

NCO Leadership in the 1/7<sup>th</sup> Air Mobile Calvary 1965

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## **NCO Leadership in the 1/7th Air Mobile Calvary 1965**

The history of 1/7th Calvary is long and distinguished, fighting in all conflicts dating back to 1866. On 1 September 1963 the 1st Battle Group 7th Cavalry was redesignated 1st Battalion 7th Calvary 1st Calvary Division. On July 1, 1965, at Fort Benning, Ga., this unit became the U.S. Army's first airmobile division, arriving in the Republic of Vietnam on Sept. 14, 1965. NCO Leadership proved itself again and again on LZ X-Ray, Vietnam Nov. 14, 1965.

The Command Sergeant Major of 1/7th Cav was Sergeant Major Basil L. Plumly. Command Sergeant-Major Basil Plumley was an old paratrooper. He was a rare breed, a former 82nd Airborne man who had made all four combat jumps in the Second World War into Sicily, Italy, Normandy and Holland. He made an additional fifth jump in Korea with the 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment (nicknamed the “**Rakkasans**,” the Japanese word for parachute.) He believed in tough discipline and tough training. He had to get this battalion going, he had almost no Soldiers and no equipment. What he did have was a few veterans from Korea and over the next few weeks a lot of new untested Soldiers. In the 1960's Soldiers came to a unit in cohorts. Plumly took his responsibilities to heart; he set out to establish an NCO support channel using his veterans to key leadership positions. He is also aware that his battalion is one of the first airmobile battalions in the Army. A training plan for helicopter and infantry skills will be required training for all leaders as well as his Soldiers. Plumly is still aware of his Command Sergeant Major responsibility; in 1965 those responsibilities are the same 45 years later. Command Sergeant Major Plumly just like any Command Sergeant Major of today must do these things. The Command Sergeant Major carries out policies and standards of the performance, training, appearance, and conduct of enlisted personnel. The command sergeant

major advises and initiates recommendations to the commander and staff in matters pertaining to the local NCO support channel. Perhaps slightly wiser and more experienced than the first sergeant, the command sergeant major is expected to function completely without supervision. Like the old sage of times past, the command sergeant major's counsel is expected to be calm, settled and unequivocally accurate, but with an energy and enthusiasm that never wanes, even in the worst of times. Assignable to any billet in the Army, the command sergeant major is all those things, and more, of each of the preceding grades of rank.

The training and weapons systems used in 1965 can still be found today, only improved on or in some other variations. The infantryman's weapons are the M-16, M79, and the M-60 these weapons are common to all in the 1965. The M-16 was built by Eugene Stoner in 1957, Colt fire arms manufactured the weapon and the bought it 1963. The M-16 rifle was designed to give the infantryman fire superiority over the enemy by providing rapid fire power. Its maximum rate of fire was 650-700 rounds per minute. Of course, changing magazines every nineteen rounds, we never reached that speed. But a single magazine still emptied quickly on full automatic. To sustain fire superiority, the men in a squad took turns firing and reloading. That way we kept a steady stream of lead raining down on our opponents. The rifle the Infantryman uses today is the M16A2. A variant of the M16, fires a three-round burst in semiautomatic operation. The M4/M4A1 5.56mm Carbine is a shortened variant of the M16A2 rifle, the M4 provides the individual soldier operating in close quarters the capability to engage targets at extended range. ([wikipedia.org/wiki/M16\\_rifle](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/M16_rifle))

The M-79, "Grenade Launcher" or "blooper" as it was known in 1965. This weapon closely resembled a large bore, single barrel, sawn-off shotgun. The first M79 Grenade launchers were delivered to the US Army in 1961. The M79 was designed as a close support weapon for the

infantry, and was intended to bridge the gap between the maximum throwing distance of a hand grenade, and the lowest range of supporting mortar fire, an area of between 50 and 300 meters. The M79 was a single shot, shoulder fired, break-barrel loading weapon which fired a 40mm diameter grenade. The M79 could also fire smoke grenades, CS gas, and flares. Later in the war the M79 was superseded by the M203 40mm launcher which was fixed beneath the handgrip of the M16 rifle. The M203 grenade launcher is a single-shot weapon designed for use with the M16 series rifle and fires a 40mm grenade. The M203A1 grenade launcher is a single-shot weapon designed for use with the M4 series carbine and also fires a 40mm grenade. Both have a leaf sight and quadrant site. The M203 is a modern version of the old M-79.

([www.diddybop.demon.co.uk/blooper](http://www.diddybop.demon.co.uk/blooper))

The M60 generally used as crew-served weapon which means that it is usually operated by more than one soldier, in this case two - the gunner and an assistant. The gunner carries the weapon while the assistant carries a spare barrel and extra ammunition in linked belts. The basic ammunition load carried by the crew is 600 to 900 rounds, which at the maximum rate of fire allows for approximately two minutes of continuous firing. In many US units that used the M60 as a squad automatic weapon in Vietnam, every soldier in the rifle squad would carry at least 200 linked rounds of ammunition for the M60, a spare barrel, or both, in addition to his own weapon and equipment. The M240B medium machine gun is a replacement for the M60 Series machine gun. This is a ground mounted variant of the original M240/M240C/M240E1 coax/pintle mounted machine gun used on M2/M3 Series Bradley Fighting Vehicles. While possessing many of the same basic characteristics as the M60 Series medium machine guns, the durability of the M240 system results in superior reliability and maintainability when compared to the M60.

([fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/m240g.htm](http://fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/m240g.htm))

In 1965 training in an helicopter was new, Air assault (or air mobile) is the movement of forces by helicopter to engage and destroy enemy forces or to seize and hold key terrain. In addition to regular infantry training, these forces usually receive training in rappelling and air transportation, and their equipment is sometimes modified as well to allow better transportation in aircraft. Due to the transport load restrictions of those aircraft, air assault troops are usually light infantry. Air cavalry are infantry units that use a helicopter for mobility and firepower. Air cavalry units can vary in organization, but all include infantry as the primary fighting element, supported heavily by helicopter transport, close air fire support, medical evacuation and re-supply. Most include some air mobile artillery. Units vary in size, but typically are brigade or division sized units. Airmobile units are designed and trained for air insertion, air re-supply, and if necessary air extraction. ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Air\\_assault](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_assault))

Along with all this air training came basic infantry skills. The term light infantry is used to refer to infantry who are not transported in armored fighting vehicles, instead walking or using unarmored vehicles and aircraft. Air assault (or air mobile) infantry units, which sometimes use helicopters for transportation to and from missions, are also light infantry. The term "light" also refers to the lower amount of weight that needs to be moved when deploying a light division or battalion to the area of operations. Two characteristics of light infantry units are mission flexibility and rapid deployment. Some examples of common light infantry missions include ambushes, raids and attacks behind enemy lines, search and destroy, and defensive operations, combined with patrolling to deny an area to the enemy. Light infantry also train for airfield seizure missions. Light infantry attend schools such as Ranger School, Air Assault School, Pathfinder School, Airborne School, Jungle warfare School, Sniper School, Anti-armor School,

and Light-fighters Course. The last 45 years or more the basic light infantry skill set has been the same, over the years we have improved with better schools, weapons and technology.

In the late morning of November 14, 1965, several platoons of American troops landed by helicopter at a clearing located in the Ia Drang River Valley, Vietnam. Over the next few hours they were followed by more men from their battalion, the 1st of the 7th Cavalry, which was one of the best-trained and equipped air-mobile formations in the U.S. arsenal. They came to fight the North Vietnamese on their own ground and they opened that effort with a visit to this clearing that was code-named X-Ray. One hour or so after hitting the LZ 2<sup>nd</sup> PLT of Bravo Company would become famous as the "lost Platoon". SGT Ernie Savage would find himself in charge, and fighting for the lives in his platoon.

Capt. John Herren's men were under attack by about 250 troops, and he radioed that his 2nd Platoon, on the right, was in danger of being cut off. The platoon was commanded by Lt. Henry Herrick, fresh out of Officer Candidate School who had joined the division along with a gaggle of other green lieutenants a month before go to Vietnam. In October, after a soldier drowned when Herrick ordered a river crossing without a safety rope, his platoon's senior man, Sgt. Carl Palmer, had complained to Herren: "Something has to be done about the lieutenant or he'll get us all killed." Herrick was, in the words of an OCS classmate, "a balls-to-the-wall kind of guy -- a hard charger." (qtd. Vietnam Story) This time, Herrick charged too hard. As his platoon trotted up the finger of land, the young lieutenant spotted a few enemy troops. The North Vietnamese fled and Herrick swung his 27 men in hot pursuit. Within minutes, they were more than 125 yards to the right of the rest of Bravo Company. Seconds later, they ran straight into 150 North Vietnamese headed down the mountain from the west. Herrick's platoon was quickly surrounded. Americans were dropping, wounded and dead, in the dry grass all around. LTC Moore and

Sergeant Major Plumley had been in constant motion on the battleground and the landing zone, shifting newly arriving troops to where they were needed most. Sergeant Major Plumley, shouting above the noise of the guns: 'Sir, if you don't find some cover you're going to go down, and if you go down we all go down.' Up on the mountain, Herrick's Lost Platoon was desperately clinging to a 25-yard circle atop a slight rise. The North Vietnamese overran one of the Americans' two M-60 machine guns. Sgt. Ernie Savage says, "I heard Sergeant Hurdle down there cursing, even over the noise of the firefight. And then they threw grenades in on him." Sgt. Paul Hurdle, the platoon's weapons-squad leader, he did not survive. The enemy turned Hurdle's machine gun around and began using it on the Americans. Herrick was mortally wounded. His last words to Savage were: "I'm glad I could give my life for my country." Command of the 2nd Platoon passed to SFC. Carl Palmer. Spc Galen Bungum, says that on the way up the mountain Sergeant Palmer said: "Bungum, I'll be 43 years old tomorrow, but I don't believe I'll live to see it." Within minutes of taking over, Palmer was shot in the head. Savage and the others laid him behind a log. Shortly afterward, an American hand grenade taken from the dead machine-gun crew flew over the clearing and exploded beneath Palmer. He died instantly. The mortar forward observer, Sgt. Robert Stokes, assumed it was his turn to take charge, stood up and said: "We've got to get out of here." (qtd. Vietnam Story) He was shot through the head and killed instantly. Command of the Lost Platoon fell to Ernie Savage. A 21-year-old buck sergeant from McCalla, Ala., he had been with the battalion more than two years and was field smart and cool under pressure. He grabbed Stokes's radio and called artillery fire down in a very tight circle. By then, eight of the Lost Platoon's 27 men were dead and 12 wounded. During the night, the remnants of Sergeant Savage's isolated little band meanwhile continued to be hard pressed. Three times the enemy attacked with at least a reinforced platoon but were turned back by the artillery and the



small arms fire of the men in the perimeter, including some of the wounded. Spc Charles H. Lose, moved about the perimeter, exposed to fire while he administered to the wounded. His diligence and ingenuity throughout the day and during the night saved at least a half-dozen lives; having run out of first-aid packets as well as bandages from his own bag, he used the C ration toilet tissue packets most of the men had with them to help stop bleeding. Calm, sure, and thoroughly professional, he brought reassurance to the men.

Before the second attack, which came at 0345, bugle calls were heard around the entire perimeter. Sergeant Savage could even hear enemy soldiers muttering softly to each other in the sing-song cadence of their language. He called down a 15-minute artillery barrage to saturate the area and followed it with a tactical air strike on the ground just above the positions. Executed under flagship illumination, the two strikes in combination broke up the attack.

A third and final attack came over an hour later and was as unsuccessful as the previous two. Sergeant Savage and his men, isolated but still holding throughout the night, could hear and sometimes see the enemy dragging off his dead and wounded. Bravo Company was sent to rescue the Lost Platoon. Sergeant Savage had not lost a single man after taking command, despite a long night and day of attacks. (Galloway)

In three days and two nights, the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry and attached units had lost 79 killed and 121 wounded. The enemy had lost an estimated 1,300 dead. In those three days heroes were made, several were NCOs. These NCOs would likely recognize the weapons of today, they have not changed only improved. The CSM of 1965 is similar to the ones of today, a no-nonsense senior leader dedicated to survival of his soldiers. Leaders like SGT Savage and SFC Palmer, these leaders are proficient in all parts of their duty, any of us can easily find an NCO in our ranks that is just like them.

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