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Posted: Wednesday, February 14, 2007 5:10 am

Art Martori

Bruce Crandall said the small-arms fire whipping helicopter sounded like bursting popcorn kernels.

"When you're in the air, it had more of a popcorn-popping sound," said Crandall, a 73-year-old former Mesa resident. "If it's a deeper sound, you're in deep (expletive), because then it's anti-aircraft."

The scene was grim in the la Drang Valley on the morning of Nov. 14, 1965. Soldiers from the 7th Cavalry Regiment were locked in battle with a force of North Vietnamese soldiers who outnumbered the American troops 7-1.

It was one of the first major battles of the Vietnam conflict, and it set the stage for another decade of fighting between ground troops.

It was during this fierce, four-day battle that Crandall — then a 32-yearold Army major — flew his Huey re-peatedly into landing zones overrun by enemy soldiers, delivering ammunition to his

Former Mesan to get Medal of Honor



outnumbered American comrades and rescuing wounded soldiers.

"It was all dust, a fantastic amount of dust," Crandall said. "An artillery smell in air. There was very dense smoke."

Three of his crew members were killed and three more wounded during 14 hours of hellish fighting, Crandall said.

"They needed the ammunition, so we went in," he said. "Didn't necessarily expect to get out. But I knew if we got in, the ammo would at least be on ground."

The battle of the la Drang Valley was immortalized in a 1992 book called "We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young" by Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore, and again in a major motion picture in 2002 that starred Mel Gibson playing the part of Moore. Actor Greg Kinnear played Crandall.

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More than four decades after the battle, the U.S. Department of Defense announced President Bush will present Crandall with the Medal of Honor Feb. 26 at the White House.

He will join a group of 111 living recipients of the award, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. More than half of them fought in the Vietnam war.

Crandall is the second member of his unit to receive the medal due to heroism at Ia Drang. Capt. Ed W. Freeman, also a 7th Cavalry pilot, received the honor in 2001.

Fewer than 3,500 Americans have received the medal since it was first awarded on March 25, 1863, during the Civil War.

The decoration will finally reach Crandall after more than 40 years, due to a bill enacted by Congress in 1996. Before that, the medal could only be awarded in the two years after a soldier demonstrated "exceptional gallantry beyond the call of duty," according to a document created by the U.S. Senate.

Crandall said there were barely enough soldiers in 1965 to man the helicopters, and that it's possible there were too few military personnel to send award recommendations up the chain of command.

"In the cavalry, when we went over, we were very short of personnel," he said. "We didn't have gunners. Clerks, cooks, anyone we could find in the unit went along on the mission.

"We weren't there for awards."

Crandall retired from the Army as a lieutenant-colonel in 1977, after a series of strokes left him unable to fly.

In 1980, Crandall moved to Mesa, where he served as director of public works until his retirement in 1994. He now lives in Manchester, Wash.

Former Mesa City Manager Mike Hutchinson said he became close friends with Crandall and that he plans to attend the Washington ceremony.

Hutchinson said Crandall never boasted of his exploits in Vietnam. It wasn't until publication of "We Were Soldiers Once... and Young" that the extent of Crandall's bravery came to light.

"When you read that book, what Bruce did sends chills down your spine," he said. "The sense that he should be recognized was felt by many people."

Hutchinson added that his relationship with Crandall was marked by a competitive element, as the two men wagered on their games at Mesa golf courses.

"We exchanged dollar bills. In his heyday, he was playing a lot," Hutchinson said. "He's a lefty, though, so people hold that against him."

Crandall's heroics were further publicized when the book about the battle for the Ia Drang Valley was adapted into a movie bearing the shortened title, "We Were Soldiers." Crandall said he acted as a consultant during its shooting, which he found accurate in every detail.

Crandall praised Kinnear for his portrayal in the movie.

"He's a kick in the teeth," Crandall said. "They picked people just exactly like us."

Mesa Mayor Keno Hawker worked with Crandall during his tenure on the City Council from 1986 to 1994. He said Crandall was known as a diligent worker who talked very little about his wartime heroics.

"Actually, his reputation as a military hero wasn't really known by a lot of city employees," Hawker

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said. "He didn't act like what you'd assume a military hero would act like."

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