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A Temporary Sort of Peace

Jim McGarrah

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Growing up in Princeton, Indiana, during the 1950s, Jim McGarrah spent his days pursuing dreams of athletic glory on the baseball diamond, becoming captain of his high school's baseball team, and winning, for a time, the affections of a blond cheerleader, escorting her to dates at the local drive-in in his 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air. Although he earned a baseball scholarship to college, McGarrah flunked out of school in May 1967 and, on the way home, enlisted for service in the U.S. Marine Corps, causing his father, a veteran of World War II, to warn him he had no idea what he had just done. In his memoir, McGarrah, today a poet and writer from southern Indiana, examines in detail his peacetime life in Indiana, his indoctrination into the cult of the marines as a fledgling warrior in basic training at Parris Island in South Carolina, and his introduction to the life of a combat soldier in Vietnam observing bulging body bags at an air base's morgue in Da Nang and going to his first assignment armed with a malfunctioning M-16 rifle. Many years later, the former private first class, serial number 2371586, realized that for him, home had become "the jungles of Vietnam, the one place where life was at its best and worst simultaneously every minute of every day." The book also includes the author's days with a small marine Combat Action Group trying to win the hearts and minds of Vietnamese in the village of Gia Le, his wounding by shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade during the height of the Tet Offensive, and dealing with his war memories back home in the United States. In August 2005, at the age of fifty-seven, McGarrah returned to Vietnam, visiting the sites of his former battles with his son and sharing memories of the past and future with a Vietnamese poet in a graceful peace ceremony in Hue.

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