



Interview: 'A General's Spiritual Journey'

By Gerald Korson
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Our Sunday Visitor

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HUNTINGTON (OSV) - When I first received Lt. Gen. Hal Moore's 58-page book, "A General's Spiritual Journey" (Wild Goose Ministries, \$10.95, available on Amazon.com), I noticed small cover type stating that the book was "observed and written by Hal Moore's driver."

I figured it must be a clever device whereby a humble man could tell his story in the third person without the slightest appearance of self-aggrandizement.

I was wrong. The "driver" is real, a close friend of the General's who desires anonymity. He has, in fact, driven Moore to many places since his military retirement and has heard all his stories and ruminations. So taken was he with Moore's spirituality and leadership that he composed this slim volume to express what it is that makes this Korean and Vietnam War veteran spiritually "tick."

Few may know Moore as the U.S. Army brigade leader at Ia Drang in November 1965, the first major battle of the Vietnam War and one of its bloodiest. Then a colonel, he earned a reputation for finding Viet Cong combatants and inflicting up to tenfold as many casualties as those sustained by his own troops.

Many more know him as the co-author of "We Were Soldiers...and Young," the book that inspired the 2002 film "We Were Soldiers," starring Mel Gibson as Col. Moore. (A sequel to Moore's book, "We Were Soldiers...Still," is due for a September release by HarperCollins.)

In a recent interview, Our Sunday Visitor discussed war, faith and spiritual journeys with General Moore — and his driver.

OUR SUNDAY VISITOR: Contrary to my initial impressions, the "driver" who wrote this book is a real person. What's the story there?

LT. GEN. HAL MOORE: He's also my dear friend. I don't know why he wants to be known as "the driver."

THE DRIVER: We go a lot of places together, and when we do, I drive him.

So when the idea came for a book about General Moore's spiritual journey, it seemed that he had shared all his best stories with me while I was driving him someplace. So it just kind of dovetailed. I love being known as "Hal Moore's driver."

OSV: Few people get to see themselves portrayed in film, and fewer still are played by a marquee star like Mel Gibson. How did you rate his performance?

MOORE: I think Mel did a great job. During the filming, he would often come up to me and ask detailed questions about how he should act or do a particular scene. He is a devout religious person and a hell of a good man. We hit it off. We've kept up our friendship.

OSV: You refer to revisiting the Ia Drang battlefield, praying there and feeling your "long lasting guilt" subside. Why guilt?

MOORE: I lost a lot of my men. I had 79 killed. I had commanded them for well over a year. A few of the noncommissioned officers who were killed were married, and I had met their wives and children. I can't explain it, but when you lose your men, and you carry them off the battlefield, bearing a terrible truth that would tear the lives and hearts of their families in 24 to 48 hours when they got the telegram, it gets to you. You feel guilty that you're still alive.

OSV: Your meeting there with Lt. Gen. [then Col.] Nguyen Huu An, your opponent at Ia Drang, must have been extraordinary.

MOORE: General An and I went back to the battlefield and talked for several hours — we, Joe Galloway [a UPI combat reporter who covered Ia Drang and co-wrote "We Were Soldiers"] and an interpreter. I gave An a wristwatch, and we became friends.

An died of a heart attack in 1995. In 1997, we visited his widow in his home and met his two sons and two daughters. They had a shrine in his room with a big portrait of him in uniform, along with candles, incense, and all his medals. Alongside the medals was the wristwatch I had given him and the letter of condolences I had written to his widow after his death.

OSV: How do you evaluate the U.S. strategy in Vietnam?

MOORE: There were two great tragedies in the 20th century in America. One was the decline in morality in our country. The second was the war in Vietnam. It was an unnecessary war. We should never have gone there in the first place.

I don't think the war was winnable, but I don't know what would constitute "winning" in Vietnam. We went to Vietnam to stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Had we never gone there at all, Vietnam would still be where it is today.

Vietnam is a booming country. It is becoming more and more capitalistic – the strangest form of communism you could imagine. Except for the looks of the people and the language, you would think you were in an American city when you go to Saigon.

OSV: The book ends with a mention of “unfinished business.” What lies ahead for a man who has spent 80-plus years of his life in service to God and country?

MOORE: My principle purpose in life now is to qualify for life hereafter. I’m a very religious person: I try to go to Mass every day, and if not then to this small chapel to meditate. And I find this very helpful.

DRIVER: He’s also a real student and reads four or five books at one time. He works at his spiritual formation, even at 86.

OSV: Tell me about how Msgr. George Murdock, the Catholic chaplain at the U.S. Military Academy, influenced your life.

MOORE: All my years at West Point, I saw Msgr. Murdock frequently. He was a great source of encouragement to me in getting through the tough academic courses. I had no problem with the discipline of the place — that was easy. I was a “goat” — that’s what they called those of us cadets who had trouble in academics.

I went to Mass daily, and at various times during the day when I was free I would sit in the chapel, meditate and pray.

DRIVER: I don’t know how you attend Mass every day at West Point with its rigorous schedule. I think his training for military leadership was secondary. What he really learned there was spiritual leadership.

The day he graduated, right after the ceremony, he was in the chapel. Right after he left that campus, he went on a three-day retreat at an abbey. So at this crucial time in his life, he already had that sense of spirituality and eternity. That’s what he took into the rest of his life.

How do you find “peace in war,” as the book states?

MOORE: In the heat of a battle, we don’t pray. We don’t think about heaven. We think about killing the enemy and getting through the battle alive. But before going into battle, I always prayed that I would make the right decisions, that I would conduct myself properly as a leader. I prayed that I would survive the battle, although I was prepared to be killed.

OSV: Today you still pray for the men from your unit. What is your prayer for them?

MOORE: I pray that my men who were killed in action under my command have eternal life in Jesus Christ. That’s the best I can do.

When I go to the cemetery at Fort Benning, Georgia, a one-hour drive from my home here in Alabama, I visit the graves of my men who died in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965. My wife is buried next to Sgt. Jack Gell, whom I held in my arms just after he died. He left a wife and three children. When I go out, I will be buried in the same grave with my wife.

OSV: What advice would you offer to someone who is just beginning his or her spiritual journey?

MOORE: Life on this planet is temporary. It's like a snap of the fingers compared to eternal life. You're only given one shot, your lifetime on earth, to quality for eternal life.

I often think of a prayer by Pope Clement XI: "Discover to me, O my God, the nothingness of this world, the greatness of heaven, the shortness of time, and the length of eternity."

I can hardly wait to enjoy life eternal with God and his saints, my late wife Julie, relatives, all my troops who died in battle, all the men and women of history. When I think of what awaits me if I qualify, I can hardly wait to get there.

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