

“So often we think about war in abstract terms but Vietnam vet, Duke Barrett, has made the traumatic and long-lasting implications of battle spring to life in this poignant story about the courage, loyalty, patriotism and conflict of a young soldier. We root for him to realize his dreams, knowing fully well that the deck is stacked against him.”

—**Sigrid Macdonald,**
editor and author of *D'Amour Road*

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THE WALL OF BROKEN DREAMS



Duke Barrett



The Wall of Broken Dreams
by Duke Barrett

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Foreword

For those of us who went to Vietnam it became more than just a rite of passage. It was a coming of age event. Others never lived long enough to take any of the lessons home with them from that passage. It was a faraway time and place, and in the way of all wars, one that separated boys from their homes, families and their very souls. The Vietnam war, though, stole more than the youth of these young warriors, fresh from the streets of America; it took them on a journey that for most became a nightmare or, at the very least, a surreal dream.

Friendships with our fellow soldiers became substitute families. We fought and died for each other, not for some vague ideology or the flag of our country or a patriotic ideal for politicians to make rhetoric about at a Fourth of July parade. Nor was it about “killing commies” or stopping the “Domino Effect.” Some of these young men were just out of high school and our bonding became the deepest and most meaningful relationships of our lives. There will never be anyone more ingrained in our memories and in our hearts than those with whom we fought side by side during our “*tour of duty*.”

Duke Barrett takes the sacred elements of the “*Nam Experience*” and weaves them into a synthesis that is the true, fundamental foundation of any authentic story about the war in Vietnam, be it a memoir or a work of fiction, and makes it a meaningful background to his novel. His story is about those young men who were with us, and whose loss took such a heavy spiritual toll on each and every veteran. We did not have time to grieve or mourn and shed tears. We could not afford to show any

FOREWARD

emotions... *“It don’t mean nothing!”*

I believe that some veterans who read this story may actually find some personal healing while others who are not veterans may find some understanding. This story is an adventure but be prepared for an emotional and inspirational journey as well. But then, when you wake up maybe all that you just read was just a dream!

W. H. “Bill” McDonald Jr.

- Author, Poet, Documentary filmmaker, Veterans Advocate, Public Speaker, Actor, Minister
- President of The Military Writer’s Society of America (MWSA)
- President of The American Authors Association (AAA)
- Vietnam veteran 1966-67 – 128th Assault Helicopter Company
- Books: “A Spiritual Warrior’s Journey,” “Purple Hearts – Poetry of the Vietnam War,” “Sacred Eye,” “Journey of my Heart,” “Poetry from the Om Café”
- Websites:

www.vietnamexp.com
www.militarywriters.com

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I'd also like to thank W.H. "Bill" McDonald, past President and founder of "The Military Writers Society of America" for his wonderful foreword, and to editor and author Sigrid Macdonald for her special comment.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention editorial assistance from Michael Garrett, Sigrid Macdonald, Pat Kennedy, and Ron Barrett, Jr.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my loving family, and my beautiful wife of thirty-five years, Mitsuko. God only knows it hasn't been easy living with a half crazed combat vet who is a musician as well; for you had encouraged me to write of my friends and experiences and of that special time of my life, and I finally listened to you. There's a special place in Heaven for you: My two handsome and wonderful sons, Ron Jr. and Christopher, my beautiful and delightful daughter Danielle, and my two Grandsons, Spencer and Devin. I would also like to thank my brothers Richard and Kevin who were always concerned for my well being while I was in Vietnam. To my sister Patty, thank you as well because you also insisted that I put these thoughts that run through my head down on paper. A more loving sister could never be found, and of course, to my late parents Nell and Dick. To think of what my poor mother went through while I was in Vietnam.

The real inspiration for me to write this story goes to some very special guys who shared a life-changing experience with me. To them I say thanks: Frank, thank you for keeping me alive pal; Keijo, thanks for being a friend; Glenn, I only wish that we could have gotten together after the war and talked about all that bothered you, and I miss you; and to a true gentleman and friend, a saint of a man, Bill, I miss you. I really miss talking politics and life in general with you. We all love you.

And of course to Maya Linn, a woman I never have had the pleasure of meeting, but whose beautiful work of art has been an inspiration to all of us who have been so affected by the Vietnam War. Last of all but certainly not least, to all of those heroes whose names are inscribed on The Wall who have made "The Supreme Sacrifice," thank you.

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In Tribute to the Heroes on The Wall

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Prologue

A Place called Happy Valley
The Republic of South Vietnam, Early October 1967

THE TROOPER GRIPPED THE knife tightly, raised his arms high above his head and waited to sink the blade of his weapon into, to take the life of, whoever dared walk down the trail that was his charge. Moments after he'd positioned himself into the raised crevice that ran alongside the enemy trail, he pondered his situation.

Visited by a brief moment of irony, an old song ran through his head. "Please, Mr. Custer," a comedic hit tune from 1960 that ironically referenced a Cavalryman of the Indian wars who'd questioned his presence in the Little Bighorn. Johnny, too, a Cavalryman, wondered what the hell he was doing there, not at Custer's Last Stand in the Montana territories, but instead, thousands of miles from home in a place called "Happy Valley." Man, he thought, I should be back in the "world" drinking a cold beer, playing guitar; this shit don't make no sense.

On that hot and humid evening, concealed in a sea of mosquito-laden elephant grass, Johnny Richards, a member of an advanced reconnaissance patrol, prayed the sweat that poured from his brow would not betray his painted, camouflaged face and expose to an ever-present enemy his white skin in the bright moonlight.

In moments of anxious wait, his teeth chattered, mosquitoes feasted on exposed skin and the twenty-year-old paratrooper's worst fears were realized. The dreaded silhouette of an enemy soldier approached his position. Fear and adrenaline boiled, his wet hands shook nervously, his soul then committed to the attack.

Fortunately, his excellent vision, not unlike the deadly Cobra snake, detected an irregularity. In an agonizing second before striking, the coiled paratrooper hesitated, frozen in motion. Aided by the bright moonlight, relief poured like whiskey at an Irish wake from his nervous soul when he determined that the silhouette, a large silhouette, was not that of the enemy, but of his buddy Dale, another member of the advanced reconnaissance patrol that evening.

"Jesus Christ! Man, I mean what the... I mean, what? I almost cut you like a stuck pig. Donner told me to take out the next dink that comes down this trail; quietly, you know, stick 'em. Man, you all should've let me know you were gonna be coming back down this trail. What the hell happened?"

"Sorry, man; didn't have a choice. We got the hell out of there before they spotted us. Donner and Frank are right behind me. Listen up, man, there's a whole bunch of VC (Viet Cong) right up this trail. I mean a bunch! We were in position to take 'em out when we realized there's too many of 'em for us to hit 'em, so we hauled ass up this trail before they saw us. But hey, thanks for not sticking me. Check it out! I mean, they've got guard towers up there, man. Two of 'em. Sergeant Frank wanted to take the guards out but Donner thinks we better talk to battalion first to see what they want us to do. He needs to get the right grid coordinates first, though, if we're going to drop some artillery on their ass."

Sergeant Donner and Frank, only footsteps behind, breathed and sweated heavily when they caught up with Dale. The heavy perspiration that ran from Donner's face dripped onto his map when he checked the grid coordinates. In a quiet but firm voice Sergeant Donner said, "Listen up, we're going to pull back to the platoon and I'm going to call in and see if battalion wants to drop some artillery on their asses. Oh, and Johnny; good job, son. We came up this trail or they would have seen us; had no choice. I'm happy to see that you were alert."

Chapter One

The Replacements

**The First Air Cavalry Division Base Camp at An Khe, South Vietnam
Late October 1967**

THE BRIGHT MORNING SUN, along with the sweating brows and wet fatigue shirts worn by the troopers, gave testimony to the hot, humid conditions that were in play for the GIs at work on their details at the division base camp. Memories of living a normal, sweat-free existence all but evaporated from the thought processes of those involved. Sweating bullets, no doubt easier than dodging them, brought into question; were the trade-off's worth it? The trade-off's being, to be in the relative safety of the "rear," with few afforded comforts available, plus a host of annoying details, versus the "bush," with no comforts, real bullets, no details. The choices were questionable at best.

Camp Radcliff was home to the United States Army's First Air Cavalry Division at An Khe, South Vietnam, in the Central Highlands, from 1965 to 1969. Named after a Major Donald Radcliff, a helicopter pilot with the famed First Battalion of the Ninth Cavalry, of The First Air Cavalry Division, the base camp became a major hub of operational activity during the war.

In August of 1965, while flying his UH-1B helicopter gunship, in support of a United States Marine operation in the Quang Tin Province of South Vietnam, the 37-year-old Major was fatally wounded by a

barrage of enemy gunfire after he selflessly inserted his helicopter between a troop-carrying helicopter and a heavily armed enemy gun position. The Major posthumously received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his selfless act of courage, which resulted in the saving of many American lives.

WITH A POPULATION OF NEARLY 17,000, the installation, virtually a city unto itself, came alive at sunrise with activity of every kind imaginable. The base camp administration, comprised of many of the functions of any operating city government, included medical services, military police, motor pool, supply, graves registration, personnel, Post-Exchanges, postal and food services, to name a few.

The infantry, artillery, engineer and aviation units of the 1st Air Cavalry worked in concert with a large number of these support units. Camp Radcliff, a unique place carved out of the rugged jungle terrain of central Vietnam, served a vital role in the war effort.

HANGING OUTSIDE OF A LARGE tent, the home of the Second Squad of the Chinese Bandits Reconnaissance Platoon, a group of colorful and energetic young paratroopers took advantage of some down time, having just completed their morning details. Young men are known to engage in plenty of colorful banter and horseplay, and this group of characters was no different. Having just finished off a run of slow blues licks on his guitar, Johnny Richards, a hot young musician from Chicago, looked up at his squad leader, Sergeant Frank, and asked, "Sarge, we running another recon patrol today or are we gonna do a search and destroy? I mean, for Christ's sake, we just got back from reconning the valley. I'm just fed up with being had. Know what I mean?"

Johnny was just another draftee caught up in Uncle Sam's war machine of the 1960s. Pulled off the streets of Chicago, the young musician, not unlike many other spirited and adventurous young men, volunteered to be a paratrooper while in basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Paratroopers are also known as "the army airborne."

Sergeant Frank, a good ol' Southern boy, hailed from the hills of