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JAMES PARKS HUGHES, JR
Fear and Courage in Tim O'Brien's If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried
(Under the direction of DR JAMES NAGEL)

After serving a tour as an infantryman in Vietnam (1969-1970), Tim O'Brien returned to the United States and began a career as a writer. He has since published six books and numerous short stories and has distinguished himself as an accomplished author in the process. Three of his books, If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973), Going After Cacciato (1978), and The Things They Carried (1990), deal specifically with the Vietnam war. In these works O'Brien clearly establishes fear as both a dominant aspect of the experience and an essential component necessary for the display of courage, one of his most significant considerations. He portrays bravery as an individual's ability to perform acts and make decisions despite apprehension, and he reveals the difficulty of demonstrating fortitude in the morally ambiguous environment of Vietnam where the horror of death was often secondary to that of cowardice. Ultimately, however, although the arena of armed combat provides a unique setting in which to display human conduct and consciousness, the link between courage and fear that O'Brien illustrates is not a war issue but rather a universal one. The strength of his writing lies in his ability to depict this intricate relationship in a manner that is relevant to humanity as a whole. Furthermore, his vivid presentation of the Vietnam conflict, without anti-war protest or political agenda, makes its own case for the prevention of a similar sacrifice of human lives and innocence in the future.

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GOING AFTER CACCIATO, AND THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam war was the most significant event in American history in the second half of the twentieth century. The influence of this conflict has been and continues to be apparent in various facets of American culture, especially in literature. The war in Southeast Asia differed from previous ones in that it was a protracted struggle fought primarily by conscripted young men from the middle and lower classes. It involved guerrilla tactics for which American troops were not adequately trained and against which they were not properly employed. As such, the nature of this war, perhaps more so than others, compelled men to write about their experiences. Some wrote to make political statements while others wrote to present the horrors of the war in an attempt to come to terms with their participation in it. Many wrote for a combination of these reasons among others, and almost all did so in the hopes of preventing a similar situation in the future. Works arising out of the war comprise a substantial portion of contemporary literature in America. Philip Beidler, a prominent Vietnam-war literature scholar, writes in his book Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation:

Of this resolutely anguished and sense-resistant passage in American life, history, and culture, there came, on the part of many who had undergone it at first hand, an impassioned effort at literary sense-making. And of the effort came a

number of texts now recognized as some of the major achievements of the past two decades.¹

Indeed, some of these achievements might qualify as the best American literature of this century and, not surprisingly, this writing has given birth to a growing amount of scholarship and criticism.²

The works of many Vietnam-war writers are grouped in the genre of "war literature" and given little notice outside that category. However, a handful of these authors, while using their military experience for material, have crafted works that transcend the "war" label and rank as the greatest contemporary literature of any classification. Beidler finds that some of these novelists "such as Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo, James Webb, Robert Olen Butler, Winston Groom, and Larry Heinemann have now produced among themselves a body of more than twenty-five works of major importance" (Generation 4). In addition to prose writers, Beidler also recognizes some accomplished poets, including John Balaban, W. D. Ehrhart, David Huddle, Yusef Komunyakaa, Walter McDonald, and Bruce Weigl (4).

The first novelist acknowledged by Beidler is Tim O'Brien, perhaps the most accomplished author to emerge from the war. With If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973), a powerful memoir, Going After Cacciato (1978), which won the National Book Award, and The Things They Carried (1990), which won the New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice Award, O'Brien has established himself as a highly skilled author and the foremost writer of Vietnam-war literature. He has also written three other novels, Northern Lights (1975), The Nuclear Age (1985), and the national bestseller In the Lake of the Woods (1994), and, although Vietnam is

neither the setting nor central focus of any of these works, each deals with the war in varying degrees.

O'Brien was born in Austin, Minnesota, in 1946, but lived his adolescent and teenage years in Worthington, Minnesota, where his family moved when he was ten.³ He graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Macalester College with a degree in political science in May of 1968, and the following summer he received his draft notice for Vietnam. After completing basic training and advanced infantry training at Fort Lewis, Washington, O'Brien arrived in Vietnam in January of 1969. While there, he served the first part of his tour (until August) as an infantry soldier and radio-telephone operator in 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company, 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry Regiment. His unit fell under the command of the 198th Infantry Brigade and the 23rd Infantry (Americal) Division which was responsible for the three southern provinces of I Corps. Headquartered in Chu Lai on the South China Sea, his battalion functioned primarily in the Quang Ngai Province, the same area of the infamous My Lai massacre in March of 1968.⁴ Approximately half way through his tour, O'Brien received a rear job in battalion headquarters that he held until March of 1970 when he returned to the United States and was discharged from the Army with the rank of sergeant. He began graduate school at Harvard and remained enrolled from 1970 to 1976. During this time, he studied government, worked as a part-time journalist for the Washington Post, and wrote his first two books, If I Die in a Combat Zone and Northern Lights. He left Harvard without a degree in 1976 to complete Going After Cacciato and never returned to school, choosing instead to pursue a career as a writer.

O'Brien attributes his literary career to his war experience stating that "'I'm sure I'd be in politics or some sort of government work now if I hadn't gone to Vietnam. I don't think I would have been a novelist'" (O'Brian E1). He refers to Vietnam as "'the material of my life'" (E1), and while almost all of his work addresses the war in some respect, the Vietnam influence is particularly apparent in If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried. These books span almost twenty years of O'Brien's writing career and serve as clear evidence of his evolution from a young, articulate veteran intent on telling his story into a talented author who uses the war as an avenue for presenting multiple issues in his fiction. Ultimately, the power of O'Brien's work, whether memoir, novel, or short fiction, is not a product of the political or military aspects of war but rather of the universal human concerns imbedded in it:

My concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam--not just the physical place, but in the spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam. . . . There was an intersection of values, of what was and what was to come, that I'll always go back to, and I'd be crazy not to. (Kaplan "Interview" 101)

Some of the ideas that O'Brien confronts in his writing include the relationship between imagination and reality, the definition of courage, the struggle to do right in a morally ambiguous environment, and the power of storytelling.

Because O'Brien relies on his personal Vietnam experience for so much of his writing, it is essential to address the often blurred distinction between events that actually happened to him and those that

are fictional creations. In his later work concerning the war, for example, he deals with many of the same issues and events that occur in If I Die in a Combat Zone, thus creating a tendency to interpret his fiction as autobiography. He encourages this approach in The Things They Carried in which the narrator is a Vietnam veteran and writer named "Tim O'Brien." It is important to remember, however, that events contained in his fiction are not necessarily occurrences that he witnessed or experienced.

War literature is at its finest when it moves beyond the external details of war to focus on the underlying human elements. In his book Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost, Tobey Herzog describes this quality perfectly:

The best tales, whether told by participants and observers remembering war or by artists imagining the experiences, cut through ideological cant and battlefield action to explore the often disturbing, ambiguous, and complex elements of war, human behavior, and life. They tell of courage, fear, cowardice, self-sacrifice, evil, life, death, and war's obscenity, as well as its attraction. (2-3)

O'Brien's writing certainly fits this description, and, while the content of his work is complex and resists being reduced to several specific thematic ideas, one consideration to which he returns in each of his books concerning the war is that of courage. In an interview with Martin Naparstek, O'Brien alluded to some of the difficulties in dealing with this issue:

It's such a complicated subject, it's hard to know what to say. It's easy to break down courage into categories.

There's moral courage versus physical courage and so on. Even that seems oversimplifying it. To break it down into categories of John Wayne and Socrates, for instance, seems to me to be really artificial. Like everything else, courage interpenetrates the whole fabric of a life. To take a strand out and say this is courage and this is something else violates a central humanness. (4-5)

The complicated nature of the concept, however, does not intimidate O'Brien. Although he makes no attempt at comprehensive absolutes and does not profess to have all the answers, he tackles larger human concerns in his writing. By repeatedly returning to such issues and observing them from new angles and exploring them via different avenues, he provides an intriguing and valuable discussion.

Contributing to the compelling nature of the way in which O'Brien deals with courage in his writing is his admission that his thoughts on the topic have probably evolved over the course of his career:

I think if I sat down and thought about it systematically I could talk more precisely about what I mean by courage, or what I've been circling in these books. But I know what I feel now, having finished The Things They Carried. Courage now seems to me much more contextual than it used to.

That is, in If I Die I presented a rather abstract, universal kind of definition--that courage is 'wise endurance'--Plato's phrase. This definition, which still strikes me as pretty compelling, argues that wisdom is one component of true courage. A sense of moral rectitude is involved, not just blind physical behavior. I was once

absolutely persuaded by this argument, but now, it seems,
I'm not so sure. I think now that courage takes meaning and
significance in relation to particular situations.

(Baughman 209)

O'Brien describes this new conception of courage that he presents in The Things They Carried as a type of "situational ethics" in which it is not a "purely virtuous characteristic" but rather has an "ugly side" as well (209). He specifically cites "The Ghost Soldiers" as an example of his "revised notion of courage" in which "one can do brave things and feel dirty afterwards" (209). However, whether considering his definition of bravery based on Plato as portrayed in If I Die in a Combat Zone or O'Brien's own idea of courage with an ugly side as depicted in The Things They Carried, one element that always underlies his concern with the issue is fear.

Fear was perhaps the most prevalent factor that characterized the nature of the Vietnam conflict for the ground troops, providing O'Brien with an ideal environment in which to present an exploration of courage. Apprehension existed in many forms and many degrees: the fear of death, of cowardice, of guilt, and of being afraid were all major concerns for the combat soldier. There were also equally as many forms and degrees of courage, and the relationship between the two is a primary issue in O'Brien's works. Terror is a driving force in If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried, and as such, it provides a single avenue for examining O'Brien's writing as he (in the memoir) and his characters (in the fiction) deal with their emotions and attempt to act appropriately in spite of them. Such conduct constitutes

the foundation of courage, and O'Brien diligently portrays the essence of this concept in all three works.

Interestingly, the link between fear and courage that is so apparent in O'Brien's writing has a psychological basis, and the conclusions that he articulates concerning this relationship are amazingly similar to those drawn by psychologists conducting scientific studies. S. Rachman, who has published numerous articles on the psychological relationship between these emotions, writes that as a profession, psychologists have "shared an extraordinary interest in fear and a notable indifference to courage" but that "the concept of courage has not been entirely neglected. Soldiers and philosophers have expressed a long and lively interest in courage" ("Fear and Courage" 110).

O'Brien indeed shows a "lively interest" in courage, and in his memoir he draws on Plato's philosophical arguments in an attempt to achieve a more accurate understanding of the idea. Rachman finds that two of the primary philosophical issues concerning the topic deal with defining courage and postulating a means of attaining it, matters that O'Brien dramatizes in his writing. Equally as important as the relationship that Rachman finds between courage and fear, particularly with respect to O'Brien's work, is the distinction he makes between courage and fearlessness:

Although fearlessness often is regarded as being synonymous with courage, there is some value in distinguishing it from another view of courage. As well as fearlessness (the absence of fear), we can recognize the occurrence of perseverance despite fear. One could, in fact, argue that

it is this later type of conduct that is the purest form of courage. It certainly requires greater endurance and effort. (112)

Through his studies, Rachman also finds that a small percentage of subjects seem to fit the description of "fearless," and as such, their acts of apparent bravery are not necessarily courageous since they overcome no fear in the process.

Rachman's conclusion certainly supports O'Brien's presentation of courage as does the deduction that "performances of courageous acts by fearful people suggest that we might more properly refer to courageous acts rather than courageous actors" (109). This finding echoes the distinction that O'Brien delineates in the memoir, rejecting the idea that men are either consistently courageous or consistently cowardly. Instead, he prefers to think that a man can act bravely on certain occasions and not so bravely on others. O'Brien's writing also displays a concern with the "purest form of courage" in which one must persevere despite fear. Like Rachman, O'Brien finds that without apprehension to overcome, courage does not exist. In addition, Rachman recognizes the "need to avoid disapproval or ridicule" as a motivating factor in acts of bravery, an idea that O'Brien confronts in all three works, questioning whether an act performed due to fear of ridicule can be considered truly courageous.

Much of the study on fear and courage has dealt with the combat performance of military members, and these studies have revealed several factors that enhance an individual's ability to act bravely. Jon Shaw finds that high morale and esprit de corps are most essential along with an "undaunted conviction in one's own capacities, leaders, and weaponry"

(225). Similarly, Rachman concludes that the factors contributing to courageous behavior include self-confidence, possession of appropriate skill, and a high level of motivation ("Fear and Courage" 113). All of these elements were lacking in Vietnam. American soldiers, particularly draftees, received minimal training and average equipment and often had poor leadership. As a result, self-confidence and morale were low, seriously limiting their potential to display bravery.

Psychological research, however, falls significantly short of O'Brien's consideration of courage in one particular area. Most studies are based on a person's ability to perform acts of bravery in the face of fear and danger. O'Brien's writing, on the other hand, is more concerned with a person's ability to make courageous decisions when faced with the threat of social disapproval or ridicule, and his portrayal of these ideas is further complicated by the morally ambiguous case of Vietnam. None of the psychological definitions of courage take into account such a situation and none of the factors for courageous behavior apply. In this instance literature exceeds the limits of scientific study, certainly one source of value in O'Brien's presentation of the topic.

O'Brien's If I Die in a Combat Zone, along with Philip Caputo's A Rumor of War and Michael Herr's Dispatches, ranks as one of the finest memoirs of the Vietnam war due to its employment of fictional techniques. Beidler considers it "one of the exemplary works of its kind to emerge from the experience" containing "its own profound humanity" and a "distinctly literary quality of aspiration toward some large and perhaps enduring significance" (Experience 99). Interestingly, despite such praise and despite his own allusions to the

writing of Plato, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot in the book, O'Brien contends that the work is "just there as a document. It's not art. I didn't know what literature was" (Schroeder 148).

In the memoir, O'Brien deals extensively with his feelings concerning the war and his choice to go to it. He recounts his summer of 1968, his experiences in basic training and advanced infantry training, and his climactic decision. He then gives a month by month account of his time as a foot soldier in Vietnam before he lands a rear job, finishes his tour, and returns to the States. Through the course of the book, he attempts to come to terms with his many fears concerning the war, and he chronicles his attempt to discover an applicable definition of courage through both an intensely honest examination of himself and a search for a model of bravery in the men around him. He finds a real-life hero in Captain Johansen and disappointingly discovers that he does not measure up to the captain's standards. O'Brien does, however, take some pride in small victories over his fears and leaves the war with an extremely realistic conception of courage and his own ability to display it. Perhaps the most important function of the memoir is that it allowed O'Brien to purge himself of his personal war experience so that he could write superb fiction in Going After Cacciato and The Things They Carried. "'I'm glad I got it out of my system,'" he says, "'otherwise I would have ended up writing . . . autobiography cast as fiction'" (148).

O'Brien moves from the autobiographical world to the realm of fiction for Going After Cacciato. The novel covers one night of guard duty for Specialist Paul Berlin during which he recalls many of his Vietnam experiences, including the series of events leading up to the

desertion of Cacciato, a fellow platoon member who decided to leave the war and walk to Paris. Berlin recalls his squad's assignment to capture Cacciato and imagines following him on his journey. By envisioning such a chase, Berlin contemplates the implications of deserting the war. He eventually concludes that the fears binding him to the war are more powerful than those pulling him away, and "just as Cacciato leads Berlin through a literal and figurative journey to partial understanding, O'Brien takes the reader on a journey exploring a soldier's fear" (Herzog "Soldier" 95). In fact, he deals more extensively with this idea in Going After Cacciato than in any of his other works. Paul's primary problem is an almost uncontrollable fear, and this characteristic creates the need for the fantasy trek that leads him through a substantial consideration of courage.

Finally, The Things They Carried stretches the limits of fiction both in content and in style. Less cohesive than a novel but more unified than a short story collection, it consists of a series of interrelated stories concerning the men of a rifle platoon in Vietnam. O'Brien considers it his "'best book'" and even thinks that it might be a "'new form'" (Naparsteck 8). Despite the autobiographical feel of the work, O'Brien insists that the narrator and stories are fictional: "'I blended my own personality with the stories, and I'm writing about the stories, and yet everything is made up, including the commentary'" (8). The book includes events and concepts from If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato but seems to contain the most vivid portrayal of the three. A major subject of the book is the interplay between memory and imagination, but the issues of fear and courage are dealt with extensively as well. In "On the Rainy River," the narrator relates his

excruciating decision to go to the war, concluding that the heroic choice would have been flight. "Speaking of Courage" explores bravery through the thoughts of a recently returned veteran. Other stories address various elements of fear and courage along with multiple aspects of the total war experience and some depart from the war setting entirely, although thematic threads tie them to the volume as a whole.

In If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried, O'Brien portrays, with the accuracy of first-hand knowledge and the skill of an accomplished writer, the nature of the Vietnam war for the average infantry soldier. More importantly, he reaches into the environment of war and pulls out the central concerns of human existence. One consideration that dominates much of his work is the complexity of courage and its underlying basis in fear. Fear provides a common link between If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried, and an examination of this issue illuminates its crucial role in the search for and definition of courage portrayed within the works. Fittingly, such an examination starts where O'Brien's writing career began, with the memoir.

CHAPTER 2

IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE

If O'Brien's Vietnam experience led him to pursue a career as a writer, then If I Die in a Combat Zone laid the foundation for it:

I came to writing because of the war. When I returned from Vietnam, I had something to say: I had witnessed things, smelled things, imagined things which struck me as startling and terrifying and intriguing in all sorts of ways. At that point I didn't care much about technique or language or structure or any of that craft stuff. All I had was a body of acquired experience that impelled me to write.

(McCaffery 131)

While he readily admits that the memoir is "'not great literature'" but simply "'an honest straightforward account'" (O'Brian E5), it provides glimpses of his talent as a writer and establishes the vital connection between courage and fear that constitutes the thematic backbone for much of his later fiction. In If I Die in a Combat Zone, bravery is a primary concern for O'Brien, both its function in his choice to go to the war and its role in his conduct while in Vietnam.

Often in war literature, the issue of valor arises in relation to battlefield conduct; however, many Americans sent to fight in Vietnam underwent a major test of fortitude before ever setting foot on foreign soil. Like O'Brien, a large percentage of the men deployed there were not volunteers but draftees. These men, excluding those who had unique

grounds for exemption from service, faced several unpromising options, including fighting in the war, deserting to a foreign country to live in exile, or refusing service and accepting time in jail. Moreover, in 1968 the rationale for United States involvement in the conflict was becoming increasingly questionable, making the moral climate of the war ambiguous at best. This combination of factors created a situation in which young men were forced to choose whether to go to war, and many of them struggled with this decision. So difficult was this process for O'Brien that he spends over one fourth of his memoir describing the events leading up to his arrival in Vietnam and presenting his psychological battle to determine the correct course of action. He has described this internal conflict as a "moral schizophrenia" (E5), stating that "'my conscience kept telling me not to go, but my whole upbringing told me I had to'" (Bruckner C15).

In the third chapter, O'Brien sketches his summer of 1968 in which he played golf and rode around the town lake with friends, sitting with his draft notice in his wallet, discussing the war. He feared going to war and hoped that it might end, but when all the "careful and precise argumentation" proved fruitless, he began to ponder the prospect of desertion. He writes of his initial consideration of escape, "to bring the conversations to a focus and also to try out in real words my secret fears, I argued for running away" (Zone 26). Initially O'Brien's thoughts of flight were tempered by two beliefs. The first was his sense of obligation to the country that had provided him with a comfortable existence:

I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I'd
lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its

food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night,
driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air,
wallowed in its luxuries. (27)

The second rested in O'Brien's admission that he might be incorrect in his opinions of the war and therefore may not be right in avoiding it. Although he thought that the war "was wrongly conceived and poorly justified," he considered that "perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?" (26). This uncertainty prevented him from avoiding the draft, but through basic training and advanced infantry training at Fort Lewis, he became more convinced that the conflict was wrong, his feelings of obligation to country faded, and soon his fear of going to war dominated all concerns.

As O'Brien's apprehension increased during training, so did the intensity of his search for the correct course of action. He suddenly found himself in a situation in which his greatest fear was not that of war but rather of disappointing family, friends, and community, should he desert. These competing anxieties combined to govern his existence, and he addressed this fear of social criticism: "It was not a town . . . where the son of a father can sometimes escape scrutiny" (27). During basic training, he found a companion in fear, Erik, who explained to O'Brien that he did not want to go to war but confessed that "'I come from a small town, my parents know everyone, and I couldn't hurt and embarrass them. And, of course, I was afraid'" (43). These sentiments echoed O'Brien's own, and, armed with similar convictions concerning the morality of the war and their obligation to serve in it, he and Erik waged a "two-man war of survival" against the Army and their peers in basic training.

More importantly, however, Erik served as the single person with whom O'Brien could discuss his fears, and, through their conversations, Erik introduced literature into the dialogue concerning the war. This literary voice was a powerful influence and was a resource to which O'Brien would return in his search for courage in Vietnam. After reciting a passage from Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," Erik came to an accurate conclusion concerning the role that fear plays in driving men to war: "'All this not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather it's from fear. . . . Fear of weakness. Fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood. We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit that we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes'" (45). The fears that Erik addressed were related to societal pressure. Although his conclusion was one with which O'Brien agreed, O'Brien would not completely realize the power of this apprehension until he entered advanced infantry training where a new anxiety confronted him: "The certainty of going to war: pending doom that comes with each day's light and lingers all the day long" (58). This "pending doom" led O'Brien to consider the prospect of flight more seriously and provided him with an arena for the potential exercise of bravery. Under these circumstances, courage became the ability to overcome his fear of societal censure, a task he would be unable to accomplish.

Just a few days before his scheduled deployment to Vietnam, O'Brien took a final weekend pass from Fort Lewis and caught the bus into Seattle with the intention of fleeing to Canada. Instead, after an excruciating period of contemplation, he scrapped his escape plans and resigned himself to the fact that he would go to the war. His fear of fighting in an unjust conflict, of having to kill another person, and of

dying, were all outweighed by the prospect of embarrassment and the "gravity" of obligation to friends and family. He addressed his portrayal of this concept in an interview:

I tried to describe those forces which seemed, almost physically, to push me into the war. . . . The "gravity" that I was referring to in that passage was a feeling of emotional pressure--a fear of exile, of hurting my family, of losing everything I held to be valuable in my life. In the end, questions of political rightness or wrongness succumbed to the emotional pressure. (McCaffery 133)

This pressure was rooted in his fear, and, in his hotel room in Seattle, he reluctantly decided to go to war finding that "I simply couldn't bring myself to flee. Family, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run. . . . I was a coward. I was sick" (Zone 73). He confronted his inability to overcome his apprehension of censure and shame, and most importantly, he attributed this failure to a lack of bravery, making the connection between fear and courage that would become so instrumental in his consideration of the issue while in the war.

In Vietnam O'Brien quickly discovered that fears were far more immediate, and one of the most powerful and justified of these was that of death. Before joining an actual infantry platoon, soldiers arriving in Vietnam received a week of acclimation training to complete their preparation. Of all that transpired that week, O'Brien found that "mostly . . . you wonder about dying" (74). The threat of death was a prominent reality and constant burden for the men, and each day was a psychological struggle: "It was like waking up in a cancer ward, no one

ambitious to get on with the day, no one with obligations, no plans, nothing to hope for, no dreams for the daylight" (18).

The horror of death in Vietnam was magnified by the various ways in which men died, and perhaps most frightening were the land mines and booby traps. Herzog points out that "some of O'Brien's fears typically emanate from the hazards of being a combat soldier--the overriding fear of death along with the gnawing feelings of hopelessness caused by the numerous land mines and booby traps . . ." (Stories 148). In fact, the apprehension of land mines was so great that O'Brien devotes an entire chapter to them in which he "offers a comprehensive catalog of mines . . . and he describes the psychological and physical responses such devices elicit among the soldiers walking through enemy-controlled areas" (148). In addition to these threats, American troops also dealt with an elusive enemy and a hostile landscape. This combination of factors made soldiering in such an environment extremely terrifying, and O'Brien captures this nagging sensation:

Eyes sweep the rice paddy. Don't walk there, too soft. Not there, dangerous, mines. Step there and there and there, not there, step there and there and there, careful, careful, watch. Green ahead. Green lights, go. Eyes roll in the sockets. Protect the legs, no chances, watch for the fuckin snipers, watch for ambushes and punji pits. Eyes roll about, looking for mines and pieces of stray cloth and bombs and threads and things. Never blink the eyes, tape them open. (Zone 35)

While the effects of existence under such circumstances are probably impossible to imagine for anyone who has never experienced it, O'Brien

superbly portrays this atmosphere and establishes the difficulty of exercising courage in it.

Amidst the constant presence of death, American soldiers discovered an even greater concern that was completely unrelated to the enemy, the fear of cowardice. Much like the threat of societal repercussions that led men like O'Brien to serve in a war in which they did not believe, a similar apprehension on the battlefield led them to fight rather than run. O'Brien discovered "what all soldiers in all past wars have known--that the need to keep one's good name is the real force driving a soldier into battle, not conviction, not 'raw courage,' not romantic claptrap" (Browne 10), and therefore, any actions or decisions resulting from this compulsion were not truly courageous. He observed the lengths to which soldiers went to disguise their anxiety and maintain an image of bravado and found that "all this took the meaning out of courage," for although fear could be mentioned, it "had to be accompanied with a shrug and a grin and obvious resignation" (Zone 142).

In Vietnam O'Brien came to realize that "whatever it is, soldiering in a war is something that makes a fellow think about courage, makes a man wonder what it is and if he has it" (140), and with the proximity of death prompting a soldier to run and the specter of embarrassment compelling him to fight, all in a morally questionable situation, he found a most unique environment for the consideration of bravery. This issue became a major concern as his tour progressed, and nowhere does he treat it in more detail than in the chapter entitled "Wise Endurance," which Thomas Myers refers to as "the key chapter"

containing "a careful exploration of personal courage and proper action in an unjust war" (85).

Central to the discussion of courage in this section is Captain Johansen, who provided a living model of the virtue. O'Brien admired him because he not only acted bravely, but he realized the potential implications and consequences of his actions. As he told O'Brien, "'I'd rather be brave than almost anything'" (Zone 134). O'Brien admits that he knows few intrepid men because "either they are stupid and do not know what is right. Or they know what is right and cannot bring themselves to do it. Or they know what is right and do it, but do not feel and understand the fear that must be overcome" (141). In this passage, he presents the crucial relationship between courage and fear. Captain Johansen understood that there were reasons to be afraid but conducted himself courageously anyway. For this reason his bravery served as a model, but it was one that O'Brien claims he could not match. While he rejoiced in finding a "living hero" who did not "dissolve at the end of a book or movie reel," he also discovered that "it's sad when you learn you're not much of a hero" (146).

In his consideration of courage in the war, O'Brien also contemplated Captain Johansen's charge on a Viet Cong soldier: "It's the charge, the light brigade with only one man, that is the first thing to think about when thinking about courage" (135). However, for O'Brien, the charge alone is not enough. For an act to be genuinely valiant, a man must realize what he is doing, and he must overcome his fear in the process: "Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise. It is the endurance of the soul in spite of fear--wisely" (137).

O'Brien consulted Plato when deciding whether to go to the war, and he called on the great philosopher again to help him come to terms with the meaning of bravery. According to Plato, endurance can be considered courageous if it is wise, which left O'Brien with the question, "what, then, is wise endurance?" (138). He reflected upon whether his fortitude during basic training and in Vietnam was wise. Convinced that the war was wrong, he asked, "was my apparent courage in enduring merely a well-disguised cowardice?" (139). Although he went to the war and endured its horrors, because of his conviction that the conflict was wrong, he considered the possibility that his decision was not an act of bravery but only a cowardly submission to his greater fears of desertion.

Without fear to overcome, whether it be of death or of criticism, there is no potential for courage. O'Brien concludes the chapter by rejecting Ernest Hemingway's idea of grace under pressure as insufficient and calling into question the belief that "a coward dies a thousand deaths but a brave man only once" (146). Instead, he argues that "it is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency" (146). He acknowledges a middle ground between heroes and cowards:

The easy aphorisms hold no hope for the middle man, the man who wants to try but has already died more than once, squirming under the bullets, going through the act of dying and coming out embarrassingly alive. . . . The fright dies the same way novocaine wears off in the dentist's chair. You promise, almost moving your lips, to do better next time; that by itself is a kind of courage. (147)

Simply enduring such an environment was an achievement, and maybe, as he points out, even a type of bravery.

Interestingly, in the memoir O'Brien does not mention the wound he received early in his tour for which he was awarded the Purple Heart. In a later interview he admits that the wound was not bad, "it hurt like shit, but it was enough just to get stitched up, and then I was back in twenty-four hours," and although he received a medal for the injury, he dismisses it as "an accident of fate--the wrong place at the wrong time. No act of courage" (Baughman 214). However, consistent with his idea of endurance as a form of valor, O'Brien does take pride in one medal: "The only medal that matters to me . . . is the CIB--the Combat Infantry Badge--which represents that I stumbled through combat and carried a rifle and endured" (214). This idea surfaces throughout the exploration of bravery presented in his Vietnam writing. In a war with nothing to fight for, he found a predicament that exposed the intricacies of courage and called into question many of its popular conceptions. He writes later in the memoir, "We weren't the old soldiers of World War II. No valor to squander for things like country or honor or military objectives. All the courage in August was the kind you dredge up when you awaken in the morning, knowing it will be a bad day" (Zone 174).

Although he does not profess to have any clear-cut answers or easily articulated definitions concerning courage, O'Brien's consideration is thorough, and he is able to come to terms not only with the issue but also with his own performance in Vietnam. In the final chapter he reflects that "fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out to die. . . . You have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and

reputation. . . . Anyone can die in a war if he tries" (204). These words echo his earlier conclusion that "now, war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery is" (31). It may be difficult to determine what bravery is, but O'Brien seemed to achieve an accurate understanding. By recognizing a situation in which one should be afraid and acting despite this apprehension, an individual demonstrates courage, and there were three primary fears associated with O'Brien's Vietnam experience. The first was that in avoiding the draft or deserting the Army he would be subject to scrutiny from family, friends, and community. The second was the very justifiable prospect of death in a combat environment. Finally, he discovered that in war there is a tremendous horror of cowardice.

Recognizing these fears, he strove to find a workable definition of courage. He determined that it took fortitude to overcome the dread of death, and for this reason, he found that in Vietnam, simply functioning normally on a daily basis was a form of valor. However, he also realized that men in war often acted bravely simply to save their reputations. While these acts appeared heroic, they were actually little more than the product of the attempt to avoid the stigma of cowardice, and such conduct did not fit O'Brien's definition. Ultimately, he concluded that the decision to fight in a war was not courageous if the choice was contrary to one's convictions and simply a submission to the fear of social censure. This apprehension of societal repercussions that compelled men to go to Vietnam also prevented soldiers from deserting while in the war, an issue with which O'Brien deals at length in Going After Cacciato.

CHAPTER 3

GOING AFTER CACCIATO

After If I Die in a Combat Zone, O'Brien turned to fiction and published his first novel, Northern Lights. Although one of the characters is a Vietnam veteran, the war is not an immediate concern. However, in O'Brien's second and finest novel, Going After Cacciato, Vietnam is the setting, the intensity of the war is ever-present, and the consideration of courage is a main theme. While the form of book is more complex than If I Die in a Combat Zone, the central issues are essentially the same. Herzog addresses the distinction between the two works finding that the memoir "becomes a straightforward confessional of O'Brien the soldier's efforts to understand courage, fear, wisdom, cowardice, responsibility, and control within his own and other soldiers' lives," whereas in Going After Cacciato, "O'Brien the artist approaches the same themes from a different perspective--a fictional world with both author and characters using imagination and fact to grapple with the same issues raised in the memoir" (Stories 141).

Although O'Brien is quick to discount autobiographical parallels between the novel and his own Vietnam experience, he admits that the idea for the book grew out of his personal struggle with the decision to go to war:

Cacciato was in essence the flip side of If I Die. That is, in Cacciato the premise I started with was, what if I had deserted? Would I have been happy living in exile? Would I

be happy running? What would I experience? Would I be able to live with myself? Was it right to run? What about my obligations as a citizen? My conclusion was basically that Paul Berlin's fantasized run for Paris would have been an unhappy experience--it wasn't compatible with his background, personality, his beliefs. But while I was writing Cacciato I tried to keep things open-ended to allow for the possibility of a happy ending for the flight. I found I couldn't write my way into a happy ending, just as in my life I couldn't live my way into it. (McCaffery 133)

Paul Berlin provides a detailed portrayal of a common soldier's apprehensions and corresponding contemplation of courage, and these considerations exist on two planes within the work. The first concerns Paul's conduct as an infantry soldier and is directly related to his horror of dying on the battlefield. The second deals with the difficulty of making decisions under the morally ambiguous circumstances of the Vietnam war. Unlike in If I Die in a Combat Zone, in Going After Cacciato the decision to go to war is not a factor. Berlin went without much thought: "It wasn't really a decision; just the opposite: an inability to decide" (Cacciato 202). Instead, the novel focuses all attention on his fears, his consideration of bravery, and his decision of whether to desert.

The book presents the thoughts and experiences of Paul while he stands watch in an observation post overlooking the South China Sea. During this night he recalls events from his recent past in Vietnam while also imagining a fantastic journey after Cacciato, a deserter from his platoon. Paul is quick to point out, however, that this trek is

"not a dream, an idea," and far-fetched as it may seem at times, it is "not a denial of reality but a deeper exploration of it" (Myers 173).

The chapters of the book can be divided into three types: Paul's remembrance of past events (flashback chapters), his invented expedition after Cacciato (fantasy chapters), and his thoughts that are neither memory nor imagination but deal with present time in the observation post (observation post chapters).⁵ However, the element that links these divisions is Paul's trepidation. His fear of death, embarrassment, guilt, and shame are all burdens with which he struggles, and his "idea" about pursuing Cacciato becomes "an opportunity neatly to separate past, present, and future; to explore the possibilities; to find answers about fear and flight; to view the war from a new angle; and to survive" (Herzog Stories 162).

While the flashback chapters recount frightening events from the past and the fantasy chapters explore the possibility of desertion, the observation post chapters serve as the stable ground between the worlds of memory and imagination and depict some of Paul's most immediate considerations of fear and its related attribute, courage.

Interestingly, while his anxiety is relatively constant throughout the different chapters, his bravery is not. In the flashback chapters he recalls terrifying events and contemplates incidents in which he did not display valor, while in the fantasy chapters he envisions himself acting heroically on the trip to Paris, but both his flashbacks and fantasies are bound by his ultimate failure of mettle in the assault on Cacciato. In the observation post chapters, however, Paul does demonstrate a certain degree of intrepidity. He competently performs his duty as the single soldier on guard and remains at his post throughout the night

rather than awakening any of the other men for their shifts. During the third observation post chapter, he has his "bravest moment" in which he climbs down from the tower and walks to the sea, "calmly" and "unafraid" (Cacciato 57). He is so excited by his thoughts of the expedition that for the only time in the novel he is without fear.

In the fourth observation post chapter Paul reflects upon his concern with bravery:

The issue, of course, was courage. How to behave. Whether to flee or fight or seek an accommodation. The issue was not fearlessness. The issue was how to act wisely in spite of fear. Spitting the deep-running biles: that was true courage. He believed this. And he believed the obvious corollary: the greater a man's fear, the greater his potential courage. (72)

Based on this assessment, Paul's heroic potential is tremendous: while apprehension was a daily companion for nearly all American infantry soldiers in Vietnam, his is more extreme than normal. As the somewhat eccentric and unconventional medic, Doc Peret, describes it, "'You got an excess of the fear biles. . . . We've all got these biles--Stink, Oscar, everybody--but you've got yourself a whole bellyful of the stuff. You're oversaturated'" (25). Doc correctly diagnoses this fear as the source of Paul's interest in Cacciato's flight, telling him that "'this Cacciato business--it's the work of the biles. They're flooding your whole system, going to the head and fucking up reality . . .'" (26).

For a soldier as fearful as Paul Berlin, Vietnam presented an environment that was almost psychologically unbearable, and he copes with the anxiety primarily through his imagination. Early in the novel

the narrator states that "Paul Berlin, whose only goal was to live long enough to establish goals worth living for still longer, stood high in the tower by the sea . . . and wondered, not for the first time, about the immense power of his own imagination" (24). Paul's trepidation accounts for his construction of the fantasy journey after Cacciato. Within the theater of armed combat, fear also provides the circumstances necessary for a demonstration of bravery, one of the primary considerations that Paul works through during the mental trek away from Vietnam. Ironically, he discovers that the popular conception of courage was often not a triumph over the horror of death but rather a submission to the even greater threat of cowardice.

The novel begins with a flashback chapter about Cacciato's disappearance and the initial stages of the search. In the opening lines, the presence of fear is immediate: "It was a bad time. Billy Boy Watkins was dead, and so was Frenchie Tucker. Billy Boy had died of fright, scared to death on the field of battle, and Frenchie Tucker had been shot through the nose" (1). These daily realities paint a bleak outlook that does not improve: "Bernie Lynn and Lieutenant Sidney Martin had died in tunnels. Pederson was dead and Rudy Chassler was dead. Buff was dead. Ready mix was dead. They were all among the dead" (1). The use of "dead" in five sequential sentences clearly establishes death as a dominant aspect of the war for Paul and the soldiers of his platoon, and in this first chapter, when Stink Harris trips a booby-trapped smoke grenade, the extent of Paul's fear is apparent.

Unaware that the grenade is harmless, the men instantly drop to the ground for protection. The physical symptoms of Paul's trepidation

come first: "His belly hurt. That was where it started. First the belly, a release of fluids in the bowels, a shitting feeling" (18). This sensation is followed quickly by disappointment and embarrassment as he loses bladder control, "a draining of all the pretensions and silly little hopes for himself" (18). As the initial crisis subsides and he learns that it was only a smoke grenade, his frustration surfaces:

He was vaguely aware of being watched. Then keenly aware. He felt it beyond his vision, over his left shoulder: some gray-haired old goat chuckling at the sorry fix of this struck-dumb ding-dong at the moment of truth. . . . You asshole, he thought. You ridiculous little yo-yo. (19)

This incident sheds some light on the nature and severity of Paul's terror, for although he is extremely afraid of dying, his "fear of being a coward . . . is as relentless as his fear of death" (Nelson 269).

This dread of cowardice was a powerful force for American troops in Vietnam; however, Paul's apprehension is not related only to his battlefield conduct. As the novel progresses, he reveals his concern with disappointing family and friends should he desert. Appropriately, these various anxieties account for the primary areas of concentration in the novel. The horror of death triggers many of Paul's flashbacks while also fueling his imagined flight from the war. The prospect of cowardice drives his concern with and consideration of the nature of courage and ultimately is a primary force preventing his desertion.

Before Paul gets to Vietnam, he does not think very much about the war, but upon his arrival at the Combat Center in Chu Lai, reality sets in and his anxieties begin to mount. He and the other new soldiers

receive their first training session during which an instructor sits in front of them and silently stares out to sea for an hour before informing the troops: "'That completes your first lecture on how to survive this shit. I hope you paid attention'" (Cacciato 35). In a similarly frightening incident, an NCO explains the area of operations in which Paul's unit will be fighting. He tells the men, "'I don't wanna scare the bejeesus out of you . . . but, shit, you guys are gonna die'" (36-37). Such events at the Combat Center prompt Paul to admit that "the war scared him silly, but this was something he hoped to bring under control" (36).

A primary factor contributing to Paul's fear of death is the nature of the war waged by the Viet Cong, and no chapter illustrates this better than "Pickup Games." Although the unconventional guerrilla tactics made Vietnam unlike any previous war in which American troops had fought, at times there was an odd regularity to it. Berlin recalls that

they never saw the living enemy. On the odd-numbered afternoons they took sniper fire. On the even-numbered nights they were mortared. There was a rhythm in it. They knew when to be alert. They knew when it was safe to rest, when to send out patrols and when not to. There was a certainty and regularity to the war, and this alone was something to hold on to. (91)

When this period ends, a time of inactivity follows. Relieved by the uncharacteristic peacefulness, the men begin to relax. Some of the troops play word games, Paul writes letters home, and when the door

gunner of a resupply helicopter throws the men a basketball, they begin to play basketball games.

Not surprisingly, Paul enjoys the orderly nature of a game like basketball to counter the chaos of the war. Herzog addresses this phenomenon:

Faced with his own helplessness and a confusing war, Berlin seeks refuge in an on-going basketball game. The game provides him with order, control, clarity, and meaning absent in his Russian-roulette existence and, as some historians note, missing from this particular war.

("Soldier" 90)

For Paul, the games are a psychological savior: "He liked reciting the final scores. . . . He liked the clarity of it. He liked knowing who won, and by how much, and he liked being a winner" (Cacciato 92).

However, as more time passes without action, the imminence of disaster mounts, and tension sets in.

Paul Berlin is the first to detect the "artificiality" and "sense of imposed peace" (92). Soon the other men begin to feel it as well, and it exacts a toll on them:

The men bickered and fought. Caution became skittishness. Irritability became outright meanness, then worse. They walked with their heads down, stiffly, thinking of land mines and trickery and ambush. Sluggish and edgy. Slow to rise from rest breaks, fitful sleep, quick to anger, wound up tight. (94)

Even during this peaceful period, the men cannot deny the reality of the war, and the longer the silence lasts, the more their anxiety grows. At

the times when he is most frightened, Paul Berlin finds relief in basketball: "The odds could be figured. Winning was the purpose, nothing else. A basket to shoot at, a target, and sometimes you scored and sometimes you didn't, but you had a true thing to aim at, you always knew, and you could count on the numbers" (98). Finally, when the tension seems like it can get no worse, one of the men detonates a land mine. This casualty ends the terrible silence and serves as "a relief for all of them" (99). In Vietnam soldiers rarely died predictably in large battles or planned assaults. The casualties were often random, isolated, and unexpected. Such uncertainty weighed heavily on the minds of American soldiers, and this chapter superbly portrays the effects of this apprehension on Paul Berlin.

Coupled with the chaotic nature of the war was the elusiveness of the Viet Cong. Paul Berlin reflects that "never had he seen the living enemy" (76), and fighting such a foe was a psychological burden for the men. The Viet Cong soldiers were indistinguishable from the indigenous population, and they fought using the hit and run tactics of guerrilla warfare in which they intended to maim rather than kill American soldiers. They also used an "elaborate system of tunnels" that "led soldiers to believe that the enemy could pop up and just as suddenly disappear anywhere" (Griffith 6). Even the land itself was often an enemy. Li Van Hgoc tells Paul in the tunnels on the road to Paris that "'the soldier is but the representative of the land. The land is your true enemy'" (Cacciato 77). The hedges served as natural lines of defense, and the paddy water contained diseases. The tunnels and the mines were also ways in which the land seemed to wage war against the American soldiers. Li Van Hgoc calls the phenomenon "Xa" and explains

that "'it has many implications. But at heart it means that a man's spirit is in the land, where his ancestors rest and where the rice grows. The land is your enemy'" (77). He then warns them that "'the land cannot be beaten'" (87). This opponent is so daunting that when the squad falls into the tunnel while pursuing Cacciato, they begin to believe that they are prisoners of war, "caught by the land" (88).

While the threat of physical injury or death was very real in Vietnam, Paul Berlin and the men of his platoon come to realize what soldiers throughout history have learned, that the fear of cowardice is often more powerful than the fear of death. The debate between Doc Peret and the Savak officer Captain Rhallon during the men's interrogation in Iran illustrates this concept. The discussion centers on why the common soldier fights in a war and what he thinks about. Doc Peret argues that

the common grunt doesn't give a damn about purposes and justice. He doesn't even think about that shit. Not when he's out humping, getting his tail shot off. Purposes--bullshit! He's thinking about how to keep breathing. Or he wonders what it will feel like when he hits a booby trap. Will he go nuts? Will he puke all over himself, or will he cry, or pass out, or scream? What'll it look like--all bone and meat and pus? That's the stuff he thinks about, not purposes. (178)

Rhallon adds that "'running is also what the soldier thinks of, yes? He thinks of it often. He imagines himself running from battle. Dropping his weapon and turning and running and running and running, and never looking back . . .'" (178). Rhallon also contends that "'it is purpose

that keeps men at their posts to fight'" (178), and while Doc Peret will concede that purpose may be part of it, he believes that the greatest reason is the fear of cowardice: "'That's why soldiers don't run. . . . We stick it out because we're afraid of what'll happen to our reputations. Our own egos. Self-respect, that's what keeps us on the line'" (179). James Griffith points out that this discussion "exposes Paul's inner divisions, reflecting his imagined actions so far and anticipating his imagined resolution to come. As always, the issue boils down to fear: fear of facing death or fear of facing a cowardly self" (20).

Indeed, the horror of cowardice drives the men to fight rather than run, and the apprehension of desertion plagues Paul Berlin throughout his journey to Paris. While enjoying a particularly peaceful time in New Delhi, he feels the need to justify his actions and is not adequately able to do so. He reflects that

there were times when he was struck with an odd sense of guilt. . . . Not guilt, exactly. A need to justify. A sense that someday soon he would be called on to explain things. Why had they left the war? What was the purpose of it? He imagined a courtroom. A judge in a powdered white wig, his own father, all the Fort Dodge townsfolk sitting in solemn-faced rows. He could hear snickers and hoots as the indictments were read. Shame, downcast eyes. He could feel himself sweating as he tried to explain that it wasn't cowardice or simple desertion. Not exactly. (Cacciato 154)

However, at this point in the trip Paul has not completely tested the prospect of flight. He must first work through the trek until he comes to the talks in Paris where he finally reaches a firm conclusion.

Of all the terrifying events that Paul recalls while he keeps watch, the fate of Billy Boy Watkins continues to haunt him more so than any other. Myers was not far off the mark when he wrote that Billy Boy's death of fright was "an incident so fearful for Berlin that by itself it could power him halfway to the French Border" (175). Billy Boy's is the first death mentioned in the book, and the circumstances surrounding it are well-documented, "scared to death on the field of battle" (Cacciato 1). As the novel progresses, Paul's preoccupation with this incident becomes increasingly apparent and reaches its height in the flashback chapter entitled "Night March." As he reflects upon the event, he imagines how he would tell his father the "ultimate war story" of Billy Boy Watkins but "would never let on about the fear" (188). In fact, he is so frightened by the occurrence that in the first Tehran chapter, when Oscar persuades Doc to tell Captain Rhallon the story, Paul becomes physically sick and must leave the room. Billy Boy's demise is a constant burden for Paul, and he takes precautions in an attempt to avoid a similar disaster: "He walked carefully. He remembered what he'd been taught. Billy Boy hadn't remembered. And so Billy died of fright . . ." (189).

Preceding the peace talks, some of most pivotal considerations that foreshadow Paul's decision at the end of the journey are contained in the Tehran episode. These fantasy chapters reflect the concerns of the observation post and flashback chapters surrounding them, and of all the things that Paul considers in this sequence, two are of particular

significance: the issue of desertion and the fragging of Lieutenant Sidney Martin. After the first Tehran chapter, the novel returns to the observation post, but the events from the Iranian stop weigh heavily on Paul's conscience. He thinks, "Why, out of all that might have happened, did it lead to a beheading in Tehran?" (185). The beheading and the arrest remind him that desertion is a serious offense and push him one step closer to abandoning the idea. Although he eventually chooses not to walk away from the war because of his fear of betraying the obligations he feels to family, friends, and country, the execution in Iran incorporates the fear of death into his consideration. As Doc so eloquently points out, "'Your fine expedition to Paris, all the spectacular spectacles along the way. Civilization. You watch this shit'" (166).

During the second Tehran episode, the potential consequences of desertion continue to haunt Paul. As he sits in the jail cell, he realizes that he and the men are probably guilty of the offense, an unacceptable one even in Paul's imagination. He concludes that "you could run, but you couldn't outrun the consequences of running. Not even in imagination" (201). At this point, Paul's ideas of Paris begin to disintegrate: "Desertion--wasn't that what it really was? And in the end weren't there always consequences? A calling to account? No question, it was all crazy from the start. None of the roads led to Paris" (203). As the chapter closes, Paul and the men are forced to confess that they deserted and although Paul's imagination is capable of devising an escape out of the Iranian prison, in the end, it will not prove powerful enough to justify leaving the war.

While in Tehran, another fear surfaces that the men of first platoon carry, specifically, that of punishment for complicity in the agreement to kill Lieutenant Sidney Martin. This anxiety fuels Paul's imagination during this portion of the trip and makes the events surrounding their arrest particularly frightening. Although no fragging incident is ever mentioned, Paul recalls forcing Cacciato to touch the grenade, and while driving out of Tehran he thinks, "what happened to Lieutenant Sidney Martin was a very sad thing" (220). While Martin is listed among the dead in the opening chapter, the circumstances of his death are conspicuously absent. This particular occurrence disturbs Paul, and rightfully so, for even if Martin did not die from fragging, Paul had agreed to the act and therefore must deal with the moral implications of his consent:

Berlin claims the status of the imprisoned innocent, but his complicity in the pact to frag Sidney Martin is an indelible stain on the moral fabric of his interpretive project, a symbolic as well as real act indicating that a separate peace, if possible at all, will not allow the escapee to emerge sinless from this war. (Myers 179)

While Paul's thoughts of desertion are played out strictly in his head, his involvement in the pact to kill Martin is real and remains on his conscience. Furthermore, the incident is more than a source of guilt, it also represents a failure of courage on Paul's part because he did not object to the agreement.

The third Tehran chapter follows, and just when things appear the worst, Paul's imagination engineers an escape. As the men race from the

prison, Paul hints at the liberating feeling of running from one's fears unfettered by greater obligations:

Fast, a head-down sprint. It was the soldier's greatest dream--fierce, hard, desperate full-out running. No honor. No thoughts of duty or glory or mission. Just running for the sake of running, nothing else. Like that time in the mountains, twitching, not wanting to die, twitching and cowering and imagining how far and how fast he would run if he were only able. (Cacciato 216)

At the conclusion of the chapter, Paul finds a new optimism. Pointing to the west he exclaims, "By God, yes it can be done" (222). However, while his imagination allows him to continue the trip to Paris, it will not permit him to forget the incident involving Sidney Martin or the issue of desertion, and in the end it proves incapable of dissolving the memory of his failure of courage in the assault on Cacciato.

Despite Paul's horror of the war and the comfort he finds in the thought of desertion, he decides that there are more powerful forces binding him to his duty as a soldier and these arise primarily out of his fear of betraying the obligations he feels to family, friends, and country. Most importantly, he reaches this conclusion in his imagination, the governing force in his life, and once he realizes that he cannot envision a happy ending to the journey, there is no hope for desertion in reality. These conclusions come in the final two fantasy chapters, "The Peace of Paris" and "The End of the Road to Paris," in which Sarkin Aung Wan, a construction of Paul's imagination, becomes the voice of his arguments for running away. Paul, on the other hand, remains subject to his conscience, his obligations, and most of all, his

fear. Sarkin tries to persuade him that they should leave the rest of the squad and get an apartment in Paris, but in order for Paul to do so, he must be able to convince himself that he did not desert, a feat he cannot accomplish even in fantasy.

When Paul cannot give up the search for Cacciato, desertion is no longer a legitimate possibility. Sarkin leaves him, representing his abandonment of the idea, but Paul feels some responsibility for not having the courage to flee: "guilty if you fulfilled old obligations, guilty if you abandoned them" (279). The journey finally comes to an end, "a failure of imagination" (280), when he reconciles his differences with himself during the peace talks with Sarkin Aung Wan. Appropriately, the discussion revolves around fear:

It is easy, of course, to fear happiness. There is often complacency in the acceptance of misery. We fear parting from our familiar roles. We fear the consequences of such a parting. We fear happiness because we fear failure. But we must overcome these fears. We must be brave. It is one thing to speculate about what might be. It is quite another to act in behalf of our dreams, to treat them as objectives that are achievable and worth achieving. (283)

Sarkin pleads with him: "'Do not let fear stop you. Do not be frightened by ridicule or censure or embarrassment, do not fear name-calling, do not fear the scorn of others'" (284), and Paul responds that although he is no expert on obligation, he knows when he feels obliged. He confesses that the moral climate of the war was imperfect, but he accepts responsibility for his choices, and this in itself is an act of courage. He also asserts that his "'obligation is to people, not to

principle or politics or justice'" (285), but he admits that fear, more than a sense of obligation, is responsible for his decision:

I confess that what dominates is the dread of abandoning all that I hold dear. I am afraid of running away. I am afraid of exile. I fear what might be thought of me by those I love. I fear the loss of their respect. I fear the loss of my own reputation. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people in my hometown, my friends. I fear being an outcast. I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself. (286)

This "'threat of social consequences'" prevents Paul from running and leads him to conclude that "'the real issue is how to find felicity within limits'" for "'imagination, like reality, has its limits'" (286).

In the observation post chapter that follows, the night is coming to an end as is the journey after Cacciato. Paul realizes that "the issue was courage, and courage was will power, and this was his failing" (288), and as a result, he does not desert. However, the novel does not close with the conclusions reached in the Paris Peace Talks but rather comes full circle and ends with a combined experience of imagination and memory involving the assault on Cacciato:

Throughout the intervening pages, Berlin's imagination and memory have avoided the most important fact of the book, the event occurring after the 'Go' of Chapter One--Berlin's embarrassing moment of uncontrollable fear. Perhaps the tale about Cacciato has been an alibi to cover cowardice. But now, the character's fear in the Paris ambush turns into a remembered fear in the actual ambush of Cacciato. . . .

With this final fact, Berlin and O'Brien arrive at the end and the beginning, for this event marks the point where reality ended and fantasy began. (Herzog "Soldier" 94)

Fittingly, Paul's failure of courage encompasses the entire novel and frames the interior chapters of the book.

As Paul imagines the final effort to catch Cacciato in Paris, he attempts to envision himself acting bravely. When he is not included in Oscar's plans for the ambush, Paul has a moment of courage and informs Oscar that he wants to participate. However, when Oscar hands him the rifle to make the final move into the hotel room, imagination can carry Paul no further. Fear takes over, and his memory of failure in the actual assault blends into his fantasy. His "humiliating attack of 'the biles' . . . is remembered, not imagined" (Bates 278). Terrified, he fires the rifle out of control until he spends the entire clip of ammunition. He then drops to his knees, drops the rifle, and loses bladder control. The imagined journey is over and the humiliating memories are real. This final chapter reveals how Paul's fear led to his loss of control during the squad's attempt to capture Cacciato, and as a result, Cacciato escaped. After Paul's folly, the squad begins its return to base. The march eases Paul's shame, and on the final night before making it to the sea, he keeps watch with Lieutenant Corson. As the two discuss the chances of Cacciato's success, Paul maintains that just maybe, "he might make it. He might do all right" (Cacciato 301).

Going After Cacciato provides a thorough presentation of the many fears experienced by infantry soldiers in Vietnam and the effect of these emotions on the novel's protagonist, Paul Berlin. Paul's horror of death, of guilt, and of cowardice occupy his thoughts in the

observation post, dominate his memory, and fuel his trek after Cacciato. Through this imagined journey, Paul contemplates the prospect of desertion and attempts to sort through his many apprehensions, but ultimately, he cannot escape his sense of obligation to stay at the war, he cannot envision himself acting courageously, and he cannot completely justify his part in Sidney Martin's death. Most of all, he cannot overcome his fear, and, while it may be more extreme than the average soldier, its sources were all very legitimate concerns in the combat environment of Vietnam. Through this character, O'Brien is able to depict more completely the nature of these fears and present the intricacies of courage, something he will continue to develop through a different form in The Things They Carried.

CHAPTER 4

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

After writing perhaps the greatest novel concerning the Vietnam war in Going After Cacciato, O'Brien moved away from this theater for his third book, The Nuclear Age, but he acknowledges that a return to it for The Things They Carried was practically inevitable: "After each of my books about the war has appeared, I thought it might be the last, but I've stopped saying that to myself. There are just too many stories left to tell--in fact, more all the time" (Bruckner C15). O'Brien is quick to point out, however, that although Vietnam provides the setting for the stories, combat is not their subject:

It's not Nam that I care about, really. Bullets and bombs and military maneuvers mean nothing to me. They never did. The Things They Carried is not about war; the war is a backdrop. The obsession is in the stories that are set in the war, of friendships, of guys in love, of ghost stories. War is a great setting for issues of the heart, because the stakes are so high, There's a built-in stress to the stories. It's life and death, even in love stories.

(Schumacher 34)

O'Brien superbly utilizes this "great setting" to explore a wider variety of human concerns than in his previous writing, and in the process he paints a more vivid and accurate picture of the conflict. A major consideration of the book is the power and process of

storytelling, and indeed much of the scholarship on the work deals with this issue. Beidler writes that the stories are

relentlessly, at the deepest levels of consciousness, about stories and their making, about how the truth of anything ever gets told in ways by which we might be still transformed and even possibly redeemed. The real war story here, then, is a single story, a story told as many times and in as many ways possible and beyond, about the processes of experiential and literary 'truth-telling' encountered at their primary nodes of human conjunction. (Generation 29)

However, in the process of this innovative illustration of storytelling, the war surfaces and a confrontation with the issues of fear and courage is inevitable.

Herzog finds that the two central concerns of If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato are "whether to flee the battlefield or fight, and once on the battlefield how to control one's fear," and he accurately points out that "these two themes . . . also emerge as central issues in . . . The Things They Carried" (Stories 139). Others have realized the importance of these elements as well. Robert Harris writes that in the book O'Brien moves "beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear" (8). However, while The Things They Carried presents many of the same issues as If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato, it contains more intricate and diversified representations of these ideas and even introduces some new conclusions regarding bravery. Some of the stories, such as "On the Rainy River" and "Speaking of Courage," deal with the concepts at length while others address only specific aspects,

but O'Brien continues to approach them from new angles and different perspectives offering still more insight into the nature of fear in a war and its influence on the definition of courage.

It is nearly impossible to address issues in The Things They Carried without first addressing its form. Naparsteck has pointed out that the book "resists easy categorization: it is part novel, part collection of stories, part essays, part journalism; it is, more significantly, all at the same time" (1). More essential, however, than classifying the genre of the work is dealing with the seeming blend of fact and fiction contained within it. The narrator of the stories is a forty-three year-old Vietnam veteran-turned-writer named Tim O'Brien, creating the misconception that this fictional persona is the same as Tim O'Brien the real-life author and that incidents in the book are relations of actual occurrences from his Vietnam experience. Instead, O'Brien claims that "ninety percent or more of the material in the book is invented, and I invented 90 percent of a new Tim O'Brien, maybe even more than that" (Kaplan "Interview" 95). Therefore, although the book is "lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa,"⁶ O'Brien admits that the characters are fictional as well: "I dedicated the book to my characters. . . . After all, I lived with them for five years while I was writing" (Bruckner C20). In order to appreciate the mastery of O'Brien's writing and value of The Things They Carried, it is imperative to treat the book as "a work of fiction" as it is labeled on its title page.

The first story is entitled "The Things They Carried," and as the narrator documents the different "things" carried by the soldiers of

Alpha Company, he reveals that while they pack different combinations of the standard equipment, they bear varying degrees of psychological and emotional gear as well. For example, in addition to the extra ammunition hauled by Ted Lavender, an unusually scared soldier, he also lugs the "unweighed fear" that creates a greater burden than the physical weight of the extra baggage. This story contains O'Brien's most revealing single passage concerning the power of fear for the American soldier in Vietnam:

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing--these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained . . . and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all. . . . They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment. (Things 20-21)

In this segment O'Brien touches on issues that he deals with in both If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato, but he seems to capture the essence of what he has presented in all of his writing on the war. Although the men were afraid of dying, "they were even more afraid to show it" (19), and this leads them to act in a manner that creates the appearance of courage. In reality, however, the apparent bravery that

it took to crawl into tunnels, walk point, and advance under fire, "was not courage, exactly; the object was not valor. Rather, they were too frightened to be cowards" (21).

In "On the Rainy River" O'Brien the author returns to the issue of desertion that dominated much of If I Die in a Combat Zone and served as the basis for Going After Cacciato. However, unlike the memoir in which he considers fleeing while in training, or the novel in which Paul ponders leaving the war in Vietnam, in the story O'Brien presents the idea of escaping to Canada to avoid the draft. Once again, the real concern is not the legally punishable offense of desertion (legality has little to do with any of his considerations) but rather the concept of courage, and consistent with his previous writing on this idea, fear defines the parameters of his illustration. The story, framed as the confession of Tim O'Brien the narrator, has an extremely personal feel to it that, according to O'Brien the author, is fictional in plot but factual in emotional and psychological considerations: "'The whole thing's invented with elaborate details. But they're rooted in my own moral schizophrenia back then. I loved my country, but on the other hand I hated the war'" (O'Brien E5). The story opens with the narrator's illustration of his disillusionment concerning heroism prior to the war. He felt that courage was something that could be summoned if the need were ever great enough:

All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. . . . If the stakes ever became high enough--if the evil were evil enough, if the good were good

enough--I would simply tap a secret reservoir of courage that had been accumulating inside me over the years.

Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. (Things 44)

He concludes that it was "a comforting theory," but an incorrect one nonetheless as he finds out once he is drafted to serve in the war. Instead, he learns that bravery is not dependent on the gravity of the situation but rather on the magnitude of the fear that one must overcome.

After recounting all of his objections to the war and his service in it, the narrator admits that "beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die" (47). However, as O'Brien presents in all of his Vietnam work, the very real threat of death is only one factor governing one's actions. The prospect of shame, embarrassment, and cowardice, all closely related to societal perceptions, contributes to the pressure O'Brien feels to go to the war. On the other hand, the horror of dying and of destroying other human lives causes him to consider escape. Narrator O'Brien writes of this mental tug of war that

it was a kind of schizophrenia. A moral split. I couldn't make up my mind, I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents.

I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure. (48)

In the story, O'Brien's apprehension of going to Vietnam leads him all the way to the Canadian border, where he must seriously confront the option of desertion. Through this fictional character, author Tim O'Brien captures the same sentiments that he experienced in real life:

My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Cafe. I was ashamed to be there at the Tip Top Lodge. I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing. (54)

However, as narrator O'Brien sits in the boat just yards away from the Canadian shore and is forced to decide whether to run or stay, the fear of shame outweighs that of the war, and this realization is a difficult one to bear. Of this critical moment, he writes that "right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country, and my life. I would not be brave" (59-60).

Similar to his previous writing on the war, in "On the Rainy River" O'Brien depicts how Vietnam provided a situation that reversed the normal ideas of courage and cowardice as they applied to the decision to participate in armed conflict. Until this particular war, Americans generally believed that the young men they sent to fight were risking their lives in a worthy cause. The courageous act under such circumstances was to pick up a rifle and answer the call; refusing to do

so was dastardly. However, such was not the case for many Americans regarding Vietnam. While much of the population, particularly the World War II generation, still held on to the traditional ideas of bravery, for young men like O'Brien, these values did not apply. In the story the narrator illustrates how the most heroic decision under these circumstances would have been to flee to Canada. Instead, he succumbed to his apprehension and went to the war. With tremendous bitterness he writes, "I would go to the war--I would kill and maybe die--because I was too embarrassed not to" (62), and as a veteran looking back on his decision he states, "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (63).

O'Brien presents another examination of courage through Norman Bowker in "Speaking of Courage." Bowker is a returned Vietnam veteran struggling to adjust to normal life, and he spends much of his time reflecting on his conduct during the war. Unlike the consideration of bravery portrayed in "On the Rainy River," "Speaking of Courage" deals with the more conventional idea of fortitude in combat, specifically Bowker's conduct under fire during a single night in Vietnam. In the story O'Brien elaborates on an idea he initially explored in his memoir, the possibility that courage is not an attribute that manifests itself consistently in all situations but rather is a quality that one might or might not possess under given circumstances. Bowker realizes that the division between heroism and cowardice is not a large rift but a thin line:

Courage was not always a matter of yes or no. Sometimes it came in degrees; like the cold; sometimes you were very brave up to a point and then beyond that point you were not

so brave. In certain situations you could do incredible things, you could advance toward enemy fire, but in other situations, which were not nearly so bad, you had trouble keeping your eyes open. Sometimes, like that night in the shit field, the difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid. (166-67)

In fact, Bowker finds, as O'Brien does in If I Die in a Combat Zone, that "sometimes the bravest thing on earth was to sit through the night and feel the cold in your bones" (166). Although he received no decorations for uncommon valor, Bowker concludes that simple endurance was a form of "common valor," and something to be proud of.

The event that garners most of Bowker's attention involves an incident in which his unit camped in a soggy rice paddy that served as a septic tank for a nearby village. During the night the platoon came under a mortar attack, and in the dark with shells falling, Bowker was unable to prevent a wounded comrade from sinking into the muck. He tries to convince himself that his failure was not cowardice but only an inability to display a certain high degree of courage. Interestingly, the factor that prevents Bowker from demonstrating such uncommon valor is not the threat of death or a lack of physical strength but simply the smell of the field: "'I had the chance and I blew it. The stink, that's what got to me. I couldn't take that goddamn awful smell'" (162). In combat something as seemingly insignificant as the stench of a field can serve as the obstacle preventing one from crossing that fine line between cowardice and gallantry.

Essential to any discussion of courage as it applies to the theater of war is the realization that there is no formula that dictates

what constitutes courage or what distinguishes heroism from common valor. This absence of a clear definition leads Bowker to continually contemplate his actions during the night in the shit field and also leads O'Brien to continually return to the issue in his writing. Most of all, Bowker just wants someone to understand how confusing the popular ideal of heroism can become in a war: "He wished he could've explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be. The distinction was important" (172). The clarification is significant for Bowker and important for any intelligent examination of the concept. Although O'Brien uncovers no new answers, he continues to confront the idea through literature where an attempt to understand fortitude is the first step involved in a meaningful display of it.

The sketch entitled "Notes" that follows "Speaking of Courage" provides a strange twist on the story and sheds some light on the narrator's interest in bravery. He reveals that he was actually responsible for Kiowa's death, not Norman Bowker:

Kiowa, after all, had been a close friend, and for years I've avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it. Even here it's not easy. In the interest of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own. (182)

While author O'Brien admits that there was an incident in Vietnam that compelled him to write the story, unlike the ending in the book, he was

not responsible for anyone's death: "I couldn't have helped the guy. It was so dark that I didn't even see it, but I heard his voice. There was nothing I really could have done, but there was this feeling of complicity" (Schumacher 39). In "Notes," however, narrator O'Brien is responsible, and this fictional transfer of accountability magnifies O'Brien's real-life feeling of complicity while also presenting a powerful illustration of the narrator's feeling of guilt in Kiowa's death and its direct relationship to his own failure of courage.

The narrator returns both literally and figuratively to the scene of Kiowa's death in "Field Trip." He recounts going back to the shit field in Vietnam twenty years later, and after two decades the topic of courage still weighs heavily on his mind: "This little field . . . had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage" (Things 210). In fact, the death of his friend seems almost secondary to the loss of parts of himself. He emphasizes the importance of bravery as a concept that people confront on a daily basis and confesses how during one single night in Vietnam, his hopes of displaying some semblance of heroism were destroyed forever: "I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been" (210). Through his admission of complicity in Kiowa's death, he brings the issue close to home and explores this complex facet of the human condition.

Some stories in The Things They Carried depict incidents of bravery that are completely unrelated to the war. "Love," for example, presents the courage involved in expressing feelings of affection to another person. Jimmy Cross relates to O'Brien how he met Martha at a college reunion after the war and "for a few moments he considered

asking her to his room, but instead he laughed and told her how back in college he'd almost done something very brave" (30). Although Martha does not share his feelings, Jimmy Cross finds the strength to express his love, a different kind of bravery. "The Lives of the Dead" portrays another opportunity to exhibit valor outside the arena of war. O'Brien recalls an occurrence in elementary school in which he wishes he had intervened: "I should've stepped in; fourth grade is no excuse. Besides, it doesn't get easier with time, and twelve years later, when Vietnam presented much harder choices, some practice at being brave might've helped a little" (263). Whether a fourth-grader or a soldier, summoning the mettle to act heroically becomes no easier and the pain and regret associated with such failures do not dissipate with time. However, as the narrator finds in "Good Form," stories can help to deal with this pain. He discovers that by recreating lost ideals, resurrecting emotions, and giving life to the dead, "I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again" (204).

The fear of falling short of one's own expectations or failing in one's responsibility to others is something that O'Brien touches on in several stories. "The Dentist" concerns Curt Lemon, a soldier who shows little fear in combat but passes out in the dentist's chair. While the other men find the incident amusing, they dismiss it. Lemon, however, does not meet his own expectations of bravery: "When he came to, there was a funny new look on his face, almost sheepish, as if he'd been caught committing some terrible crime" (96). His feelings of personal defeat are so great that he redeems himself only by insisting that the doctor extract a perfectly good tooth. In "Friends" Dave Jensen

displays similar feelings of disappointment, although his sense of obligation is not to himself but to others. When he fails to uphold his agreement to kill Lee Strunk after Strunk loses a leg to a booby trap, Jensen is clearly troubled by his breach of contract. Like Lemon, Jensen struggles with his violation and finds relief only when the situation is resolved. When the men learn that Strunk died from the wound, the news "seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight" (72).

In "In the Field" O'Brien the narrator returns to the subject of Kiowa's death. However, instead of addressing his failure to prevent the tragedy, he reflects on the mettle required to accept responsibility for it. He realizes that his flashlight was the direct cause of the mortar attack, and he has the strength to admit his complicity. He even attempts to confess his mistake to Lieutenant Cross, but Cross is preoccupied with his own sense of accountability in the incident. As the leader of the men, he realizes that he should have had the fortitude to act contrary to orders:

Looking out toward the river, he knew for a fact that he had made a mistake setting up here. The order had come from higher, true, but still he should've exercised some field discretion. He should've moved to higher ground for the night, should've radioed in false coordinates. (187)

Although he would like to blame Kiowa's death on a multitude of factors, he takes responsibility for it, and his acceptance is an act of bravery.

Always striving to illustrate "truth" through multiple presentations of the same idea in his fiction, O'Brien includes scenes in The Things They Carried that are extremely similar to those contained

in his previous work. In the combat environment of Vietnam where random moments of terror punctuated long periods of boredom, chaos was more often the norm than the exception, and "a moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever" (199), soldiers found ways to deal with their fears and discovered comfort in simple activities of peace and order. Reminiscent of the consolation that Paul Berlin finds in the pickup basketball games in Going After Cacciato, "Spin" depicts the relief that the men found in the checker games played by two members of the platoon:

There was something restful about it, something orderly and reassuring. There were red checkers and black checkers. The playing field was laid out in a strict grid, no tunnels or mountains or jungles. You knew where you stood. You knew the score. The pieces were out on the board, the enemy was visible, you could watch the tactics unfolding into larger strategies. There was a winner and a loser. There were rules. (36)

Checkers provides a model of order that does not exist in Vietnam, and most importantly, whether the soldiers win or lose, there is nothing to be afraid of.

The men also rely on superstitions to deal with fear. "Stockings" concerns a man in the platoon named Henry Dobbins who wraps his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck as a good-luck charm before going out on ambush. Narrator O'Brien writes that "like many of us in Vietnam, Dobbins felt the pull of superstition, and he believed firmly and absolutely in the protective power of the stockings" (130). However, what starts out as one man's lucky charm turns into an entire

platoon's savior. When Dobbins has a few miraculously close brushes with death and comes out without a scratch, O'Brien writes that "it turned us into a platoon of believers. You don't dispute facts" (130). In a world where the stakes were high and fear governed all, the men searched for something tangible to hold on to, and when nothing was available, they created it. Superstitions became facts, and facts were comforting. If it helped to cope with the terror of war, nothing was too trivial or eccentric, and no one questioned its validity.

An idea with which O'Brien deals in his Vietnam work is the use of imagination as a way of coping with the harsh reality of war, and Going After Cacciato is based largely on this notion. In The Things They Carried, however, he puts a new twist on this concept, relating how imagination also amplifies fear. While discussing the terror of "tunnel duty" in "The Things They Carried," O'Brien ponders the power of the mind: "Will your flashlight go dead? Do rats carry rabies? If you screamed, how far would the sound carry? Would your buddies hear it? Would they have the courage to drag you out? . . . Imagination was a killer" (11). Mitchell Sanders, in "How to Tell a True War Story," relates the story of a six man patrol that goes into the mountains on a listening-post operation. Because they cannot talk to each other, their imaginations run wild. Sanders points out that "what makes it extra bad, see, is the poor dudes can't horse around like normal. Can't joke it away. Can't even talk to each other except maybe in whispers, all hush-hush, and that just revs up the willies. All they do is listen" (80). He goes on to say that the men heard chamber music and a cocktail party, and although he eventually admits that he made up that part of the story, his point is clear. In Vietnam silence created a void that

could only be filled by imagination, and in a war with so many reasons to be afraid, horrific thoughts occupied soldiers' minds.

Like silence, darkness also created a void, and at no time was the imagination more active than at night:

Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering--odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogie-men in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. . . .

In the daylight, maybe, you didn't believe in this stuff.

You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you

turned into a believer. (229)

Night patrols were some of the most frightening experiences in Vietnam, and in "Night Life" Sanders relates to O'Brien this type of fear. He explains how the patrols took a toll on the entire platoon until the medic, Rat Kiley, finally cracked under the strain and shot himself in the foot. When games and superstition and imagination failed to assuage the anxiety, men resorted to desperate measures, and self-inflicted wounds were one way of escaping the apprehension of the war.

Interestingly, neither O'Brien as narrator nor any of the men in the platoon even hint that Kiley's decision was an act of cowardice.

Instead, "nobody blamed him" (251). Even the lieutenant promises to "vouch that it was an accident" (251). The night before shooting himself, Kiley told Sanders that "he'd done his best. He'd tried to be a decent medic. Win some and lose some, he said, but he'd tried hard" (250), and in Vietnam such submission to fear was a reality.

The Things They Carried also addresses a major irony of the war. Despite the horror of combat that made the conflict a living hell for so many soldiers, narrator O'Brien cannot deny that the war had a certain

attraction as well. In "How to Tell a True War Story" he captures this dichotomy:

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. (87)

The very elements that make armed conflict terrifying are the same ones that make all other human endeavors trivial in comparison. The stakes are high, and the odds are not on the side of the infantry soldier. Yet as O'Brien documents, these factors cause one to experience life at a level of heightened sensation: "At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life" (87).

"Ghost Soldiers" also addresses the allure of combat. Sitting in the rear recovering from a gunshot wound, O'Brien admits that there were times when he missed the "adventure, even the danger, of the real war" because "the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world" (219-20). "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" presents an extreme case of this narcotic-like effect in which the victim of the addiction is not a soldier but rather a teenage girl. Far from absurd, this gender shift emphasizes that the enticing quality of war is a phenomenon that affects human nature universally. However, this attraction, whether slight like O'Brien's or obsessive like Mary Anne Bell's, is in no way a form of

courage. Instead, the repulsion and appeal of armed conflict are both imbedded in the horror of the experience creating one of the many ironies of war.

Finally, several stories include events that illustrate author O'Brien's evolving conception of courage. He outlines this idea in an interview with Ronald Baughman and specifically cites the actions of the fictional O'Brien in "The Ghost Soldiers":

He feels that he has been wronged terribly by Jorgenson, the medic, who didn't attend to him quickly enough after the wounding. . . . He wants revenge. The ways in which O'Brien behaves, although sometimes cruel, reveal a kind of courage, a standing up for what he feels. (209)

Similarly, in "Ambush" the narrator tells of killing a man and relates the tremendous fear he had to overcome in order to throw the grenade: "I crouched and kept my head low. I tried to swallow whatever was rising from my stomach. . . . I was terrified" (Things 148). Although he conquers his anxiety and performs his duty, he is not proud of his bravery. In fact, he regrets killing the enemy soldier and in the wake of the incident, imagines the man's personal history. He attributes many of his own apprehensions about going to war to the dead man: "The young man would not have wanted to be a soldier and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle" (141). Yet the man went to war so as not to disappoint his family and died for a cause in which he did not believe. By imagining an enemy soldier of noble character, O'Brien dramatically magnifies the feelings of guilt that result from his courageous act, thus reflecting this paradoxical notion.

O'Brien has said of The Things They Carried that "'if there is a theme, it has to do with the fact that stories can save our lives'" (O'Brian E5), and while the book is founded on the art and power of storytelling, Vietnam provides the ideal environment necessary for an intriguing exploration of some basic human concerns. O'Brien admits that for this reason he continues to write stories about the war, and these stories inevitably deal with some aspect of courage and some facet of the multiplicity of fears associated with combat. Of all his Vietnam writing, The Things They Carried offers a more complete presentation of a greater variety of issues related to war, and in the process it skillfully depicts matters of relevance to human existence as a whole.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In their diversity of form and gravity of content, If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried stand as an intriguing combination of literary achievements dealing with the Vietnam war. O'Brien not only depicts the nature of the war but, more importantly, he uses it as a backdrop for the presentation of a myriad of significant human concerns. A primary consideration in all three books is the complex idea of courage and its relationship to fear. Herzog writes that in If I Die in a Combat Zone and Going After Cacciato "O'Brien explores a foot soldier's various fears, his self-conscious attempts to define courage and manhood, and his fundamental doubts about whether to flee the battlefield altogether or stay and fight," and this assessment can certainly be applied to The Things They Carried as well (Stories 148). Although the exploration of these issues exists in different forms and degrees in each work, the fundamental concepts remain the same and are not ones that are easily resolved.

In If I Die in a Combat Zone O'Brien recounts his personal struggle with the decision to go to war and chronicles his experience as a soldier in Vietnam. In both cases various fears dominate his existence, and he confronts these head-on in an extensive consideration of courage, a concept he comes to understand and articulate by the end of the work. He concludes that bravery in combat must be accompanied by a knowledge of the danger involved. He reflects upon Plato's definition

of the virtue as "wise endurance" and finds that simply overcoming the constant threat of death to perform the normal duties of a soldier in war qualifies as a type of valor.

Furthermore, O'Brien rejects the idea that some individuals are endowed with intrepidity and others with cowardice. Instead he comes to believe that people act heroically in some situations and dastardly in others and that past acts of gallantry make it no easier to conduct oneself similarly in the future. Most importantly, however, he addresses the paradox in which the decision to go to war and one's conduct while in it are not products of courage but instead are the result of a surrender to the fear of disappointing family and friends or that of being labeled a coward. This notion is essential to all of his writing on the war, and If I Die in a Combat Zone is equally vital to any discussion of his portrayal of these and related issues because it explores his own effort to understand the concepts that dominate his later work.

Through the fictional protagonist, Paul Berlin, in Going After Cacciato, O'Brien vividly portrays the multiple fears that American soldiers faced in Vietnam and the difficulty involved in conducting oneself courageously under such circumstances. This tremendous literary achievement deals specifically with the issue of desertion and illustrates the immense power of social pressure, perceived obligations, and the stigma of cowardice. The novel tracks Paul's thoughts and actions through a night of reflection, contemplation, and imagination, during which he decides that surmounting one's anxieties is the foundation of true bravery. This conclusion, however, proves to be little consolation since an understanding of the attribute is no

guarantee that one will display it. Failures of fortitude and frightening events dominate Paul's memory of his time in Vietnam, and although he imagines a daring journey of desertion to Paris, in the end he is incapable of escaping his feelings of guilt resulting from the agreement to kill Lieutenant Sidney Martin. He succumbs to his apprehensions of desertion, and he cannot visualize himself acting heroically in the assault on Cacciato. Despite these realizations, Paul accepts responsibility for his actions and decisions; he endures the daily rigors of the war; and he even has a daring moment during his night in the observation post. For these reasons he is a redeemable character, and he allows O'Brien to present various topics through a sympathetic "everyman" who possesses many characteristics of the average Vietnam draftee.

In The Things They Carried O'Brien moves to the form of the short story cycle and deals with a wider range of issues. Some stories focus specifically on fear and courage while others touch on these ideas within the context of other concerns. "On the Rainy River," for example, contains a detailed exploration of the decision to go to war. In an interesting inversion of traditional American expectations, the narrator, Tim O'Brien, concludes in retrospect that his choice to fight in the conflict was an act of cowardice. "Speaking of Courage" delineates the often fine line between bravery and diffidence in a combat situation. For Norman Bowker, the pivotal factor between the two is little more than the putrid smell of a field. Throughout the stories, O'Brien offers countless images of the horror of war and the soldiers' methods of dealing with the constant threat of death. He displays his own evolving notion of courage in several stories in which

characters overcome trepidation to perform certain acts, only to regret them afterward. He touches on the difficulty involved in accepting responsibility for the deaths of fellow soldiers as well as enemy troops and the lasting effects of such a burden. Finally, he addresses the irony of the attraction and feeling of heightened sensation that accompany fighting in a war despite the imminence of death.

Several common threads become apparent when reading these books in light of their presentation of fear and exploration of courage. Regardless of the form that O'Brien chooses, the Vietnam war provides a unique setting in which to portray human conduct and consciousness, for his deepest concerns are not war issues but universal ones. Indeed, the circumstances of armed conflict force a consideration of the nature of bravery and provide a situation in which there is a higher premium on this virtue. In an interview with Brian McNerney, O'Brien attempted to articulate the nature of war:

War is a multiplicity of events. . . . The environment of war is the environment of life, magnified. The stakes of living in a war are enhanced only because of the awareness of the proximity of death. . . . The problems and dilemmas presented in a war setting are essentially the problems and dilemmas of living itself. It's hard to be brave in the ordinary world. It's hard to know what bravery is in the ordinary world. It's hard to know what rectitude is in the ordinary world because we are often put into situations of paradox. . . . Those paradoxes which war presents . . . are there all the time. I hope that when my books are read, they'll reverberate for those reasons, for those who have

never experienced war and never will, but experience daily,
a different war: the war of life itself. (23-24)

Consistent with these thoughts, O'Brien makes clear in his writing that many of the anxieties related to war are the same as those that are present in any other human endeavor: the fear of failure, of making costly mistakes, of not living up to one's own expectations. Similarly O'Brien lays to rest the image of heroism so often associated with armed conflict. It can be a bunker charge if, as in the case of Captain Johansen in If I Die in a Combat Zone, it is done for the right reasons with a knowledge of the possible consequences. However, more often than not, the fortitude involved in war is the same as in life: the courage to choose the difficult path, to decide what is best for one's self despite social pressure, to confront fear rather than avoiding it.

If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried constitute a thorough presentation of human concerns as they exist in the environment of the Vietnam conflict. While creating some of the most vivid and touching literature to come out of the war, O'Brien clearly establishes fear as a common, dominant thread throughout the works, and this factor serves as the necessary foundation for courage, possibly his most important consideration. In a comprehensive yet concise piece of writing, Herzog summarizes the value of Vietnam war literature:

Difficult moral choices in war and such attendant concepts as fear, cowardice, manhood, courage, heroism, and control are commonplaces within the war genre. . . . What causes fear? Is it courageous for soldiers to fight in a war they believe to be wrong, or is it more courageous to flee the

battlefield and establish a separate peace? Are heroic acts unthinking ones? Is mere endurance in a war a type of courage? What exactly are society's expectations of a soldier's conduct? What obligations do soldiers have to society, to comrades, to themselves? What are the characteristics of a hero? Such questions in any war are difficult to answer, but within the Vietnam literature authors' and characters' efforts to consider these issues lead to particularly important insights about self and fundamental truths about human nature and responsibilities.

(Stories 140)

The exploration of issues such as bravery that makes O'Brien's work essential as Vietnam-war literature also allows it to transcend this label, making it valuable as twentieth-century American literature. This achievement is certainly O'Brien's intention: "I hope that my work will ultimately have its effect in understanding the war of living" (McNerney 24). He reaches into the substance of the conflict and pulls out the vital elements of human existence. This ability to depict the nature of war in a manner that is compelling to readers far removed from the experience is a testament to his skill as a writer.

The relationship between fear and courage that O'Brien portrays in his writing is by no means an unprecedented discovery. In his memoir he traces the connection as far back as Plato, and the notion is surely as ancient as man's consideration of bravery. Modern psychological studies have demonstrated a discernible link between the two qualities as well as a distinction between courage and fearlessness; however, this research falls short of O'Brien's literary presentation of the concept.

While psychological examinations focus primarily on acts that require one to surmount a single anxiety, O'Brien deals with both acts and decisions in an atmosphere of competing apprehensions where the horror of death is frequently not as great as that of cowardice. Furthermore, essential to O'Brien's portrayal of the topic is the morally ambiguous environment of Vietnam in which soldiers struggled to deal with fear, perform brave acts, and make courageous decisions in a situation in which the distinction between right and wrong was often indeterminable. His ability to depict the intricate relationship between courage and fear as it exists under these circumstances in a manner that is relevant to humanity as a whole makes his work worthy of examination, and his presentation of the reality of the Vietnam conflict, without anti-war protest or political agenda, makes its own case for the prevention of a similar sacrifice of human lives and innocence in the future.

NOTES

¹ For Beidler's list of some of the major achievements in Vietnam-war literature see Philip D. Beidler, Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991) 2-3.

² For a list of key titles of critical works on Vietnam-war literature see Philip K. Jason, ed., "Introduction," Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) xvi.

³ All information in this paragraph was compiled from Ronald Baughman, ed., "Tim O'Brien," Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, Vol. 9, (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1991) 137-214; Robert S. Browning, "Twenty-third Infantry Division," Dictionary of the Vietnam War (New York: Greenwood, 1988) 461; Vineta Colby, ed., "O'Brien, Tim," World Authors 1980-1985 (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1991) 652-655; Steven Kaplan, Understanding Tim O'Brien, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Tim O'Brien, If I Die in a Combat Zone, 1973, (New York: Dell, 1987); Shelby L. Stanton, Vietnam Order of Battle (Washington: U. S. News Books, 1981).

⁴ Both Ronald Baughman, ed., "Tim O'Brien," Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, Vol. 9, (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1991) 137-214; and Vineta Colby, ed., "O'Brien, Tim," World Authors 1980-1985 (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1991) 652-655; document

O'Brien's Vietnam service with the 198th Infantry Brigade. However, according to Shelby L. Stanton, Vietnam Order of Battle (Washington: U. S. News Books, 1981), the 46th Infantry Regiment, which contained O'Brien's battalion, was transferred from the 198th Infantry Brigade to the 23rd Infantry Division on 15 February 1969 shortly after O'Brien's arrival. This transfer apparently had little effect on the day-to-day operations of the battalion, but if Stanton's information is correct, then O'Brien spent the majority of his tour in the 23rd Infantry Division, not the 198th Infantry Brigade.

⁵ Dean McWilliams in his article "Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato," Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 29 (Summer 1988): 245-55, and Dennis Vannatta in his article "Theme and Structure in Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato," Modern Fiction Studies, 28 (Summer 1982): 242-46, both acknowledge three distinct chapter types in the novel. McWilliams refers to the chapters as "the observation post, the war stories, and the going-after Cacciato sections." Vannatta calls them the "observation post chapters, recollected war chapters, and the going-after-Cacciato chapters." I have chosen my own chapter references based on these same distinctions.

⁶ Quote taken from the dedication page in Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried, 1990 (New York: Penguin, 1991).

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