An, his enemy counterpart commander at Ia Drang. It was the start of an unusual friendship that would last until An's death in 1995.

"General An and I just hit it off," Moore said. "He was very straightforward. Soldiers don't create the wars, politicians do. Soldiers are the ones who have to fight the wars."

When Moore returned again in 1993, this time bringing with him a dozen of his men for a tour of the battlefield, he slipped off his wristwatch and gave it to An, calling it a gift "from one soldier to another."

An was speechless, and 45 minutes later gave Moore his Army helmet.

"We corresponded after that, and when I found out he died in March of 1995, I faxed his widow a letter of sympathy," Moore said. "And then in October of 1999, Joe Galloway and I received permission to make a courtesy call to his widow. We went to her home, and she's a little old Oriental lady, 5-feet-1, dressed in a long, black dress. She had two strapping sons who greeted us in suits and neckties. Their daughter, a doctor in the Army with the rank of major, was there in uniform. We had brought flowers and incense, because I knew being a Buddhist home that they would have made a shrine.

"They had a huge display of all his medals and uniforms, the watch I gave him, the fax I sent her ... and over here in the middle of this wall was a huge framed picture of him, with flowers, fruits and bottled water, which the Buddhists believe that the spirits consume. And I lit the incense.

"He was a soldier, just like me. Thirty-six years ago, we were trying to kill each other, but that was over when I met him."

Moore will return to Vietnam once more, this time bringing with him An's helmet. "I'm going to return it to the widow," Moore said. "Now that he's gone, it would mean more to her."

When the sun sets in Crested Butte, Moore walks onto his deck to bring down his American flag. As darkness descends on the town perched at an altitude of 9,000 feet, the stars are so close you'd swear you were sitting inside a planetarium. The three small, gray tattered flags continue to flap in the wind. You want to know why he keeps them.

"They are Tibetan prayer flags," said Moore, who hung his four years ago, when they were green, blue and white. "The Buddhists keep their flags out until they disintegrate. They believe that as every little shred falls off, the wind carries their prayers with them."

As each piece of Moore's flags wither away, they take with them to heaven not only his love and prayers for every man who has served under him, but for his old enemy as well.

*Note: Denver Post staff writer John Moore is no relation to Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (ret.).*