

Ellis W. Williamson, Who Led Troops in Vietnam, Is Dead at 88

Maj. Gen. Ellis W. Williamson, who led the first Army combat troops into South Vietnam, died on Jan. 28 in Arlington, Va. He was 88.



Maj. Gen. Ellis W. Williamson

Jean O’Neil, a friend of the family, announced the death.

General Williamson participated in the D-Day landings in Normandy in World War II and the Inchon landings in the Korean War. He held high-level posts supervising troop training and, from 1971 to 1973, was chief of the United States military mission to Iran.

In 1963, General Williamson reactivated the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which had begun as an infantry brigade in World War I and was absorbed into other units in World War II. For two years, his 3,500 troops trained intensively in Okinawa.

They began arriving in Vietnam on May 5, 1965. Their first mission was to secure, patrol and neutralize any threat to Bien Hoa Air Base. That day, General Williamson said in an interview with The New York Times, “I am sure my men will want, as I do, to get out for action.”

Then 47, General Williamson developed tactics for a war with no defined front. Fighting with South Vietnamese troops, he had his men penetrate the countryside surrounding the base and then worked methodically to expand the perimeter with day and night patrols.

The members of the 173rd were among the first soldiers to use M-16s, the lightweight rifle that became the standard for American forces. Hardly a night went by when they were not attacked.

They were also the first to go into what the military called Zone D, a flat, eerie jungle filled with dragonflies and Vietcong sniper bullets, to destroy enemy base camps. This successful operation in June 1965 was American troops' first big attack against the Vietcong.

In August 1965, General Williamson commanded the 173rd and other American units when they and South Vietnamese troops broke the Communist siege of a Special Forces camp at Duc Co. By September, he told *The Times*, "The enemy is running from us like a scared rat."

The next year, General Williamson led United States troops into the Mekong Delta for the first time. In March 1966, he briefed President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) at Johnson's ranch in Texas. He told the president that morale was high and that the enemy was groggy; he also advised sending more troops.

Ellis Warner Williamson was born in the summer of 1918 in Raeford, N.C. He served in the North Carolina National Guard during high school and college. In 1940, he graduated from Atlantic Christian College, now Barton College, and was commissioned a second lieutenant.

In addition to taking advanced courses at military schools and colleges, he received an M.B.A. from [Harvard](#) in 1962 and a master's in international affairs from [George Washington University](#) in 1963.

He became a paratrooper in 1959, and was promoted to brigadier general in 1963. General Williamson returned from Vietnam in 1966

to be assistant commander at the infantry school at Fort Benning, Ga. After being promoted to major general, he commanded the Army Training Center at Fort Polk, La.

As chief of the military mission to Iran, General Williamson met regularly with Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and oversaw a quiet but steady influx of American military personnel into Iran.

On Sept. 27, 1942, General Williamson married Margaret McNeill, who survives, along with a daughter, Nan V. Williamson of Clyde, N.C.; a son, Dan, of Pineville, Mo.; and a grandson.