



Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat

By James R. McDonough

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A remarkable memoir of small-unit leadership and the coming of age of a young soldier in combat in Vietnam.'

"Using a lean style and a sense of pacing drawn from the tautest of novels, McDonough has produced a gripping account of his first command, a U.S. platoon taking part in the 'strategic hamlet' program. . . . Rather than present a potpourri of combat yarns. . . McDonough has focused a seasoned storyteller's eye on the details, people, and incidents that best communicate a visceral feel of command under fire. . . . For the author's honesty and literary craftsmanship, **Platoon Leader** seems destined to be read for a long time by second lieutenants trying to prepare for the future, veterans trying to remember the past, and civilians trying to understand what the profession of arms is all about."—*Army Times*

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Col. James McDonough, USA (Ret.), graduated from West Point and served in Vietnam as an infantry platoon leader in the legendary 173d Airborne Brigade. A military theorist who has helped shape the post-Cold War army's thinking, he is also the author of *The Defense of Hill 781* and *The Limits of Glory*. Now retired from active duty, McDonough lives with his family in Tallahassee, Florida.

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AUGUST 1, 1971:

LZ ENGLISH

Slowly the jeep pulls away, and I watch my driver, Phil Nail, trying hard to demonstrate his mastery over the alien vehicle. He has been driving only a few days, and his eyes dart nervously. His new job is a result of my final act of concern for the men of my former rifle platoon. Although Nail is uncomfortable, I am glad I had him transferred. As a rifleman, he was wounded three times. He's been lucky so far, but I know the odds are against his pulling through a fourth wounding. The longer he allows himself to stay in the relative safety of LZ English, the base camp for the 173d Airborne Brigade, the more likely that he will survive to the end of his stay in Vietnam. Having him transferred is the one small gesture I can make before going home, an act I hope will lessen, if only minutely, my feelings of guilt for going home on my feet. How well I know that there are many Phil Nails still out there in the bush. For them I can do nothing.

In the hot sun I stand beside the short airstrip of LZ English, waiting for the helicopter to take me to Camranh Bay, where the DC-10 waits to take me home. It is a quiet morning. From my vantage point on the small, leveled hill that houses the airstrip, I can see across the barbed wire fence to the rice paddies and the village of Bong Son beyond. Amid the tall, green rice, Vietnamese peasants are toiling away, here and there a domesticated water buffalo performing the timeless chores of Southeast Asian farming. Smoke wafts up from countless small homes and huts in the crowded village. The smells of Asia drift across the runway, intensified by the warmth of the sun and the stillness of the day. How quiet and serene it seems. Only the sandbagged wooden hut at the edge of the airstrip reminds me that a war is in progress.

I am not quite alone. A few yards to my right stands an army major in ill-fitting fatigues. His awkwardness of dress and his soft facial expression tell me at a glance that he has never been on the other side of the barbed wire, out in the field. In the wooden hut a soldier stands beside a field radio; nothing but static hums over the speaker. The soldier's rifle is the only weapon in sight.

I ignore them both. I want to be alone with my thoughts. Somehow I must rivet the picture of Bong Son and the countryside into my mind, and I feel I can only do it at this moment. Soon I will be gone, never to see it again. Before, I was too involved, too close to it, to remember it objectively. But now it is important for me to concentrate on these last few minutes on the ground in Binh Dinh province. Perhaps I am assuring myself that I have made it to the end. Perhaps I must convince myself that this is my last day with the 173d Airborne, and I am intact. That seemed a remote possibility when I began leading my platoon back in the early stages of my tour in Vietnam.

How long ago was that? Only a year? It seems I was much younger then, so much younger. And the men.

Only a few are still around. Perhaps that was why Phil Nail was so smug when he shook my hand and said good-bye. So many of the others are gone. Even their replacements are gone, gone to early graves, hospital wards, shocked and horrified families, and years of questioning what happened, why it happened, and why it happened to them.

And how did I make it? Did I ask other men to do what I would not have done? Did I not take care of them? Was I too zealous in doing what was military? Did I contribute to the evil of this war in some callous, uncomprehending way? Or did I lessen that evil by doing what was right, by doing what had to be done, by doing what I was supposed to do?

My thoughts are interrupted. The major approaches me and asks me where I am going. I try to conceal my disdain for him, the disdain of a self-acclaimed veteran for the rear area soldier. It is an unfair disdain, but it is there, and he probably sees it.

"I'm going home," I tell him. He smiles, trying to share what he expects is my joy. I sense that, and my disdain grows. Doesn't he know that it's not joy? It's confusion; it's guilt; it's a sense of loss--but not joy. There is no room for joy in Vietnam.

"I'm a doctor," he tells me. "Psychiatrist, as a matter of fact." I wonder why he tells me that. I become wary. What is a psychiatrist doing here? He makes small talk, but I am only half-listening. Somewhere in his words he asks me my branch (infantry), and where I served in Vietnam. I point to what we call the Tiger Mountains, over in the north. "There," I say, "by the village of Truong Lam, not far from Tam Quon." He looks, but cannot see. He doesn't know the places; he doesn't know what comes with the names. The words mean nothing to him. I suppress my rage at this; many have died in the places that bear those names.

"What did you do?" he wants to know. I am wary again. Why is he asking these questions? The answers mean nothing to him. I speak in the past tense of the platoon I led. It has been a while since I led it (having been a staff officer in the last few months of my tour), and the men who were in it then are no longer there. The major picks up my mood; perhaps he is a good psychiatrist after all. "Do you ever dream about it?" he asks me.

I am surprised by the question. Dream about it? What does he mean? What is there to dream about? Is he testing a pet theory? Am I a subject of a research effort? "No, I don't dream about it," I tell him, with all the warmth with which I might say, "Shit on you, Bud!" He gets the message and backs off. I stand in silence waiting for the helicopter. The major is the final irony in a year filled with irony. Whoever sets in motion the forces that determine the life we lead has a tremendous flair for the ironic.

I marvel at the audacity of the question. My platoon was a part of my life, but I will not dream about it. I am determined I will not.

January, 1974: Medford, Massachusetts

I wake from my sleep with a start. The sweat is damp and chilly on my chest; the sheets cling to me. I sit up, causing my wife to stir in the cool air. Outside the bedroom window I can see a gray morning forming beyond the barren trees that ring the backyard.

My heart is beating fast; my nerves feel frayed. The dream was vivid; I feel it lingering even now in the faint morning light. How many were there? Four? Five? No, there were more, and I knew them all. Who were they? Think, think! I knew them. I knew their names. Yes, that's it. They are West Point classmates of mine,

all six of them graduates of the Military Academy, class of '69. Momentarily, their names escape me.

In the dream they moved so slowly, they talked so solemnly. And their eyes: big, wide, but nothing in them. Glass eyes, looking at me with no expression. They were in full battle dress, each of them, bandoliers strapped across their chests, faces and hands camouflaged, their M-16s taped tightly to avoid metallic clangs. In single file--ranger file, as we called it--they came to me. We knelt in a muddy, barren hole in the ground, an enlarged foxhole or a fresh bomb crater. I'm not sure which. We talked, they and I, but I couldn't remember the words. We were discussing a mission; a map was spread on the ground in front of us, a map marred by mud and rain, barely legible in the dark jungle. When our discussion was over, they stood up to leave. How stiff they looked, how blank their stares.

Then I remembered some of the dialogue. "How are you doing?" I had asked them. I wanted to know. I felt as if I had to know. But no one answered. Slowly, again in ranger file, they walked off into the foliage, soundlessly fading into the background of my vision and my dream. By now I knew each of them. Their names, first and last, had come to me. Each one had come with me to Vietnam. Each one had died there.

I remembered the psychiatrist, and I cursed him in the quiet of the New England winter morning.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROAD TO WAR

The United States slid into Vietnam so gently, so slowly, it was all but imperceptible to the average observer. The early 1960s had bigger issues to contend with: a missile gap, a space race, a Cuban invasion, confrontation in Berlin, a nuclear face-off with the Soviet Union, an assassinated president, remote wars in faraway places of little importance to the United States, but seeming more important than the nonwars in Indochina.

In 1963 a boy coming of age in Brooklyn could identify more easily with the immediate issues of his own life than he could with Buddhist monks immolating themselves in grisly street scenes in Saigon. "Where is Saigon anyway?" he might ask while quickly thumbing through the newspaper to reach the box scores on the latest Yankee thriller against the Red Sox. Sports were important then. Politics were not. Girls were important, too, even if they were more incomprehensible than politics. World affairs are not the stuff of adolescence.

School was alleged to be important. All the adults said so. But in Brooklyn, school very often ended with graduation from high school, and that event was looming ever closer as 1963 passed into 1964. A time for decision was fast approaching. If not college, then what kind of work? And if college, then how to pay for it? And where to go?

The roads that lead young men to war are not political roads, or national and international roads, but individual roads. What propels young men (and, perhaps in the future, young women) to combat is not the draft. Those who are not destined for armed combat usually will not be drafted for armed combat. The pool of human resources is vast, and the number of riflemen is small. The person who wants to avoid the draft will avoid it. And in Vietnam, as the war went on, the numbers who successfully avoided the draft increased. So who fights? The fools, the uneducated, the knaves? I was none of these--or so I maintain. But I fought. What led me to it?

Certainly not the draft. Things were looking up in the winter of 1963-64 as I moved successfully through my

senior year in high school. A New York State Regents Scholarship and a part-time evening job were answering the question of how to afford college. Although the thought of enlisting in what appears to be a peacetime army was appealing to an eighteen-year-old yearning to break free of the nest, I was cautioned against running pell-mell into the ranks by my wise father, a veteran of World War II and twenty-two years of enlisted service. The advice made sense, and doubly so since there was a chance for an appointment to West Point. True, it was a remote chance in the highly politicized congressional districts of New York, but some exposure as a promising amateur boxer representing the American Legion gave me hope for a political appointment. At any rate, the army could wait; life was too exciting.

By the fall of 1964 Vietnam had become a bigger news item in the local papers. Still, it was too far away, and the United States too little involved, for it to be more than an item of passing interest to a young man planning his future in a world he already knew, a world alien in every way to Southeast Asia. Undergraduate study in civil engineering at Brooklyn Polytechnic allowed me to live at home and commute to college. It also allowed me to continue developing as a boxer in the nearby Brooklyn YMCA. I was expanding my intellectual horizons and feeding my hunger for adventure--right in my own backyard.

The summer of 1965 brought talk of sending American units to Vietnam. A year earlier the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had laid the groundwork for the deployments, but the buildup was still not addressed as a war. It was not of much interest to a college student completing his first undergraduate year and embarking on an interesting summer surveying job in upstate New York.

A quirk of fate, however, brought the appointment to West Point. Nobody had qualified from the lower East Side of Manhattan. With a deft push of a pencil I was made an imaginary citizen of Manhattan. The phone call reached me at the surveying camp: "If you can get to West Point in three days, you can enter with the class of 1969. Want it?"

A moment of decision. Although young people are never properly prepared for these decisions, they must make them anyway: "I guess so." After all, I had told everybody I was seeking a nomination, and I had literally fought for it. I had taken the tests for it, and I had even been circumcised for it. Having given that much, it didn't seem right to turn it down.

I drove down to Staten Island that night. (My family had made the break from Brooklyn.) There was a big family party, a dinner out on the town, a proud ex-NCO father pounding his son the cadet-to-be on the back. I remember his face that night--the map of Ireland looking at me with sparkling blue eyes, pleased as punch that his boy was going to become one of "those goddamned officers."

Two days later I drove with my mother to her sister's home thirty miles from West Point. How different my mother's emotions were from my father's. As I left her to continue the last leg of the journey on my own, she became stricken with grief. She was saying good-bye to her boy, her sad dark eyes pouring out tears as she clutched at me with her small hands, her Italian features showing all the hurt a mother feels when she fears for what is about to happen to her son in his quest for his own life. It made me cry, and I was ashamed of it. How could I go to West Point, the school of military leaders, with tears in my eyes? That was a place for men, not mama's boys. Thank God, I had thirty miles for my eyes to unreddden.

From [AudioFile](#)

A kid grows up in Brooklyn, goes to West Point, and then finds himself leading a platoon in the fabled 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam. Not your typical experience. But as the author points out with intelligence, fine details, and intensity, nothing about the Vietnam experience was typical. These accounts of booby traps, the ubiquitous helicopters, and the bankrupt "Strategic Hamlet Program" are challenging and riveting. Joel

Rooks's steady and decidedly urban reading reflects the author's background, strong sense of duty, and questioning nature. McDonough relates how he struggled to hang on to his humanity and morality in extremely inhuman situations. He did manage to hold on to his values, and he found something else besides--wisdom. B.P. © AudioFile 2003, Portland, Maine-- Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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