

## *Dr. Ronald Glasser, Bard of the Vietnam War Wounded, Dies at 83*

His “365 Days” offered unvarnished, vivid sketches of soldiers injured in the war. He said it was a book he felt compelled to write.



By Sam Roberts

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Dr. Ronald J. Glasser, an Army physician who wrote the acclaimed book “365 Days,” a scorching account of the war in Vietnam through the words of the soldiers who were wounded there, died on Aug. 26 in St. Louis Park, Minn. He was 83.

His death, in the Minnesota Veterans Home, was confirmed by his partner and former wife, Joy Glasser, who said the cause was complications of dementia.

Dr. Glasser was opposed to the war when he was drafted in August 1968.

He was assigned to a hospital in Zama, Japan — one of four frenetic Army hospitals in Japan that every month were receiving 6,000 to 8,000 injured troops airlifted from the battlefields of Vietnam during their 365-day tours of duty.

Dr. Glasser was originally assigned as a pediatrician to treat the families of military dependents in Japan. But, he wrote, “I soon realized that the troopers they were pulling off those medevac choppers were only children themselves.”

“365 Days,” published in 1971, was a finalist for the National Book Award. The playwright David Mamet hailed it in *The Wall Street Journal* as “the best book to come out of Vietnam, and yet the author wasn’t stationed there.”

Dr. Glasser explained in “365 Days” that he had never intended to become a writer, but that he felt compelled to record what he had seen and heard at the hospital. He dedicated the book to Stephen Crane, the author of the novel “*The Red Badge of Courage*,” which vividly described the bloody battlegrounds of the Civil War.

“I did not start writing for months, and even then it was only to tell what I was seeing and being told, maybe to give something to these kids that was all theirs without doctrine or polemics, something that they could use to explain what they might not be able to explain themselves,” Dr. Glasser wrote.

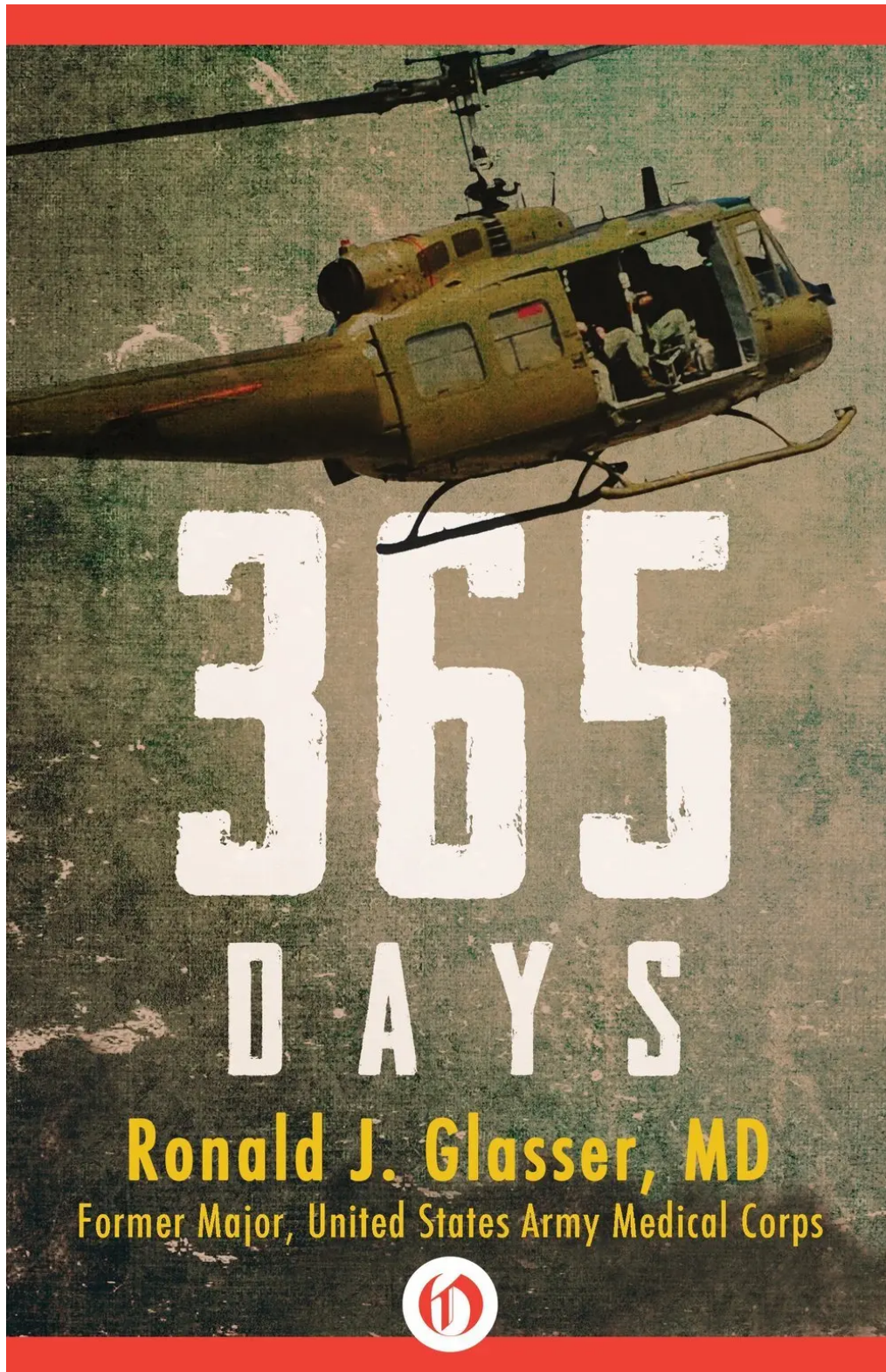
“As for me,” he continued, “my wish is not that I had never been in the Army, but that this book could never have been written.”

Those who were likely to survive, he wrote, were worried “about how they would explain away their lost legs or the weakness in their right arms. Would they embarrass their families? Would they be able to make it at parties where guys were still whole?”

“Above all, and underlining all their cares,” he continued, “would anybody love them when they got back?”

He cited an unattributed passage that a fellow doctor, about to escort the body of his own fatally wounded brother home, seized upon to comprehend a dying patient’s state of mind:

“These mature young men who have worked, trained and striven to reach self-confidence and self-sufficiency now appreciate what they can do and what they can enjoy and that suddenly it will all end,” the text said. “They are so ready to live, to them death is a brutal, personal attack, an unforgivable insult, a totally unacceptable event.”



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Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, who was a national security adviser in the Trump administration and is now a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, characterized Dr. Glasser in an email as "one of the most humane men I have ever met" and said that what distinguished him was "his description of war and the experiences of those who fight, sacrifice and suffer" and "his empathy for those he treated and to whom he listened" — including his fellow doctors and nurses.

The novelist William Styron, writing in *Washington Monthly*, called "365 Days" a "moving account about tremendous courage and often immeasurable suffering."

Reviewing "365 Days" in *The New York Times*, Thomas Lask said its "quiet eloquence, its factual precision, its emotional restraint braided into the horror and pain of the subject matter make it a book of great emotional impact."

"The war is the cause and excuse for the book," Mr. Lask continued, "but the theme is the waste of war, the destruction of our American young."

Lewis H. Lapham, who was the editor of *Harper's Magazine* when it excerpted "365 Days," said in a phone interview that Dr. Glasser, "like Walt Whitman, like his experience as a nurse in the Civil War, understood that what the wounded needed was love."

The book was banned from some public libraries because it liberally quoted the soldiers' use of profanity. Dr. Glasser was unapologetic.

"The truth as I saw it was that common language failed," he testified in a court case contesting the ban. "It didn't express their anguish. It wasn't enough."

Ronald Joel Glasser was born on May 31, 1939, in Chicago to Sidney and Ann (Teeman) Glasser, owners of a delicatessen.

He earned a bachelor's degree and then in 1965 a medical degree from Johns Hopkins University, followed by a fellowship in pediatric nephrology at the University of Minnesota.

His marriage to Dr. Janis Carol Amatuzio ended in divorce. In 2008 he married Joy Ann Itman. They legally divorced in 2018 when he was admitted to the veterans home with dementia; but, she said, "For private reasons involving his late memory care, I was his wife and partner to the end of his life."

He is also survived by three stepchildren, Rachel, Benjamin and Aaron Silberman.

Dr. Glasser went on to write several other books, including "Ward 402" (1973); "The Body Is the Hero" (1976), about the body's recuperative powers; "Another War, Another Peace" (1985), a novel about a doctor during the Vietnam War; and "Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds (2011)," which surveyed military medicine.

In "Ward 402," he explored whether doctors, in pursuing heroic measures to keep the terminally ill alive, had been taught to deal with body parts rather than human beings and were treating the disease and ignoring the patient.

"Ready for hearts and lungs and kidneys, I was confronted with a whole person," he wrote. "In the midst of all the familiar precision, of laboratory values and X-rays, suddenly there were human concerns: grief and heartache, personal problems, economics, distrust, fears, and even anger."