

# Review: Former St. Louisan's novel of Vietnam

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Blood Chit, Grady Smith, Apippa Publishing Co., 169 pages, \$14.95

Returning veterans have written many fine novels about the Vietnam War, such as "Matterhorn" by Karl Marlantes, "Fields of Fire" by James Webb and "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien.

Now a former St. Louisan and retired soldier has written his first novel, "Blood Chit" (Apippa Publishing, 169 pages, \$14.95).

Author [Grady Smith](#) was born in St. Louis. He received his master's degree in theater at St. Louis University in 1962, but ended up on a different stage than he'd studied.

He was an Army officer during the Vietnam War, and his novel takes the reader back to the basic story line that just about every combat-experienced vet has in him somewhere.

Out in the field on an operation in 1968, around the time of the infamous Tet Offensive, Staff Sgt. Chuck Paxton finds himself in a firefight with North Vietnamese troops that will scar him for life. He makes no mistakes, really, nor is he a coward in the face of intense enemy fire. Yet two of his men are killed and one is missing, a deeply wounding blow for a non-commissioned officer who puts a very high value on his ability to protect his men during a battle.

You can see where this story is going. It's the tale of one veteran's life-changing moment and his deeply injured life after that. Slight book that it is, I found it hard to put down "Blood Chit." I even felt I knew how it might end, but I had to keep reading.

Smith's style is spare, not puffed up with adverbs or flights of fancy or speculation. He tells the arc of Paxton's life, from battlefield to the end of the book, which comes too quickly. He's no philosopher, but his story is really both unforgettable and yet, one believes, all too common.

Here he sketches Paxton's agony at losing a man who was right beside him during the firefight:

“...Every troop who processed into Vietnam signed his life away – every single one. Death had the option of collecting or not, and nobody would ever know why this one was foreclosed and not that one, why Kessler was dead and not Paxton. But from the day-in, day-out sharing of that risk had grown the single intuitive reality – his feelings for Kessler. Paxton hoped that when the emotional dust settled, he would feel more grateful that Kessler had saved his life and less guilty that it had cost Kessler his own to do it. But he knew, inside this present moment at least, that both the gratitude and the guilt were rooted in love. Yes, Paxton thought, consenting to it, thankful for it. Yes, I love Kessler. But across this simple emotional truth the dark shadow fell again: It's my fault.”

Smith's story is filled with technical details about the battle in the rice paddy in the Mekong Delta, a medevac visit to a field hospital, a grisly stay at the morgue at Tan Son Nhut airbase and then back home to a small town that Smith describes as outside of St. Louis.

Paxton never gets his life together when he returns home. Like that of too many vets, it is a series of broken lines: having trouble taking direction from bosses in civilian life, failing to turn a lover into a

partner, living on the streets of St. Louis. At times, his mind plays tricks on him, and he cannot distinguish his combat past from the present.

Many vets know this problem, and they aren't all from Vietnam some 40 years ago. They could be from the first Persian Gulf War or the more devastating, brutal conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many vets, when they return home to civilian life, don't know what to do with their nightmares and their intense memories of combat. No one except other vets understand, they believe.

Paxton follows this pattern, and he cannot seem to halt the inevitable downward trajectory of his life. This raises the issue of who exactly is responsible for the health of a combat vet when he or she returns home, a mission that Smith takes seriously. He is telling us that we need to become acutely aware of the costs of war on every individual and do what we can to ease that transition back to civilian life.

By imagining and telling Paxton's story, Smith says to readers that combat vets must be helped. They send many signals, and those around must learn to recognize the signs of despair.

Repps Hudson was an infantry platoon leader with the First Infantry Division in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968.