

Basil L. Plumley, Veteran of Three Wars, Dies at 92

By DENNIS HEVESI October 15, 2012 NYTIMES

Night had fallen as American and North Vietnamese soldiers exchanged sheets of gunfire during Operation Landing Zone X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965. Illumination flares attached to parachutes floated from American aircraft.

One parachute failed to open, and the flare plummeted into stacks of ammunition crates near the command post of the First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry Regiment, one of several American units engaged in the Vietnam War's first major battle with North Vietnamese regulars.

Sgt. Maj. Basil L. Plumley jumped to his feet, reached into the pile, grabbed the burning flare and tossed it into a clearing. For that unhesitating action, he earned the Silver Star. It was one of more than 30 decorations he would receive; among the others were the rare honor of a Combat Infantryman's Badge with two stars, signifying that he had fought in three wars.

"It's very rare for someone to have served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam," said retired Col. Greg Camp, executive vice president of the National Infantry Museum in Columbus, Ga., near Fort Benning. Only 325 soldiers have ever received what is known as the "Triple C.I.B."

Sergeant Major Plumley, who died at 92 on Wednesday at a hospice in Columbus, Ga., also has the distinction of having received the Master Combat Parachutist Badge with a gold star, indicating that he had leapt into battle five times during his 32-year military career.

"In World War II, he made four combat jumps into hostile fire: at Sicily, Salerno, on D-Day in Normandy and in Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands," Colonel Camp said. "To have then made a fifth jump in Korea would make him one of a very few to have earned a gold star on his jump wings."

Sergeant Major Plumley received wider prestige after the 1992 publication of "We Were Soldiers Once ...and Young," an account of the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, and the 2002 release of the movie based on the book, "We Were Soldiers." The book was written by Joseph L. Galloway and Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore, who as a lieutenant colonel at the time was commander of the First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry. The movie starred Mel Gibson as the colonel and Sam Elliott as Sergeant Major Plumley.

Mr. Galloway was a United Press International correspondent attached to the battalion during the Ia Drang battle in the remote Central Highlands of Vietnam. "This was a cliffhanger situation, 450 Americans in an understrength battalion surrounded by more than 2,000 North Vietnamese regular troops," Mr. Galloway said in an interview on Thursday. "In four days, 234 Americans were killed." (Colonel Camp of the Infantry Museum said the North Vietnamese lost many more troops.)

