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AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Helicopter Love Mail: Part 2
Bill Clark
Donna Clark
CreateSpace
978-1-4680-2137-0
Four Stars (out of Five)

Is it considered voyeuristic to enjoy reading other people's love letters? Maybe, but it generally involves a bit of stealthy snooping. Some folks have done it, usually by sneaking a peek when the writer or recipient of those letters isn't there to stop them. Bill and Donna Clark, coauthors of the letters documented in *Helicopter Love Mail Part 2*, have decided not to hide their love letters, but instead to gather them together into two volumes and offer them to inquisitive readers.

This second part of the Clarks' collection includes about six months of daily letters between the newly married couple during the time Bill was serving in the Army Special Forces in Vietnam. Having promised to write one another every single day during Bill's overseas posting, the two faithfully corresponded, with only a rare missed letter or two, up to and including the day Bill caught the helicopter that would carry him on the first leg of his journey home. The letters are not literary masterpieces, nor are they particularly profound. What the letters offer, however, is an education in the hardships of forced separation and, above all, in the power of love.

Reading the Clarks' letters is enlightening, but also sometimes achingly uncomfortable. Those with low tolerance for cutesy nicknames and private endearments may feel queasy after a few too many sappy notes addressed to "Sugar Toe," "Poopy Doopy," and "Sweet Petute." That said, any reader who gives up on the book because of this will miss the extensive and timeless insights the Clarks provide into the life, hardships, and bonds of an American military family during a time of war.

Bill's anguish at not being able to better inform his wife is obvious in his letters, and, at the same time, it is decidedly telling of a larger issue. He can neither comfort his wife nor unburden himself about his circumstances. The "secrets" and the resultant anxiety create an imbalance that has served as a death knell for many a relationship. Bill's own solution is simply

to keep writing his daily letters, declaring that “one thing outweighs all that. I love you.” Each letter he sends to Donna is an affirmation that *he* will make it out of Vietnam, and *they* will make it as a couple.

Donna, on the other hand, represents the military spouse left behind to carry on. As her letters to Bill illustrate, people outside the military, especially in modern times, often fail to recognize, let alone understand, the devastation wreaked upon those who must take over on the home front. Donna is a strong woman, yet as a young, pregnant wife, she is completely unprepared to face the challenges her situation requires. Her letters are sometimes newsy and always as upbeat as she can manage, yet the undercurrent of loss and confusion is heartrending and ever present.

Helicopter Love Mail Part 2 is not a memoir, in the strictest sense, but it certainly is a story. Those who can look beyond the nature of its small, boring details of Donna’s “I will go to K-Mart to buy some film,” and Bill’s “Today was another scorcher, and whew, I mean it was hot,” will understand why the Clarks decided to make their letters public. It is not the correspondence itself but rather what it represents that makes this a worthwhile read. Anyone who is—or ever has been—separated from a loved one will certainly understand and relate to the message the Clarks provide. Their tale is pure inspiration.

Cheryl M. Hibbard