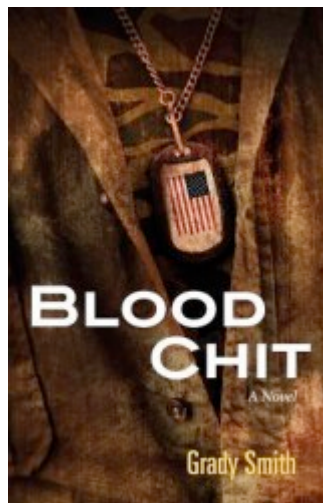


[Author Q&A: Grady Smith](#)

Grady Smith attended the U.S. Army Infantry Officer Candidate School, followed by Ranger and Airborne training. In Vietnam, he commanded an infantry company. He ultimately stayed in the Army for 20 years, teaching at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, serving a three-year tour in Germany, and working as a staff officer in the Army's Leadership Division in the Pentagon. His last duty position was Executive Officer of the U. S. Army Center of Military History.

Writer [Tom Glenn](#) spent the better part of 13 years shuttling between Vietnam and Washington, D.C., as a civilian intelligence officer. Having served in all parts of the country from the Mekong River delta to the highlands, his last tour was in Saigon advising the U.S. ambassador on intelligence and assisting the government of Vietnam in exploiting intelligence in prosecuting the war against the North Vietnamese invaders. He escaped Saigon under fire when the North Vietnamese were already in the city streets.

To read Tom's review of *Blood Chit*, click [here](#).



I see nothing in your bio that explains your familiarity with Post-Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI). How did you come to know it so well?

Personal experience, continuing research and lots of coffee with other vets. Like so many others, I came by it honestly before it even had its current name. It was like an explosive device with a time-delay fuse and showed up gradually in the late 80s (I ended my 20-year military career in 1985). One breakthrough in dealing with it was going to a VA storefront clinic in Springfield, Virginia. My recollection is that they didn't worry about the latest nomenclature; they simply dealt with the condition. Another breakthrough was beginning the process of journaling, which over the years segued into a fictional mode and became *Blood Chit*. The actual diagnosis was classic anticlimax — while I was filling out the VA paperwork for an Agent Orange health issue, the Amvet case worker

helping me looked at my file and said I'd likely have no problem getting a PTSI classification. And so it was, 40 years after my Nam service.

The detail you offer the reader in chapter three of *Blood Chit* is unnerving. How did you learn of the procedures and conditions at military mortuaries?

I was out in Suitland doing research in the National Archives on the graves registration/mortuary function. I found lots of useful info — SOPs, standard DA forms, photos — that sort of thing. But most of it was Korean War vintage. I asked about the Vietnam era, and the reference guy asked if I'd like to talk to someone who did it. He dialed 10 digits, and I was speaking with a Nam vet in North Carolina who had served in Graves Registration — and who had extended his tour for six months, which absolutely blew my mind. And he told me how it was. We still get together about once a year or so. I can't begin to tell you how much of the level of detail throughout *Blood Chit* I owe to other vets sharing their experiences. Once they realize you're a vet too and really want to know, the cautious reticence begins to break down — I still notice that same kind of conscious loosening up in myself, depending on who I'm talking to.

Was your time in Vietnam in 1968 like that of your protagonist, Chuck Paxton? Did you serve in the Nha Be region?

Yes, early 1968. My company was actually based out of the Nha Be tank farm just south of Saigon for several weeks. My battalion trained at Ft. Lewis and deployed in the immediate aftermath of the Tet. We were actually headed for I Corps and the Americal Division, and I was on the ground with the advance party in Chu Lai. And then we got word that Westmoreland had given us to the 9th ID in III Corps, which included the Delta and Saigon. The HQ guys were extremely worried about the NVA repeating their Tet performance and worked very hard to beef up defenses around the capital. If we'd stayed in I Corps, the combat portion of *Blood Chit* would have been very different because of terrain, and the differences in enemy strength, tactics and logistics capabilities.

Which incidents in the Vietnam portion of the book are factual, which pure fiction?

As usual in this sort of thing, the writing was a hybridizing process. Paxton's last firefight never happened as such, but all the building blocks, all the combat techniques Paxton uses to call in supporting fires, treat the wounded and set up the helicopter extraction, for example — all that really happened in a cumulative way. It's a kind of mix-and-match construct designed to deliberately put Paxton in the no-give environment of combat.

Chuck Paxton reminds me of so many Vietnam veterans I have known and read about. Even his homeless wandering feels real. Is he based on someone who really lived?

Again, no one particular guy, but an amalgam of vets who have shared their experiences with me or vets I've read about. Plus the imaginative side: here's this guy I've assembled — if I put him in this situation, how will he react? A few times, he surprised me after I

started writing a situation — like shoving the drunk off the top of the bleachers at the high school football game and then coolly walking away. But that’s who Paxton is.



Author Grady Smith after his service in Vietnam

I admire your ability and willingness to describe the love between men who have served together in combat. In my experience, it’s a bond stronger than that between husband and wife. What’s your understanding of how it comes to exist?

Charlton Ogburn Jr., writing about a Merrill’s Marauders reunion, speaks of the cold that flows in from all over the universe, and how that can be held at bay when one is back together with men you’ve shared a life-and-death experience with, “in the truest sense of that overworked phrase.” I think that’s as close as rational analysis can get to it — except that there’s so much more there that the mind alone can’t parse. Thirty-five years ago, the *Military Review* carried a cover with the picture of a pair of empty boots and the caption: “Buddy loyalty cannot be broken by anything other than death.” That’s the comrade’s bond, and it goes even beyond death, really. Three weeks ago at my own regimental reunion, one of the other company commanders told me that after almost 40 years he still hasn’t been able to take himself down to the Wall where the dead of his unit are inscribed. I knew exactly what he was talking about, because it was many years before I could go there without being intensely torn up emotionally. That’s not a bad thing, but it’s hugely painful. Grief at the loss of comrades. But isn’t love at the core of grief?

The only character in the novel whose bio resembles yours is Captain Bonner. Is he based on you?

Yes and no. Bonner is one of the characters who wouldn’t go away quietly for me. My website has the follow-on stories of five second-level characters from *Blood Chit* who have their own combat IOUs called in. (www.gradysmithbooks.com; click the Books tab and then “Other Blood Chits.”) Before I separated their stories from Paxton’s, the title of the novel was pluralized, *Blood Chits*, and included all these stories. It was an adobe brick of a book and didn’t move nearly as swiftly as it does now, but it had what for me was a satisfying complexity. A single case study simply can’t stand as the sum of human

experience about combat and its aftermath. So — Bonner is one of the five who lived on after the novel went final, and his character turns darker in his own story. He's haunted by the commander's decisions he had to make and how those decisions led inevitably to the death of some of his men. In my experience, that's the witch's brew that conjures combat trauma. In addition, Bonner self-medicates with alcohol — which solves not a single problem and creates so many more. Personally, I haven't had a drink in well over 30 years.

I was struck by Chuck's solitude. How and why did you decide to make him such a loner?

A synonym for loner is isolator. Personally, I was able to compartmentalize the parts of me that were deeply affected by combat and just let them be (isolate them), while getting on with life in other areas. But because of who he was, Paxton couldn't do that, couldn't segment his inner self. He had to isolate the whole person. I don't remember consciously making a writer's choice here, but I do remember how the character reacted when, for example, a vet down at the corner joint told him to stop remembering and start forgetting. Right, Paxton says, be glad to — where's the switch for that? A ton of other vets would like to know, too. So that kind of attitude in others forces him to keep it all inside, to isolate as a survival strategy. Basically, it arises from his character.

One of the great strengths in your writing, in my opinion, is your withholding of judgment. A variety of your characters, including Chuck, do some terrible things and some admirable things, but you simply tell the facts and express no praise or condemnation. Was that a conscious decision?

I thought if I got the character right, a reader would draw the kinds of conclusions about combat vets that I hoped for, without any ham-fisted manipulating on my part, and as a result the reader would more easily accept those conclusions. After a writer friend read the book in manuscript, he said that, following the incident with the police officer, he lost his empathy with Paxton, but not his sympathy. That's a very delicate and critical distinction for any reader to make, and he made it. We can condemn some of Paxton's actions and still care about the man himself.

After your experience and obvious deep thought, would you recommend a military career for your children? Why?

No. When my son was about 14, he went through a phase where he wanted to do the Army like his dad. I said nothing, and he grew his way past it. Two reasons for not recommending: First, the people who decide to send us to war usually do so for oil or some other transiently important cause that's well masked with encomiums on democracy or world peace. Or with figments, like weapons of mass destruction. And then, having made the decision, they painfully demonstrate their ignorance about the most efficient way to conduct the war. Inevitably the troops have to take up the slack in the wake of this incompetence. And second, once you're out there, training and technology notwithstanding, it's a crap shoot.

Carmen Griggs is in some respects one of your most shocking characters. Is she based on anyone real?

She's certainly not a generalization about all nurses, or even a lot of them, but she's an amalgam of the biographical writing of some of the women who served in Vietnam. Griggs' behavior reflects that of others who cobbled together a personal survival mechanism in the face of the constant life-and-death of a battle zone ER. In my research I came across the concept of secondary trauma in the caregiver, and she's got that. But she's also got the primary trauma of having had to nurse wounded soldiers in an active combat environment. Of having, for example, to hover over an open incision to protect the wound while the hospital is mortared, the ceiling is disintegrating above her, and every instinct in her body is telling her to flee for her life. My God, these women were brave. But it cost them, and the cost sometimes showed in their actions. As it happens, Carmen Griggs is another of those characters, like Captain Bonner, who refused to go away without some kind of accommodation, some kind of rebalancing. Her follow-on story is on my website too, and it shows the tenacity of her struggle to come to terms with the combat she experienced. And the necessity of accepting herself, warts and all, because all she really has is who she is. Like any vet.

What's your solution to the problem of veterans with PTSD? How should we handle the problem?

At the very outset we have to realize there's no blanket solution to PTSD. Some men and women will fall by the wayside. By that I mean they'll live on the street like Paxton, or they'll lead a life of pervasive emotional numbness, or they'll even take their own life. Over 30 years ago, Peter Marin published an article in *Psychology Today* titled "Living in Moral Pain." For him, that's what the crux of the post-combat syndrome is all about: vets come back from battle wrapped in a cocoon of moral pain because of what they've done and seen. And for Marin, therapy is to some extent inadequate to reset the human psyche in the face of that moral pain: therapy's efficacy has limits. Moreover, for a combat vet, reverting to who he was before battle is simply not an option. The matrix of his experiences will never allow him to be that kid again. Therefore, Marin says, the vet has to consciously decide who he's going to be. He can't go back. He has to go forward. But some vets can't.

All that said, one approach to helping the vet does include therapy and consists in a threefold strategy: narrative, purification and re-integration. Most vets don't want to revisit the experiences that sent them home from combat psychologically hobbled. But they have to get those memories out of their psyches where they've burrowed in, and in front of self and therapist and very often other vets in a group setting. Light of day has a way of diminishing the potency of the past, although not eliminating it. Purification is more complex — in the Book of Numbers, Moses has the Israelites wipe out the neighboring Midianites. When they've done that, he keeps his soldiers outside the camp for seven days because human blood has made them ritually impure (yes, the enemy is human). On the third and on the seventh day they are to purify themselves with lustral water, and "whatsoever can stand the fire, you shall make it go through the fire, that it

may become clean.” We don’t have that kind of mechanism in our society — but we do have welcome home celebrations (prominently absent during the Vietnam War — our nation kept its soldiers outside the camp, in a chronic state of ritual impurity. No wonder there was combat trauma). I’ve personally found unit reunions very important and powerful. Some vets go back to Vietnam and even adopt a village school or make sure an impoverished village gets enough rice every year. So sometimes, aspects of purification will transition right to re-integration with society and vice versa — and help a vet find a meaningful place once again. Sometimes the self a vet decides to be is a beautiful thing indeed. But it’s hard, often devastating work.

Do you see a relationship between PTSI and the rising suicide rate in the military?

Yes, big-time. Last June, the Washington Post and the New York Times reported that year-to-date active duty military suicides were outpacing the number of combat deaths in Afghanistan. Then the cover story of the 23 July issue of Time, on military suicides, ran the headline “One a Day.” Unfortunately, dead is also an option for a vet who’s deciding who and what he wants to be. A couple of years ago General Loree Sutton said that in 1989, right before Gulf One, active Army suicides were about 10 per 100,000 — Army end strength that year was just under 770,000, so there were probably about 75 or 80 suicides that year. And now, one a day. We’ve reached a point where we’re harming ourselves more than the enemy is. Yes, PTSI certainly has blood on its hands.

Given your background as a playwright, what prompted you to take on writing a novel?

The crux lay in the fact that the primary conflict of *Blood Chit* was not external, but internal to Paxton. That can be done in a theatrical mode, although with some difficulty, but his story also required that he hold two separate realities in his consciousness simultaneously: his past combat reality, and his present back-home reality. To my mind, that called for the dimensions of a novel’s canvas.

Many of us with experience in Vietnam see eerie parallels with Iraq and Afghanistan? Do you?

Absolutely. At the top of the chain, decisions to begin the war are not well thought through, then continuation strategies often work at cross-purposes, and finally myopic goals are welded together to make an endgame; followed by hand-wringing about one’s place in history. At the bottom of the chain, troops take up the slack to compensate for this pervasive intellectual incompetence — with a slow fadeout on the street or in a lockdown ward or a cemetery. For me, the only difference between Vietnam and Afghanistan is that one is green, the other’s brown.

My sense is that the U.S. would be less willing to go to war if we had experienced a war on our own territory within our national memory. In other words, we don’t understand the monstrosity of war. Do you see it the same way?

Yes, I agree. And while 9/11 was an act of war, it wasn't war in the sense of protracted years-long combat. In addition it would help to have more military vets in Congress and seeded throughout the administration at advisory levels. The problem is also complicated by the fact that the teaching of history doesn't always cover the waterfront very well, doesn't always do a very good job of building an understanding of war's brutishness into the national psyche — and to my mind, that's not because of the teachers, but because of strategic decisions made by “educators.”

Related question: Did your experience in Vietnam make you a pacifist?

At one point, my publisher told me she thought *Blood Chit* was a profoundly antiwar novel. That shocked me. If the novel is antiwar, it is in the same way *Saving Private Ryan* is antiwar — and Steven Spielberg was given a medal by the Pentagon. Just as that movie showed the physical reality of combat unalloyed, especially in the opening D-Day sequence, so I wanted to show in *Blood Chit* the emotional and psychic reality with the same degree of candor. I hope I've done that. But I'm not a pacifist per se. In fact, I come from a family with a tradition of service — my great-great grandfather lies under a Confederate army headstone in North Carolina, my dad lied about his age to get in the Navy in WWI, Uncle Walter was infantry in WWII, my cousin Larry was in a Marine recon unit in Korea. But nowadays I have a significantly greater intolerance for what used to be called adventurism.

Now that *Blood Chit* is in print, what's your next writing project? Are more novels in the offing?

The novel on the front burner I call *Tower View* right now, about a murder in St. Louis at the turn of the last century. Someone takes a hammer to the skull of the wealthy owner of a Turkish bath, and the crime is pinned on the black caretaker. The novel on the back burner is about a Quaker widow in Civil War Winchester, Virginia, a town that, by local lore, changed hands 72 times during hostilities. The book deals with her relationship with her “still, small voice within,” what the war forced her to do, and how that resulted in a kind of spiritual combat trauma. And yes, there's a full-length play knocking around, working at a very low simmer — old South, former slaves, who is whose sibling? Potentially a rather gothic presentation of graying themes, I suppose. We'll see.

Grady Smith Has More to Say...

On 13 September, we published [Tom Glenn](#)'s review of Grady Smith's *Blood Chit* and a question-and-answer between the reviewer and writer, both Vietnam vets. Smith responded to those articles with the following:

One additional comment re treatment [of Post Traumatic Stress Injury]: Clinicians and psychologists are now reaching back to the ancient Greeks to see what their experience with PTSI was during the Trojan and Peloponnesian wars. This results in comparisons of today's vets and their issues with the ancient classical archetypes, and this in turn generates a more cogent grasp of what's happening now. This comparison can also

provide the wider community with clarity about the vets' situation. One instance of this reachback is psychiatrist Jonathan Shay's (MD, PhD) work. In *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, he examines the causes of PTSI in a crosswalk between Achilles in the *Iliad*, 27 centuries old, and the vets that Shay treated at the Boston VA hospital for many years. His subsequent *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* deals with typical problems of readjustment and reentry — everything from alcohol and drugs (the Lotus Eaters) to sex (Calypso) to wanting to grasp the true meaning of what happened in Vietnam and why — to know the truth, all of it: the sirens' song.

Another instance of reaching back to the classics is a project called "Theater of War." It presents staged readings of ancient Greek tragedies dealing with wounds that won't heal ("Philoctetes") and post-combat suicide ("Ajax"). This project is designed for troops, for medical communities and for the public at large, and is used as a springboard for discussion and greater understanding. I've seen it in all three types of venues — in an auditorium full of Marines at Henderson Hall, at the UVa Medical School in Charlottesville, and with wider community-based groups. Here in Washington, Woolly Mammoth presented "Theater of War" in two separate performances on two different occasions for a running total of four nights. Some really good discussion developed after the readings, and sometimes you could see the lights go on when people in the audience began to grasp the full implications of combat trauma. As far as I'm concerned, the Pentagon owes Woolly and Howard Shalwitz some sort of recognition for this distinguished service to vets and the military, and to the larger DC community — if that hasn't happened already.