

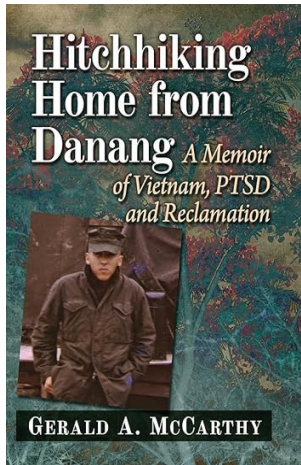
Fifty Years After Vietnam

By Cynthia Allen

A Review of *Hitchhiking Home from Danang: A Memoir of Vietnam, PTSD and Reclamation.*

By Gerald A. McCarthy.

From MacFarland Press, 2024



In *Hitchhiking Home from Danang: A Memoir of Vietnam, PTSD and Reclamation*, poet and veteran Gerald McCarthy reckons with the aftermath of war and the legacy of trauma. Having lost his mother at age four, McCarthy sets out to find himself at 17 by enlisting in the Marines and later, volunteering for Vietnam. In 1966, he arrives in Danang City “as a naïve 18-year-old with no knowledge of the country, its culture, its people or their traditions.” Although he never engages in combat, he witnesses the degradation of war: teenage girls forced into prostitution, hungry children scavenging through mess hall slop for scraps of food, and years later, the suicide of a fellow veteran staged to look like an accident.

Hitchhiking is a collage of memories organized around a set list of songs that serve as chapter headings. The book opens with *Dancing in the Dark* (Bruce Springsteen/Sarah Vaughn), the author’s experience of dancing to soul and Motown music in the enlisted man’s club. Here he learned “line dancing and break dancing and solo dancing” and “developed a kinship and community with my Black comrades” that endures to this day.

Song titles often parallel the emotional triggers associated with PTSD. In *Four Days Gone* (Buffalo Springfield), McCarthy tries to explain to his 18-year old son Nate what happened when he went AWOL after returning from Vietnam. Instead, he’s transported back to the snowy winter morning when he turns himself into the FBI office in Binghamton, New York. He uses italics to show how an “invasive memory comes back, interrupting the narration” of his life.

And I’m not telling him about the flashbacks, about the dead, about the other stuff. I’m deliberately not telling Nate how the story really started.

I tell Nate, “Well, I just left. I’d had enough of it, you know.”

With a nod to Julio Cortazar’s experimental novel *Hopscotch*, McCarthy suggests several ways to read his memoir: back to front, front to back, randomly, or by following a pattern of chapters he lays out in the introduction. I first read the book the old-fashioned way, from beginning to end and was distracted by the intentional repetition of flashbacks. A second reading following McCarthy’s suggested schematic was more satisfying. It revealed the story beneath the story, the origin of his trauma:

“My childhood was filled with a very real aura of death and dying, of wakes and funerals, of hushed voices speaking Italian. For years, the Italian language was the language of death. . . words like *allora* or *aspetta* always made me think something bad was going to happen.”

When his infant son dies from medical malpractice, McCarthy revisits his roots, burying the baby’s tiny coffin next to his great-grandmother. “I asked the stone cutter to chisel on her headstone only his first name and the year--1992.

New Beginnings (Joe Bonner). McCarthy received his discharge papers on the day Martin Luther King was buried: eight months after going AWOL and being listed as a deserter. He spent two months in a locked ward at the Neuro Psychiatric Unit in Norfolk Naval Hospital for a condition that had yet to be named. PTSD did not appear as an operational diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) until 1980 and wasn’t listed in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) until 1992.

Over fifty years after deplaning in Vietnam, McCarthy finally found the help he needed with a therapist at the James A. Peters Veterans Hospital in the Bronx, New York.

“I’m trying to tell Dr. Morley about how I ‘turned away’ from the Marines. I show him the letter written by a psychologist from my undergrad college.

He says, *You don’t have to prove to me you have PTSD.*”

Trauma and abuse experienced at any age can trigger lifelong symptoms of PTSD. For veterans like McCarthy, therapy and counseling can soften the edges.

“The ghosts come back at night or sometimes even at midday--I see their signs, their leavings. I hear the wind picking up--like an inland sea, one poet called it--and I listen to the wind in the branches of the oaks, pulling through the boughs of the Norway spruce. I hear the wind coming close, pulling at me to keep remembering.”•