

A Critique of the Ia Drang Valley Campaign

I have read this article before, and think Joe Galloway to be a very brave reporter and a very good person. However, I have also read his book (We were Soldier's Once, . . . and Young), and I got the impression that he is awed by the Army unit he reported about, and the West Pointer's, in particular, that he seems to idolize.

Even in his own book, he writes that the Regimental and Battalion Commander's stated their Intelligence of the enemy was sketchy at best, yet they appeared more interested in proving that the new Air Mobile Warfare concept worked, rather than in protecting their Soldier's lives. George Armstrong Custer was unquestionably brave, but also unquestionably stupid, and in turn also got his soldier's killed due to his lack of proper prior scouting, planning, and deployment.

Basically the Air Cavalry went into a meat grinder and got their butts shot off, and then sent in another understaffed Battalion to do the identical thing a few days later. After taking very heavy loses, the Division Senior's informed SECDEF Robert Strange MacNamara and the world, that they had really won the battles, because they had killed more of the enemy than their own losses, and somehow managed to estimate a 12 to one kill ratio. The questionable body count formula began here, and remained as the guide throughout the course of the War.

Of course, the fact that we had air and artillery superiority might have had a major effect on the enemy loses, but this very important observation seems to have been overlooked. Now don't get me wrong, I'm glad they did, or they never would have made it out of there alive. I sure as heck used those assets, and Naval Gunfire to boot, every chance I got. But poor planning and lack of Intelligence, coupled with the Commander's desires to simply engage the enemy, was the real reason for their high troop loses. The near annihilation of two Battalion's of the US. 7th Air Cavalry, was almost a repeat of George Custer's debacle of 1876, some 89 years earlier.

I have preached to my fellow Marine's that we should study our mistakes in War, rather than covering them up to protect someone's image, or to hide the truth of various Engagement errors. Unfortunately, there seems little desire to do these studies. In Vietnam, I couldn't believe some of the poor indefensible positions, selected by WW11 and Korean Veteran vintage commander's, who we previously thought to be omni-knowledgeable in tactics and strategy. Some of our Operations bordered on the criminal, primarily due to lack of proper prior planning, and our failure of not calling for B-52's to do the required work in high density enemy troop concentrations areas, and in order to spare our troops.

I was hardly considered a timid or indecisive Platoon or Company Commander., but I did my homework as best I could and tried to protect my men in every way possible, before engaging the enemy. I think there really are Commander's who honestly believe that the more casualties they sustain, the more notoriety they will receive. I view this attitude as seeking some idiotic form of glory, at the unnecessary expense of their troops, and in my opinion a criminal offense as well.

As Military Officer's, I believe we have been honored to be selected to lead American's son's and daughter's in the military, with the tacit understanding that we are there to defend and protect them from harm, if at all possible. And even when we have to place them in harms way, we must use every weapon at our disposal to protect them, whether by proper prior planning to avoid traps, mines, etc., or by actual firepower.

Mr. Galloway and Gen. Moore seem to be very proud to have been a part of that debacle; however, I think that if the tactics and planning used in the Ia Drang Valley were put to the test, they would fail that test.

I might add that they have played this up as the first major engagement of the Vietnam War. I guess the Marine Operation, "Starlight" in August 1965, doesn't count, although over 1000 enemy soldiers were killed, with the lose of 55 Marines. Well, enough of my views on this "avoidable" debacle.

Major Stolz, USMC Ret. sends-2003.