

Lt. Gen. Harold Moore, Whose Vietnam Heroism Was Depicted in Film, Dies at 94

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By [SAM ROBERTS](#) FEB. 13, 2017



Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore in South Vietnam in 1966, when he was 44. Credit Associated Press

Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore, whose fortitude saved most of his outnumbered battalion in 1965 in the first major battle between American and North Vietnamese troops — exploits immortalized in a book and a movie starring Mel Gibson — died on Friday at his home in Auburn, Ala. He was 94.

His death was confirmed by his son Col. David Moore who, like his brother Lt. Col. Stephen Moore and their father, was a West Point graduate.

General Moore recounted his battlefield heroics in 1992 in a best-selling book, “We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young,” written with Joseph L. Galloway.

Mr. Galloway, as a 24-year-old war correspondent for United Press International, had witnessed the battle, one of the war’s bloodiest, in the I Drang Valley in November 1965. Mr. Gibson played General Moore in “We Were Soldiers,” the 2002 film adaptation of [the book](#).

“He was a phenomenal man of great strength and character, courageous and like a father to his troops who got most of his boys out of there after he landed in a hornet’s nest,” Mr. Gibson, who visited the general a few months ago, said on Monday in a phone interview.

General Moore later fended off an antiwar protest by Jane Fonda at a California base and oversaw the sweeping transition to an all-volunteer Army after the war. But no moment in his 32-year military career was as transformational as the brief American victory at I Drang, in shaping both his heroic reputation (he was George Armstrong Custer’s heir as commander of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment) and his view that America’s combat role in Vietnam was futile.

“It wasn’t our place to question,” General Moore wrote with Mr. Galloway in a follow-up book, “We Are Soldiers Still: A Journey Back to the Battlefields of Vietnam” (2008). “We were soldiers and we followed their orders. In times and places like this, where the reasons for war are lacking, soldiers fight and die for each other.”

Photo



A wounded soldier from the First Battalion of the Seventh Cavalry after combat in 1965 at I Drang in South Vietnam. Credit Neil Sheehan/The New York Times

The North Vietnamese retreated after the battle, but they went on, with the Vietcong, to wage a successful guerrilla war that ended in 1975 with the fall of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital.

Years after General Moore retired from active duty in 1977, he visited I Drang with his North Vietnamese battlefield counterpart for an ABC documentary, publicly supported a global ban on the production and use of anti-personnel land mines, and likened the American invasion of Iraq to the protracted war in Vietnam, which, he wrote, ended after 10 years “with a hasty withdrawal just ahead of defeat.”

“His mantra,” his son David said, was “Hate war, love the American soldier.”

General Moore did both. Nicholas Proffitt, a former war correspondent, wrote of “We Were Soldiers Once” in The New York Times Book Review, “General Moore’s respect and affection for his troops is evident on every page, and one can understand why he became one of the legendary commanders in Vietnam.”

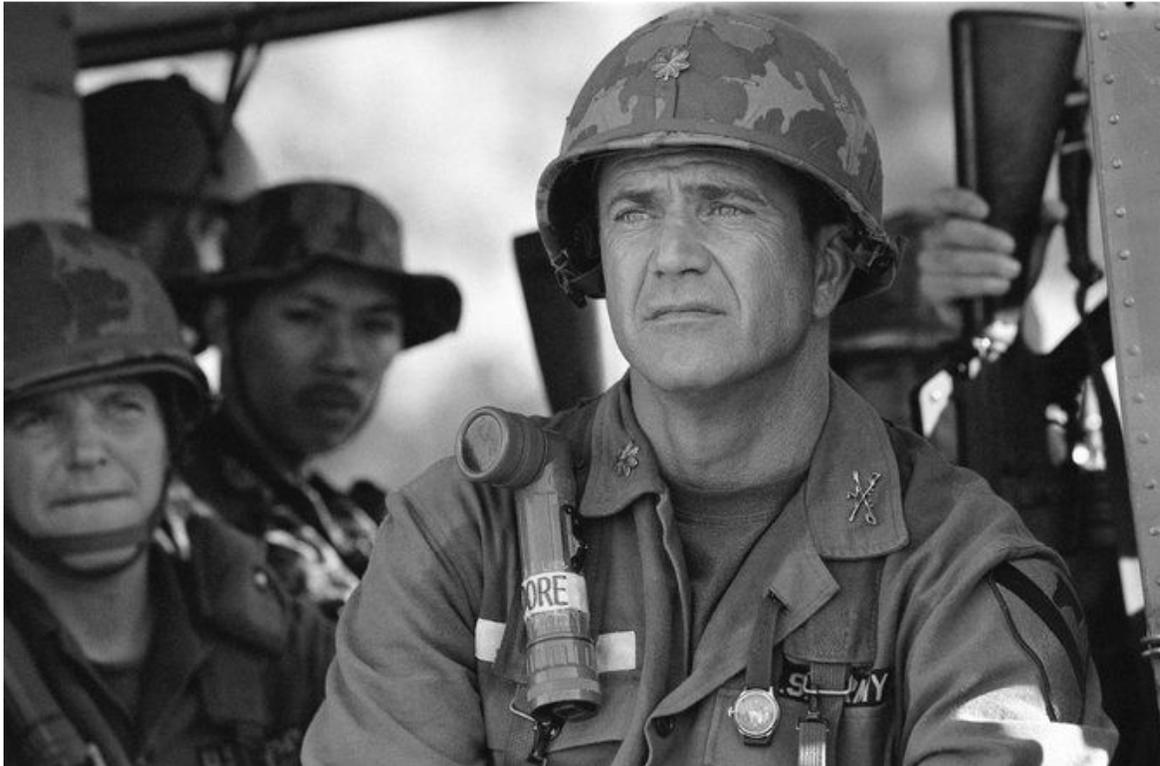
And why he hated war.

“As a glimpse into the abyss, into the bilious reality of war, it is a revelation,” Mr. Proffitt wrote. “As a reading experience, it’s a car crash of a book; you are horrified by what you’re seeing, but you can’t take your eyes off it.”

On Nov. 14, 1965, Hal Moore, at the time a lieutenant colonel and battalion commander, and about 450 troops from his First Battalion were ferried by helicopters to Landing Zone X-Ray, a field near the Drang River in South Vietnam, six miles from the Cambodian border. They stumbled on more than they had bargained for: three North Vietnamese regular army regiments that at times outmanned them 12 to 1.

“By midafternoon in 100-degree heat we were strongly outnumbered, taking heavy casualties in a cliffhanger fight to the finish,” the general wrote in a West Point yearbook.

Photo



Mel Gibson, who played General Moore in the movie version of his book “We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young,” described him as “like a father to his troops.” Credit Paramount Pictures

Bloody hand-to-hand combat ensued on a battlefield punctuated by termite mounds the size of pickup trucks and bodies strewn amid the elephant grass. Never leaving the combat zone and remaining in the thick of the fight, General Moore delivered on a vow that endeared him to his troops: “I’ll always be the first person on the battlefield, my boots will be the first boots on it, and I’ll be the last person off. I’ll never leave a body.”

Finally, reinforcements and the firepower of helicopter gunships, fighter-bombers and American 105 mm howitzers positioned several miles away turned the tide.

“Unlike Custer,” General Moore said later, referring to Custer’s Last Stand in 1876 at the Little Bighorn, “we had major fire support.”

The American death toll at X-Ray was 79. As the reinforcements marched to a second landing zone named Albany, they suffered heavy casualties in an ambush that was largely covered up at the time. When the combat in both places ended, as many as 3,000 North Vietnamese and 234 Americans were dead.

By the end of November, the American toll in the I Drang Valley had risen to 305, branding it as the Valley of Death.

“Every one of us thought at least once we were going to die there,” Mr. Galloway said in an interview on Monday. “There was only one man who thought for certain we were going to prevail, and that was Hal Moore.”

Photo



General Moore speaking at West Point in 2000, 23 years after his retirement from active duty. Credit Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Harold Gregory Moore Jr. was born on Feb. 13, 1922, in Bardstown, Ky., then a city of about 2,000, where his father was an insurance agent. His mother was the former Mary Crume.

He was 15 when his father first suggested he consider West Point, provided he got a required recommendation from a United States senator. As a high school senior, though, all Hal was able to extract from Senator A. B. [\(Happy\) Chandler](#) was a patronage job in the Senate warehouse in Washington.

By the time he graduated from George Washington University in 1942, though, [World War II](#) had begun, and more appointments to military academies were available. This time he was successful, making it to West Point and graduating in 1945.

His wife, the former Julie Compton, died in 2004. In addition to his sons David and Stephen, he is survived by another son, Harold Gregory Moore III, known as Greg; two daughters, Julie Moore Orłowski and Cecile Moore Rainey; a sister, Betty Karp; a brother, Ballard; 12 grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

After West Point, General Moore served in the Korean War and in Europe. He was deployed to Vietnam in 1965 and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for valor at I Drang.

Returning to the United States, he was assigned to plan for the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam; commanded Fort Ord in California, where he dealt with antiwar demonstrators, including Ms. Fonda; and was named the Army's deputy chief of staff for personnel in Washington.

General Moore likened I Drang to the Spanish Civil War before World War II: a dress rehearsal for the tactics that both sides would employ for the rest of the war and a harbinger of a prolonged stalemate in seesaw battles over territory.

“He never claimed that was an American victory, but he prevailed,” Mr. Galloway said. “At the end of the day they left and we still occupied the ground, although after we left they came back.”

Correction: February 13, 2017

An earlier version of this article misspelled the location of one of Vietnam's bloodiest wars in one reference. It was in the I Drang Valley in 1965.

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