



# **Vietnam,**

**As Told Through Personal Poems**

# **1968-1969**

**Bill McCloud**

## LET'S DROP OUT

One day I was carpooling to college with four other guys when suddenly one of them

not necessarily the smartest one said let's drop out and join the army

and that's what we did  
My problem with that school was that they graded very strictly on attendance

Only a short time later did I discover that the army was a lot more serious about attendance than that school ever was

FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS EXACTLY

When I fired for qualification  
on the M14 and M16 rifles  
I scored as expert on both

That pretty well amazed me  
because I had never hunted or  
shot a weapon before in my life

I thought I must be a  
natural some hotshot but  
they had an explanation

I had no bad habits to  
unlearn and followed  
their instructions exactly

That would be my style  
through three years  
in this man's army

Do exactly as you're told  
and you'll succeed here  
And I folded into myself

## OFF TO WAR

Standing by the plane  
as we said goodbye  
We hugged and  
looked each other  
in the eye

A mom and dad  
a boy by their side  
We chuckled  
and laughed  
with grins a mile wide

But the truth was something  
we tried to hide  
My mom kissed my cheek  
but it was my dad  
who cried

## ARMS ROOM

One of the first things I did  
was report to the arms room  
where I would have an M14 rifle  
checked out to me

But it would stay there  
unless I needed it  
That was two important  
pieces of information

The fact that I was getting an  
M14 instead of the newer M16  
implied that I probably wouldn't  
have to use it as much as someone  
given an M16 somewhere else

It was also very telling that the weapon  
would normally stay in the arms room  
instead of me carrying it  
This air base must be considered  
a relatively safe place

There was another comforting moment  
when I learned that the guy in charge of the  
arms room was from Blackwell Oklahoma

I had just traveled more than 9,000 miles  
and one of the first people I meet is a man  
whose hometown is just 18 miles from mine

## APRIL FOOL'S

It was a Monday morning  
not that days of the week  
really mattered

Anderson came to the door  
of the hooch  
Did you hear?

It's over  
It's all over  
We're goin' home

He stuck his hand out to me

I saw my girl  
my mom  
my dog and home

I reached out to shake his hand

"April Fool's!" he said  
and kind of chucked  
me on the shoulder

Now I like a good joke  
as much as the next man but  
I don't do April Fool's anymore

## HILLCLIMBER 027

On May 4 Hillclimber 027  
performed one of the fastest  
air rescues of the entire war  
Major Degner and Warrant Officer Taylor  
were bringing the ship back to Vung Tau  
when Specialist Choate the flight engineer  
saw a crashed USAF O-1 directly below them  
They entered a descent and landed near the crash  
Crewmembers set off to assist the pilots  
Neither were seriously injured and  
were loaded on 027 to Vung Tau where  
an ambulance would be standing by  
Total time from crash to hospital  
was 31 minutes

JUNE 2, 1968

Rain  
all  
day  
rain  
all  
day  
rain  
all  
day  
rain  
all  
day  
rain  
all  
day



DYLAN WINS THE WAR

From a prompt by D.C.

I had a dream that  
Bob Dylan spent his  
months of seclusion  
after his famous accident  
fighting in Vietnam

In the dream I saw  
him and he was in  
uniform wearing  
pearl-handled revolvers  
Patton style

But all of his insignia  
were upside down  
When I asked someone  
about it they said  
Well, that's Bob

As he walked away he  
turned back to me and said  
You can either sing this war  
to an end or you  
can fight it to one

## A BALL OF FLAMES

Numerous hits from VC snipers  
brought Hillclimber 989 to the  
ground in a ball of flames  
They had just departed a fire support base  
when they were hit  
With their aft end on fire the  
load was jettisoned and the  
ship put into autorotation  
After a soft landing the crew  
ran from the ship as  
the aft pylon fell off  
Another of our ships  
(Magel and Adams) landed  
' and picked up the men and  
the two crews returned home

## CALLED HOME BY DEATH

In these crazy times  
you just never know  
from which direction  
it's going to come

The man who works nights  
in the orderly room  
has the job of making  
early morning wake-up calls

He's woke me up  
every morning at 4:30  
every day that I've worked  
the past two months

Yesterday he was notified  
by the Red Cross that  
his father had been killed  
in an automobile accident

\* \* \* \*

That's the word they used  
automobile four syllables  
You can't just say car and be done?  
You have to drag it out?

\* \* \* \*

He's almost home now  
called there by death  
and will soon return  
to this place of war

## SEATS

Our Chinook helicopters  
were allowed to carry 33  
Americans and their  
gear in one load

Because that's how  
many seats we had  
Everyone had  
to be in a seat

When we carried  
South Vietnamese soldiers  
we could usually take 55  
Some had seats

One time we carried  
little Vietnamese children  
and got 93 of them in  
Most not in seats

Those kids had the  
time of their life  
The time of  
their life

## MOCKINGBIRD

When I was told I was  
being promoted I was  
also told I'd be going to  
Dong Tam to make it official  
and would stay there overnight  
That evening they dropped  
a couple of white sheets  
down the side of a shed  
because it was their  
regular movie night  
The film we watched was  
To Kill a Mockingbird  
A timeless movie that would  
become a beloved classic  
I watched it that night  
under the skies of Vietnam  
While Scout and Jem grew up  
over a couple of years I was  
moving up the military ranks  
None of us were as innocent  
as we once had been

## CONVERSION DAY (C-DAY)

We were not allowed to  
have actual American money  
while stationed in-country

Our currency was in the form of  
military payment certificates  
called MPCs

It was illegal for  
Vietnamese to possess them  
but they were greatly valued

and would end up in the black market  
amid great concern that they  
would harm the local economy

So one day totally by surprise  
we were restricted to base and  
all our MPCs were exchanged

for new ones with a different look  
meaning all of the previous  
ones had no value at all

I can still see the Vietnamese faces  
outside the fence begging and pleading  
for us to exchange what they had for them

No can do we told them as they looked  
at fists full of now worthless paper  
No can do

## MID-AIR ACCIDENT

The other day  
one of our aircraft  
was taking off from

the Can Tho airport  
when it lost power  
and

started

coming

down

hit some large cable wires  
lost the rotor blades in flight  
and landed upside down

in a rice paddy  
Five Vietnamese were killed  
twenty-one injured

As for the crew there was  
just one sprained back  
The pilots were two

of my favorites so  
I was very happy it  
turned out the way it did

## LAST TWO WEEKS (THE CHANT)

There was an unwritten rule  
in our helicopter company  
that when down to two  
weeks left in Vietnam you  
did not fly on any missions

Didn't want to lose anyone  
that close to going home  
So that became our goal  
That blessed two week point  
Get there and let the

chant begin |  
can't fly |  
can't fly |



## THE SAINT CHRISTOPHER MEDAL (A LOVE STORY)

The day before I left for 'Nam  
my mom's best friend Anne  
gave me a Saint Christopher medal  
She asked me to put it on right then  
and to never take it off  
If nothing else do it for me.

The patron saint of travelers he  
also holds the patronage of soldiers  
I put it around my neck

My time in Vietnam didn't  
involve the constant danger  
that so many men faced but  
there was flying and mortars  
and twice there had been  
those Russian-made rockets

And hell  
if nothing else  
I was in Vietnam

The first day home I showed  
Anne and my mom that I  
was still wearing the medal  
I had never taken it off  
That night I went to sleep  
with it around my neck

When I woke up in the morning  
it was gone so I searched for it  
It was never found it had done its job

## BEER

When I got home from Vietnam  
I wanted a beer

Not an easy thing to get if you're a  
boy under twenty-one in Oklahoma

So I got one of the Coffman boys  
either Jack or Mike I don't remember

And he Jack or Mike bought  
me a six-pack of cold beer

Just home from Vietnam  
I had some thinking to do

I wanted to drink beer while doing it and  
was very lucky to run into Jack or Mike

When a young man's head is full  
of memories thoughts and ideas

instead of just sitting in a library he may  
want to take some beer down a country road

Not an easy thing to do if you're a  
boy under twenty-one in Oklahoma

## DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

In a letter home  
to my mom once  
I told her I was so  
lonely it must have  
been like being on the  
dark side of the moon

Just a few months later  
Armstrong and Collins  
walked on the moon  
Maybe not on the dark side  
but they failed to report  
any sightings of Viet Cong

I think by that time we  
had them pretty well  
rounded up and controlled  
Either that or they had  
already been taken out  
by Jules Verne

## TRANQUILITY BASE

We watched the TV coverage  
of the first time that men  
walked on the moon  
with the same sense of awe  
as virtually everyone else

In our company's dayroom  
next to the airfield at Fort Riley  
we watched for hours as  
the empty Schlitz cans were  
added to the stack in front of us

The greatest technological achievement  
in the history of mankind  
and we wanted to make sure  
that our efforts matched what  
we were watching on TV

So we piled the cans high  
By now we were experts at this  
and we fully understood the  
human accomplishment  
playing out in front of us

and we piled the cans high  
That night we went to bed with a  
tremendous sense of fulfillment because we  
had established a company record for the  
number of empty beer cans formed in one stack

PLATOON (EVERYONE'S VIETNAM IS DIFFERENT )

In early 1987 I took my mom  
to see the movie Platoon  
I couldn't relate to it  
any more than she could  
It was not my Vietnam War  
I hadn't been a grunt  
trudging through jungles  
fighting my own buddies one day  
and the Viet Cong the next  
There was not one Vietnam War  
When did you go?  
Where were you stationed?  
What was your job?  
I couldn't relate to Platoon  
any more than my mother could  
But Good Morning Vietnam  
Now that was a different story

AT THE WALL

It was me  
in the rain  
at night  
in the rain  
at the Wall  
in the rain

No school kids  
no volunteers  
just me and  
58,000 stories  
and all I remember  
is the rain

## DISABILITY

The VA considers my Type 2 Diabetes  
to be a service-connected disability  
Diabetes is so closely linked  
to Agent Orange that if  
you're diabetic and served  
at least one day in-country it's  
considered to have been the cause  
You don't have to prove any connection  
You just have to have been there  
One thing that most wars have in common  
is that they all seem to keep on giving

LINH IS BORED

Linh is bored with  
studying about this old war

She innocently flirts with  
a boy across the room

She thinks about being anywhere  
other than sitting at this long desk

looking out a window  
deciphering the cloud shapes

in a room so crowded she  
never has her own space

She knows tomorrow is her  
day to help clean her school

But today she's bored  
studying about this American war

at her desk in this room  
that are all a part of this school

built on blood-soaked ground  
in the city of Dien Bien Phu