

WE WERE SOLDIERS

Study Guide



**KNIGHTS
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❖ Introduction ❖

In November 1965, the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division was ordered into the forest jungle of Ia Drang in Vietnam. The four-day battle that ensued changed the course of the Vietnam War.

Up to that point, Americans had served primarily as advisors to South Vietnamese battalions fighting against Viet Cong guerrillas, a group which was a constant threat to the South Vietnamese.

In response to these threats, President John F. Kennedy pledged America's support to the South Vietnamese and others fighting for liberty throughout the world, no matter what the cost. The president would not, of course, live to see just how great the cost would be, but it was in response to his pledge that many young men initially enlisted. They wanted to defend their country, to become heroes as many of their fathers and brothers had done during World War II and Korea. They served under men such as then-Lt. Col. Harold G. "Hal" Moore, a career officer with nearly 20 years of military experience and tactical command.

Moore fought alongside Sgt. Maj. Basil Plumley, a highly decorated airborne combat infantryman who had served in World War II and the Korean War. Together, these men would lead their battalion using troop carriers, medevacs and aerial artillery yet untested on such a scale. With them was young Joe Galloway, a 22-year-old reporter, who would become the only civilian decorated for valor for actions in combat during the conflict.

Galloway would survive. Many did not. Those who lived eventually returned home to a country that was, for the most part, angry at the war, and which frequently projected this anger onto the soldiers who fought in it. People grew tired of yet another war story; men, courageous defenders of their country, were cast aside without any fanfare, recognition or praise. To this day, many feel that America was not justified in becoming involved in the Vietnam War. Others feel that the war consisted of poor political and tactical decisions, leading to the unnecessary sacrifice of countless men.

However complicated the political situation, war is not just a story of events. Rather, as director Randall Wallace attempts to portray in *We Were Soldiers*, war is a story of people, a story of brotherhood.

"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. ... 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."

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



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

Galloway: These are the true events of November 1965. The Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam, a place our country does not remember, in a war it does not understand. This story's a testament to the young Americans who died in the valley of death, and a tribute to the young men of the People's Army of Vietnam who died by our hand in that place. To tell this story, I must start at the beginning. But where does it begin?

Moore: Our Father in Heaven, before we go into battle, every soldier among us will approach you, each in his own way. Our enemies too, according to their own understanding, will ask for protection and for victory. And so we bow before your infinite wisdom; we offer our prayers as best we can. I pray that you watch over the young men, like Jack Geoghegan, that I lead into battle. ... use me as your instrument in this awful hell of war to watch over them, especially if they are men like this one beside me, deserving of a future in your blessing and goodwill. Amen.

Galloway: In Saigon, Hal Moore's superiors congratulated him for killing over 1,800 enemy soldiers, then ordered him to lead the 7th Cavalry back into the valley of death. He led them and fought beside them for 235 more days. Some had families waiting. For others, their only family would be the men they bled beside. There were no bands, no flags, no honor guards to welcome them home. They went to war because their country ordered them to. But in the end, they fought not for their country or their flag. They fought for each other.

Galloway: We who have seen war, will never stop seeing. ... We will always hear the sound of screaming. So this is our story, for we were soldiers once, and young.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. Early in the film, Moore is asked by his young daughter Cecile, "Daddy, what's a war?" He offers this explanation: "Well... a war is when people hurt other people, and people like daddy try to stop them."

Interestingly, Moore doesn't speak of "bad guys" versus "good guys," but simply people in general. What does this say for Moore's perspective on his "enemy"?

2. Just prior to the troop being sent to the jungles of Vietnam, Jack Geoghegan's wife gives birth to a baby girl. The young lieutenant expresses his concern: "I know God has a plan for me. I just hope it's to help protect orphans, not make any." He doesn't wish his baby girl — who he has yet to hold — to grow up without him.

In these moments after his daughter's birth, Jack seems unsure about God's will for him. Yet, once on the battlefield, Jack shows no sign of hesitating. What might Jack's heroic death reveal about his understanding of God's will for him, both as a father and a soldier?

3. "As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted."

These words, written by Pope Paul VI less than a month after the battle of Ia Drang, form the basis of Catholic Just War Theory. What do you think of Moore's situation in light of this theory?

4. **Hal Moore is depicted as a devout Catholic, offering prayers with both his children and his fellow soldiers, asking that his men may return home safely. While praying with Lt. Geoghegan, he mentions an additional request, saying, “Dear Lord, about our enemies. Ignore their heathen prayers and help us blow those little bastards straight to hell. Amen.”**

While Moore's request provides comic relief to the otherwise serious dialogue, it also raises several questions. How should people of faith — particularly Catholics — approach war? Can Catholics, in right conscience, pray specifically for their enemies' defeat? Or, should they instead pray that war be carried out in a just manner and peace be achieved?

5. **Moore and Plumley motivate their men quite differently. Through his actions, Plumley demonstrates the strength and grit that it takes to face war, while Moore offers inspiration through words. “We are going into battle against a tough and determined enemy,” he explains. “I can't promise you that I will bring you all home alive. But this I swear before you and before Almighty God: That when we go into battle, I will be the first to step on the field and I will be the last to step off. And I will leave no one behind. Dead or alive, we will all come home together.”**

Moore's speech seems idealistic and somewhat impractical as he promises to bring them all home, a promise no one can guarantee. Despite this, do you think that Moore's promise — or even the idea of the promise — helped his men be better prepared to face battle?

6. **Throughout the film, the American soldiers risk their lives in order to extract the wounded and retrieve the dead. Many are wounded or killed in these attempts.**

What creates a bond of brotherhood, a bond so strong that one is willing to die for it? Is this bond only unique to combat zones? Or can it be built up among any good men?

7. **“Look around you. In the 7th Cavalry, we've got a captain from the Ukraine, another from Puerto Rico. We've got Japanese, Chinese, Blacks, Hispanics, Cherokee Indians, Jews and Gentiles. All Americans. Now here in the states, some of you in this unit may have experienced discrimination because of race or creed. But for you and me now, all that is gone.”**

What is it about war that makes our differences disappear? Moore states a war zone becomes “what home was always supposed to be.” Is this because these differences no longer matter?

8. **These men fought and struggled to become fighters, combatants who would not run away in the heat of battle, who would face the enemy to retrieve the body of a fallen brother. They were simply, as the title suggests, soldiers.**

What makes a soldier? Is it wearing a uniform? Being in battle? If it is being on a battlefield that makes one a soldier, what were these men when they returned — were they soldiers still?

9. **For many of these men, it was the thought of their wives and families back home that keep them going. It was their wives who felt the hurt and pain of war most deeply, wondering each day whether it would be their turn to receive a telegram notifying them of a death.**

As these women worked to provide comfort and compassion, they created a deep bond. Could their community have survived without their support for each other and their families?

10. **After *We Were Soldiers* was released, some claimed that it was a waste to make a film about a war that simply was a waste of lives.**

What do you think of this criticism? Was the film a “waste,” or does it help us better understand the universal experience of the soldiers in combat?