

## Peace without Conquest (1965)

Lyndon B. Johnson

On April 7, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson addressed members of the faculty and student body of The Johns Hopkins University, making his case for escalation of the United States' role in the war in Vietnam. Although Johnson had run for president in 1964 as the sensible alternative to Barry Goldwater's foreign policy extremism, he had nonetheless begun increasing the presence and role of the U.S. military in Vietnam soon after taking office in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's November 1963 assassination. Following reported attacks on U.S. naval vessels in 1964, Johnson asked Congress to authorize him to take "all necessary measures" to repel any attacks against U.S. military forces and prevent future "aggression." The House of Representatives passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution unanimously; in the Senate, only Senators Ernest Gruening and Wayne Morse, both Democrats, dissented. In so doing, Congress essentially turned its warmaking power over to the president. Johnson, well aware of this fact, noted: "Like grandma's nightshirt, it covered everything."

In early 1965, following Vietcong attacks on American military installations in South Vietnam, Johnson authorized Operation Rolling Thunder. The Air Force campaign that began in early March would, over the course of three and a half years, send U.S. pilots on close to one million sorties, dropping nearly 750,000 tons of bombs on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). As Johnson prepared to increase the number of U.S. ground troops, he used this speech to explain why "some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil."

What explanations does President Johnson offer? Do his claims echo those of John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech? How well do they fit into a Cold War vision of America's role in the world? What might be the significance of the title of this speech? Is it possible, given what you know about the war and its outcome, to read Johnson's speech without a sense of foreboding?

Lyndon B. Johnson, Address at Johns Hopkins University, April 7, 1965. <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650407.asp>.

I have come here to review once again with my own people the views of the American Government [which we believe will contribute toward peace in this area of the world].

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change.

This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Vietnam.

Vietnam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil.

Why must we take this painful road?

Why must this Nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away?

We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.

This kind of world will never be built by bombs or bullets. Yet the infirmities of man are such that force must often precede reason, and the waste of war, the works of peace.

We wish that this were not so. But we must deal with the world as it is, if it is ever to be as we wish.

The world as it is in Asia is not a serene or peaceful place.

The first reality is that North Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest.

Of course, some of the people of South Vietnam are participating in an attack on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from north to south.

This support is the heartbeat of the war.

And it is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks. Large-scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities.

The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy.

Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Vietnam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in South Vietnam?

*We are there because we have a promise to keep.* Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence.

And I intend to keep that promise.

To dishonor that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong.

*We are also there to strengthen world order.* Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

*We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance.* Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. We must say in southeast Asia—as we did in Europe—in the words of the Bible with: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further."

There are those who say that all our effort there will be futile—that China's power is such that it is bound to dominate all southeast Asia. But there is no end to that argument until all of the nations of Asia are swallowed up.

There are those who wonder why we have a responsibility there. Well, we have it there for the same reason that we have a responsibility for the defense of Europe. World War II was fought in both Europe and Asia, and when it ended we found ourselves with continued responsibility for the defense of freedom.

Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.

We will do everything necessary to reach that objective. And we will do only what is absolutely necessary.

In recent months attacks on South Vietnam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary for us to increase our response and to make attacks by air. This is not a change of purpose. It is a change in what we believe that purpose requires.

We do this in order to slow down aggression.

We do this to increase the confidence of the brave people of South Vietnam who have bravely borne this brutal battle for so many years with so many casualties.

And we do this to convince the leaders of North Vietnam—and all who seek to share their conquest—of a very simple fact:

We will not be defeated.

We will not grow tired.

We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement.

We know that air attacks alone will not accomplish all of these purposes. But it is our best and prayerful judgment that they are a necessary part of the surest road to peace.

We hope that peace will come swiftly. But that is in the hands of others besides ourselves. And we must be prepared for a long continued conflict. It will require patience as well as bravery, the will to endure as well as the will to resist.

I wish it were possible to convince others with words of what we now find it necessary to say with guns and planes: Armed hostility is futile. Our resources are equal to any challenge. Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending.

Once this is clear, then it should also be clear that the only path for reasonable men is the path of peaceful settlement.

Such peace demands an independent South Vietnam—securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others—free from outside interference—tied to no alliance—a military base for no other country.

These are the essentials of any final settlement....

This war, like most wars, is filled with terrible irony. For what do the people of North Vietnam want? They want what their neighbors also desire: food for their hunger; health for their bodies; a chance to learn; progress for their country; and an end to the bondage of material misery. And they would find all these things far more readily in peaceful association with others than in the endless course of battle....

We often say how impressive power is. But I do not find it impressive at all. The guns and the bombs, the rockets and the warships, are all symbols of human failure. They are necessary symbols. They protect what we cherish. But they are witness to human folly.

A dam built across a great river is impressive.

In the countryside where I was born, and where I live, I have seen the night illuminated, and the kitchens warmed, and the homes heated, where once the cheerless night and the ceaseless cold held sway. And all this happened because electricity came to our area along the humming wires of the REA [Rural Electrification Administration]. Electrification of the countryside—yes, that, too, is impressive.

A rich harvest in a hungry land is impressive.

The sight of healthy children in a classroom is impressive.

These—not mighty arms—are the achievements which the American Nation believes to be impressive.

And, if we are steadfast, the time may come when all other nations will also find it so.

Every night before I turn out the lights to sleep I ask myself this question: Have I done everything that I can do to unite this country? Have I done everything I can to help unite the world, to try to bring peace and hope to all the peoples of the world? Have I done enough?

Ask yourselves that question in your homes—and in this hall tonight. Have we, each of us, all done all we could? Have we done enough?

We may well be living in the time foretold many years ago when it was said: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

This generation of the world must choose: destroy or build, kill or aid, hate or understand.

We can do all these things on a scale never dreamed of before.

*Well, we will choose life.* In so doing we will prevail over the enemies within man, and over the natural enemies of all mankind....

## We Were Soldiers Once... and Young

Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway

*The Vietnam Memorial, a wall of polished black granite bearing the name of each and every American who fell in Vietnam, graphically illustrates the toll of the war in loss and heartbreak. The names are listed in the order that the men died, and the wall begins low, with just a handful of names from the years before 1960. It rises to tower above the people who stand reading the names before tapering down again with the names of those who died toward the end of the war.*

*It was on November 14, 1965, in Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley, that American servicemen began dying in large numbers. In the following excerpt from We Were Soldiers Once... and Young, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry and the only journalist with the battalion tell the story of the first major battle of America's Vietnam War. Writing from hindsight, they attempt to show us a moment in time, a "watershed year when one era was ending in America and another was beginning."*

### PROLOGUE

*In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watch'd*

*And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars...*

—Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part One, Act II, Scene 3

This story is about time and memories. The time was 1965, a different kind of year, a watershed year when one era was ending in America and another was beginning. We felt it then, in the many ways our lives changed so suddenly, so dramatically, and looking back on it from a quarter-century gone we are left in no doubt. It was the year America decided to directly intervene in the Byzantine affairs of obscure and distant Vietnam. It was the year we went to war. In the

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broad, traditional sense, that “we” who went to war was all of us, all Americans, though in truth at that time the larger majority had little knowledge of, less interest in, and no great concern with what was beginning so far away.

So this story is about the smaller, more tightly focused “we” of that sentence: the first American combat troops, who boarded World War II-era troopships, sailed to that little-known place, and fought the first major battle of a conflict that would drag on for ten long years and come as near to destroying America as it did to destroying Vietnam.

The Ia Drang campaign was to the Vietnam War what the terrible Spanish Civil War of the 1930s was to World War II: a dress rehearsal; the place where new tactics, techniques, and weapons were tested, perfected, and validated. In the Ia Drang, both sides claimed victory and both sides drew lessons, some of them dangerously deceptive, which echoed and resonated throughout the decade of bloody fighting and bitter sacrifice that was to come.

This is about what we did, what we saw, what we suffered in a thirty-four-day campaign in the Ia Drang Valley of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam in November 1965, when we were young and confident and patriotic and our countrymen knew little and cared less about our sacrifices.

Another war story, you say? Not exactly, for on the more important levels this is a love story, told in our own words and by our own actions. We were the children of the 1950s and we went where we were sent because we loved our country. We were draftees, most of us, but we were proud of the opportunity to serve that country just as our fathers had served in World War II and our older brothers in Korea. We were members of an elite, experimental combat division trained in the new art of airmobile warfare at the behest of President John F. Kennedy.

Just before we slipped out to Vietnam the Army handed us the colors of the historic 1st Cavalry Division and we all proudly sewed on the big yellow-and-black shoulder patches with the horsehead silhouette. We went to war because our country asked us to go, because our new President, Lyndon B. Johnson, ordered us to go, but more importantly because we saw it as our duty to go. That is one kind of love.

Another and far more transcendent love came to us unbidden on the battlefields, as it does on every battlefield in every war man has ever fought. We discovered in that depressing, hellish place, where death was our constant companion, that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other, and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers. In battle our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around. We held each other's lives in our hands and we learned to share our fears, our hopes, our dreams as readily as we shared what little else good came our way.

We were the children of the 1950s and John F. Kennedy's young stalwarts of the early 1960s. He told the world that Americans would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship” in the defense of freedom. We were the down payment on that costly contract, but the man who signed it was not there when we

fulfilled his promise. John F. Kennedy waited for us on a hill in Arlington National Cemetery, and in time we came by the thousands to fill those slopes with our white marble markers and to ask on the murmur of the wind if that was truly the future he had envisioned for us.

Among us were old veterans, grizzled sergeants who had fought in Europe and the Pacific in World War II and had survived the frozen hell of Korea, and now were about to add another star to their Combat Infantryman's Badge. There were regular-army enlistees, young men from America's small towns whose fathers told them they would learn discipline and become real men in the Army. There were other young men who chose the Army over an equal term in prison. Alternative sentencing, the judges call it now. But the majority were draftees, nineteen- and twenty-year-old boys summoned from all across America by their local Selective Service Boards to do their two years in green. The PFCs soldiered for \$99.37 a month; the sergeants first class for \$343.50 a month.

Leading us were the sons of West Point and the young ROTC lieutenants from Rutgers and The Citadel and, yes, even Yale University, who had heard Kennedy's call and answered it. There were also the young enlisted men and NCOs who passed through Officer Candidate School and emerged newly minted officers and gentlemen. All laughed nervously when confronted with the cold statistics that measured a second lieutenant's combat life expectancy in minutes and seconds, not hours. Our second lieutenants were paid \$241.20 per month.

The class of 1965 came out of the old America, a nation that disappeared forever in the smoke that billowed off the jungle battlegrounds where we fought and bled. The country that sent us off to war was not there to welcome us home. It no longer existed. We answered the call of one President who was now dead; we followed the orders of another who would be hounded from office, and haunted, by the war he mismanaged so badly.

Many of our countrymen came to hate the war we fought. Those who hated it the most—the professionally sensitive—were not, in the end, sensitive enough to differentiate between the war and the soldiers who had been ordered to fight it. They hated us as well, and we went to ground in the cross fire, as we had learned in the jungles.

In time our battles were forgotten, our sacrifices were discounted, and both our sanity and our suitability for life in polite American society were publicly questioned. Our young-old faces, chiseled and gaunt from the fever and the heat and the sleepless nights, now stare back at us, lost and damned strangers, frozen in yellowing snapshots packed away in cardboard boxes with our medals and ribbons.

We rebuilt our lives, found jobs or professions, married, raised families, and waited patiently for America to come to its senses. As the years passed we searched each other out and found that the half-remembered pride of service was shared by those who had shared everything else with us. With them, and only with them, could we talk about what had really happened over there—what we had seen, what we had done, what we had survived.

We knew what Vietnam had been like, and how we looked and acted and talked and smelled. No one in America did. Hollywood got it wrong every damned time, whetting twisted political knives on the bones of our dead brothers.

So once, just this once: This is how it all began, what it was really like, what it meant to us, and what we meant to each other. It was no movie. When it was over the dead did not get up and dust themselves off and walk away. The wounded did not wash away the red and go on with life, unhurt. Those who were, miraculously, unscratched were by no means untouched. Not one of us left Vietnam the same young man he was when he arrived.

This story, then, 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 including one Air Force pilot, are engraved on the third panel to the right of the apex, Panel 3-East, of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and on our hearts. This is also the story of the suffering of families whose lives were forever shattered by the death of a father, a son, a husband, a brother in that Valley.

While those who have never known war may fail to see the logic, this story also stands as tribute to the hundreds of young men of the 320th, 33rd, and 66th Regiments of the People's Army of Vietnam who died by our hand in that place. They, too, fought and died bravely. They were a worthy enemy. We who killed them pray that their bones were recovered from that wild, desolate place where we left them, and taken home for decent and honorable burial.

This is our story and theirs. For we were soldiers once, and young.

### HEAT OF BATTLE

*You cannot choose your battlefield,  
God does that for you;  
But you can plant a standard  
Where a standard never flew.*  
—Stephen Crane, "The Colors"

The small bloody hole in the ground that was Captain Bob Edwards's Charlie Company command post was crowded with men. Sergeant Herman R. Hostuttler, twenty-five, from Terra Alta, West Virginia, lay crumpled in the red dirt, dead from an AK-47 round through his throat. Specialist 4 Ernest E. Paolone of Chicago, the radio operator, crouched low, bleeding from a shrapnel wound in his left forearm. Sergeant James P. Castleberry, the artillery forward observer, and his radio operator, PFC Ervin L. Brown, Jr., hunkered down beside Paolone. Captain Edwards had a bullet hole in his left shoulder and armpit, and was slumped in a contorted sitting

position, unable to move and losing blood. He was holding his radio handset to his ear with his one good arm. A North Vietnamese machine gunner atop a huge termite hill no more than thirty feet away had them all in his sights.

"We lay there watching bullets kick dirt off the small parapet around the edge of the hole," Edwards recalls. "I didn't know how badly I had been hurt, only that I couldn't stand up, couldn't do very much. The two platoon leaders I had radio contact with, Lieutenant William W. Franklin on my right and Lieutenant James L. Lane on Franklin's right, continued to report receiving fire, but had not been penetrated. I knew that my other two platoons were in bad shape and the enemy had penetrated to within hand-grenade range of my command post."

The furious assault by more than five hundred North Vietnamese regulars had slammed directly into two of Captain Edwards's platoons, a thin line of fifty Cavalry troopers who were all that stood between the enemy and my battalion command post, situated in a clump of trees in Landing Zone X-Ray, Ia Drang Valley, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, early on November 15, 1965.

America had drifted slowly but inexorably into war in this far-off place. Until now the dying, on our side at least, had been by ones and twos during the "adviser era" just ended, then by fours and fives as the U.S. Marines took the field earlier this year. Now the dying had begun in earnest, in wholesale lots, here in this eerie forested valley beneath the 2,401-foot-high crest of the Chu Pong massif, which wandered ten miles back into Cambodia. 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. Now his goal was to draw the Americans into battle—to learn how they fought and teach his men how to kill them.

One understrength battalion 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 (PAVN)—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.

One of Captain Edwards's men, Specialist 4 Arthur Viera, remembers every second of Charlie Company's agony that morning. "The gunfire was very loud. We were getting overrun on the right side. The lieutenant [Neil A. Kroger, twenty-four, a native of Oak Park, Illinois] came up in the open in all this. I thought that was pretty good. He yelled at me. I got up to hear him. He hollered at me to help cover the left sector."

Viera adds, "I ran over to him and by the time I got there he was dead. He had lasted a half-hour. I knelt beside him, took off his dog tags, and put them in my shirt pocket. I went back to firing my M-79 grenade launcher and got shot in my

right elbow. The M-79 went flying and I was knocked down and fell back over the lieutenant. I had my .45 and fired it with my left hand. Then I got hit in the neck and the bullet went right through. Now I couldn't talk or make a sound.

"I got up and tried to take charge, and was shot a third time. That one blew up my right leg and put me down. It went in my leg above the ankle, traveled up, came back out, then went into my groin and ended up in my back, close to my spine. Just then two stick grenades blew up right over me and tore up both my legs. I reached down with my left hand and touched grenade fragments on my left leg and it felt like I had touched a red-hot poker. My hand just sizzled."

When Bob Edwards was hit he radioed for his executive officer, Lieutenant John Arrington, a twenty-three-year-old South Carolinian who was over at the battalion command post rounding up supplies, to come forward and take command of Charlie Company. Edwards says, "Arrington made it to my command post and, after a few moments of talking to me while lying down at the edge of the foxhole, was also hit and wounded. He was worried that he had been hurt pretty bad and told me to be sure and tell his wife that he loved her. I thought: 'Doesn't he know I'm badly wounded, too?' He was hit in the arm and the bullet passed into his chest and grazed a lung. He was in pain, suffering silently. He also caught some shrapnel from an M-79 that the North Vietnamese had apparently captured and were firing into the trees above us."

Now the North Vietnamese were closing in on Lieutenant John Lance (Jack) Geoghegan's 2nd Platoon. They were already intermingled with the few survivors of Lieutenant Kroger's 1st Platoon and were maneuvering toward Bob Edwards's foxhole. Clinton S. Poley, twenty-three, six feet three inches tall, and the son of an Ackley, Iowa, dirt farmer, was assistant gunner on one of Lieutenant Geoghegan's M-60 machine guns. The gunner was Specialist 4 James C. Comer, a native of Seagrove, North Carolina.

Poley says, "When I got up something hit me real hard on the back of my neck, knocked my head forward and my helmet fell off in the foxhole. I thought a guy had snuck up behind me and hit me with the butt of a weapon, it was such a blow. Wasn't anybody there; it was a bullet from the side or rear. I put my bandage on it and the helmet helped hold it on. I got up and looked again and there were four of them with carbines, off to our right front. I told Comer to aim more to the right. After that I heard a scream and I thought it was Lieutenant Geoghegan."

It wasn't. By now, Lieutenant Geoghegan was already dead. His platoon sergeant, Robert Jemison, Jr., saw him go down trying to help a wounded man. "Willie Godboldt was twenty yards to my right. He was wounded, started hollering: 'Somebody help me!' I yelled: 'I'll go get him!' Lieutenant Geoghegan yelled back: 'No, I will.' He moved out of his position in the foxhole to help Godboldt and was shot." Just five days past his twenty-fourth birthday, John Lance Geoghegan of Pelham, New York, the only child of proud and doting parents, husband of Barbara and father of six-month-old Camille, lay dead, shot through the head and back, in the tall grass and red dirt of the Ia Drang Valley. PFC Willie F. Godboldt of Jacksonville, Florida, also twenty-four years old, died before help ever reached him.

Sergeant Jemison, who helped fight off five Chinese divisions at Chipyeong-ni in the Korean War, now took a single bullet through his stomach but kept on fighting. Twenty minutes later the order came down for every platoon to throw a colored smoke grenade to mark friendly positions for the artillery and air strikes. Jemison got up to throw one and was hit again, this time knocked down by a bullet that struck him in the left shoulder. He got up, more slowly now, and went back to firing his M-16. Jemison fought on until he was hit a third time: "It was an automatic weapon. It hit me in my right arm and tore my weapon all to pieces. All that was left was the plastic stock. Another bullet cut off the metal clamp on my chin strap and knocked off my helmet. It hit so hard I thought my neck was broke. I was thrown to the ground. I got up and there was nothing left. No weapon, no grenades, no nothing."

James Comer and Clinton Poley, thirty feet to Jemison's left, had been firing their M-60 machine gun for almost an hour, an eternity. "A stick-handled potato-masher grenade landed in front of the hole. Comer hollered, 'Get down!' and kicked it away a little bit with his foot. It went off. By then we were close to being out of ammo and the gun had jammed. In that cloud of smoke and dust we started to our left, trying to find other 2nd Platoon positions. That's when I got hit in the chest and I hit the ground pretty hard."

Poley adds, "I got up and then got shot in my hip, and went down again. Comer and I lost contact with each other in the long grass. We'd already lost our ammo bearer [PFC Charles H. Collier from Mount Pleasant, Texas], who had been killed the day before. He was only eighteen and had been in Vietnam just a few days. I managed to run about twenty yards at a time for three times and finally came to part of the mortar platoon. A sergeant had two guys help me across a clearing to the battalion command post by the large anthill. The battalion doctor, a captain, gave me first aid."

Meantime, Specialist Viera was witness to scenes of horror: "The enemy was all over, at least a couple of hundred of them walking around for three or four minutes; it seemed like three or four hours. They were shooting and machine-gunning our wounded and laughing and giggling. I knew they'd kill me if they saw I was alive. When they got near, I played dead. I kept my eyes open and stared at a small tree. I knew that dead men had their eyes open."

Viera continues, "Then one of the North Vietnamese came up, looked at me, then kicked me, and I flopped over. I guess he thought I was dead. There was blood running out of my mouth, my arm, my legs. He took my watch and my .45 pistol and walked on. I watched them strip off all our weapons; then they left, back where they came from. I remember the artillery, the bombs, the napalm everywhere, real close around me. It shook the ground underneath me. But it was coming in on the North Vietnamese soldiers, too."

All this, and much more, took place between 6:50 A.M. and 7:40 A.M. on November 15, 1965. The agonies of Charlie Company occurred over 140 yards of the line. But men were fighting and dying on three sides of our thinly held American perimeter. In the center, I held the lives of all these men in my hands.



The badly wounded Captain Bob Edwards was now on the radio, asking for reinforcements. The only reserve I had was the reconnaissance platoon, twenty-two men. Was the attack on Charlie Company the main enemy threat? Delta Company and the combined mortar position were also under attack now. Reluctantly, I told Captain Edwards that his company would have to fight on alone for the time being.

The din of battle was unbelievable. Rifles and machine guns and mortars and grenades rattled, banged, and boomed. Two batteries of 105mm howitzers, twelve big guns located on another landing zone five miles distant, were firing nonstop, their shells exploding no more than fifty yards outside the ring of shallow foxholes.

Beside me in the battalion command post, the Air Force forward air controller, Lieutenant Charlie W. Hastings, twenty-six, from La Mesa, New Mexico, radioed a special code word, "Broken Arrow," meaning "American unit in danger of being overrun," and within a short period of time every available fighter-bomber in South Vietnam was stacked overhead at thousand-foot intervals from seven thousand feet to thirty-five thousand feet, waiting its turn to deliver bombs and napalm to the battlefield.

Among my sergeants there were three-war men—men who parachuted into Normandy on D day and had survived the war in Korea—and those old veterans were shocked by the savagery and hellish noise of this battle. Choking clouds of smoke and dust obscured the killing ground. We were dry-mouthed and our bowels churned with fear, and still the enemy came on in waves.