

Death in the Tall Grass: Jim Lawrence's "Fields of Fire"; MacPherson's Interview with Lawrence in *Long Time Passing*; Medal of honor Citations: Bruce Crandall, Ed. W. Freeman, & Walter J. Marm, Jr.; Save the Date: Jim Lawrence to Speak at Grace Doctrine Church on Sunday, July 8

With the news that Colonel Moore and Mr. Galloway's book, *We Were Soldiers*, was going to be made into a movie, Jim Lawrence was inspired to put to paper many of the thoughts that he carried with him over the years. I'd like to now read from his unpublished manuscript *Reflections on Albany: "Fields of Fire"*:

Fields of Fire

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When the soldier heard the first scattered shots
Coming from across the landing zone
Where the recon platoon
And two platoons from Alpha Company
Had gone into the wood line,
He was confused;
He thought that all the damage
Inflicted on the enemy
On Landing Zone X-Ray
Should have sent them running,
But somebody was firing at someone,
And he was confused.

He was also tired and hungry
And felt that he did not need
Any more delays
From a cold shower,
A hot meal,
And a comfortable bunk,
So he was annoyed
By the scattered actions
From across the open field to his left front.

Suddenly the well-concealed enemy
Opened fire from the soldier's right flank,
Springing the surprise ambush perfectly
And pouring small arms fire,
Automatic weapons fire,
Rockets and mortar rounds
Into the startled American column.

The soldier dropped into the tall elephant grass,
Shocked at the turn of events,
Feeling fear for his life at the sudden assault,
But experiencing the transition
That must occur in a combat soldier
At a time like this.

His old self,
His feeling, caring self,
His hungry, tired self
Began fading away,
And the other persona,
The one that the United States Army
Had spent time and money to create,
Was kicking in.

His eyes glazed over,
His brain began to click automatically,
And now he began to fully understand
Why he spent three arduous weeks



In Airborne School
In repetitious training
To be able to jump out of
Perfectly good airplanes,
When he was assigned
To the First Cavalry—Airmobile,
A unit that moved exclusively by helicopter;
Why he had gone to Ranger School
And suffered through
The hell of the mountains and swamps
To earn that little arched yellow and black tab;
Now he knew,
And it was kicking in,
All the repetitions,
All the training,
So that the sensitive, caring man of thought
Would give way
To the cold, calculating man of action.

He raised his helmet-covered head enough
To determine that the enemy was to his right,
That the Americans had been surprised
And were being decimated
By the enemy's blistering crossfire;
That the enemy would try
To close with the Americans quickly,
And that he had to do something.

He looked and saw a nearby anthill,
A clay-hardened mound of dirt
About six feet tall and six feet round at the bottom
And tapering to a pointed top,
Which would provide good cover for his body
While allowing him
To expose his right eye—his shooting eye,
His right arm and shoulder,
And his M-16 automatic rifle,
So he moved quickly in a crouch ...
To his anthill—his combat station—
And fell into the rhythm of his combat training,
The mechanics of his body performing without question
The need and duty to fight back.

He slid up against the anthill,
Above the tall elephant grass,
So that he could establish his fields of fire
And seek his targets of opportunity.

At that very moment,
The North Vietnamese soldiers
Came out of the wood line
To the American's right flank
With the sole purpose
Of closing with their enemy,
Neutralizing their air superiority,
And annihilating the foreign invaders.

The American soldier saw the enemy,
Picked out his first target,
Locked and loaded his M-16,
Chambered the first round,

Pulled the black, plastic butt of the weapon
Deep into his right shoulder
To absorb the recoil,
Grasped the black plastic stock
With his left hand
While rotating his left elbow
Under the weapon to steady it,
Clicked off the safety,
Set the selector switch to semi-automatic,
Sighted down through the two sights,
Aligning the triangular front sight blade
In the center of the rear sight,
Began to squeeze the pistol-grip handle and the trigger,
Stopped his breathing
Halfway through the exhale,
And fired three quick shots.

The enemy soldier dropped, Hit squarely in the chest
And dead before he hit the ground.
The soldier sighted on another,
Followed the exact same procedure,
And another enemy fell,
Then another,
Then another.

Suddenly the top of the anthill mound
Was splattered by several machine gun rounds,
And the American to the soldier's right
Was hit in the neck and head
And went down screaming.
The soldier peered out around his mound,
Looked up into the dark green canopy
Of the tall jungle trees
And saw the muzzle flashes
Of the enemy machine gun.

The training—
Shoulder—sight—exhale—hold—squeeze—
Pow—Pow—Pow—
The enemy machine gunner
Fell out of the tree,
Down until his harness caught him
And left his dead body dangling
Fifty feet up in the air,
Hit by two of the three rounds
Fired by the American fighting man.

The soldier looked back towards the wood line,
Still feeling nothing,
But reacting as he was taught;
He saw three enemy charge out together,
With bayonets fixed
On their Chinese-made AK-47 assault rifles;
They were only fifty yards or so away,
So the soldier knew it was time.
The man on his right was dead,
The Americans to his left were wounded,

So this was his gunfight, his shootout.
So he entered the zone—
The killing zone—
Not a place, but a state of mind;
Devoid of reason,
Devoid of logic,
Devoid of fear;
Composed of the mechanics of his training,
His strong sense of survival,
A pressing desire to win,
And the arrogance of a fighting man
Who knew he was indestructible
At that moment in time.

He clicked his selector switch to fully automatic,
Stepped out from behind his hiding place,
Standing completely exposed to the enemy,
Muttered “rock and roll” once under his breath,
And sprayed twenty rounds of high-velocity death
Into the charging enemy.

All three went down,
Clattering and tumbling to the ground;
But one got back up,
Three small red dots
Now in the middle of his khaki-colored jacket
And his silver belt buckle with the red star
Shattered by a fourth bullet.
He started towards the American,
Stunned and shaken,
A look of amazement on his face,
But going on guts.
The soldier calmly ejected his empty magazine,
Locked his weapon,
Loaded a full clip,
Unlocked—sighted—squeezed—fired,
The North Vietnamese fell again,
Only to get up a second time,
To be put down again by the rifleman’s third volley.

Then almost as suddenly as the ambush had started,
It stopped.
The soldier just stood there
As the mass confusion and noise of battle
Was replaced by an eerie quiet;
Except for the groans of the wounded and dying,
A strange silence fell across the battlefield,
A scattered shot or two off in the distance,
But the battle was over.

As the smoke began drifting away,
The man of action,
The one trained for all this,
Began crawling back
Into the shadowy depths of his soul,
And the other person

Began to emerge.

The soldier looked around him
And saw the carnage of combat;
He saw the shattered weapons
And the broken bodies,
The dead hanging from trees
And the groups of bodies
From both armies ...
Piled together in a hand-to-hand fight to the death,
And there he stood without even a scratch.

And he knew that he was now two people,
And he would always be two people;
First the one that the public would accept,
The one that would conform to society's standards,
That would hold the right job,
Go to the right church,
Raise the right family,
Say the right things,
Live the life that all back home
Expected him to live.

But he also knew
That he was another person,
A soldier trained for combat,
And one that would always lie
Just below the surface
Of the first persona,
And never very far away.
He knew that he would have to hide
The second person,
That the first person would have to control the second,
Partially because the world
Would not approve
Of the thoughts and actions
Of the second person,
Partially because the first person
Might not be able to bear
The thought pictures of the horrible slaughter,
Partially because no one
Could ever understand
What he had experienced
He knew he would never talk about the battle,
He knew he would not even try to explain,
He knew that only those who had been there
Could understand,
And he knew that he would spend
The rest of his life
As two persons
And most would never ever know.¹

¹ James T. Lawrence, "Fields of Fire," in *Reflections on Albany*, 2002.

In 1984, Myra MacPherson interviewed a number of veterans of the Ia Drang campaign. She compiled their responses into a book entitled *Long Time Passing*. Some were depressed while others were strengthened by the experience. Jim Lawrence was one of the latter. I'd like to quote from her book a portion of Jim's comments to her:

Today Lawrence looks predominantly at the positive values of his war. "I came out of the war without the scars of war. I can't therefore jump into the mind of someone who's been really altered by it and understand his problems. But where would a lot be, say, if the war hadn't existed? Would they still be losers? I contend that would be. (p. 292)

"The war gave me a tremendous amount of strength to handle stress." Lawrence mentioned an attitude common to many successful veterans. "I watch people crack up in the world of business and I think, 'What's wrong with you guys? This is trivial, just little daily stress.' The other thing, the war made me appreciate what I've got. I'm talking about everything from milk shakes to the American flag. Literally, that was my first request, lying paralyzed in the hospital—a chocolate milk shake."

Lawrence returned to teach American literature at the University of Alabama, then took a gamble on real estate.

Lawrence married a woman from his hometown, Troy, Alabama, now an English teacher. "I just don't have those negatives. This is my first and last wife, hopefully. This is my first night of two drinks in a month. I've never used drugs." (p. 293)

... finally, Lawrence explains what has carried him through these years. "Vietnam started me on a trip that convinced me of a higher being. When I realized all this was an awful dirty joke—. Had I gone through all this—losing friends, watching their bodies rotting on the ground—I could never have accepted it without something to cling to. The experience guided me toward a trip to find out what that was. What I came to was Christianity. As I say, life would have been a dirty joke without it. I had to think there was the essence of Christ and the idea that there's a better life after this one."² (293–94)

There was only one Medal of Honor presented to those who saw combat at either X-Ray or Albany. Two others were presented some years later to the helicopter pilots who courageously flew repeated missions into X-Ray bringing ammunition in and taking the wounded out.

Medal of Honor: Bruce Crandall

On February 26, 2007, Crandall was awarded the Medal of Honor by President George Bush for his actions at the Battle of Ia Drang. The citation reads:

² Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam & the Haunted Generation* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1984), 292–94.

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty: Major Bruce P. Crandall distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism as a Flight Commander in the Republic of Vietnam, while serving with Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). On 14 November 1965, his flight of sixteen helicopters was lifting troops for a search and destroy mission from Plei Me, Vietnam, to Landing Zone X-Ray in the la Drang Valley. On the fourth troop lift, the airlift began to take enemy fire, and by the time the aircraft had refueled and returned for the next troop lift, the enemy had Landing Zone X-Ray targeted. As Major Crandall and the first eight helicopters landed to discharge troops on his fifth troop lift, his unarmed helicopter came under such intense enemy fire that the ground commander ordered the second flight of eight aircraft to abort their mission. As Major Crandall flew back to Plei Me, his base of operations, he determined that the ground commander of the besieged infantry battalion desperately needed more ammunition. Major Crandall then decided to adjust his base of operations to Artillery Firebase Falcon in order to shorten the flight distance to deliver ammunition and evacuate wounded soldiers. While medical evacuation was not his mission, he immediately sought volunteers and with complete disregard for his own personal safety, led the two aircraft to Landing Zone X-Ray. Despite the fact that the landing zone was still under relentless enemy fire, Major Crandall landed and proceeded to supervise the loading of seriously wounded soldiers aboard his aircraft. Major Crandall's voluntary decision to land under the most extreme fire instilled in the other pilots the will and spirit to continue to land their own aircraft, and in the ground forces the realization that they would be resupplied and that friendly wounded would be promptly evacuated. This greatly enhanced morale and the will to fight at a critical time. After his first medical evacuation, Major Crandall continued to fly into and out of the landing zone throughout the day and into the evening. That day he completed a total of 22 flights, most under intense enemy fire, retiring from the battlefield only after all possible service had been rendered to the Infantry battalion. His actions provided critical resupply of ammunition and evacuation of the wounded

Major Crandall's daring acts of bravery and courage in the face of an overwhelming and determined enemy are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Medal of Honor: Ed W. Freeman

Presented to Freeman by President George W. Bush, July 16, 2001. The citation reads:

Captain Ed W. Freeman, United States Army, distinguished himself by numerous acts of conspicuous gallantry and extraordinary intrepidity on 14 November 1965 while serving with Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). As a flight leader and second in command of a 16-helicopter lift unit, he supported a heavily engaged American infantry battalion at Landing Zone X-Ray in the la Drang Valley, Republic of Vietnam. The unit was almost out of ammunition after taking some of the heaviest casualties of the war, fighting off a relentless attack from a highly motivated, heavily armed enemy force. When the infantry commander closed the helicopter landing zone due to intense direct enemy fire, Captain Freeman risked his own life by flying his unarmed helicopter through a gauntlet of enemy fire time after time, delivering critically needed ammunition, water and medical supplies to the besieged battalion. His flights had a direct impact on the battle's outcome by providing the

engaged units with timely supplies of ammunition critical to their survival, without which they would almost surely have gone down, with much greater loss of life. After medical evacuation helicopters refused to fly into the area due to intense enemy fire, Captain Freeman flew 14 separate rescue missions, providing life-saving evacuation of an estimated 30 seriously wounded soldiers -- some of whom would not have survived had he not acted. All flights were made into a small emergency landing zone within 100 to 200 meters of the defensive perimeter where heavily committed units were perilously holding off the attacking elements. Captain Freeman's selfless acts of great valor, extraordinary perseverance and intrepidity were far above and beyond the call of duty or mission and set a superb example of leadership and courage for all of his peers. Captain Freeman's extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.

Medal of Honor: Walter J. Marm, Jr.

Presented on February 15, 1967. The citation reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty. As a platoon leader in the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), 1st Lt. Marm demonstrated indomitable courage during a combat operation. His company was moving through the valley to relieve a friendly unit surrounded by an enemy force of estimated regimental size. 1st Lt. Marm led his platoon through withering fire until they were finally forced to take cover. Realizing that his platoon could not hold very long, and seeing four enemy soldiers moving into his position, he moved quickly under heavy fire and annihilated all 4. Then, seeing that his platoon was receiving intense fire from a concealed machine gun, he deliberately exposed himself to draw its fire. Thus locating its position, he attempted to destroy it with an antitank weapon. Although he inflicted casualties, the weapon did not silence the enemy fire. Quickly, disregarding the intense fire directed on him and his platoon, he charged 30 meters across open ground, and hurled grenades into the enemy position, killing some of the 8 insurgents manning it. Although severely wounded, when his grenades were expended, armed with only a rifle, he continued the momentum of his assault on the position and killed the remainder of the enemy. 1st Lt. Marm's selfless actions reduced the fire on his platoon, broke the enemy assault, and rallied his unit to continue toward the accomplishment of this mission. 1st Lt. Marm's gallantry on the battlefield and his extraordinary intrepidity at the risk of his life are in the highest traditions of the U.S. Army and reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of his country.

On Sunday, July 8, Jim Lawrence will address this congregation with his retrospective of the Pleiku Campaign and his involvement in the battles at Landing Zones X-Ray and Albany.

Jim has been accepting invitations to deliver his address from civic groups, veteran's organizations, and schools for quite a number of years. During these appearances, he has met and become friends with General Hal Moore and Joe Galloway as they have shared the same platform on several occasions.

I have been wanting to get Jim to our church for a long time so he could tell us his story to us. My father's time with us prevented doing so until now. It is my desire that each of you Save the Date of Sunday, 8 July. We want to demonstrate on that occasion the devotion and appreciation that we profess we hold to those who have served and are serving in our nation's military.

It is through the sacrifice of Jim and other members of the military who have spoken at Grace Doctrine Church that have made it possible for us to freely exercise the privilege to grow in grace. The freedom they defended gives us the opportunity to advance to the high ground. When that becomes a reality, we become the *promachoi* that win the spiritual victory in our generation in the combat of the Invisible War.



