

Joe Galloway recalls how as a young wire service reporter in 1963, convinced that a then-escalating conflict in Vietnam would become his generation's war, he began an 18-month campaign of letters and phone calls to convince his bosses at UPI to transfer him to Saigon to cover the war.

They did in early 1965 and he arrived there as a 23 year old to launch a career in which he wrote about the soldiers from the places where they fought and died. He became the only civilian awarded a medal of valor by the U.S. Army for his actions during battle in Vietnam and eventually wrote what was viewed as one of the 10 all-time best books on war.

After Desert Storm, the first Gulf War, Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf called Galloway "the finest combat correspondent of our generation-a soldier's reporter and a soldier's friend."

It was in that capacity of "soldier's friend" that for the past seven years he wrote a weekly column for first Knight-Ridder and then McClatchy Newspapers, serving as a gadfly on behalf of soldiers and a fierce critic of the civilian officials whose military decisions put them in harm's way.

Galloway's "We were soldiers once...and young " was judged by a group of military historians two years ago as one of history's top 10 books on war. That put it in good company with the likes of Homer's Illiad, Tolstoy's "War and Peace" and Stephen Crane's "Red Badge of Courage."

Galloway has now written a "farewell" to his weekly syndicated column. Although we only met once, 30 years ago when we were both employed by the now-defunct UPI wire service, we've reconnected by e-mail a couple of times recently. So when I saw his final column, I e-mailed him some questions to provide fodder for this salute to him. I decided it was time someone wrote about him, rather than reading what he's written about.

I asked Galloway, who as a kid from Refugio, Texas, had actually received a 1-Y draft status because of his asthma (meaning he was medically deferred), if he had views of war that were changed by his time as a correspondent, as well as how he managed to take part in some fierce battles without being trained as a soldier.

"All I knew about war I had learned from reading the collected works of Ernie Pyle (famed World War II correspondent for Scripps Howard) and watching John Wayne movies," he e-mailed me. "But I was a country boy from Texas, had learned to shoot and hunt when I was 7 or 8 years old, and knew some fieldcraft learned in a hard environment where everything else out there was equipped with fangs, venom, claws or was armored against those things.

"The fieldcraft and Mr. Pyle stood up when I got to Vietnam. Most of the rest, including my opinions about war before I had actually seen it, did not," he added.

He was a reporter who actually carried a rifle as well as a camera and in 1998 was awarded the bronze Star Medal with V for rescuing wounded soldiers under fire in the Ia Drang battle that was to be the subject of the book. It was the only medal of valor the U.S. Army awarded to a civilian for actions during the Vietnam War.

There are those who felt his bite, officials of both the Bush and the Obama administrations, who will be happy to see the last Joseph L. Galloway byline over a column. Many of those in the military will be saddened.

Of the former, Galloway e-mailed me that he "didn't really know what heat was till I started writing the column and began criticizing some of the appointed officials. I got a lot of rude, personal attacks by email from the true believers."

"I wore out the 'delete' key on my keyboard every year," he said. "I didn't take it personally. Most who wrote such diatribes calling me nine kinds of a Commie rat were people who had never worn a uniform, would not send their children to fight in the wars they championed and really were so unread in history as to be unqualified to say a damn word."

But of the military folks who have appreciated his support, whether with the written word or words delivered at various military events, Galloway recalled a conversation "a few years ago with a good friend, the late Lt. Gen. Bill McCaffrey. He looked at me sadly and told me: 'You know, Joe, you can never retire. We won't let you. We need you telling the soldiers' story right to the day you die.'"

It was clear he was more pleased by soldiers' praise than by the praise for his book. When I asked him about his reaction to the celebrity, Galloway replied: "I am at heart a country boy and still a bit bashful about it. I learned when they released the movie that a very little bit of celebrity goes a long damn way with me. I left Washington, D.C., four years ago and moved to my home in a village of 400 good souls on the south Texas coast because I am more comfortable here."

I suggested, in one question, that he didn't really need to be doing a column over the past seven years since his earnings from the book and the movie must have been substantial.

"Your idea that somehow I was floating on a sea of book and movie money is laughable," he replied. "Book money comes in dribs and drabs, twice a year, and leaves much the same way. Movie money for an author is simply a myth. Hollywood accounting sees to that on your first movie. They consider what they extract from the fine print to be tuition you pay for lessons learned."

He recalled his first fierce combat experience in October of 1965 inside Plei Me Special Forces camp, which was under siege by a regiment of North Vietnamese regulars.

"The commander was Maj. Charlie Beckwith, who later founded the Delta counter-terror forces," Galloway recalled. "He informed me that he had no vacancies for a reporter but

was in great need of someone to man an air-cooled .30 caliber machine gun, and I was it."

Galloway remembers that he left that battle "with an M16 rifle and a thousand rounds of ammo, the rifle a gift of Major Beckwith, as a reward for my services as his machine gunner.

"I tried to turn it away, telling him that technically speaking I was a civilian non-combatant. He grinned and said: 'No such thing in these mountains, boy. Take the rifle!' I took it," he said.

It was three weeks later, happy to be armed with the rifle and ammo, that he found himself in the Ia Drang Valley. It was a place dubbed Landing Zone XRAY in the battle that he made famous with his reporting and later the book co-written with Lt. Gen. Harold Moore, the then-lieutenant colonel who commanded the Seventh Cavalry unit that engaged the North Vietnamese there.

"In three days and two nights there, and another day and night in a landing zone called Albany two miles away, 234 American soldiers were killed and nearly 300 wounded. The North Vietnamese left behind the bodies of somewhere between 2,000 and 5,000 dead," he recalled. "No one in their right mind stakes a claim to victory in the middle of that kind of carnage. Funny but both sides did just that."

Galloway upset many in the Bush Administration with his withering criticism of their decisions relating to Iraq and Afghanistan and now he's been doing the same with the Obama Administration.

Referring to those who have been upset at his criticisms, Galloway said in his e-mail to me: "I'm happy to listen to anyone I've offended, if the guy can prove to me that he has ever held a dying soldier in his arms and watched the life run out of his eyes while you beg him to hang on."

Galloway has written "30" on his weekly column. But the chances are remote that he won't be heard from again, either in books to come, speeches before soldiers and veterans groups or in op-ed pieces.