

CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD

*Is a Bridge  
That Beats the  
Constant Drum  
Of War,  
Me, Stranger  
To My  
Homemouth  
Lives than One  
of the Innocents*



# THE WAR OF THE INNOCENTS CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD

DANIEL WEBSTER COLLEGE  
LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY DRIVE  
DANVERS, MASS.

McGraw-Hill Book Company

New York

Toronto

St. Louis

San Francisco

Mexico

Panama

g on this slope in Asia since the

s. He had been in and out of the  
He would make it up to sergeant  
t out and drive a caterpillar trac-  
re he saw a recruiting sergeant it  
: and there he would be, back in  
as a helicopter gunner in 1962,  
icized, advisors' war. One day his  
en shot down deep in the jungle,  
but him. The nearest helicopter,  
opped in and had just room to  
g Jack alone with some corpses.  
d disappeared into the jungle. In  
y four Viet Cong, who kept him  
y miles a day. During one after-  
iet Cong nearest him was indus-  
the foot-impaling wooden spikes  
overed holes on the trails. Jack  
position, grabbed a *punji* stake,  
igh the stomach, darted beyond  
carbine was leaning, shot another

re said, not looking up from his  
en-slime-encrusted socks. After a  
the jungle, eating two snakes en-  
ng outside a Vietnamese govern-  
he sentries behind their barbed  
n return. As he dazedly made his  
the camp, he noticed that there  
arm-waving and shouting, and he  
d that they were so pleased to see  
he camp, he discovered he had  
eld.

ended, he decided to be a little  
He went to Infantry Officer Can-

didate School at Fort Benning, and emerged number one in a  
class of one hundred and sixty-four starters.

Thus Jack Crumley, and the air of confidence in himself and  
his ability to command. From his lips there came a torrent of  
praise for his men. The Fourth Division, he pointed out, was  
an outfit without glamour, straight-leg Infantry, eighty per cent  
draftee. The other outfits—paratroopers, Marines, the crack  
First Infantry and First Cavalry Divisions—all had arrived  
with fanfare and Public Information Officers working over-  
time. The Fourth Division just came ashore and went to work  
in the nasty bush-whacking aspect of the war, and the high  
school dropouts, the poor boys of all races who had not wanted  
to be here, were fighting as well as the outfits laden with volun-  
teers.

"This battalion came over here with one hundred and fifty  
men and six hundred and fifty boys," he said. "Now we have  
eight hundred men." Jack put away the socks and started chip-  
ping the dried mud from his boots. The impression, he said,  
was that the American juggernaut was just tearing Vietnam  
apart, rolling around the country recklessly and at will. I could  
see for myself that nothing was going to roll through these jung-  
les. Often it came down to hand-to-hand. His platoon was Re-  
connaissance, its job to scout rather than fight, but sometimes  
you stumbled on something and there you were. One day he  
had found himself in an idiotic position; he was holding onto  
the foot of a Viet Cong who was trying to escape through the  
bushes. "All I could see was the foot." Another day one of his  
men had thrown a body-block on him from the side, knocking  
him down and bayoneting a VC who had just been raising a  
rifle at him from a hole in the deep brush. One of his friends,  
Lieutenant O'Brien, had been at the head of a platoon when  
one shot had been fired at O'Brien from an old Mauser rifle.  
The bullet went into O'Brien's left breast, tunneling through  
the flesh between his skin and his ribs, and came out under his  
shoulder blade, flying on to break the arm of the next man in  
the file.

n that they knew what was necessary. The words were simple, but deep, he was speaking of loyalty, friendship. The faces of the young officers, Colburn, The Royal Pineapple, Toby, nodded. Next to Toby, nodded returned C Company commander, I had seen presenting his company, to Tom in the red dust at Polei

we ate steak. Halfway through the day of the Reconnaissance Platoon, I was summoned from the rear, and the story was too good. His men had decided to test the defenses. They had slipped out through the perimeter of a mile along the outside of the noses of guards in their watches. They had penetrated the defenses at they were back inside, muddy and had asked them what they were. I was less than polite, and Jack had arrested the MPs from calling reinforcements into custody.

A helicopter at six in the cold black engine to start and the operation to go on. Voices spoke, matches were turned spongy gray. Light tore the sky as it moved slowly down the red clay slip.

I walked toward me, the Sergeant. Captain Paul Titus of the artillery pointed his finger of his right hand in a circular motion. The helicopter engine whacked into gear, the sky was light and the earth

## THE WAR OF THE INNOCENTS

I looked down and saw our task force. It was everywhere—twenty vehicles on a side road waiting to come into the main road, thirty vehicles on another side road, forty vehicles already under way, tanks and armored personnel carriers spaced out in the long column of canvas-sided trucks.

There were two hundred and forty vehicles down there, and I was excited. There was a tremendous surge of purpose and adventure. This was what we knew how to do, roll out in great force and hit with everything we had.

• • •

By evening we had not heard a shot fired. We were dug in on a meadow a few miles northeast of the *montagnard* town of Ban Me Thuot, beside Route Fourteen, the only two-lane north-south road in II Corps other than the coastal Route One. In parts this road was even paved, but traffic on it this first evening was zero.

With dawn came one of those inexplicable things. Two armed Viet Cong appeared on a grassy road that ran into the woods from the highway. They were four hundred yards from us, and they stood staring at our camp, making no motion to conceal themselves in the bushes.

Our mortar platoon commander was Lieutenant Andrew O'Brien, through whose body a bullet had passed while he was leading a rifle platoon in the hills of Phu Yen. He took one look at the two VC through his binoculars and tiptoed to the nearest mortar and whispered the interesting tidings to the section chief. The mortar was leveled, aimed, a round dropped into the tube with a *THUNK-BAAM*. Everyone watched the round soar into the sky; everyone watched the two VC. They stood staring at the camp; they were still staring when the round landed between them and killed them, throwing them apart like long gray sacks. The operation was off on its eccentric course.

\* \* \*

CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD

few minutes before, a sound I did not know, and Tom said it was a Skyspot, bombs hitting in salvo from one of the radar-controlled F-100 missions in which the planes flew high and level and the enemy knew nothing until the bombs landed.

Tom rubbed the back of his head with one hand, and took a sip of Scotch. For an instant I remembered that first time I saw him, distant, elegant yet tough, at the Taj Mahal Christmas party. Now I knew that he was a man who could brood in the night about his lost troops and get up the next morning and work hard all day trying to find the enemy, doing a job he had sworn to do when he raised his right hand one day in 1945.

He was explaining how in Vietnam one had to become an expert on sounds, to know when it was strange that birds should be chirping, to know when it was strange that they were silent. He spoke of sounds at night.

"You have to know what the sound is, you have to know what hearing it under those conditions means, and you have to know what to do about it." He took a swallow of the Scotch and tepid water, and glanced fondly at the card from his children. "If you're going to operate successfully in Vietnam, you have to be prepared to forget everything you ever learned before."

III

Two mornings later I was watching from a slight distance as our mortars fired in a new defensive concentration, the rounds quite visible as they soared from the mortar tubes, arced up, and then plunged crashing into the jungle a few hundred yards away. I followed the quick blurring ascent of one of them, and suddenly, among the wet clouds overhead, it exploded, harming no one but leaving a strange dark smoke ring above us.

I walked over and asked the mortar platoon commander what had happened.

"Well," he told me, "these rounds have very sensitive noses,

THE WA

and that particular one off by contact with a c

I looked to see if he was Lieutenant Andrew foot platoon in Phu Y body in the famous ex—the enemy bullet, w the arm of the man be It was he I had watch Ban Me Thuot when away, evidently thinki both been killed by th

I had never asked graduated from Bostc His plan had been t never go near a unifo

"Shortly after I go jungle jacket open, hi point of being shaved

He smiled as he sa to which this had led original plan he wou

"Yeah." He nodded sunken sandbagged l mand. "I like it."

I asked him what

"Basically, I like b fice." He went on to ing the riflemen in t putting him in a wounded and then t

"While I was out enjoyed it. There's a danger for the peopl can see the results c closer to it than tha

## IN FLOOD

to know, and Tom said it  
to from one of the radar-  
the planes flew high and  
until the bombs landed.  
with one hand, and took a  
bered that first time I saw  
he Taj Mahal Christmas  
1 who could brood in the  
up the next morning and  
e enemy, doing a job he  
s right hand one day in

in one had to become an  
t was strange that birds  
was strange that they were

and is, you have to know  
ns means, and you have to  
k a swallow of the Scotch  
at the card from his chil-  
ccessfully in Vietnam, you  
hing you ever learned be-

; from a slight distance as  
concentration, the rounds  
e mortar tubes, arced up,  
ungle a few hundred yards  
ascent of one of them, and  
rhead, it exploded, harm-  
rk smoke ring above us.  
ortar platoon commander

; have very sensitive noses,

## THE WAR OF THE INNOCENTS

and that particular one was evidently sensitive enough to be set off by contact with a cloud."

I looked to see if he were kidding me, but he was not. This was Lieutenant Andrew O'Brien, who had been in charge of a foot platoon in Phu Yen until he had been shot through the body in the famous exchange in which just one shot was fired—the enemy bullet, which had gone through him and broken the arm of the man behind, with never a glimpse of an enemy. It was he I had watched with such interest that morning near Ban Me Thuot when the two VC stood four hundred yards away, evidently thinking we could not see them, until they had both been killed by the mortar shell directed by O'Brien.

I had never asked him about himself. He told me he had graduated from Boston College with an ROTC commission. His plan had been to go into the Army for two years, and never go near a uniform again.

"Shortly after I got in," he said, standing in the mud, his jungle jacket open, his helmet off and his hair cut almost to the point of being shaved, "I became interested in it as a career."

He smiled as he saw me glancing at the muddy mortar pits to which this had led him, thinking that if he had followed his original plan he would have been out of the Army by now.

"Yeah." He nodded toward the tilted mortar tubes in their sunken sandbagged holes, the men working under his command. "I like it."

I asked him what there was about it that he liked.

"Basically, I like being outdoors. I don't like being in an office." He went on to say that what he had really liked was leading the riflemen in the bushes, although he saw the wisdom of putting him in a less exhausting slot after he had been wounded and then became sick after returning to duty.

"While I was out there"—he nodded toward the jungle—"I enjoyed it. There's a certain amount of danger out there, and danger for the people you're responsible for, but out there you can see the results of what you're doing—you can't get much closer to it than that."

CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD

O'Brien added that he had voluntarily extended his year in Vietnam by another six months, and hoped he would continue to spend it right in the Dragoons. He would take any job up here and be happy to do it, but he didn't want anything back at Brigade or Division.

I nodded. I was getting used to finding these men who had found, early in life, what they really loved—men like Jack Crumley, whom I had met while he was washing his socks on that hillside in Phu Yen, and young men who did not yet shave, like Tomlinson, chewing gum, cleaning his rifle, and talking on the radio. There was no use saying that all sane, reasonable men hated war. These men were not neurotics. There was no use saying that they would come to their senses the first time they were in a really horrible fight, or were wounded, or had a friend killed. They had already experienced all that, had Crumley and Tomlinson and O'Brien, and they were planning to stay in the Army, and in no damned hurry to get out of Vietnam.

I asked O'Brien what he thought of the enemy.

"He's good." The man who had been cut straight through by an enemy bullet stared out at the rainy jungled hills as if he could see the enemy in formation there, silent phalanxes in their sand-colored NVA uniforms. "He's very good. But he's not better."

We talked for a few more minutes. There were dark clouds tumbling toward us from the north. It was not yet noon, but the feeling was that of a rainy dusk.

O'Brien stared at the black hills wrapped in mist across the valley and said: "I don't think this country ever had a beginning or will ever have an end."

IV

Arriving at Pleiku to look for transport back to Tuy Hoa, I found that, at four-thirty in the afternoon, the last plane of the day had gone. Too tired to be angry, I hitched a ride up to a

THE WA

transient barracks, sign cot, and went to sleep.

I woke at seven in the Officers' Club. Crooked object of a dozen disapproved to use any club in lar of my jungle fatigue pocket, indicating that wrinkled and obscured

I stared right back drinks in their hands. ready to fight the whole tiques if they tried to

A hand touched my ing a deep breath before damned club officer turned, and looked into tain Rod Rodriguez, the handlebar mustache in known him on the gr gade had its headquar that he and his colleague out of Pleiku in support units.

"That won't do," R transient barracks down jeep, helped me collect stalled me in a corner a cot with mosquito net door, and after twenty dirty jungle fatigues room.

It was a good reunion to eat. The new boss, Madden, from Alexar reer as a submariner.

assisted by air strikes

tus was lying in his  
ever, but yesterday  
eryman's craft. We  
g known as Three  
trees in the center  
d the wounded. At  
e guns from Tom's  
ty cannon support-  
anging in size from  
ers I had seen long  
s around us and on

added in tribute to

around, and asked  
ells landing.  
in fifteen meters of

ce of steel that had  
e I was crouching,  
s, Paul?"

e. That would have  
nd, from where it

ned near killed me  
fire base. The word  
of a battle up here,  
of them was a Jap-  
who was to die in  
that he was a gradu-  
on in Tokyo where  
red mud beside the  
rs, talking of differ-

ent priests we had known. He had majored in economics, and there we were, an English major from Harvard who was writing about the war and an economics major from Sophia who was photographing it.

I said good-bye to Mine, whom I would see again in bizarre and dangerous circumstances near Tuy Hoa Air Base, and ran into some of the boys in C Company, who had been brought in to pull themselves together and guard the fire base while the two other companies carried on with the mopping-up operation in the jungle. They told me that four of the men in the ambushed platoon had been captured by the North Vietnamese right then. They had tied one man's hands in front of him with rope and had been leading him away when our artillery started crashing in. The boy had landed in some bushes away from his captors. He lay low for a while, chewed through his ropes, and got back to the C Company perimeter. The other three had not been so lucky. They had been found with their hands tied behind them, shot dead through the back of the neck.

I strolled into the TOC, only to find The Royal Pineapple giving me a pat on the back. He didn't know how to express it, but he was glad I was alive, and glad that I had seen his old former command, B Company, do its stuff. As I stood chatting with him, Lieutenant Andrew O'Brien walked past—the mortar platoon commander I had last seen gazing at the Cambodian hills and saying "This country never had a beginning, and it will never have an end." O'Brien flicked my arm with his hand. "Hello, Combat," he said.

A staff officer who had been out in the C Company perimeter last night, working radios after the action, told me something that turned a myth into reality. I had heard tales of a character named McCoy, a soldier attached to Fourth Division Headquarters who modestly referred to himself as the Division Sniper, who would cast off into the jungles by himself for days at a time. Last night, this officer told me, just at dusk, McCoy had appeared in the C Company perimeter. He had been carrying an AK-47, the North Vietnamese automatic rifle, and the last

CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD

man, forty-three years old, soft-spoken, with a quick, nervous way of moving. He was dressed in rumpled fatigues with a minimum of insignia. When they walked to the TOC, it was almost a Mutt-and-Jeff effect, Tom in his tall striding elegance, and Glen stepping along beside him as if content to give him center stage. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between two men, and all that this proved, eventually, was that good commanders come in many sizes, shapes, and attitudes.

"I want you to come up here again after Tom leaves," Glen said firmly. "I want you to feel you're welcome up here any time, and I want you to come up again."

I told him I would, not meaning it, little thinking that the next time I saw him would be at the biggest battle of the war.

Tom was the Dragoons' commander until the moment of the ceremony the next day, and that night he held his last staff meeting in the TOC tent. I stood at the back, knowing every man there, remembering the first time I had entered this tent on a hilltop in Phu Yen, and how I had spilled coffee over my then-shiny fatigues when a cannon went off as Tom was briefing me in front of the map. I had seen this tent in a lot of places and these men under a lot of conditions. Standing beside me was Jack Crumley of the Reconnaissance Platoon, whom I had first met washing out his socks in his helmet on that hilltop. Sitting on a metal chair in front of me was Toby Colburn, The Royal Pineapple, and next to him was Paul Titus of the artillery, throwing up every day from stomach trouble and still doing a better job than any other artilleryman in the division. Neil Buie was next to me, and Sergeant Higa beyond him. Standing just inside the open tent flap was Sergeant Major Hannon, still chewing whatever it was that he chewed, and beside him was Mortars, Lieutenant O'Brien, who was still putting out the firepower up here nine months after an enemy bullet had passed through him in Phu Yen.

Tom stood beside the old easel, new maps of a new area on it, and the tent became silent except for the hissing of the radios on their tables and the rain on the canvas.

THE WA

"There's one individ  
us around for months  
ones together. He's eat  
all my Scotch, eaten up  
in the same vein, and

I made my way aro  
chairs and stood before  
and he handed it to m

In the dim light in  
canvas, I looked at w  
wooden plaque, and c  
man's Badge. Below it  
only thing in the room

I shook hands with  
then he said good-bye

"Thank you," he sai  
ping and yelling and  
purpose—to save lives.  
you'll go on doing a fi

The next morning w  
acle occurred. Phoeni  
peared in fatigues they  
produced fatigue jack  
which had chevrons an

Everyone stood abo  
thought of pulling com  
and the perimeter ha  
group of twenty-one r  
companies, formed in  
sergeants of the staff.  
from Dragon Mountain  
and out, bringing the c



h a quick, nervous  
 atigues with a min-  
 e TOC, it was al-  
 l striding elegance,  
 ontent to give him  
 greater contrast be-  
 ventually, was that  
 pes, and attitudes.  
 Tom leaves," Glen  
 come up here any

e thinking that the  
 t battle of the war.

the moment of the  
 : held his last staff  
 ack, knowing every  
 id entered this tent  
 lled coffee over my  
 as Tom was brief-  
 nis tent in a lot of  
 ns. Standing beside  
 e Platoon, whom I  
 helmet on that hill-  
 was Toby Colburn,  
 Paul Titus of the ar-  
 h trouble and still  
 an in the division.  
 Higa beyond him.  
 as Sergeant Major  
 he chewed, and be-  
 , who was still put-  
 ths after an enemy

os of a new area on  
 e hissing of the ra-  
 nvas.

## THE WAR OF THE INNOCENTS

"There's one individual," Tom began, "who's been following us around for months. He and I have had a couple of close ones together. He's eaten me out of house and home, drunk up all my Scotch, eaten up all my Cs—" He said a few more things in the same vein, and then said: "Come on up here."

I made my way around the men sitting on the gray metal chairs and stood before Tom. Someone handed him something, and he handed it to me.

In the dim light in the tent, the rain coming down on the canvas, I looked at what was in my hands. It was a black wooden plaque, and on it was affixed the Combat Infantryman's Badge. Below it was a small square of brilliant brass, the only thing in the room that twinkled. It said,

CHARLES B. FLOOD

HONORARY DRAGOON

I shook hands with Tom and walked back to my place, and then he said good-bye to his staff.

"Thank you," he said. "You've had to put up with my snapping and yelling and chewing you out, but it all had one purpose—to save lives. I wish you luck and success and I know you'll go on doing a fine job. Thank you."

• • •

The next morning was cold, misty, rainy, but a sartorial miracle occurred. Phoenix from the mud, young Dragoons appeared in fatigues they had somehow made clean, and sergeants produced fatigue jackets they had been hiding somewhere which had chevrons and the division patch.

Everyone stood about self-consciously. There would be no thought of pulling companies out of the jungle for a ceremony, and the perimeter had to remain manned, so a composite group of twenty-one men, including representatives of all the companies, formed in three trim ranks behind the officers and sergeants of the staff. The battalion colors were brought out from Dragon Mountain, and chopper after chopper whirled in and out, bringing the commanders of other battalions and offi-

### CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD

cers from Brigade and Division. There were more spectators for the ceremony than participants.

Two helicopters circled low over this muddy field and landed among the ferns at its edge. The division commander, Major General William Peers, a big man with the kind of weathered broken-nosed face one sees on the skippers of tuna boats, came wading through the ferns.

The troops snapped to attention in their small phalanx behind the flag with its fluttering battle streamers. At the point of the phalanx stood Tom Lynch, saluting the commanding general.

It went quickly. There was Tom, taking the colors from Sergeant Major Hannon and handing them to Glen Belnap, who returned them to the Sergeant Major. At that instant Glen became the battalion commander.

Tom was required to make another speech. He turned and faced his men.

"I'm just passing through," he said. "Men come and go, but the important thing is that the battalion should go on. No man has ever had a better battalion than this one. I'm proud of you." His voice started to break. "Thank you," he choked, did a perfect parade ground about face in the mud, and was once again facing General Peers.

Then the adjutant was reading a citation, mentioning Tom's leadership at Three Trees, flying low in an under-fire helicopter as he turned the initial ambush into a resounding victory, and General Peers was pinning the red-white-and-blue ribbon of the Silver Star on Tom's fatigue jacket. Another citation, this one the Legion of Merit. Then the Bronze Star, for swooping into a firefight and leaping from his helicopter to pull a wounded boy to safety.

Tom's face was a study. The only medal he had known he would receive was the one coming next, the Air Medal with a "V" clasp for valor, given for being the first man out of a helicopter on an Eagle Flight in which he had successfully led an assault on a defended hilltop, but the staff had pushed forward the paperwork on the others without telling him.

tall sergeant from the  
except for the momen  
to Tom and received i  
portorial self, I asked  
flag.

"It's a privilege," he  
of battle streamers bac

Inside the TOC the  
tion day. The cooks a  
huge cakes that had be  
had cakes, coffee, and e  
Tom to congratulate h  
other battalion comma  
his four new medals on  
orations, his record, an

I shook hands with  
his rank I had met in V  
ach would stop troublin  
Higa, Neil Buie, Jack  
Lieutenant O'Brien, an  
ter.

Tom came walking c  
of young soldiers behir  
filled barracks bag, and  
for a year in the jungle  
and he had left his rifle  
trip to Dragon Mount

The Sergeant Major  
stood waiting by the  
turned the salute, and  
hug, shaking hands, sl  
geant Major still chew

Tom and I were in t  
mist. The last thing I s

we were more spectators

this muddy field and the division commander, a man with the kind of authority on the skippers of tuna

their small phalanx battle streamers. At the point of saluting the commanding

officer, the colors from Sergeant Belnap to Glen Belnap, who at that instant Glen be-

speech. He turned and

"Men come and go, but you should go on. No man is like this one. I'm proud of you," he choked, did the mud, and was once

in action, mentioning Tom's role in an under-fire helicopter to a resounding victory, a red-white-and-blue ribbon jacket. Another citation, the Bronze Star, for swooping his helicopter to pull a

medal he had known he would get, the Air Medal with a star, the first man out of a helicopter had successfully led an entire staff had pushed forward telling him.

Then it was over. The ranks of troops behind Tom dissolved, turning into little knots of men moving toward their respective holes. I walked toward the TOC with Joe Guerra, the tall sergeant from the Recon Platoon who had carried the flag except for the moments when the Sergeant Major handed it to Tom and received it back from Glen. Reverting to my reportorial self, I asked him how he felt about carrying the flag.

"It's a privilege," he said quietly, carefully slipping the forest of battle streamers back into a canvas case.

Inside the TOC the atmosphere was one of a school graduation day. The cooks at Dragon Mountain had baked several huge cakes that had been brought out here by chopper, and we had cakes, coffee, and even paper napkins. Men crowded about Tom to congratulate him and wish him godspeed. Some of the other battalion commanders, talking with Tom, who still had his four new medals on his chest, had an air of envy for his decorations, his record, and his battalion.

I shook hands with Captain Paul Titus, the best officer of his rank I had met in Vietnam, and told him I hoped his stomach would stop troubling him soon. I said good-bye to Sergeant Higa, Neil Buie, Jack Crumley, Toby The Royal Pineapple, Lieutenant O'Brien, and then I was waiting out by the helicopter.

Tom came walking out of his tent for the last time. A couple of young soldiers behind him were carrying his pack, one half-filled barracks bag, and a brief case—everything he had needed for a year in the jungle. The medals were gone from his chest, and he had left his rifle out here, just carrying a .45 for this last trip to Dragon Mountain.

The Sergeant Major appeared from another direction, and stood waiting by the helicopter door. He saluted, Tom returned the salute, and then they were giving each other a bear hug, shaking hands, slapping each other on the back, the Sergeant Major still chewing without missing a beat.

Tom and I were in the helicopter and it all dropped away in a mist. The last thing I saw was Chaplain Buckner, who had "fol-