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Blood Chit

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Blood Chit by Grady Smith

(Apippa Publishing Company, 2012)

From Grady Smith's website: "A 'Blood Chit' serves as an Armed Forces aviator's last survival tool employed when all other methods of evasion and escape have failed in a combat zone and the aviator considers assistance vital to survival."

This is Grady Smith's debut novel, a fast-paced, well written account of the battlefield experiences and subsequent life of Army SSG Chuck Paxton. Though he acted heroically in the face of the enemy, Paxton was devastated with grief at the loss of his squad mates. The opening battle scene is overwhelming, with realistic images and language. Paxton's singular point of view gives a grittiness and urgency to the tale as it unfolds.

Smith follows Paxton and his physical, mental, spiritual and emotional struggles through the end of his Army career and back into civilian life. As with many who endured that war, Paxton leaves Vietnam, but Vietnam never leaves Paxton.

There is a frightening realism to Paxton's journey. His attempts to understand and deal with his condition echo the experiences of many. Mental health professionals are attempting to deal with too many cases of people who are deeply shattered. Short term solutions are not the answer when the damage is this deep. Like many, Paxton questions the ability of a civilian to understand the depths of his dilemma. Can someone who has only read about it in a book ever really understand?

Paxton feels the pressures of integrating back into the civilian world at every level. He has difficulty holding jobs and maintaining relationships. He spirals into an existence in which he questions his perceptions of what is real and what is not. His experiences in that rice paddy are always very close to the surface.

Grady Smith's book will not be an easy read for anyone who was there. There are too many images of the brutality of war for it to be enjoyed casually. Sometimes, however, we need a reminder of why we work to stop war. I recommend this book highly to those who were there, and especially to those who were not.

JIM SCHMIDT WAS A DRAFTEE SOLDIER IN THE 101 ST AIRBORNE, VIET NAM 1971-1972.