

*The novel covers more aspects of the war in Vietnam than most other works of fiction. The American, South and North Vietnamese soldiers are followed from their civilian backgrounds, through enlistment, training, combat, wounding and the treatment of those wounds. This is placed within the historic context of Vietnam's struggle.*

## **SOLDIERS OF A FOREIGN WAR**

by Charles McNair MD

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# Soldiers of a Foreign War



A NOVEL OF VIETNAM



Charles McNair, M.D.

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First Edition

Words and Music by Joe McDonald c: 1965 Alcatraz Corner  
Music, renewed 1993.

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# Chapter 1

## Jet Plane

Hey, hey, LBJ, how many babies killed today? It wasn't until he heard the chanting that Steve Aiken realized this was that Saturday: the big rally against the war. He continued walking in from the south parking lot and onto the Reville College campus of the University of California, San Diego. The chanting grew in volume and anger. Hell, no, we won't go.

He was in his first, very conflicted, year as a pre-med student. He did not think he should still be here, in school, in March of 1968. He did not support the war in Vietnam, but then again, he did not support the demonstrators, either. He was like a man without a country. He had no place in either camp, no one with whom to associate, no group to join. One, two, three, four - we don't want your fucking war!

The war had taken up most of his last two years in high school. The coverage on TV, magazines, newspapers was relentless. Johnson had announced he would "not seek, nor accept the nomination of my party for the presidency of the United States." He had hoped to quiet the fury but only emboldened the resistance, making them feel they had driven a sitting president from the White House. Well, it's one, two, three what are we fightin' for? Don't ask me, I don't give a damn...

Aiken was not political, he was not an activist, in fact, he had decided to enlist after high school and get it over with. This terrified his mother who wept and pleaded so much that he go to school that he did finally capitulate and enrolled at UCSD instead. Now he merely wanted to be a pre-med student and eventually a doctor. He thought he could keep his head down and study without becoming involved. He was born into the wrong times for that. Aiken

felt he could justify what he saw as a cowardly act only by excelling in college. Even in this, he felt he had failed. His grades were good enough to keep him in college but not to get him into med school.

He walked through the eucalyptus trees around the side of Galbraith Hall and was stopped by the crowd filling Reveille Plaza. There were over a thousand-people jammed together. A stage was set up in the center where the speakers, performers and evidently anyone who felt they had something to say could grab the bullhorn and hold forth. Aiken worked his way down the side of the plaza towards Urey Hall, hoping he could get into the library and do his work.

Flags, banners, signs waved back and forth. Effigies of Johnson, McNamara and Reagan bobbed up and down on sticks shoved up their nether regions. Students, almost all white, were decked out in their best hippie garb or dressed as grim reapers, wounded soldiers or burned Vietnamese. Field jackets and bush hats were everywhere. Vietminh and National Liberation Front flags outnumbered American flags, most of which were flown upside down. There were counter demonstrators flying their American flags correctly and sectioned off from the demonstrators by a line of campus police.

What do we want? Peace! When do we want it? NOW!

“Hey... Aiken, isn’t it?” A tall grad student plucked at his sleeve.

“Yeah, Steve Aiken,” he said warily at first but then recognized his Western Civ teaching assistant, Christian Robb.

“I didn’t expect to see you here. I thought you were pretty much a straight arrow type.”

“I should probably take offense at that. Actually, I was headed to Urey to get some studying done, but I guess that plan is pretty well screwed.”

“Well, stick around. Marcuse is supposed to speak later and we’re going to burn our draft cards.”

“As fun as all that sounds, I’ve really got to get some work done.”

Robb was tall, spare with long red hair reaching his shoulders. He was wearing a camouflage poncho, bell bottoms and sandals. He drew closer to Aiken. “Listen, Steve, this is important. We have to oppose this illegal, murderously insane slaughter. There is no justification, only profits for the war industry. The goddam draft is the new slavery of mainly the blacks and poor. They are made to fight for Shell Oil, Dupont, Colt arms and the rest of corporate America. It has been going on for more than five years, killed thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Vietnamese, and for what?”

“They say we are saving south Vietnam from the Communists and keeping all of Asia from going red.”

“Who the hell asked us to?”

End the war – bring the troops home – Now! Five, six, seven open up the Pearly Gates Ain’t no time to wonder why, WHOOPEE, we’re all gonna die.

Chants and protest songs wafted over them like the pot smoke. A woman had climbed onto the stage and grabbed the bull horn. “For too long now,” she began, “privileged, rich, white America has been committing atrocities and war crimes with impunity in Vietnam in our names. Our war industry is dictating policy to the elected officials – I say ‘elected’ when the truth is they are bought and paid for – pursuing a war that trades in the bodies and blood of the Vietnamese for their obscene profits.”

The counter demonstrators had their own bullhorn, apparently. Bite me, you Commie bitch...Shut the fuck up, you slut. They surged against the police line.

“Free speech, First Amendment...heard of them, you rightwing assholes?”



"Now this is some reasoned debate," remarked Robb.

"What do you expect from competing mobs?" asked Aiken.

"What do you expect, Steve? Why are you here?"

"I really don't know. Did you know I nearly enlisted straight out of high school?"

"No shit?"

"Yeah: the draft, the whole privileged middle class white kid able to sit it out in college while others not as lucky get swept into the killing machine scenario just kept eating at me."

"You can't possibly support the war?"

America – love it or leave it you red slime faggots!

Gimme a F. F! Gimme a U. U! Gimme a C. C!  
Gimme a K. K! What's that spell? Fuck! What's that spell?  
Fuck! What's that spell? FUCK YOU!!"

The right wingers surged again against the police line which barely held. Rocks began to arc into the massed demonstrators.

"No," Aiken said. "I don't support the war but I don't support this, either. I made this big decision to enlist, the first decision of my so-called adult life and then my mother cried and I totally wussed out." Lights and sirens of the San Diego police began arriving and the two mobs calmed down a bit. "So here I am. Too chicken shit to stand up to my mother, surrounded by people who I think are just hiding out, whose motivations I suspect, but in my gut, I feel that I am no better than they are - just more spineless."

"You don't think we are sincere in standing against the killing and an illegal war? That we are just a bunch of cowardly white kids taking advantage of a rigged system?"

"Ask yourself, Christian, would you be here all angry and self-righteous if it wasn't for the draft? If you were at no risk of having to fight, how much would the suffering of the Vietnamese mean to you then?"

“Well, you’re sure as hell here, aren’t you?” Robb asked with some heat.

“You are right and that’s my problem.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

The climax of the demonstration had arrived: the burning of the draft cards. Young men began to line up at the stage. A large banner slowly unfurled. It showed an erect phallus painted red, white and blue with “USA” stenciled on the shaft, ejaculating blood whose terminal droplets turned into dollar signs over a vulva with “Vietnam” lettered on it. The caption read, “LBJ, pull out like your father should have.” The crowd roared out its approval.

“You have got to love the Art Department,” Robb said.

“Now that is truly revolting,” answered Aiken who was grinning none the less. “But I think I have had enough theater for one day. I guess I’ll head on back home.”

“You can’t dodge this forever. You’ve got to take a stand eventually.”

Aiken waved as he made his way through the throng. Behind him the first of the protesters mounted the stage.

“My name is Roland Montfort and I reject this illegal war.” He dropped his draft card into a flaming trash can.

The crowd chanted, “Hell no, he won’t go[BS1]!”

My name is Alfred Hoppen... William Banner... Clive Hindel... Robert Zander... Michael Thomas... Alexander Dumont...

Aiken had not slept well, what with the nervous diarrhea and vomiting, as well as hearing his mother crying in her bedroom through most of the night.

He had enlisted in the fall of 1968, after a lackluster freshman year at UCSan Diego, even now he’d be hard-

pressed to tell you why. The army did not care, they were happy to take him.

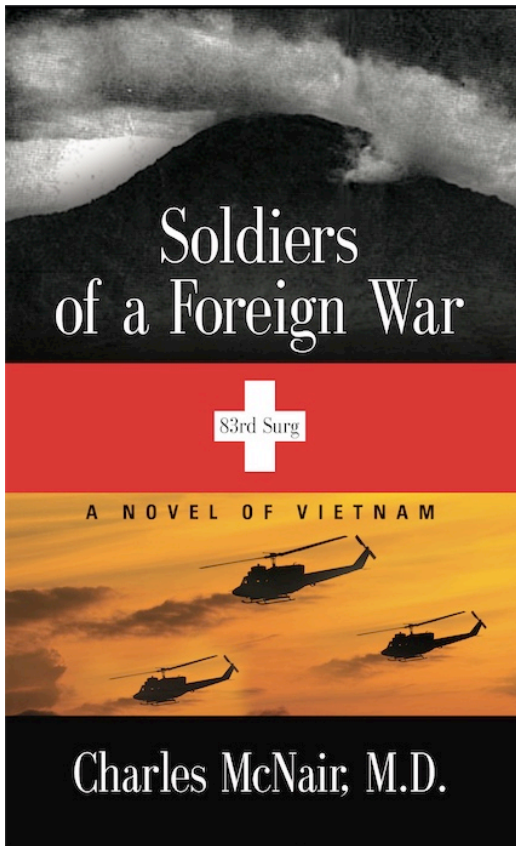
They put him through nine months of training and Steve Aiken became an operating room technician. This was his last night at home before leaving for Vietnam. There had been a sendoff party of mainly his parents' friends. He slipped away after an hour and drove to the college campus where all his lifelong friends and school mates were beginning their junior years. He circled the school, walked among some of the buildings, but ended up getting back in his car and driving home. Not one of his friends had been able to understand his decision and he felt there was not much point in going through awkward goodbyes.

John Denver's maudlin *Leaving on a Jet Plane* was playing almost continuously on the radio during that summer of 1969. It seemed particularly apt.

Now his duffle bag was packed, his khakis laid out. He had his manila envelope with his travel orders under his AWOL bag. His older brother would drive him to Lindbergh Field in San Diego later that morning where he would board his flight to Oakland and from there it would be a short ride to Oakland Army Base. In a day and a half, Steve Aiken, twenty years old, would be in a plane on his way to Vietnam.

#

The year before on a September day in 1968 when Aiken boarded a Greyhound bus in San Diego and headed off to enlist. It seemed an improbable start to his five-thousand-mile journey to Vietnam. The first night he was put up in a hotel next to the induction center and the next morning the mental and physical testing began. He was surprised to find there were math and reading tests as well as what he expected to find, aptitude tests.



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