

# The battle of landing zone (lz) x-ray in the viewnam war



## BATTLE OF LANDING ZONE X-RAY

### Introduction

The Vietnam conflict was a proxy war between communist powers and the United States. While China and the Soviet Union supported the communist North Vietnam, the United States supported South Vietnam. Under President John F. Kennedy, the United States Defense Secretary deployed 16, 000 combat advisers to Vietnam to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).<sup>1</sup> When multiple United States military advisers were killed from a series of terrorist attacks acted by the Viet Cong, a South Vietnamese communist group that was aided by the North, President Lyndon B. Johnson took action. On 28 July, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced, “ I have today ordered the Airmobile division to Vietnam.”<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Harold Moore, Commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was ordered to find and kill the enemy.<sup>3</sup> The battle of Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley, began on 14 November, 1965.<sup>4</sup> This became the first major battle between the United States and north Vietnamese forces. Under LTC Moore’s command, his ability to build a cohesive team, exercise disciplined initiative, and accept prudent risk resulted in successfully pioneering effective tactics of the newly developed airmobile division concept.

### Battle Description

In support of the Pleiku Campaign, the intelligence staff briefed LTC Moore on the area of operations that was within the Ia Drang Valley, west of Plei Me

and east of the Chu Pong massif.<sup>5</sup> The staff guessed that there is "...possibly one battalion at the base of the Chu Pong massif two miles northwest of the area we were aiming for; possibly enemy very near a clearing we were considering for the assault landing zone; and a possible secret base a half-mile east of our target area."<sup>6</sup> With inadequate information, LTC Moore formulated his plan, assembled his companies, and coordinated with supporting elements.

On 14 November, 1965 at 1017G (Local) LTC Moore had preparatory artillery fire along with aerial weapons in various landing zones in order to deceive the enemy from the exact Helicopter Landing Zone location. LTC Moore was first on the ground, followed by his command group, and leading elements of Bravo Company (B Co). B Co landed with no enemy fires and quickly dispatched a platoon to conduct reconnaissance of the LZ.<sup>7</sup> Helicopters continued to shuttle remaining B Co, Alpha (A), Charlie (C) and Delta (D) Co. "It was a thirty-minute round trip and at the expected rate it would take more than four hours to get all my men on the ground."<sup>8</sup>

At 1120G, a NVA prisoner was captured revealing that they, "... wanted very much to kill Americans but had been unable to find any."<sup>9</sup> Questioning the prisoner exposed that the intelligence was incorrect. They had landed right in the middle of three battalions and the headquarters battalion of the NVA's 66th Regiment. It was the NVA's strongest reserve force with a total strength of 1, 600 men.<sup>10</sup> LTC Moore was facing 1, 600 enemies with his 431 subordinates.

LTC Moore ordered B Co to concentrate on the northwest of the LZ where the prisoner was captured. B Co initially engaged in moderate firefight, but was soon involved in a heavy attack by two NVA companies from the north. A Co reinforced B Co and was positioned west of the LZ where they were engaged in moderate to heavy attacks. C Co was hastily directed south and southwest to block hundreds of enemies forcing their way towards the LZ. D Co headed towards the southwest corner of the LZ. They engaged with enemies immediately and suffered casualties. LTC Moore ordered air strikes on the mountain and on enemies approaching the LZ from the west and south. <sup>11</sup>

To the left and right, company commanders, platoon leaders, and Soldiers dropped as they were killed or wounded in action, but the next ranking soldier in line would automatically step up to take lead and fight with determination. LTC Moore recognized the significant loss of his men, which impelled him to request for an additional rifle company. <sup>12</sup>

By nightfall, LTC Moore established a defensive perimeter around the battalion command post. They concentrated on resupplying water, ammunition, evacuation of casualties and wounded, and reorganization due to the high number of leader casualties. B Co from the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry arrived to establish the perimeter on the north and northeast. LTC Moore and his Soldiers utilized all assets they had to include: M16, M79 grenade launchers, howitzer artillery, Air Force flare ships for illumination, and air strikes on the mountain. <sup>13</sup>

On 15 November, 1965 at 0650G, the second day of battle erupted in violence like the first day. Two to three enemy companies launched a vicious attack from the south on C Co resulting in numerous casualties and exhausting the company's strength. D Co was attacked from the southeast and A Co was attacked from the southwest with smaller enemy forces. The enemy continued to push and break through C Co which initiated intense artillery fire, aerial rocket artillery and tactical air support. A Co from the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry arrived as requested and split the company to protect the battalion command post in the north and C Co area in the south. By 1000G, friendly forces defeated the enemy attack and the enemy withdrew. At 1205G, LTC Tully and his 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry arrived on foot from LZ Victor to LZ X-Ray. LTC Moore and LTC Tully worked together to focus on rescuing an isolated platoon. They were able to rescue the platoon with little confrontation. On the second night, the enemy attempted multiple unsuccessful probes, especially with the reinforced perimeter.<sup>14</sup>

The date 16 November, 1965 marks the final day of the battle. At 0422G, the enemy launched four consecutive attacks on the south aspect of the perimeter, where C Co had been attacked the previous morning, without success. Persistent flare illumination and firing of mortar and artillery shells confused and crippled the flow of the enemy reinforcement into the battle. At 0655G, everyone on LZ X-Ray simultaneously fired on the enemy to achieve an overwhelming fire superiority for a full minute. At 1200G, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry arrived to relieve LTC Moore and all of the brave Soldiers who fought on the LZ.<sup>15</sup> LTC Moore ensured all his Soldiers were accounted for prior to being the last to step off of the battlefield.

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## Mission Command Principles

### Build Cohesive Teams Through Mutual Trust

“ LTC Moore was the first American to set foot in X-Ray. ...He was the last man of his battalion to depart the battlefield.”<sup>16</sup> By stepping on the battlefield first, he builds trust with his Soldiers by showing them that he valiantly leads from the front. He steps off into danger first to protect his battalion and displays that he is on the ground with them through the battle. When LTC Moore was the last to leave LZ X-Ray, he demonstrates that he truly cares for every individual fighting under him and that he will not leave any Soldier behind.

Building a cohesive team takes a lot of work and effort. LTC Moore believed in “ tough training, tough discipline, and tough physical conditioning.”<sup>17</sup> In LTC Moore’s battalion, the hard work they endured in training built trust when they understood the value of the training that directly translated to their success on the battlefield. “ Sergeant [John] Rangel bayoneting a North Vietnamese in the chest. It was just like practice against the straw dummies: Forward, thrust, pull out, move on. One, two, three.”<sup>18</sup>

Mutual trust is often harder to achieve. Not only will the Soldiers under LTC Moore need to be confident in his ability to lead them to victory, LTC Moore must have faith to rely on his Soldiers to continue fighting and following orders. LTC Moore confirms his trust in company commanders and Soldiers by emphasizing decentralized decision making.<sup>19</sup> “ I want every man trained for and capable of taking over of the man above him”<sup>20</sup> By entrusting his

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Soldiers that they are all leaders regardless of rank, he is confident that they are capable of making the best decision necessary to accomplish the mission. In turn, the Soldiers reciprocate their trust in LTC Moore's leadership by staying in the fight, encouraging LTC Moore, and staying positive despite the heavy casualties they witnessed in battle. " I heard weary Soldiers say things like: ' We'll get ' em, sir' and ' They won't get through us, sir.' Their fighting spirit had not dimmed, and they made me proud and humble." <sup>21</sup>

LTC Moore's accessibility and eagerness to accept ideas or opinions from subordinates also adds to his ability to build a cohesive team. " I am available day or night to talk with any officer of this battalion. ...I told Sergeant Major Plumley that he had unrestricted access to me at anytime, on any subject he wished to raise." <sup>22</sup> LTC Moore shows that he values the opinions of his subordinate leaders, offering them the opportunity to be just as vested in the success of the battalion as he is.

Since COL Moore successfully built a cohesive team through mutual trust, he had the foundation necessary to win the battle in LZ X-Ray. Mutual trust and teamwork empowered the Soldiers to execute orders and achieve victory.

#### Exercise Disciplined Initiative

Despite the failure of the intelligence staff to provide LTC Moore information on the enemy location, number and capability, LTC Moore exercised disciplined initiative by solving unanticipated problems that could arise if any of the possibilities described by the intelligence staff were true. LTC Moore knew that if the enemy were at the base of the mountain upon arrival on LZ

X-Ray, his battalion could become over run from manpower shortage because it would take four hours for his entire battalion to arrive on the LZ. Instead, he solved this problem by utilizing all his resources with superior fire power and air support.

Probably the most notable example in which LTC Moore exercised disciplined initiative was when he disobeyed General William Westmoreland's order. During the intense battle, LTC Moore was ordered to "leave X-Ray early the next morning... for Saigon to brief him and his staff on the battle...[I] registered my objections to the order in no uncertain terms. I made it very clear that this battle was not over and that my place is with my men..."<sup>23</sup> He informed General Westmoreland immediately that he was going to deviate from orders because leaving in the middle of a serious battle would risk the lives of Soldiers.

#### Accept Prudent Risk

"Prudent risk is a deliberate exposure to potential injury or loss when the commander judges the outcome in terms of mission accomplishment as worth the cost."<sup>24</sup> This principle obligates a commander's judgement heavily as it directly affects the lives of the Soldiers. COL Moore demonstrated his superior understanding of prudent risk.

On the second day of battle, CPT Robert Edwards the C Co commander called LTC Moore in desperation for help, "I told him no; he would have to hold with his own resources and firepower for the time being. It would be tactically unsound, even suicidal, to commit my small reserve force quickly,



before we got a feel for what the enemy was doing elsewhere around the perimeter.”<sup>25</sup> LTC Moore prudently resisted sending his reserve forces to helping C Co under heavy fire because he did not want to commit losing his reserve forces without analyzing all the hazards and mitigating the risks with other possible options.

Going into the operation, LTC Moore unknowingly went into battle with 1,600 highly trained and skilled NVA Soldiers. His battalion was already short 220 subordinates in his allocated table of organization and equipment (TO&E). With the Soldiers killed or wounded in action, plus the delay in the arrival of the rest of his companies, LTC Moore was severely outnumbered. However, he analyzed the risks and made deliberate plans by offsetting manpower with fires. “ At least I can rely on strong fire support to stack the deck. The weather forecast - clear sunny days and moonlight nights - practically guaranteed air support, and two batteries of twelve 105mm Howitzers would be dedicated entirely to our use period.”<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

It looked like LTC Moore jumped into a lair of hungry, angry lions with no possibility of surviving, but he came out ahead with dragons blazing fire balls in the sky. LTC Moore’s ability to build a cohesive team, exercise disciplined initiative, and accept prudent risk appeared instinctive to him. His incorporation of the mission command principles lead to his victory in the battle of LZ X-Ray. “ The 1st Cavalry Division proved the validity of numerous tactics, techniques, and procedures, many of which have endured the test of time.”<sup>27</sup>

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  2. Lt. Gen Harold Moore (Ret.) and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once...And Young* (New York: HarperTorch, 1992), 24.
  3. Ibid, 43.
  4. Robert H. Edwards, *The Battle of LZ X-Ray: Personal Experience of a Company Commander* (Infantry Magazine, 2015), 25.
  5. Moore, 43.
  6. Ibid, 54.
  7. Edwards, 25.
  8. Moore, 55.
  9. Edwards, 26.
  10. Moore, 70.
  11. Edwards, 25-27.
  12. Ibid, 27.
  13. Ibid, 28-29.
  14. Ibid, 30-31.

15. Ibid, 31.

16. Steven M. Leonard, *Forward Support in the Ia Drang Valley* (Army Logisticon, 2006), 43-45.

17. Moore, 28.

18. Ibid, 161.

19. Ibid, 28.

20. Ibid, 34.

21. Ibid, 172.

22. Ibid, 28.

23. Ibid, 240-241.

24. U. S. Department of the Army, *ADP 6-0 Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 2-5.

25. Moore, 190.

26. Ibid, 55.

27. Leonard, 45.

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