



ACROSS THE POND

MICHAEL McCORMICK

With a foreword by Ron Kovic, author of *Born on the Fourth of July*

Across the Pond

Michael McCormick

Dedicated To the veterans of the Vietnam era

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Foreword

When we thought we had read all the books about Vietnam, and had heard all the stories there were to be told, suddenly, Michael McCormick's *Across the Pond* appears and we find ourselves startled and deeply shaken by its emotional intensity. This little book with its seemingly simple yet deeply compelling narrative grips the reader from the very beginning and does not let go. It is written with the violence and fury of Leon Uris's *Battle Cry*, and the tenderness and compassion of a simple poet.

Across the Pond is more than just another book to come out of the Vietnam war. It is a poignant reminder that many of the stories of that war are yet to be told. I believe it will be recognized as one of the important books to come out of that war and McCormick will rank with the other writers of his generation, equaling their intensity, integrity, and impact. Like a stone thrown into a pond that sends out a ripple, reaching places and people not at first thought possible, *Across the Pond* does just that; with a simple, yet eloquent narrative, it becomes much greater than itself and that ripple will be felt for years to come.

With this work, McCormick takes his place among the other important chroniclers of this period. He reminds us that these stories are still out there, needing to be told, needing to be listened to and remembered. Each and every one of these stories adds up to a greater understanding of the time we have all passed through. It is our common history and will remain so forever.

This beautiful little book should be required reading in every high school, along with the other books of the Vietnam war. Because of its brevity, stature, and dignity, I am confident *Across the Pond* will last.

Against overwhelming odds, Michael McCormick has succeeded. He has honored his country and himself with his contribution, which is simply written with great feeling. Like Erich Maria Remarque's Paul in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Steven Crane's Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, his character, Sean McBride (Mac), permits us to feel what it was like to be there, day in and day out, in that place which will forever remain seared in the consciousness of a generation of Americans. So few enlisted men from that war were able to tell their stories. McCormick and very few others give a direct report from the daily existence of the infantry and grunts of that war. He puts you right there and makes you live and feel and sweat and cry, so that decades from now a generation of men and women not even born will be able to understand.

When it seemed all the other voices were still and all the stories had been told, former marine sergeant and Silver Star recipient Michael McCormick, from Jackson, Ohio, suddenly and powerfully reminds us that those voices and stories are still out there. His courageous contribution helps all of us to understand even more the great picture that was our time, the intricate and complex tapestry that was our generation. Mr. McCormick makes us wonder how many others like himself are still out there in that wilderness that so few of our generation's artists and authors have been able to escape from. Michael McCormick has not only freed himself from that bleak and dark

time (that would be enough to celebrate); he has arrived as an important author and writer and he should be listened to.

With an emotional intensity that is sometimes overwhelming, *Across the Pond* is a short, violent, extremely powerful forty-two-page ride through hell that you will never forget.

Ron Kovic

Chapter I

Sean McBride, or Mac, as he was called in Vietnam, had a very bad feeling about this patrol. The company moved through the rice paddies and villages all morning with no enemy contact, but everyone felt the Vietcong were there, someplace. It was a very hot day, and most of the marines had already used up their water. The captain stopped the patrol for a rest at the edge of a village near a well. Some of the marines were beginning to gather at the well, filling their canteens. The area was surrounded by hills, and Mac knew what the Vietcong could do with a mortar. His men pulled out canteens and headed for the water as the Willie Peter round came whistling in and landed near a group of young marines.

Men screamed as the white-hot phosphorus seared through their uniforms and burned into their flesh. They heard the high-explosive rounds being dropped into the mortar tube. Everyone dove for cover. The air was filled with singing steel and death.

Mac was as close to the ground as he could get, but he still felt vulnerable and scared. He wished he could somehow make himself invisible or burrow under the ground and hide. Then he heard his friend.

“Help me, Mac. Oh God, please, someone help me. I’m hit and I can’t see.”

Mac did not want to look up, much less move. The mortars would be coming again, soon. He didn’t want to die. *Where are your guts, man? Your friend is hurt. You know he is*

there, but you're scared, lying here on your belly like a worm with your face in the mud.

Then, to his own amazement, Mac was up, running through the exploding shells to his wounded friend. *So this is what it feels like to die*, Mac thought as he reached the wounded boy and knelt down beside him.

“Don’t worry, Utah. I’m going to get you out of here.”

As he spoke, Mac noticed the boy’s body was completely riddled with shrapnel wounds. There was blood flowing from the holes where his eyes had been.

“I can’t see, Mac.”

“You’re going to be okay, man.”

The mortars stopped crashing in, but Mac could hear more shells plunking into the mortar tube. *Damn, they’re good with that thing—and fast*, he thought. As the next barrage of mortars began to explode around them, Mac grabbed the wounded boy and started dragging him to cover. They reached a ditch, and Mac shoved the kid in and fell on top of him. The ground shook above their heads. Mac reached down and felt the boy’s neck for a pulse. There was none.

Chapter II

Mac lurched forward violently, suddenly awakened from the nightmare he had been having for months. He was sweating and shivering at the same time.

When he first arrived in Vietnam, Mac had been assigned to Zang's squad. Zang had a reputation as a very tough squad leader. He was completing his second tour of duty in Vietnam and was somewhat crazy. The squad was patrolling near An Hoa, South Vietnam, when they started taking sniper fire from a village they were passing. The marines hit the deck and returned fire. After a few minutes, the firing stopped. The men prepared to continue the patrol. They knew the sniper had probably made his escape through a nearby tunnel.

"Form up on-line; we're going to sweep through the vill and try to flush out that sniper," Zang said.

At this time, Mac had not been in Vietnam long, but he had been there long enough to know the sniper was gone. It seemed foolish to delay the patrol because of one sniper, who was probably gone anyway. Then Mac heard Zang say something about execution call. Mac knew Zang was from Chicago. He had boasted about having connections with the Mafia. He wanted to become a lieutenant in the mob when he got back to the world.

The squad got on-line and swept through the village. They did not receive any enemy fire. The people in the village had taken cover in underground bunkers. Zang had his men search the bunkers and bring all the people to the center of the village. There were approximately fifty Vietnamese in the

bunker complex: old men, women, and children. The exceptions were three young men, who appeared to be about seventeen years old. Zang pulled the young men off to the side. He was in a rage.

Zang pointed at the young men and said, “You VC.”

The boys shook their heads violently. “No VC! No VC!”

Mac could see the fear in their eyes. The marines towered over the diminutive Vietnamese, and the marines were dirty, sweaty, tired, hungry, and not very happy about having just been shot at, but Mac didn’t think Zang would actually do anything to the young men. He thought Zang was trying to scare them, possibly to find out where the Vietcong were. But Zang pulled his pistol out of its holster, cocked it, and put the barrel against the head of the oldest Vietnamese boy. Zang was red in the face, hyperventilating. He was very angry.

“You’re VC, and I’m going to kill you if you don’t tell me where your unit is.”

Mac was worried; he could see that Zang meant business. He walked over to Zang and stood next to him. “This isn’t right, man,” Mac said. “I don’t think they even understand what you’re saying.”

“Shut up and get back where you belong,” Zang barked. “These fucking gooks damn well know what I’m saying, and if they don’t tell me where their Vietcong unit is, we’re going to have an execution call.”

Mac could not believe it. What was he going to do, he thought, get into a firefight with his squad leader?

Zang lowered the pistol, grabbed the collar of the boy, and pulled him closer. He pointed the pistol directly at the boy’s heart.

“No!” Mac said.

Zang squeezed the trigger. The bullet struck the Vietnamese in the chest, sending blood spurting through the air. The boy crumpled to the ground, dead. The villagers gathered around the body, crying. The boy’s mother cradled his body in her arms, sobbing. The village men stood motionless. There was fear and hatred in their eyes.

“You’re crazy, Zang,” Mac said.

Zang cocked the pistol again and pointed it at Mac’s head. “What did you say, mister?”

“Go to hell!” Mac said, then turned and walked away.

Chapter III

The Alamo wasn't really a fort at all. Evidently, there had been an American outpost there at one time, halfway between An Hoa and Phu Loc VI. The entire area was now heavily booby-trapped and the Vietcong liked to mine the road and snipe at the marines. Mac's squad was assigned to the job of flank security. He and his squad were moving along the sides of the road, one fire team on each side, providing security for the main body of marines sweeping the road for mines. When he heard the explosion, Mac hit the deck hard, a reflex that required no conscious thought. One learned fast in this environment that your life often depended on how fast you could duck. The blast had been on the other side of the road. Mac became aware that he was lying on the ground with his face in the dirt. He felt afraid, then embarrassed that he was hugging the ground. Mac rose to his feet quickly and glanced around to see if his men had sensed his fear. They were all still lying facedown in the mud. He ran across the road and along the rice paddy dike to the downed marine. It was one of the new men, Chris, from Nebraska.

"How you doing, Chris?"

"I think I tripped a frag, Mac. I heard the spoon fly."

"Don't worry, man; the choppers are on the way."

The wounds were not bad. Chris had caught some shrapnel from a Chi Com grenade booby trap in the legs. He would be going to Da Nang and then to a hospital in Japan. A corpsman appeared and began placing battle dressings on the

boy's wounds. A medivac chopper arrived. Mac and three other marines put Chris on a poncho and carried him to the bird.

The patrol moved out. Ten minutes later another explosion shook the ground. The truck following the road sweep hit a mine. The blast was so powerful, it flipped the truck over on its side, killing both marines inside. Pieces of metal, rubber, and dirt rained down. The marines put what they could find of the two men in a poncho and called another medivac.

It was decided that Mac's platoon would patrol the area around the Alamo and try to make contact with the enemy unit that had planted the mine. The patrol moved out, the column snaking its way through the rice paddies, along the dikes, and past the villages. After ten minutes of patrolling, the point man tripped a booby trap. The bomb had been made from an American artillery round that had not exploded. The Vietcong rigged up the shell to explode when a wire was tripped, using a friction device. The marine who tripped the explosive was blown to pieces. The four marines behind him were all seriously wounded. One kid lost both of his legs at the thigh and, in a state of shock, was trying to get up and walk on the stumps. Another boy lost a leg, an arm, and an eye. He was lying on his back, crying out for his mother.

After the dead and wounded had been flown out, the rest of the marines moved out. Thirty minutes later, another booby trap exploded. There were more dead and wounded. Calls went out for "Corpsman, up!" A medic jumped up and ran in the direction of the wounded. He stepped on a booby trap and was killed instantly. Marines bandaged marines and the helicopters were called. When the birds landed, four marines carrying a wounded boy in a poncho tripped a booby trap and were

themselves wounded. A third medivac chopper landed on a mine, wounding the pilot. The carnage continued throughout the day. The marines would move out, get blown up, call in the choppers, and get blown up again. Not one enemy soldier was spotted during this time.

Mac's squad took point. They hadn't gone very far when the platoon leader got on the radio.

"Hotel Two Bravo, Hotel Two Bravo, this is Hotel Two, over."

"Hotel Two, this is Two Bravo, over," Mac said into the handset.

"Mac, find us a spot to bed down for the night, over."

"Understand, Two," Mac said.

A suitable location for a night defensive perimeter was found, and the men started digging in for the night. The next day was more of the same. The area was so heavily booby-trapped, the marines could not move fifty yards without tripping an explosion.

Some of the men reached their breaking point. The marines had volunteered to fight, not get blown up, day after day, with no enemy contact. The morning of the third day near the Alamo, Mac was approached by two of his fellow squad leaders.

"Mac, we're taking our men out of here."

"Where you going to go?" Mac responded.

"Back to the fire base."

"I don't think that's the answer," Mac said.

The rogue marines formed up in a column, the two squad leaders at the head. They began walking toward the

perimeter. Sergeant Milner was watching. He walked over to the two leaders.

“Where are you going, corporal?”

“The men can’t take any more, sergeant. I’m taking them back to An Hoa.”

The sergeant drew his pistol and chambered a round.

“You’re not going anywhere, marine. If anyone tries to leave this perimeter without orders, I’ll shoot him myself. Now get these people back to their positions.”

The rebel marines hung their heads and went back to their fighting holes.

The platoon patrolled near the Alamo for two more days; then they were flown back to An Hoa for hot chow, showers, and mail. The mutiny was never mentioned again.

Chapter IV

Darkness began to envelop the fire base at Phu Loc VI. The marines of Mac's squad inspected their gear, checked weapons, counted grenades, and distributed ammunition. They darkened their faces and joked back and forth to cut the tension. When it was dark, Mac led his men to the ambush site. He took the long way around, avoiding any roads or trails. Mac didn't want to get his squad killed before they could get into position. The marines walked through the rice paddies and worked their way back to the road, nearly a mile south of the fire base entrance. Mac located the spot he had picked out during the day patrol and set in his men. They faced the road from a small hill about thirty yards away, with a clear field of fire in all directions.

Mac positioned his machine-gun team in the center of the squad. A rifle fire team was on each side of the gun, with Mac and the radioman next to the gunner. When the ambush was sprung, the gun would open up first. Every third man would remain awake during the night. No one expected the Vietcong to come walking right down the road so near the marine base, but enemy movement had been spotted in the area recently.

It was 2:00 A.M. when Mac felt something on his shoulder. He was awake at once and instinctively reached for his pistol. The marine next to him was pointing down the road.

“VC.”

Mac could barely see the silhouettes in the darkness. A dozen Vietcong were walking down the road, laughing and talking as they walked. Mac glanced over at his machine gunner

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