If I Die in a Combat Zone

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIM O'BRIEN

Tim O'Brien was born in Austin, Minnesota in 1946, the first of three children, immediately after his parents returned from serving in World War II. He spent his entire childhood in rural Minnesota, and the setting features prominently in several of his books. In 1968, O'Brien graduated from a small liberal arts college with a B.A. in political science, after which he was drafted into the United States Army to serve in the Vietnam War. O'Brien was ethically opposed to the war and nearly fled to Sweden, one of the few European countries unwilling to extradite American deserters. However, he felt duty-bound to respect his small Minnesota community and decided to serve. After a few months of basic training, O'Brien was sent to Vietnam where he served as a general infantry, a "foot soldier" from 1969 to 1970 in the 23rd Infantry Division—whom the year before committed the infamous My Lai Massacre, a mass-killing of hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians. O'Brien survived the Vietnam War and returned to the U.S., attending graduate school at Harvard University before becoming an intern with the *Washington Post*. In 1973, O'Brien began his literary career by publishing *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, his memoir of the Vietnam War. Although he never considered himself an authority on the Vietnam War, he wrote several influential books about it for the next several decades, most notably the award-winners *Going After Cacciato* in 1978 and *The Things They Carried* in 1990. O'Brien married in 2001 and became a father at the age of 58. His latest book, *Dad's Maybe Book*, is a series of letters to his two sons, so they can know him as a man even though he will be elderly by the time they enter adulthood. O'Brien currently lectures at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Vietnam War stretched from 1955 to 1975. The conflict officially took place between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, though the presence of communist allies backing North Vietnam (the Soviet Union, China, and others) and anti-communist allies backing South Vietnam (the U.S., Australia, South Korea, Thailand, and others) made it essentially a proxy war for major powers, an extension of Cold War-era tensions between the East and the West. The Vietnam War began in 1954, when colonial France abandoned Indochina (the regional name for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam). The U.S. quickly stepped in to occupy the military and financial vacuum left by France in South Vietnam, but the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong (also known as the National Liberation Front) swept south and launched a guerrilla war to oust the U.S. and establish a unified, independent communist state. In 1959, U.S. President John F. Kennedy began dramatically increasing America's military presence in Vietnam, sending thousands of soldiers per year. Although by 1966 American military leaders privately doubted that the U.S. could achieve victory in Vietnam, heavy American involvement continued through 1973, since no president wanted to admit to a humiliating and costly defeat during their term of office. President Richard Nixon eventually ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. troops in 1973, and in 1975, the Viet Cong took control of South Vietnam and established their Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Vietnam War is remembered especially for its catastrophic death tolls: 58,000 American soldiers died in combat and tens of thousands more were seriously wounded. However, this pales in comparison to what the Vietnamese people suffered: over three million dead, at least half of whom were unarmed civilians.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tim O'Brien is recognized as one of the 20th century's most important anti-war writers, particularly because of books like *If I Die in a Combat Zone* that describe the grim reality of the Vietnam War. In his novel *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien continues to reflect on the Vietnam War through the story of an American soldier who deserts the army and walks from Vietnam through Asia and all the way to Paris, France. *The Things They Carried*, arguably O'Brien's most revered work, is a fictionalized memoir that again reflects O'Brien's his experience in the Vietnam War, but from the perspective of the author in his mid-forties, still haunted by what he did and saw 20 years ago. In addition to O'Brien's body of work, many other powerful reflections on the Vietnam War also exist. Phillip Caputo, a U.S. Marine-turned-journalist, writes of his own experiences in the Vietnam War in *A Rumor of War*, focusing especially on how ambiguous the war felt, without clear-cut ideals of good and evil or even a clear idea of who their real enemy was. Bao Ninh, a former North Vietnamese soldier, relates his experience of the Vietnam War from the opposite side in his memoir *The Sorrow of War*, which describes what it felt like to see his country ravaged by American military strikes. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien notes that black American soldiers particularly suffered during the war, as they were subject to disproportionate danger and trauma due to their prejudiced white superior officers. Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* explores this further, describing how black soldiers faced even greater dangers and died at higher rates than white soldiers due to being assigned the most dangerous roles in war.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home
- **When Written:** 1969-1972
- **Where Written:** Vietnam; Cambridge, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1973
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Minnesota; Vietnam
- **Climax:** O'Brien finishes his military service and leaves Vietnam, returning home to the U.S.
- **Antagonist:** The Vietnam War
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

At Ease. O'Brien began writing his memoir while in Vietnam, in the quiet periods between firefights. He estimates that he wrote roughly 20 pages during his military service and he filled in the rest in the two years after he returned home.

PLOT SUMMARY

Tim O'Brien's memoir moves back and forth throughout time, jumping between the months before he deploys into the Vietnam War and his combat experiences in the field. The story opens with O'Brien and a young soldier named Barney hiking through the jungle, enduring constant sniper attacks and chatting about home.

In 1968, O'Brien receives his draft notice the summer after graduating from college. However, as an academic and an intellectual, O'Brien opposes the Vietnam War on ethical grounds. He considers fleeing the draft, but he feels too beholden to his family and community to shame them by rejecting his duty. O'Brien's father fought in World War II and many young men from O'Brien's Minnesota hometown fought in the Korean War, so patriotism and duty are reinforced all throughout his childhood. Even so, O'Brien feels that fighting in the Vietnam War is never his choice—it is merely something that the "gravity" of his community's expectations pulls him into.

O'Brien attends basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington and immediately discovers that he hates his superior officers' sense of manly bravado and blind nationalism. However, he meets Erik, a fellow intellectual and poetry-lover, and the two bond over their mutual disdain for the military and for war. When both Erik and O'Brien individually voice their moral opposition to the war, their commanding officers and even the military chaplain, Edwards, accuse them of cowardice and of being "disturbed." During basic training, O'Brien decides that he will desert the army and flee to Sweden, via Canada and Ireland, since Sweden does not extradite deserters back to the U.S. O'Brien draws up plans, buys his bus ticket into Canada, and goes to Seattle to make his escape, but ultimately realizes he cannot flee—doing so would shame his family, his community, and his fellow recruits.

O'Brien hopes that he will be assigned a support position, like Erik, but instead he finds himself assigned to the general infantry—the most dangerous role, fighting on the combat front. He completes two months of infantry training and flies to Vietnam, where he joins Alpha Company serving under Captain Johansen. O'Brien quickly realizes that Alpha Company has a flippant attitude toward war and death, and the soldiers seem unconcerned with the Vietnam War's actual objective. When guerrillas from the Viet Cong attack their unit in O'Brien's first week, killing two Americans, the other soldiers downplay its significance. With Alpha Company, O'Brien hikes through Vietnamese jungles, setting ambushes for Viet Cong soldiers. The countryside is covered in mines, and many of Alpha Company's men are blown to pieces during otherwise placid moments outside of combat. Amid the fighting, O'Brien sees many civilians killed or maimed by crossfire. Occasionally, American soldiers torture Vietnamese civilians for information. During a particularly brutal expedition through a region called Pinkville, Alpha Company takes such heavy losses and grows so frustrated that O'Brien and his comrades take to setting fire to Vietnamese villages as an expression of their own hatred and rage toward Vietnam.

O'Brien thinks that Captain Johansen is the bravest man he's ever known and one of the few truly courageous men in Vietnam, since he possesses a powerful will while also exercising good judgment. Johansen's men love him since he treats them well, especially by disobeying direct orders from his superiors (like executing dangerous and fruitless ambushes) when he believes they pose an unnecessary risk. However, Captain Johansen is eventually reassigned and replaced by Captain Smith, a pudgy, inexperienced officer. Because of his inexperience, Captain Smith's poor leadership decisions inflict massive casualties on Alpha Company. However, Captain Smith never regrets the lost lives that he causes, only the poor effect that such losses will have on his military career. It doesn't take long for Captain Smith's superiors to remove him from command.

After Captain Smith's exit, Alpha Company sets up in a small Vietnamese village nestled alongside a **lagoon**. O'Brien imagines that the beautiful lagoon must have been an idyllic place, almost like a fairytale with a mythical "lagoon monster" hiding in the sea, but now it is surrounded by minefields and covered in razor wire. One evening, a nearby American artillery station makes a miscalculation: during a routine practice drill, they accidentally hit the lagoon village with mortars, wounding 33 villagers and killing 13, including several children. The U.S.

government pays the bereaved families a tiny sum of money as recompense, and O'Brien thinks that their army is worse than any lagoon monster.

O'Brien receives a new assignment, leaving combat to work as a typist at their battalion headquarters far from the combat front. His life there is placid and peaceful. However, O'Brien reports to Major Callicles, a life-long military man who is staunchly traditional and believes that soldiers don't have enough "guts" anymore. Callicles despises things like marijuana, mustaches, and prostitution. When reporters arrive in Vietnam to investigate the My Lai Massacre, a mass-killing of civilians that Alpha Company committed the year before O'Brien joined them, Major Callicles furiously defies the journalists who charge that killing civilians was morally wrong and a war crime. However, after they leave, Major Callicles is ordered to help the military investigate the massacre. The investigation erodes Callicles's staunch belief in the army's moral "rightness," and he starts drinking heavily. Major Callicles grows gradually more unhinged, spending hours searching their base for marijuana, drunkenly dragging O'Brien and another soldier into the jungle on a fruitless ambush. Callicles eventually sets fire to a "whorehouse," which gets him exiled from their support base and stripped of his command.

In 1970, O'Brien completes his military service and flies home to America. He feels that the trip home is strangely underwhelming. The world seems to have changed very little, even though he himself feels permanently changed.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tim O'Brien – Tim O'Brien is the author, narrator, and protagonist of the memoir. In 1968, while he is home from university, O'Brien receives his draft notice, enlisting him into the U.S. Army to fight in the Vietnam War. Though O'Brien ethically opposes the war, he feels beholden to his patriotic Minnesota community to do his duty and serve. He undergoes basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington, where he meets Erik, a fellow intellectual and objector to the war, and the two form a close bond. Both raise their ethical objections with their superior officers but they are disciplined and dismissed as cowards. When O'Brien finds out that he will serve as a foot soldier, the most dangerous occupation in the war, he forms a plan to desert the army and flee to Sweden via Canada. However, O'Brien again finds himself held captive by his own sense of duty—he gives up on his plan and flies to Vietnam to fight. In Vietnam, O'Brien joins Alpha Company under Captain Johansen, whom O'Brien considers one of the few truly courageous men in the war, possessing both a strong will and good judgment. O'Brien travels with Alpha Company throughout South Vietnam as they perform ambushes and search villages for Viet Cong soldiers. He sees many of his comrades killed by bullets, landmines, or bizarre accidents. Although O'Brien resists the army's demonization of the Vietnamese people, as he sees more and more of his friends die, he starts to feel racial animosity toward the villagers he encounters. He participates in setting fire to villages, and when his comrades torture civilians or shoot at farmers, he does not stop them. As O'Brien's time in Vietnam draws to a close, he works as a clerk for Major Callicles in a headquarters base, removed from combat. O'Brien's final months pass uneventfully, but he still finds himself disturbed by America's presence in Vietnam, and especially by the violence inflicted on civilians. Looking back, O'Brien's experiences lead him to believe that the Vietnam War was evil.

Captain Johansen – Captain Johansen is the commander of Alpha Company, in which O'Brien serves as an infantryman. Captain Johansen is a capable warrior and excellent leader. The men in Alpha Company love him and are deeply loyal to him. O'Brien considers Captain Johansen to be the embodiment of true courage as Plato defines it: a combination of wise judgment and willpower to act on that judgment, even when afraid. Captain Johansen demonstrates his bravery by making a solo charge across a rice paddy to kill a Viet Cong soldier at arm's length, which O'Brien thinks makes him appear like Sir Lancelot. This is tempered by Captain Johansen's good judgment, shown when he disobeys direct orders to send his men on dangerous and fruitless ambushes—demonstrating that he cares more for his men than he does for his career or the military hierarchy. Midway through O'Brien's time in Vietnam, Captain Johansen is retired from Alpha Company and replaced by the worthless Captain Smith.

Erik – Erik is a young man who is drafted into the Vietnam War, just as O'Brien is. Erik befriends O'Brien during basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington, and they bond over their ethical objections to the war and their shared love of poetry. In particular, Erik joins O'Brien in despising Sergeant Blyton, who is in charge of their training. Due to Erik and O'Brien's liberal values and anti-war sentiments, Sergeant Blyton and his ilk hate them as well. Although O'Brien receives assignment to fight in the general infantry, Erik receives an occupational assignment, working in a support role away from combat. Even so, he and O'Brien write letters to each other over the course of the war. In Erik's last letter before leaving Vietnam, he confides that he feels guilty for having survived when so many others died, and he thinks that the entire Vietnam War is an evil affair.

Major Callicles – Major Callicles is O'Brien's commanding officer in LZ (Landing Zone) Gator. Major Callicles idolizes tradition and discipline and despises the long hair, marijuana, and prostitution that their base is rife with. He believes that the soldiers in Vietnam don't have "guts" and aren't manly enough. Major Callicles—and thus O'Brien, as his employee—is placed in

charge of investigating the My Lai Massacre that occurred the year before when an American platoon massacred hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians. The investigation and the journalists that follow it infuriate Major Callicles, since he remains convinced that the U.S. Army is morally superior and always right, and that whichever civilians were killed brought it on themselves. However, as he continues the investigation, he becomes disillusioned with the military and takes to heavy drinking. Callicles becomes obsessed with rooting out marijuana and prostitution from LZ Gator—in a drunken fit, he sets fire to a "whorehouse" and is promptly stripped of his command.

Captain Smith – Captain Smith replaces Captain Johansen as the commander of Alpha Company. Captain Smith is short, pudgy, and obviously inexperienced, making him the polar opposite of Captain Johansen. Due to Captain Smith's incompetence and inability to lead, he leads Alpha Company into heavy losses during their first mission, but he is far more saddened by the toll his failures will have on his military career than by all the soldiers who died under his command. Within a couple of months, Captain Smith is stripped of his command.

Mad Mark – Mad Mark is a platoon leader in Alpha Company. Mad Mark earns his nickname by being unnaturally calm under pressure. O'Brien describes him as an excellent warrior who neither shies from combat nor seeks it out. Rather, Mad Mark views fighting as a profession like any other and he resolves to do it well.

Sergeant Blyton – Sergeant Blyton is a drill sergeant at Fort Lewis. Erik and O'Brien meet Blyton during basic training and instantly hate him, regarding him as a living embodiment of the military and all of its evils. Sergeant Blyton hates Erik and O'Brien as well, since they are college-educated intellectuals and prefer to keep to themselves rather than join in the camaraderie of the other recruits.

Chaplain Edwards – Edwards is a military chaplain at Fort Lewis. O'Brien approaches Edwards with his ethical objections to serving in the Vietnam War, hoping for counsel. However, Edwards becomes furious that O'Brien would question America's judgment. He argues that America is a good country and that any war that it fights is consequently a good war.

Colonel Daud – Colonel Daud is a battalion commander over Alpha Company. The officers in Alpha Company despise Daud for being inexperienced and sending them on reckless missions. After Daud orders Alpha Company to do several dangerous Combat Assaults in Pinkville, all of Alpha Company hates him so much that they cheer when they hear that Viet Cong soldiers killed him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Li – Li is an officer in the North Vietnamese Army, though O'Brien meets him while studying abroad in Czechoslovakia. Li explains to O'Brien that the North Vietnamese view America as a foreign invader and that they are fighting to push out such invaders and unify their country.

Barney – Barney is a young soldier in Alpha Company and O'Brien's friend. Barney is absurdly optimistic and never lets anything get him down, though this also makes him careless.

Bates – Bates is a soldier in Alpha Company and O'Brien's friend. Bates is one of the few soldiers who appears to share O'Brien's sense of conscience and discomfort at what they do to civilians. However, like O'Brien, Bates never protests or stops any of it.

O'Brien's Father – O'Brien's father fought in World War II, leaving O'Brien with a childhood sense of patriotism and duty.

O'Brien's Girlfriend – O'Brien's girlfriend writes occasional letters to him. In her last, she announces that she's found a new boyfriend while traveling in Europe.

Chip – Chip is a popular soldier in Alpha Company and O'Brien's close friend. A mine explodes and kills him and Tom together, and their deaths affect everyone in Alpha Company due to how well-liked they were.

Kline – Kline is a helpless young recruit at Fort Lewis whom Sergeant Blyton bullies because he is an easy target.

The Kid – The Kid is a young soldier in Alpha Company known for being an excellent shot. The Kid enjoys killing Viet Cong more than most, and excitedly recounts stories of enemies he shot down.

Arizona – Arizona is a soldier in Alpha Company. When he tries to make a heroic charge like Captain Johansen, a Viet Cong soldier shoots him in the chest, killing him.

Reno – Reno is a squad leader in Alpha Company.

Tom – Tom is a popular squad leader in Alpha Company. He dies alongside Chip when a mine explodes.

TERMS

Viet Cong – The Viet Cong, also known as the National Liberation Front, are the South Vietnamese guerrilla soldiers who oppose American presence in Vietnam (different from the North Vietnamese Army). Since the Viet Cong face a larger, better-equipped than themselves, they are experts in guerilla warfare. They are so good at hiding that though they constantly engage in firefights with American soldiers, American soldiers rarely actually see them.

The My Lai Massacre – The My Lai Massacre refers to a mass-murder of Vietnamese civilians. American soldiers methodically executed more than 500 women, children, and old men in the village of My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968, one year before **O'Brien** entered the Vietnam War. U.S. Army officers covered the massacre up for a full year before American journalists learned

of it and wrote about it, prompting international outrage and a full military investigation.

North Vietnamese Army – The North Vietnamese Army is the formal army of North Vietnam. They appear more organized and equipped than the Viet Cong, but Alpha Company rarely encounters them.

Guerrilla Warfare – Guerrilla warfare is a style of fighting that focuses on small skirmishes, ambushes, and hit-and-run style attacks, utilizing dense and difficult terrain. Guerrilla warfare became popular in Vietnam since it allowed the Viet Cong to take on American soldiers—even though the Americans had far better weapons and vehicles—by keeping themselves hidden in the jungle or among villagers.

THEMES

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THE EVILS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Tim O'Brien was drafted and served in the Vietnam War from 1969 to 1970, which inspired many of the books he wrote throughout his career. In Obrien's memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, the first and most autobiographical account he wrote of his time in Vietnam, he describes serving as an infantryman with Alpha Company and witnessing the horrors of war firsthand. Although as a foot soldier, O'Brien does not feel qualified to derive moral lessons from his experience, only to "tell war stories," his account of the war depicts it as nightmarish, brutal, and completely unnecessary. Through his depictions of horrific violence, O'Brien argues that the Vietnam War is misguided and results in tremendous amounts of death and suffering and is therefore evil.

Although most of O'Brien's superiors during the Vietnam War claim that America is fighting a just conflict, O'Brien finds the whole campaign misguided and entirely unnecessary. By the late 1960s, American public opinion is divided over the Vietnam War: some argue that it is a just campaign to defeat communism, but more and more civilians see it as an unnecessary crusade. However, nearly all of O'Brien's military superiors fully believe that the war is a righteous and noble cause. When O'Brien voices his own moral objections to an army chaplain, Edwards, during basic training, the chaplain is furious that O'Brien would challenge America's morality. Edwards shouts, "If you accept, as I do, that America is one helluva great country, well, then, you follow what she tells you. She says fight, then you go out and do your damnedest. You try to win." The chaplain's argument puts forth the worldview of America as a moral country, and thus any action it takes as the right action. However, O'Brien knows that other countries do not share America's belief in the country's moral superiority. Before O'Brien is drafted, he spends a summer studying abroad in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He occasionally sees protest posters condemning American killings of Vietnamese civilians, indicating that the international perception of America's war is mixed at best. A friend introduces O'Brien to a North Vietnamese student named Li, who is also an officer in the North Vietnamese Army fighting against America. They discuss the war for hours, and Li explains that the Vietnamese see Americans as the "aggressors," especially when "they see [American] airplanes killing people." Li's perspective on the Vietnam War suggests that, for many Vietnamese people, America seems like a predator rather than a moral defender. During O'Brien's deployment, although he and his fellow soldiers fight dutifully, he notes that almost all of the general infantry are "not committed, not resigned, to having to win a war." The American soldiers' disinterest suggests that they recognize the futility of their military campaign. To the men actually fighting and dying, the war is clearly misguided and unnecessary.

O'Brien witnesses horrific death and suffering during his year of combat, demonstrating that the Vietnam War is not only misguided, but devastating in its violence and destruction. Many of O'Brien's American comrades die in combat in horrific ways. He sees men's limbs get blown off by mines; men disemboweled by explosions; and men who are shot, stabbed, or suffocated. O'Brien recalls that one day, 17 men in his platoon either die or are permanently maimed by mines within 30 minutes. He sees a piece of shrapnel slice a soldier's nose off while he is eating breakfast, causing him to drown in his own blood. On another day, snipers ambush O'Brien and his friend at least 10 times, their bullets narrowly missing them every time. For foot soldiers like O'Brien, death and horrific violence are a constant presence. Even worse, O'Brien sees numerous Vietnamese civilians, including women and children, horrifically maimed and killed by American crossfire. Because the Viet Cong engage in guerrilla warfare (hiding and ambushing, waging war through small-scale battles), firefights often break out in villages and farms. Every time O'Brien's unit approaches a village, they expect Viet Cong fighters to ambush them. In one instance, soldiers throw grenades into a house, believing Viet Cong fighters are hiding there, only to realize they've killed an old woman. In another instance, while watching a village burn to the ground after American jets hit it in an airstrike, O'Brien reflects, "There were Viet Cong in that hamlet. And there were babies and children and people who just didn't give a damn in there, too," indicating that civilians are often butchered in crossfire. The carnage O'Brien witnesses demonstrates the catastrophic costs of such a war: not only is the Vietnam War simply misguided, but utterly devastating, causing horrific

suffering for millions of people on all sides of the conflict.

Since the Vietnam War is both unnecessary and causes widespread suffering, O'Brien argues that America's presence in Vietnam is not simply wrong, but evil. Looking back on his experience of the war, O'Brien states, "I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil." O'Brien's friend Erik, also serving in Vietnam, echoes this thought. As Erik prepares to go home, he feels disturbed by the violence Americans have wrought on the Vietnamese people. Erik writes in a letter, "Perhaps it's that I know I will leave [Vietnam] alive and I need to suffer for that. But, more likely, what I see is evil." Erik's shame at participating in Vietnam—even though he was drafted—and O'Brien's belief that the war served no purpose other than horrific death and suffering argues, in no uncertain terms, that the Vietnam War is evil, a blight on America's history and moral character.

COURAGE

O'Brien recognizes that Americans have long considered war to be a coming-of-age ritual for young men, a way for them to test their resolve and prove their courage. This drive to act courageously is a powerful force in young men's' live, especially during wartime, and evokes time-honored ideals of heroism, fearlessness, and bravado. However, O'Brien's experiences of fear, moral conflict, and horror as a soldier lead him to believe that such an ideal of courage misses the point. Although many men in the army regard courage as manly bravado and fearlessness, O'Brien realizes that courage is actually the ability to "act[] wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise," even when that means disobeying orders.

Several of O'Brien's superiors regard courage as manliness and having "guts," indicating that this is the pervasive understanding of courage in the army. After O'Brien receives assignment at a headquarters base, removing him from regular combat, he is assigned Major Callicles as his commanding officer. Major Callicles is an ultra-conservative soldier (he hates long hair, marijuana, and prostitution) who constantly laments about how soldiers aren't manly enough and don't have real courage anymore, since many don't want to fight. Callicles preaches that courage means being "tough" and having "guts to stand up for what's right," though he leaves the "problem of what is right unresolved," suggesting that he lacks wisdom or moral judgment despite his position of authority. Callicles regards himself as an embodiment of courage, someone who commits himself to army life to "show that there are still people with courage in this world"—but the major's ideal of courage is essentially just manly bravado put on to intimidate his inferiors. While in combat, O'Brien's firsthand experiences lead him to reflect on what actually constitutes bravery. For instance, Captain Johansen, beloved by his troops, charges across a rice paddy and kills a Viet Cong soldier from only feet away—an act that makes him seem as "brave" as Sir Lancelot. On the same day, a young soldier named Arizona does the same sort of charge but he is shot dead within his first few steps. O'Brien reflects, "People who [charge into danger] are remembered as brave, win or lose. They are heroes forever. It seems like courage, the charge." That is, in the popular view of courage, ignoring danger and one's personal safety is a key component, regardless of outcome or judgment.

However, after seeing many "brave" but dangerous actions, O'Brien recognizes that such manly bravado does not include good judgment, and this idea of courage leads men to do foolish or immoral things. Major Callicles eventually gets so fed up with the lack of "guts" in the army that he gets drunk and orders O'Brien and another soldier to go down with him to a village in the middle of the night to hunt for Viet Cong soldiers. Although it serves no mission or objective, Major Callicles is hell-bent on proving himself and "get[ting] some kills," suggesting that he simply wants to kill people and prove that he's a man, thus fulfilling his own courageous ideal. They lie in the forest all night, waiting to ambush anyone who walks past. Callicles, still drunk, speaks so loudly that any Viet Cong in the area would easily hear them and shoot them. Callicles eventually passes out in the grass, and they soon realize the village is empty anyway. To finally prove his own courage, Callicles sets fire to a "whorehouse," and his superiors immediately strip his command. Callicles's idealization of courage as manly bravado and action not only makes him foolish, but a dangerous and immoral leader as well. Even Arizona's charge does not seem quite courageous to O'Brien. Although it is certainly brave, it is also foolish, since Arizona sacrifices his life for nothing—his death does not achieve anything, and thus feels unnecessary. This causes O'Brien to reflect, "Courage is more than the charge," suggesting that bravery is not simply bravado or a disregard for one's personal safety.

O'Brien decides that Ancient Greek philosopher Plato is correct when he argues that courage is the "endurance of the soul in spite of fear," one's capacity to exercise and act on wise judgment, even under tremendous pressure. Although Captain Johansen is an excellent soldier, O'Brien thinks it is Johansen's good judgment that makes him courageous. When Johansen's superiors—safely hidden away in a headquarters outpost, far from combat—order him to send his men into dangerous and fruitless ambushes, Johansen decides to report in as if they did but instead he lets his men rest and recover. Although this poses considerable risk to Captain Johansen—if his superiors were to find out he'd be severely punished—Johansen chooses to exercise good judgment and care for his men rather than risk their lives without reason. His men love him for it, and O'Brien notes that Captain Johansen's willingness to put himself at risk for the benefit of others makes him uniquely courageous among all the superior officers O'Brien serves under in

Vietnam. Although O'Brien contemplates the meaning of courage, he ultimately states that he himself is not courageous. He fights and faces death like any other soldier, but he fails to take a stand on what he believes to be right. O'Brien's platoon harasses and hurts civilians: they shoot at farmers for target practice and hold old Vietnamese men hostage, reasoning that Viet Cong fighters won't attack a platoon when their own fathers are tied up in the middle of them. O'Brien doesn't participate in these acts but he also fails to intervene even when he knows he should. His desire to simply survive and his fear of earning the ill will of his peers prevents him from stopping something he knows is wrong. O'Brien has the good judgment that courage requires but he does not have the willpower to act on it, demonstrating that one without the other is useless.

O'Brien's view of courage, which he admits that he does not have, suggests that the courageous thing to do is often in opposition with military orders or his comrades' desires. Thus, the army does not breed courage so much as it creates bull-headed compliance, disregard for one's safety, and a particular lack of good judgment.

DUTY VS. CONSCIENCE

By 1969, public sentiment is turning against America's presence in the Vietnam War, especially among young people. Drafted Americans (people whom the government forces to fight in the military, or else be thrown in prison) desert the army or flee the draft notice in greater and greater numbers, in order to avoid fighting and dying for a cause they don't believe in. Although O'Brien morally objects to the Vietnam War and makes plans to flee the draft, he finds himself dragged into service by a begrudging sense of obligation, suggesting that one's sense of nationalistic duty may compel them to contradict their conscience and participate in something that opposes their better judgment.

Like much of the country, O'Brien finds the Vietnam War morally reprehensible and makes plans to desert, demonstrating that his conscience firmly opposes participating in what seems to be an evil war. O'Brien's father served in World War II, and most of the men in his town either fought in World War II or the Korean War; O'Brien thus idolizes war as a child and pretended to be soldiers with his friends, fighting like their fathers did. However, by the time O'Brien has graduated college—when he receives his draft notice—he and his friends have read about politics and history and seriously question the ethics of the Vietnam War, holding long conversations about it into the night. However, O'Brien finds these elaborate ethical conversations difficult to sustain "when the town's draft board were calling me to duty, smiling so nicely," suggesting that he already feels the pull of his community and their expectation that he do his duty and fight. O'Brien finds himself caught between these two forces. The night before he leaves for basic training, he writes his moral protests on scraps of cardboard and "declare[s] the war evil, the draft board evil, the town evil in its lethargic acceptance of it all." However, he quickly feels foolish and tears them up. He leaves for basic training in Washington, but soon realizes he must honor his conscience, desert the army, and flee to Sweden, which harbors American deserters and will not extradite them to the U.S. He pulls together enough money for a bus ticket into Canada, plots the route he will take through Ireland and into Sweden, and even gets as far as buying his tickets in Seattle. He prepares letters for his friends and family, explaining that his conscience firmly and ardently opposes participating in the Vietnam War, and that he hopes they will not be too ashamed of him.

However, when it comes time to actually flee, O'Brien's sense of duty prevents him from doing so, even though desertion seems morally justified. That is, his sense of duty overrides his conscience. While sitting in a hotel room in Seattle, trying to summon the courage to take the bus to Canada, O'Brien is so anxious that he vomits. He looks through his plans and his letters again and he decides to burn them. He states, "It was over. I simply couldn't bring myself to flee." Despite O'Brien's moral opposition to the Vietnam War—as well as his desire not to die for an unworthy cause—he feels beholden to his country and the expectations of his community. He reflects, "Family, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run." That is, his sense of duty to the place he grew up, the people and the culture that raised him—who all expect him to go to war—compels him to ignore his conscience and instead do as he's told. O'Brien begrudgingly accepts his role and returns to basic training, though for the remainder of his time there he feels "restless and hopeless," heavy with a particular sense of dread. His sense of duty overpowers his conscientious objections to participating in the war.

O'Brien feels as though his duty to his country drags him into a horrific and purposeless war, ultimately suggesting that each person's sense of duty to their country may actually serve a negative function, drawing them into actions they know are wrong. O'Brien's time in Vietnam is as horrific and senseless as he expects, made worse by the fact that serving never feels like his own choice. He reflects that, with the pressures of his community and family and the patriotic history of his Minnesota town, "in the end, it was less reason and more gravity that was the final influence," implying that he feels passively pulled into fighting an evil war by a "sleepwalking default." O'Brien's friend and fellow soldier Erik echoes Obrien's feeling of passivity, suggesting that duty is less based in conviction than fear. He argues they are going off to fight "not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather it's from fear of society's censure [...] Fear of weakness. Fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood." Erik's observation implies that duty has little to do with one's conviction that their country is doing the right thing—rather, it's often based in a fear of being

rejected by that country or shamed by one's peers. In O'Brien's account, one's sense of duty to their country can actually be a negative influence rather than a positive one, leading a person to defy their conscience in order to please or pacify their community. Rather than fighting from a righteous conviction, duty compels soldiers like O'Brien to fight because everyone else is and because society expects it, regardless of one's own morality or conscience.

THE ENEMY

For many American soldiers, the Vietnam War lacks the clear-cut objectives and open battlefields of past major wars, particularly compared to World War II. Instead, they find themselves fighting in a war they don't understand against an enemy who employs guerrilla tactics, hiding within the jungle and killing American soldiers in ambush attacks or with booby-trapped mines. As O'Brien describes, he and his fellow infantrymen in Alpha Company begin to lose their sense of who their true enemy is, since they don't actually care about the Viet Cong and suffering comes not only from enemy soldiers, but from the environment and the American military hierarchy as well. Through O'Brien's own experiences, he demonstrates how this impersonal style of warfare can extend the horrors of war to a wider array of targets—when foot soldiers don't even know what they are dying for, the enemy becomes whomever causes the most suffering or happens to be nearby.

The American soldiers' real enemy, the Viet Cong fighters, are rarely seen, leaving the Americans without a traditional, visible enemy to face. In the worst fighting that O'Brien sees, in a region nicknamed Pinkville, Alpha Company often finds itself fighting against the elite Forty-eighth Viet Cong Battalion. Despite constantly encountering the Viet Cong and getting picked off by their bullets, Alpha Company almost never actually sees the enemy soldiers—they only feel the spray of gunfire coming out of the bushes or hear snipers shooting at them from somewhere in the jungle. The Viet Cong are so adept at remaining invisible that O'Brien thinks of them as "phantom[s]" and recalls that he only sees a live enemy once with his own eyes. However, at night, the Americans often imagine that the Viet Cong are waiting for them. O'Brien recalls, "We would see [them] in our heads: oiled up, ghostly, blending with the countryside, part of the land." As skilled guerrilla fighters, the Viet Cong remain virtually invisible yet so present through their bullets and mortars that they become an intangible fixture in the American soldiers' minds. This effect is only made worse by the fact that more American soldiers die from mines than from gunfire: the Viet Cong and the villagers who choose to help them riddle the jungle and empty villages with booby traps. They build mines of varying severity: some only blow off toes or lower legs, whereas some shred a person's entire body or spring into the air before blowing up in front of a person's stomach. Because of this hidden but ever-present danger, the American infantrymen feel as if they are fighting an invisible, phantom enemy—they lack any clear target or person to struggle against.

With so many men dying and without a clear enemy to fight, O'Brien recalls that his company sometimes considers the Vietnamese civilians to be their enemy instead, since they are easy to find and they become representations of the Viet Cong by association. As frustration and rage over dead comrades mounts, O'Brien admits that the soldiers' hatred often turns toward people who have nothing to do with their own suffering. After a mine blows two well-liked American soldiers to pieces, O'Brien remembers, "men put their fists into the faces of the nearest Vietnamese, two frightened women" and "an officer used his pistol, hammering it against a prisoner's skull." O'Brien notes that "the men were crying, doing this," suggesting that the sporadic, brutal violence is a result of the Americans' pain and frustrated rage that they lack a traditional enemy to fight. Tragically, O'Brien recalls that such outbursts aren't just limited to individual civilians: Alpha Company takes to setting whole villages on fire. "On bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk from Pinkville and to see fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate is good." Because Alpha Company cannot find their true enemy, and they continue to die by that enemy's bullets and explosives, they turn the Vietnamese civilians into representational targets, an outlet for their festering rage.

Often, the American foot soldiers even regard their military superiors as the enemy because they treat the soldiers as dispensable, abusing them or sending them into needless danger. This demonstrates how the foot soldiers' hatred and angst can even redirect against their own army. The "gung-ho" American, Colonel Daud, becomes one of Alpha Company's most hated villains, perhaps even more so than the Viet Cong. Though he himself never goes into combat—he flies safely around in his helicopter overhead—he orders Alpha Company into numerous dangerous ambushes and charges that often incur heavy death tolls, all because he is enthusiastic about war and wants to report good numbers of enemies killed. O'Brien states that Alpha Company grows to hate the man so much that when they hear that Vietnamese soldiers killed him in a night raid, they sing a "catchy, happy, celebrating song: Ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead," suggesting that they regard Daud as a villain, the very worst enemy.

More than just wishing death on American officers, some soldiers take vengeance into their own hands. A handful of Alpha Company's black soldiers believe that a white lieutenant mistreats them and gives them the most dangerous assignments. Within weeks of their frustration building, the lieutenant dies when a small explosion blows his legs off, and one of the black soldiers later confides to O'Brien that it was their own doing. They'd meant to shoot a grenade launcher in

front of the lieutenant to just scare him, but "the blacks weren't crying, he said." Since the lieutenant caused the black soldiers to suffer, they saw him as just as much an enemy as the Viet Cong. Alpha Company's murderous hatred for Vietnamese civilians and for certain American officers suggests that in a war without a clear enemy and that no one believes in fighting, the traditional concept of the enemy becomes increasingly blurred. Rather than only the opposing army being the enemy, American foot soldiers during Vietnam treat whomever causes them suffering as their enemy, whether they are Vietnamese, American, or simply civilians who happen to be close by.

RACISM AT WAR

Although the U.S. Army no longer practices overt segregation in 1969, and although America is ostensibly fighting to protect the South Vietnamese people from communism, O'Brien recognizes that his experiences during the Vietnam War are all framed by racial hostility. Old and new racial prejudices impact who occupies what role, how much empathy soldiers show to civilians, and how everyone involved in the war perceives the people around them, as well as those they fight against. O'Brien's account of the Vietnam War suggests that racism plays an outsized role in the conduct of the war, and that racial prejudice often has lethal consequences for the people who suffer it.

By O'Brien's account, nearly all American soldiers harbor some level of animosity toward Vietnamese people, which thus minimizes their view of Vietnamese civilian suffering. In basic training, all of O'Brien's superiors refer to Vietnamese people as "dinks" (a racial slur against Southeast Asian people) and "Charlie Cong" and they encourage new recruits to do the same, indicating that the army encourages its soldiers to dehumanize the people they fight against. A lieutenant about to ship off to Vietnam tells O'Brien he is eager to test his mettle and the skills that he's learned. He says, "I think I'm better than those dinks," suggesting that his denigrating view of Vietnamese people causes him to see himself as superior. This low view of Vietnamese people causes American soldiers to minimize war crimes against Vietnamese civilians as well. When international reporters arrive in Vietnam to investigate the My Lai Massacre, where American soldiers mass-murdered an entire village of unarmed civilians, Major Callicles claims, "they're dumb and they die; they're smart, they run, they hide, then they live," implying that the Vietnamese villagers brought their doom on themselves. It seems highly unlikely that Major Callicles would respond that way to white Americans' deaths, which suggests that he sees Vietnamese people as fundamentally different and inferior. O'Brien, who is self-described as "liberal" by nature, tries to resist this racial animosity, especially against civilians. However, after Alpha Company takes exceptionally heavy losses in Pinkville, O'Brien discovers that as frustration and anger festers, so does racial hate. He states, "one Oriental face began to look like any other, hostile and black, and Alpha Company was boiling with hate when it was pulled out of Pinkville," suggesting that the fear, stress, and pain of war exacerbates racial animosity between groups.

Even within the U.S. Army, O'Brien sees racism targeted at black soldiers, suggesting that racial animosity even infects and segregates people within the same military. O'Brien notes that the military hierarchy is segregated along racial lines: "the officer corps is dominated by white men; the corps of foot soldiers, common grunts, is disproportionately black." White officers are the ones who reassign foot soldiers to coveted positions in the rear (away from the fighting front), doing clerical or technical work, where life is calmer and much safer. As a result of "old elements of racial tension—fears, hates, suspicions," most white officers assign privileged non-combat jobs to "white grunts." O'Brien states that black soldiers react to this discrimination as anyone would: by being angry, insolent, disruptive, and cynical. This sadly justifies white officers' inclinations to not give the good jobs to black soldiers, since their behavior seems "insubordinate." Racial tension and prejudice thus become self-reciprocating problems within the U.S. Army, playing a significant role in its structure and order.

O'Brien observes that because of the high stakes of war, racial discrimination against black people and Vietnamese people has dramatic life-or-death consequences. American prejudice toward the Vietnamese endangers civilians, since American soldiers are much less empathetic toward them. O'Brien implies that Alpha Company's built-up hatred and racial animosity from Pinkville leads his company to later commit war crimes like burning villages, torturing civilians, and calling airstrikes on locations where they know there are women and children. Similarly, white officers' prejudice toward black soldiers leads to these black soldiers doing the worst, most dangerous jobs. The infantry, which is "disproportionately black," takes the heaviest losses by far, which means that black men die at much higher rates in the Vietnam War than white men do. A black man entering the war is most likely to be assigned an infantry role based on his race, putting him at far greater risk and lessening his chances of surviving the war at all, purely based on white officers' racial prejudice.

By O'Brien's account, racial prejudice influences all aspects of the Vietnam War. Although the Vietnamese people and black American soldiers likely harbor some of their own racial animus, as a white man, O'Brien is only positioned to describe how his own ethnic group asserts its racism onto the world around them.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION

O'Brien uses allusions to Jesus Christ's crucifixion to symbolize his changing perception of his role in the Vietnam War. The story contains three allusions to Christ's crucifixion and the events surrounding it. The night before O'Brien leaves for basic training at Fort Lewis, he states that he has a "Last Supper" with his family, referring to the final meal that Christ shared with his disciples before going to be crucified. Although O'Brien has no messianic visions of himself, the allusion represents his belief that as a soldier, he is a martyr—an innocent life sacrificed on behalf of his in a similar way that Christ was sacrificed on the cross for humanity. The second allusion to the crucifixion comes when Alpha Company ties three old Vietnamese men to trees in the middle of their encampment, leaving them bound and gagged all night to dissuade the Viet Cong from ambushing them. As O'Brien keeps watch, he calls them the "men at Golgotha," referring to the men crucified alongside Christ. The chapter is titled "Centurion," referencing the Roman Centurion that watched over the crucifixions and gave Christ a drink: O'Brien gives one of the Vietnamese men a drink in the same way. Additionally, this association indicates that O'Brien no longer sees himself as a martyr or a sacrificial lamb, but rather as a soldier that watches others be sacrificed and does not intervene to help them. The true martyrs or guiltless sacrifices in the Vietnam War are the powerless Vietnamese civilians, not the American soldiers. In O'Brien's friend Erik's final letter before leaving Vietnam, he tells O'Brien that he, too, feels like a "centurion" as he watches an American officer physically kick a Vietnamese woman off of a base. Erik writes that he sees Christ in the form of a "yellow-skinned harlot," again suggesting that the Vietnamese civilians are the only guiltless people in the Vietnam War, sacrificed for the aims of a foreign power.

THE LAGOON

The lagoon on the Batangan Peninsula represents Vietnam as a whole, contrasting the paradise it once must have been with the ravaged landscape it's become during the Vietnam War. Alpha Company spends time in the village tucked inside the lagoon, and O'Brien finds himself imagining how beautiful the place must once have been—the lagoon represents the quaint beauty of Vietnam before foreign powers invaded. O'Brien visualizes a simple, content, romantic fishing village whose only fear would have been a pesky sea monster that terrorized wayward children or foolish fishermen. O'Brien's idealized vision of the lagoon contrasts with its present reality (and thus Vietnam's present state more broadly) as a war-ravaged refugee camp covered in razor wire and surrounded by landmines. The contrast between O'Brien's vision of what the lagoon once was and observation of what it currently is symbolizes the terrible toll that the Vietnam War has wrought upon the country. When American artillery accidentally shoots the lagoon, maiming and killing dozens of villagers, O'Brien reflects that the U.S. Army is a worse monster than anything that could possible rise out of the lagoon's waters.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Broadway Books edition of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ On the perimeter of the village, the company began returning fire, blindly, spraying the hedges with M-16 and M-70 and M-60 fire. No targets, nothing to aim at and kill. Aimlessly, just shooting to shoot.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

While O'Brien marches with Alpha Company through Vietnam, they constantly endure brief attacks from the Viet Cong, who hide in the jungle, invisible. The Viet Cong practice guerrilla warfare tactics, meaning that they attack in small, quick ambushes rather than engaging in large-scale fights. This allows the Viet Cong to use their superior knowledge of their homeland to fight a larger, better-equipped army. For the Americans however, the Viet Cong's guerrilla warfare tactics and skill at hiding in the jungle means they rarely see the people who try to kill them—bullets simply come at them through the trees, with nobody behind them. For the American soldiers, this makes it difficult to effectively fight the Viet Cong, since they have no one to aim at,. It also distorts the traditional idea of an enemy: given that the American soldiers almost never see the Viet Cong, they struggle to maintain a clear idea in their mind of who they are actually fighting. However, their outrage at being constantly attacked and witnessing their fellow soldiers killed persists, and unfortunately this anger is often redirected toward Vietnamese civilians. Vietnamese innocents are much easier to find than the Viet Cong, and thus become a kind of representational enemy, a group against which the Americans can express their rage and frustration.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Norwegians and Swedes and Germans had taken the [Minnesota] plains from the Sioux. The settlers must have seen endless plains and eased their bones and said, "Here as well as anywhere, it's all the same."

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien recalls the small Minnesota town where he grows up, reflecting that it belonged to the Native Americans before the white settlers arrived and claimed the land as their own. O'Brien effectively describes his own ancestors as "invaders," a term that he later uses to describe Americans in Vietnam as well. O'Brien's connection between the European settlers' invasion of Native American land and the American soldiers' invasion of Vietnam suggests that the United States has a long history of invading other people's homes and imposing its own authority there. The American military's governance of South Vietnam—ordering civilians to move here or there, inflicting death and destruction at its own whim—thus echoes the manner in which European settlers decided that their claim of ownership superseded the Native Americans' claim to their own land. Significantly, however, O'Brien does not picture the European settlers as malicious—just largely indifferent to the claims or rights of other people. This, in turn, suggests that America's incursion into Vietnam is not necessarily malicious in and of itself, but is merely the result of American indifference toward the will of other countries—a lack of self-awareness mixed with poor judgment, which results in suffering and pain.

Chapter 3 Quotes

I declared my intention to have no part of Vietnam. With delightful viciousness, a secret will, I declared the war evil, the draft board evil, the town evil in its lethargic acceptance of it all.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

The night before O'Brien leaves for basic training, he sits in his parents' basement, writing his protests out on sheets of cardboard. Tim extends his declaration of the war's evil—which he continues to believe in for the rest of his life—to the draft board, the town, and any other entity that participates in or supports the Vietnam War. He extends responsibility from the military leaders to the entire country itself, suggesting that all citizens of a country participate in its wars in some way, whether by fostering a patriotic sense of duty that compels young men to fight, paying the taxes which fund the weapons, or electing war-mongering leaders. His criticism of his own town is particularly enlightening, since he finds the town's "lethargic acceptance of it all" to be its own form of evil. This suggests that sleepy small-town America passively participates in an evil war simply by accepting what their government tells them—they fail to challenge it, investigate it, or encourage their sons not to fight. O'Brien thus implicitly advocates for America's towns and communities and people to take a more active stance in their country's wars and to independently determine whether they are good or evil rather than simply trusting their government that the war is justified.

Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyze them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien feels unable to draw any specific moral lessons about the Vietnam War from his own experiences, particularly as a foot soldier. Although O'Brien feels unqualified to teach lessons from his recollection of the war, his experience as an infantryman arguably allow him to provide the most honest and direct perspective of the Vietnam War that an American soldier could possibly have. Many American soldiers in the war do not have to grapple with the full weight of its horror: for instance, people working in support roles in the rear, away from combat, will undoubtedly hear of the horror but will never be plagued by memories of their comrades dying around them or feel the guilt of having killed civilians. Likewise, high-ranking officers

are shielded from the horrific reality of the war by their station—they fly overhead in helicopters or command from headquarters bases, even as they send ground troops marching to their death. Although O'Brien feels that his lowly position prevents him from imparting any great lessons about warfare, that position allows him to speak as honestly and frankly about the horrific reality of war as any American soldier possibly can. As the lowest rank of soldier, O'Brien sees the very worst of the war and he can testify to what it is truly like.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Mama has been kissed good-bye, we've grabbed our rifles, we're ready for war. All this not because of conviction or ideology; rather it's from fear of society's censure [...] Fear of weakness. Fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood."

Related Characters: Erik (speaker), Tim O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

During basic training, O'Brien's friend and fellow soldier, Erik, reflects that they are preparing for a war they don't believe in or care about; they're simply afraid of not doing their duty. Contrary to popular portrayals of war, O'Brien depicts duty and patriotism as essentially negative forces, compelling young men to fight and die for causes they don't understand or don't agree with. Erik's belief that they are not acting out of "conviction or ideology" suggests that many soldiers actually defy their own consciences in order to adhere to society's expectation that they do their duty. Erik's discussion of fear implies that even one's sense of duty no longer comes from a sense of national pride or truly-held patriotism. Rather, soldiers do their duty because they fear that their friends, family, and community will reject them if they don't, or see them as cowards. Such a fear-based sense of duty will arguably only lead to disaster, since an entire country will embark on wars that its citizens may feel are wrong. This widespread fear of not meeting nationalistic expectations thus makes citizens feel compelled or even forced to fight, as if they were living in a non-democratic state.

We laughed. We congratulated ourselves. We felt smart. And later—much later—we wondered if maybe Blyton hadn't won a big victory that night.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Sergeant Blyton, Erik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

While on a punitive night patrol during basic training, Erik and O'Brien find a recruit making an unauthorized phone call. They consider letting him go without reporting him, but ultimately decide to turn him in, reasoning that he will take over their night patrol as punishment, allowing them to go to sleep. Although Erik and O'Brien resolve to resist Sergeant Blyton and the military's attempts to break down their conscience, this moment represents an unconscious submission to the army's structure and rules. Rather than recognize that the army's rules are arbitrary and let the recruit go free, Erik and O'Brien choose to uphold the army's rigid discipline and exert it on others for their own benefit. In this way, they betray their personal convictions for the sake of a few hours of sleep. Through its structure, the army effectively coerces Erik and O'Brien into setting their consciences aside to minimize their own suffering, which suggests that basic training and army structure are designed to condition its individual members into compliance with the whole. Rather than encourage individual thought or personal convictions, the army makes total compliance the easiest and most comfortable path to take, thus creating obedient, unquestioning soldiers who will follow orders to suffer as little as possible.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"If you accept, as I do, that America is one helluva great country, well, then you follow what she tells you. She says fight, the you go out and do your damnedest. You try to win."

Related Characters: Chaplain Edwards (speaker), Tim O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

When O'Brien tries to explain his ethical objections to the Vietnam War to Chaplain Edwards, Edwards explodes at him for questioning America's morality. Edwards's claim that America is a good country and thus anything America does is a good action carries a heavy undertone of American

exceptionalism and moral superiority. This statement fails to recognize that many Vietnamese people do not want America in their country at all—in fact, the Vietnamese name for the Vietnam War is "the Resistance War Against America." Believing that America's ideal of what Vietnam should be is inherently better than Vietnam's ideal for its own future has racist undertones, as it implies that American people (who are predominantly white) are naturally wiser or morally superior to Vietnamese people. This reframes the entire Vietnam War with a particularly racist, even colonial undertone, as it entails a foreign army invading Vietnam and trying to force the country's people to live and act in accordance with the foreigner's own standards.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Later two or three more men straggled out. No helmets, no weapons. They laughed and joked and drank. The first sergeant shouted something, but the men just giggled and sat on sandbags in their underwear.

Enemy rounds crashed in. The earth split. Most of Alpha Company slept.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

When O'Brien first meets Alpha Company on a base, Viet Cong fighters attack the base with mortars at night. Terrified, O'Brien waits for Alpha Company to fight back, but they either sleep through it or sit back and watch while laughing. As O'Brien later realizes, Alpha Company deals with the stress and trauma of war by pretending that it doesn't exist. The giggling soldiers contrast with O'Brien's image of the earth splitting and rocking with explosions, which emphasizes the degree to which Alpha Company's men separate themselves from reality. Their strange, almost nihilistic behavior—they don't take cover, even when a mortar round could easily kill them—suggests that combat can have a dissociative effect. In order to endure the brutal violence and horrific suffering of fighting in Vietnam, the American soldiers separate their minds from any consciousness of the ever-present danger to their bodies and lives. Although this seems an effective way to endure horrific suffering and constant danger, one can assume that this dissociative response to trauma has significant psychological effects— especially once those soldiers are home and they need to be mentally present in their lives once again. This represents yet another cost of a war that O'Brien categorizes as evil.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ [N]o one in Alpha Company gave a damn about the causes or purposes of their war: it is about "dinks and slopes," and the idea is simply to kill them or avoid them.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

In his first month with Alpha Company, O'Brien quickly learns that his fellow soldiers don't know why they are fighting in Vietnam, nor do they care—they simply want to survive. The fact that the soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War don't buy into its purposes implies that they are being forced to risk their lives for something they don't even believe in. Their country drafts them and calls them to make sacrifices for their country, even though they themselves don't believe those sacrifices are worth making. Additionally, O'Brien's reference to the term "dinks," an offensive racist slur against Southeast Asian people, indicates that the American soldiers see the Vietnamese people as inferior—a subhuman target to be annihilated.

All of this together reinforces O'Brien's argument that the Vietnam War is both evil and futile, and further implies that the only people who do believe in the purposes of the war—the high-ranking officers and government leader—are not the ones actually fighting and dying for it. This suggests that the war is fundamentally unjust, even toward the American foot soldiers. Vietnamese soldiers, Vietnamese civilians, and American soldiers thus suffer and die for a cause that only the American government seems to believe in, though the government leaders do not die for it themselves.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ I asked if the North Vietnamese were not the aggressors in the war. [Li] laughed and stated that of course the opposite was the case. They were defending Vietnam from American aggression.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Li

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien recalls meeting a North Vietnamese man named Li in Czechoslovakia, the year before O'Brien is drafted into the Vietnam War. Li is a soldier in the North Vietnamese Army, and O'Brien and Li discuss the ongoing war. Li explains that the North Vietnamese see America as a foreign invader rather than any sort of defender or support. Li laughs at the argument that the North Vietnamese are the real aggressors in the war, suggesting that from the Vietnamese perspective, seeing America as anything but an aggressive invader is laughable. Li's argument echoes O'Brien's own sense that he is part of an invading army in Vietnam, and recalls his earlier reflection that Minnesota was built by European invaders into Native American lands. His interaction with Li demonstrates that, in every war, there are multiple perspectives and it is wrong to assume that one's own nation is naturally morally superior. O'Brien's meeting with Li is critical to his personal development since it humanizes his "enemy" in the Vietnam War and helps him understand that his opponents see a different war and a different world than he does. This arguably contributes to the fact that O'Brien always expresses some hesitance about killing and never seems to enjoy it the way other American soldiers do.

> We stood straight up, in a row, as if it were a contest. I confronted the profile of a human being through my sight. It did not occur to me that a man would die when I pulled the trigger of that rifle.
>
> I neither hated the man nor wanted him dead, but I did fear him.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Erik, Captain Johansen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis

During an ambush, O'Brien, Captain Johansen, and another officer spot three Viet Cong soldiers sneaking out of a building. The three American soldiers take aim and fire. This is O'Brien's first time shooting at another human being. His lack of realization that he will kill the man in his sights if he shoots him again demonstrates how the soldiers in Alpha Company deal with the trauma of combat by disassociating themselves from reality—they make the world around them feel unreal, and thus less frightening or horrific. Moreover, O'Brien's sense that fear is the only reason he has to shoot another person echoes Erik's previous observation that fear drives each soldier's sense of duty and patriotism. Once again, O'Brien's experience of trying to kill another person suggests that the soldiers in the Vietnam don't fight out of any sense of conviction or ideological certainty that they are doing the right thing. Rather, they kill to survive and to keep their own fear at bay. This suggests that all of the horror and death of the war is ultimately meaningless: there is no passion or conviction behind it, no sense of a righteous war. Rather, fear and the desire to survive coerce the soldiers into butchering the enemy, making the whole affair seem needlessly evil.

Chapter 11 Quotes

> More Combat Assaults came in the next days. We learned to hate Colonel Daud and his force of helicopters. When he was killed by sappers in a midnight raid, we head the news over the radio. A lieutenant led us in song, a catchy, happy, celebrating song: Ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Colonel Daud

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

After Colonel Daud sends Alpha Company on repeated Combat Assaults—particularly risky, aggressive deployments into enemy territory—Alpha Company hates him so much that the celebrate when Viet Cong fighters finally kill him. The image of American soldiers cheering at a Viet Cong victory is obviously the opposite of how war traditionally works—the soldiers' enemy has killed one of their own leaders, yet they are happy. However, this suggests that Alpha Company's view of who their real enemy is is fluid, constantly changing. Alpha Company's hatred toward Daud for frequently sending them on dangerous missions makes him their greatest enemy in their eyes, since his reckless orders pose a greater risk to their lives than the average Viet Cong soldier does. This suggests that in a war the Alpha Company does not believe in, against guerrilla fighters they rarely see, the American soldiers view whomever causes them the most suffering as their greatest enemy. Their opponent is no longer just the other side of

the war, but even the people amid their own ranks who pose a threat to their survival. Therefore, if the soldiers' traditional enemy is able to destroy their internal enemy, a reckless and dangerous officer, they view it as a cause for celebration.

Chapter 13 Quotes

In the next days it took little provocation for us to flick the flint of our Zippo lighters. Thatched roofs take the flame quickly, and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk from Pinkville and to see fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate is good.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

After weeks in Pinkville, taking heavy losses from Viet Cong bullets and mines, Alpha Company starts setting fires to civilian villages, with or without cause. Although O'Brien does not always participate in Alpha Company's violence against civilians, he notably does not excuse himself from setting fire to villages, implying that he participates the same as anyone else. Such acts of violence are horrific and particularly notable coming from someone like O'Brien, a self-avowed "liberal" who does not otherwise enjoy killing and tries to resist racist animosity. Although O'Brien makes no excuses for the terrible things he does as part of Alpha Company—he even admits that they feel good in the moment—he does note that such despicable actions are the result of the soldiers' pent-up frustration and rage, their "pure hate." That is, the horrific environment in the Vietnam War primes soldiers to do terrible things, such as taking their fury out on civilians. O'Brien's admission of his own guilt in such actions both demonstrates that even conscientious American soldiers do terrible things in war, but also suggests that just because someone commits such actions doesn't mean that they are soulless monsters. Rather, soldiers like O'Brien find themselves thrust into a hellish environment and thus act hellishly themselves. Ultimately, war ruins even the best of people.

Chapter 15 Quotes

[The old men] were only a few feet away, hanging to their saplings like the men at Golgotha. I went to the oldest of them and pulled his gag out and let him drink from my canteen.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

When Alpha Company finds a rifle hidden in a Vietnamese village, they ransack the village, looking for enemies. The Company ends up taking three old men hostage for a night and tying them to trees in the middle of their encampment, figuring that Vietnamese soldiers won't ambush them if it would mean killing their own people. As O'Brien keeps watch at night, he thinks the three old men tied to trees resemble the men crucified alongside Jesus Christ. O'Brien makes several references to Christ's crucifixion throughout the novel, which reflect his changing perception of himself in the midst of the Vietnam War. In the beginning of the story, for instance, O'Brien feels like Christ himself, led to sacrifice himself for a greater cause.

However, O'Brien's description of the three Vietnamese prisoners as the crucified men while he stands guard suggests that he now identifies himself with the soldiers who carried out Christ's torture and crucifixion—he is no longer the person being sacrificed for a cause, but the person sacrificing someone else. The chapter's title, "Centurion," confirms this, since the soldiers in Christ's crucifixion are Roman centurions. Additionally, O'Brien's act of giving one of the men a drink from his canteen mirrors the centurion who gives Christ a drink while he hangs on the crucifix. O'Brien thus sees himself as the aggressor, the captor and torturer, who extends a small act of mercy to ease his own conscience. O'Brien clearly recognizes his own participation in an evil war which sacrifices Vietnamese civilians for an American cause.

Chapter 16 Quotes

I was not at My Lai when the massacre occurred. I was in the paddies and sleeping in the clay, with Johansen and Arizona and Alpha Company, a year and more later. But if a man can squirm in the meadow, he can shoot children. Neither are examples of courage.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Arizona, Captain Johansen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien decides that courage is the wisdom to know right from wrong combined with the willpower to do what is right, in spite of one's fear. His reflection on the My Lai Massacre implies that he believes if he were present, he would have murdered children just like all the other soldiers did. In the context of his reflection on courage, this implies that O'Brien does not view himself as courageous (he later states this outright) since he does not believe he would have had the willpower to oppose the rest of his company. More broadly, O'Brien's mournful admission that he would've participated in the massacre suggests that every person, regardless of ethics or conscience, is capable of committing horrific evil in particular situations. O'Brien's own participation in violence against civilians leaves him with a cynical, though honest, reckoning of human nature: he no longer believes that good people will naturally do good things unless they are extraordinarily courageous. This pessimistic belief in human behavior illuminates how the Vietnam War could spiral from a presumably well-meant campaign into a needless and horrific war that O'Brien cannot see as anything but evil.

> Courage is nothing to laugh at, not if it is proper courage and exercised by men who know what they do is proper. 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.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Major Callicles, Captain Johansen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien reflects on the true meaning of courage, deciding that bravery requires both the wisdom to know what is right and the willpower to do what is right, regardless of fear. This definition of courage, which Captain Johansen embodies, notably contrasts with the military's traditional ideal of courage, which Major Callicles later embodies with his belief that courage means having "guts" and taking action. O'Brien's view of courage importantly requires that one possess good judgment and truly reflect on what is right and what is wrong. In O'Brien's view, most people's lack of courage becomes particularly notable in Vietnam, as low- and high-ranking soldiers commit terrible acts because they lack either the wisdom to recognize their own evil or the willpower to act on what they know is the right thing to do. Additionally, O'Brien's view of courage links it directly to conscience—one cannot do what they know to be right unless they are wise and conscientious in the first place. Since O'Brien pits one's conscience against one's sense of duty throughout the novel, having courage in this way will ideally lead a person to defy their sense of duty or patriotism in order to do what they know is right.

> Captain Johansen helped to mitigate and melt the silliness [of the war], showing the grace and poise a man can have under the worst of circumstances, a wrong war.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), Captain Johansen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

As Captain Johansen nears the end of his combat career, O'Brien views Johansen as one of the few men in the Vietnam War who possesses true courage, especially in the way that he tries to shield his men from the most absurd aspects of the war and military hierarchy. Johansen possesses both wisdom to know what is right and the willpower to act on that wisdom under pressure, as demonstrated by his decisions to defy his superior officers when they order Alpha Company to execute pointless and dangerous ambushes. However, O'Brien's idolization of Captain Johansen is tempered by the fact that Johansen leads Alpha Company through Pinkville, is there when they set fire to villages and torture civilians, and even remarks that there are many times when he wishes he'd acted better in the war. This shows that even the most courageous men commit heinous actions during war, but also suggests that O'Brien's view of Captain Johansen is somewhat tinted. If Johansen were entirely courageous, he arguably would have stopped his men from doing some of the things they did. However, since Johansen is Alpha Company's only commander who ever puts the soldiers first and truly cares

for them, he is still a comparatively courageous (though far from perfect) leader.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ The next day we blew up tunnels and bomb shelters. A piece of clay came down and hit a man, slicing off his nose, and he drowned to death in his own blood. He had been eating ham and eggs out of a can.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

During an uneventful morning, O'Brien includes these two sentences to describe the random death of one soldier while he sits eating breakfast. Although the incident is only a minor aside in the narrative, the soldier's death typifies the random deaths that occur throughout the Vietnam War. The bizarre circumstances of the soldier's death and the nonchalant way in which O'Brien describes it both indicate that death occurs frequently, often without real meaning our purpose. Such a random death defies the heroic ideal of American soldiers dying nobly for their country, sacrificing their lives for a righteous cause. Rather, the soldier who drowns to death in his own blood while eating his breakfast epitomizes the meaningless and gratuitous violence of the Vietnam War, devoid of any meaning or valor. Once again, this senseless loss of life depicts the Vietnam War as needlessly lethal, and thus evil.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Thirty-three villagers were wounded. Thirteen were killed [...] Certain blood for uncertain reasons. No lagoon monster ever terrorized like this.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

While Alpha Company camps at a small lagoon village, a nearby American artillery base miscalculates their firing coordinates and accidentally shoots the village, maiming and killing tens of Vietnamese civilians. The lagoon works as a symbol to compare what Vietnam could be without the American military ravaging the country against what it looks like after years of warfare. O'Brien imagines that the lagoon was once a beautiful, idyllic little fishing port with a local sea monster as it's only villain. Now, instead, the village is war-torn and destitute, covered in razor wire and landmines. O'Brien's feeling that the American military inflicts far greater suffering than any lagoon monster could implies that the American military is itself a monstrous entity, bringing suffering to a people that do not deserve it. Moreover, the villagers die in a completely random miscalculation—the artillery base isn't even firing at an enemy. The randomness of the attack that maims and kills dozens of civilians reinforces the needless suffering characteristic of the Vietnam War. O'Brien's remark, "certain blood for uncertain reasons," suggests that the only clear thing about the Vietnam War is that civilians will suffer and die.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker), O'Brien's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien again reflects on how soldiers in the Vietnam War do not believe in the war they are fighting or aspire to be courageous warriors—they simply want to endure and survive. O'Brien's reflection implies that the Vietnam War changes the concept of the American soldier, marking a transition in the how the country conducts and perceives war. O'Brien's father served in World War II, and O'Brien recalls growing up idolizing veterans like his father and their fight against Germany and Japan, viewing them as valorous warriors fighting for a noble cause. His own experience of being a soldier in Vietnam could not be more opposite—the violence is horrific, their missions lack purpose, and nobody feels patriotic or particularly interested in winning. Due to its nebulous motivations, high civilian death toll, and new

horrific techniques of killing enemies, the Vietnam War thus represents the turning point in which both American soldiers and the American public cease to view American wars as implicitly righteous or noble causes. By O'Brien's estimation, serving as an American soldier is no longer a noble duty or an honor, but a hellish task forced on people without justifiable cause. There is no more honor or valor in war.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ Needless to say, I am uncomfortable in my thoughts toady. Perhaps it's that I know I will leave this place alive and I need to suffer for that.

But, more likely, what I see is evil.

Related Characters: Erik (speaker), Tim O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Erik writes a letter to O'Brien, reflecting on the Vietnam War as he is about to leave it and return to America. Erik's statement that he "needs to suffer" for surviving the war untouched implies that he feels guilty for it. Erik's burden of guilt appears to stem from the fact that he participated in an evil war without injury, while Vietnamese civilians endure that same war—which they never asked for—and suffer in catastrophic numbers. It seems unjust to him that so many people suffer and die, while he suffers nothing at all. Erik's guilt at surviving suggests that even soldiers who didn't witness death and horrific suffering and weren't injured in combat themselves are still are marked by the horror of what they participated in, even in support roles away from combat. This reiterates the brutal cost of the Vietnam War, demonstrating that its impact on returning soldiers can take many different forms, whether physical injury or emotional pain. Like O'Brien, Erik blatantly states that the Vietnam War is an evil action, a horror that the American government should never have wrought upon the world and a stain on the entire nation's conscience.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ "When you go into My Lai you assume the *worst*. When you go into My Lai, shit, you know—you assume—that they're all VC [Viet Cong]. Ol' Charlie with big tits and nice innocent, childlike eyes. Damn it, they're all VC, you should know that."

Related Characters: Major Callicles (speaker), Tim O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

While O'Brien works as a typist in his final months at war, Major Callicles tries to defend the My Lai Massacre as a justifiable military action, arguing that any Vietnamese civilian could conceivably be a Viet Cong militant. Major Callicles represents pure, unhinged militarism at its worst. He believes the American military is morally superior to anyone else and thus is always in the right, even in the case of the My Lai Massacre, where an American platoon murdered hundreds of civilians. Callicles's attempt to justify the massacre obviously represents the danger and inhumanity of such a persona. His argument that every civilian is likely a combatant and should be shot is obviously wrong, even reprehensible. However, it does demonstrate the difficulty of fighting in a guerrilla war. Since the Viet Cong rely on ambushes and hit-and-run tactics, they often do not wear uniforms. Guerrilla fighters can be young or old, men or women, thus making it very difficult for American soldiers to determine who is a threat and who is a civilian. The emergence of guerrilla warfare during Vietnam illuminates part of the reason why the war is so much more horrific and filled with atrocities than past wars: often, the American soldiers simply do not know who they are fighting and who will try to kill them.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ The stewardess comes through the cabin, spraying a mist of invisible sterility into the pressurized, scrub-filtered, temperature-controlled air, killing mosquitoes and unknown diseases, protecting herself and America from the Asian evils, cleansing us all forever.

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien boards the plane that will take him home, away from Vietnam and back to the U.S., and a stewardess sprays them all with disinfectant. The stewardess and her disinfectant killing all of the "Asian evils" symbolizes

America's expectation that its soldiers will return from the Vietnam War and leave all of their problems behind them, rather than bringing their physical and psychological pain back into America. O'Brien's statement that the stewardess is "cleansing us all forever" sarcastically implies that America not only expects its soldiers to leave their problems behind, but to live out the rest of their lives as if their country didn't subject them to horrific suffering and evil. Although O'Brien does not write about his life after he returns home, the bitter sarcasm here suggests that he will struggle to live as a civilian after the madness and horror he saw in Vietnam.

Speaking more broadly, America's desire to keep the "evils" in Vietnam, rather than allowing them back into its own borders, suggests that the country is happy to undertake horrific wars and cause terrible levels of death and suffering, so long as those "evils" happens in someone else's home. If America's wars caused such awful suffering in places like O'Brien's own rural Minnesota, the government likely wouldn't have the stomach to carry them out, especially not for the two decades over which the Vietnam War stretched.

> You add things up. You lost a friend to the war, and you gained a friend. You compromised one principle and fulfilled another. You learned, as old men tell in front of the courthouse, that war is not all bad; it may not make a man of you, but it teaches you that manhood is not something to scoff; some stories of valor are true; dead bodies are heavy, and it's better not to touch them; fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out and die [...]

Related Characters: Tim O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

In the last pages of his memoir, O'Brien reflects on things he learned and things he didn't learn in the Vietnam War. His summary of the war is pointedly rambling and disorganized, suggesting that he sees his experience in Vietnam as a confusing jumble of memories and thoughts. The randomness of his thoughts and their haphazard nature suggest that his time in combat cannot be easily understood and that moral lessons are not simply waiting there to be picked out. War is confusing and contradictory. This ending reflects O'Brien's statement in the early pages of his memoir that, as a foot soldier, he doesn't feel that he has any moral lessons to impart; he can only "tell war stories." Although his memoir has notable themes repeating throughout, this ending leaves the reader to draw their own conclusions from his experience in Vietnam. More than anything, O'Brien's scattered recollection of the war argues that war is chaotic, horrific, and nearly impossible to understand.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: DAYS

Tim O'Brien and a soldier named Barney take cover in a jungle in Vietnam. Snipers take shots at them, but O'Brien and Barney can't see where they're coming from so they don't bother to shoot back. While they lie in the brush, they chat about Cleveland. Barney shows O'Brien his helmet, where he's made tick marks to count the number of times that snipers have shot at them today. They are up to their 10th encounter so far. Barney seems upbeat, unbothered by any of the danger. When they start marching again, O'Brien lets Barney stay ahead of him a few meters since he knows Barney won't look carefully for mines before stepping.

This opening portrays the nature of life during the Vietnam War as both tense and dull. The snipers shoot at O'Brien and Barney, obviously intending to kill them, which demonstrates that death could come at any moment. At the same time, Barney and O'Brien's idle chatter suggests that the find the experience tedious and repetitive. The fact that O'Brien and Barney don't even have visible targets to shoot back at foreshadows O'Brien's ongoing struggle to clearly define who the enemy is.

O'Brien and Barney keep hiking through the jungle, chatting. A sniper takes one shot at them, so they dive for cover before continuing on their way. With their squads, they stop and prepare to search an abandoned village for Viet Cong, though O'Brien thinks it's a waste of time. They never find the Viet Cong; the Viet Cong always find them instead. Captain Johansen reports their location to headquarters on the radio, then he sits with O'Brien and Barney and smokes a cigarette. Johansen tells O'Brien that their search hopefully won't take long.

O'Brien's statement that the Viet Cong always find the Americans, never the other way around, suggests that the Vietnamese guerrillas are far more adept at operating in their dense jungle environment. Meanwhile, the fact that Captain Johansen casually smokes and chats with his soldiers suggests that although he is a commander, he has good rapport with his men.

Carefully, the American squads fan out and slowly sweep through the village, watching for booby traps, "hoping to find nothing." They find three tunnels, but rather than crawl in and search them and possibly set off a mine, the soldiers decide to just throw grenades in and collapse them. Gunfire erupts on the edge of the villages. Soldiers take cover and shoot "blindly" into the jungle—"nothing to aim at and kill." The gunfire stops and O'Brien reflects that there is no "developing drama" to their war. Something happens, then it stops abruptly. As the soldiers sit back down, O'Brien remarks that there is "no fear left in [them]."

The soldiers' hope that they will not find anything suggests that they care less about killing enemy soldiers or accomplishing objectives than they do about surviving. This hints at the soldiers' general indifference about the war itself or any of its aims. Again, the fact that the soldiers shoot blindly into the brush, without any targets to aim at, foreshadows the story's loose definition of who the American soldiers' enemy truly is, especially when the people trying to kill them are practically invisible.

As the sun sets, the soldiers dig foxholes to sleep in and they eat rations from tin cans. At night, the real fear sets in as the soldiers' imaginations populate the pitch black jungle. However, despite several firefights, they took no casualties that day, which makes them more confident to face the night. The soldiers rotate guards throughout the night, knowing that they will be attacked before sunrise as they always are. Late in the night, six mortar rounds strike nearby, but no one is hit. Bates tells Barney the Viet Cong must be running out of ammunition. In all, it isn't a bad night.

The soldiers' fear of the dark and their fantasies that the Viet Cong are coming for them at night suggests that the Viet Cong have become fixtures in their imagination, likely due to the fact that the American soldiers so rarely actually see the Viet Cong during the day. The predictability of this potentially lethal mortar attacks suggests that life as a soldier becomes oddly routine, even though it is always a matter of life and death.

CHAPTER 2: PRO PATRIA

O'Brien recalls that he is raised to believe that war is right. His parents both served in World War II, and as a child he grows up pretending to be a soldier and buying old relics from an army surplus store. His family lives in southern Minnesota, on land that used to be "Indian land," between Sioux and Cherokee territory. A "celebrated massacre" occurred there generations before. "Norwegians and Swedes and Germans had taken the plains from the Sioux" and settled there themselves.

O'Brien's childhood conditions him to believe the commonly-held notion that America is justified in whatever war it engages in. However, his recognition that his Minnesota town is built on stolen Native American land suggests that he breaks from traditional, nationalistic views of history. O'Brien envisions the original European settlers as invaders, which he will later relate to America's presence in Vietnam.

O'Brien remarks that the town he grows up in is not a "thoughtful" place. As a youth, he hears about World War II from the old veterans who believe the war had to be fought. He hears about the Korean War being fought by the young men, some of whom seem haunted by the experience. But life goes on. Their town is mildly famous for their Turkey Day parade. O'Brien and his neighbors listen to the radio, ride amusement park rides, and try to play sports. By the end of middle school, O'Brien realizes he is too small to be an athlete, so he takes to reading instead.

O'Brien's memory of past veterans in his town suggests that his town's military history frames his upbringing and sense of identity. His recollection of radio programs, amusement park rides, and sports indicates that he enjoys a standard American childhood, with all of the safety and security it brings. His turn to reading, rather than sports, further indicates that he is more of an intellectual than a fighter.

As a teenager, amid learning to drive, taking girls on dates, and going to dances, O'Brien develops an interest in politics. He goes to a democratic meeting but he gives it up because he thinks the liberals sound the same as the people backing Nixon. Everything in O'Brien's town feels basically the same as everything else. He wanders town and thinks about God: the idea doesn't make sense to O'Brien and he wonders if he's an atheist.

O'Brien's interest in democratic politics suggests that he is a liberal thinker. The sameness of all things in America echoes O'Brien's later feeling that everything in Vietnam is effectively the same as well—one attack feels like another attack and the days blur together.

CHAPTER 3: BEGINNING

In 1968, home from college after graduation, O'Brien receives a draft notice that inducts him into the Vietnam War. He keeps it tucked in his billfold and spends the summer drinking coffee and beer, playing golf, and debating the ethics of war with his hometown friends. College friends visit and ask what O'Brien will do, but he doesn't know yet. All of their debates about war and ethics feel futile when the "smiling" people at the draft board are asking O'Brien to serve his country.

O'Brien's complex discussion on ethics contrasts with the "smiling" people at the draft board expecting him to serve. This contrast reflects the story's thematic conflict between conscience, which tells O'Brien not to fight in an evil war, and duty, which encourages him to serve his country regardless of what he feels.

O'Brien considers running away, partly because he is scared but mainly because he believes the war is wrong and causes so much death that it is evil. He has his doubts about whether he is right, especially since his town and family believe in patriotic service. Their influence eventually outweighs O'Brien's moral objections, and he feels that "gravity" rather than "reason" leads him to accept his draft notice. All summer, his family avoids the subject of the war. O'Brien reflects that he's lived in this town until now, benefited from its care. Just as Socrates chose to accept his execution, so O'Brien should accept his military service. If he really wanted to move to Canada, O'Brien thinks, he could have done it before being drafted.

O'Brien lets his sense of duty to his family and community outweigh his conscience. However, his feeling that "gravity" draws him into military service suggests that serving is not his active choice, just the default of letting himself be pulled along. This suggests that for some soldiers, duty is something they feel passively, driving them toward a decision they might never actively make on their own. In this sense, duty is arguably a negative force since it pushes people to defy their conscience.

At the end of the summer, the time comes for O'Brien to join the army. His family has "a cautious sort of **Last Supper** together" and prepares for him to leave, until his father looks at his draft papers and realizes O'Brien is not supposed to report in until tomorrow—he'd read the notice wrong. They breath a sigh of relief and O'Brien takes a long drive around the lake next to town. He feels like his sense of self and the war are permanently "grafted together," unable to exist without each other, and it makes him angry. At night, in his family's basement, O'Brien writes out his opposition to the war on pieces of cardboard, declaring the war and the draft board are evil, and even the town is evil for accepting that the war must be fought.

O'Brien and his family's "Last Supper" is a reference to the last meal that Jesus Christ has with his friends before he is crucified. O'Brien makes several such allusions to Christ's crucifixion throughout the story, which reflects his perception of his relationship to the war. This allusion does not suggest that O'Brien is any sort of messianic figure, but rather that he is being sacrificed as a martyr for a larger cause, just as Christianity teaches that God sacrificed Jesus Christ to save humanity. O'Brien's declaration that the town is evil for passively accepting a misguided war suggests that all Americans, by accepting the actions of their government, participate in the evils that the country commits.

O'Brien tries to read his declarations aloud but instead he tears up the signs and throws them away, feeling like a coward. O'Brien reflects that he's never been one to take a stand—he's always been a listener instead. He thinks about his friends' and neighbors' theoretical arguments about war but he figures that all of these ideas matter less when the war in question seems wrong in and of itself.

Although critics sometimes label O'Brien an anti-war writer, his statement that the Vietnam War in particular is wrong suggests that he does not oppose all wars—only ones that are fought for the wrong reasons.

On August 13, O'Brien boards a bus that takes him to basic training. The next day, he and all the other new recruits raise their hands in the air and swear their induction oath. O'Brien never been a fighter; he's a "confirmed liberal," though not an outright pacifist. Nevertheless, he thinks the Vietnam War should end, though his moral convictions don't have the energy to stand against the weight of his community's expectations. O'Brien fears the exile that would result from refusing to fight, and after the war is over he still feels that conflict. He wishes his book could carry succinct moral lessons, a warning to future generations, but all he has are his experiences. As a foot soldier, all he can do is "tell war stories."

O'Brien's feeling that his moral convictions don't have the strength to stand against his community's expectations suggests that duty, though largely passive, is still a powerful and even crushing force. O'Brien's fear of exile indicates that his desire to belong to the world he grew up in outweighs his desire to avoid fighting. His eventual feeling that he has no morals to preach, only stories to share, suggests that even years later, his experiences feel chaotic and inexplicable.

CHAPTER 4: NIGHTS

At night, a lieutenant shouts "incoming" as grenades and gunfire burst along the edge of their perimeter. O'Brien and several others dive into a foxhole. When the noise settles, a soldier shows Mad Mark his bleeding hand, where a piece of grenade shrapnel hit him. Mad Mark thinks he'll be fine. In the morning, they all discover that there was no attack: a few American soldiers were bored and decided to play a prank, faking an ambush. One of pranksters, referred to as "Turnip Head," is the man with shrapnel in his hand. Bates thinks Turnip Head is lucky his grenade didn't bounce back to him and kill him. Chip says the soldiers are "nutty" for taking stupid chances.

The soldiers' decision to play a prank with real bullets and real grenades suggests that many of them possess poor judgment, inflicting unnecessary danger on their comrades in an already stressful environment. Turnip Head's self-inflicted injury, as a result of his own prank, could have ended in someone's death, which demonstrates how people in the Vietnam War can die in random, senseless ways. However, Bates's and Chip's irritation shows that some soldier possess more common sense.

The soldiers march on, each carrying a rucksack, grenades, bullets, rifle, helmet, dogtags, and their own fat, muscle, and flesh. They walk carefully, looking for mines as they step. The squad leader orders a five-minute break but advises his men to watch where they sit down. They keep marching until the end of the day, then they dig foxholes and lay out their ponchos.

O'Brien's list of gear and weight suggests that the soldiers carry heavy burdens—both physical and emotional—as they hike through the Vietnamese jungle. This gear list forms the symbolic basis of O'Brien's fictionalized memoir, The Things They Carried, which he writes two decades later.

O'Brien, Bates, Barney, and Chip look through a "starlight scope," a new night-vision device developed by the government. They look into the dark jungle, listening for sounds of Viet Cong. Chip jokes that he can see a peep show amid the trees. In reality, there's nothing out there: the night is less alive than they imagine it to be. Bates thinks that being able to see during a pitch-black night feels evil. Chip and Barney go to sleep. Bates and O'Brien wait up awhile, then pack the scope back into its case and fall asleep as well, Bates cradling his rifle.

The empty jungle contrasts with the soldiers' fantasies of what hunts them in the darkness, suggesting that their own imaginations can be as much of an enemy as the actual Viet Cong, making the darkness more fearsome than it actually needs to be. In this way, the Viet Cong wage a kind of invisible though ever-present psychological warfare on the American soldiers. Bates falls asleep cradling his rifle, evoking the image of a child with a blanket or doll, suggesting that his weapon is his sole source of comfort at night.

CHAPTER 5: UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

O'Brien states that to understand the minefields around My Lai, one also has to understand basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington. He befriends a recruit named Erik, though he never meant to make friends. O'Brien hates his time in Fort Lewis: he hates the drill sergeants, the officers, and the gung-ho new recruits. O'Brien knowingly considers himself above it all and resolves to not make friends and to suffer silently and alone. He dreams about a girl back home, idealizing her into something more than she is. He thinks about Canada and desertion as well.

O'Brien's recognized sense of self-superiority suggests that his ethical objection to the war and military is mixed with some level of egotism. His decision to suffer alone implies that in his mind, he sees himself as some sort of martyr figure. This belies a particular level of arrogance mixed with O'Brien's anti-war bent, indicating that he is still young and naïve about his place in the world.

Eventually, O'Brien tires of silently suffering. He asks Erik, sitting on the bunk next to him, what book he is reading. Erik hands him *The Mint* by T.E. Lawrence, and O'Brien thinks that by picking up the book and making a friend, he finally becomes a soldier. He and Erik talk about poetry, literature, travel, and their mutual disdain for army culture. They resolve to fight the army together, to keep themselves and each other from becoming "cattle" like all the other young soldiers.

O'Brien's sense that he becomes a soldier as soon as he makes a friend suggests that camaraderie—even a bond based on mutual disdain for the army—is central to the soldier's identity and ability to endure hardship. Erik and O'Brien's desire not to become "cattle" suggests they want to maintain their individualism, even as the army tries to strip it away.

O'Brien and Erik rarely actually assert themselves against the war and basic training. One day Erik tells their drill sergeant, Sergeant Blyton, about his moral opposition to the war, and Blyton shouts and calls him a coward, watching him closely from then on. Erik fears that the sergeant is right—that all of Erik's moral arguments are just masking his simple fear of dying in Vietnam. To avoid Blyton, Erik and O'Brien start spending their time sitting on a log behind the barracks, where they can be alone. Erik talks about how Robert Frost is the greatest American poet but Ezra Pound is the "truest." He recites some of Pound's verse and thinks Pound is right: they are going off to war not for "conviction" or "ideology," but just because they fear society's rejection and fear that they might not be heroes after all.

Sergeant Blyton is one of several characters who embodies the spirit of the army, and his charge that Erik is a coward for disagreeing with the war suggests that the military views anything less than total compliance as cowardice or insubordination. This obsession with compliance and obedience suggests that the military discourages free thought or individualism. Erik believes that fear may fuel his anti-war sentiments, but fear also compels him to do his duty and fight for his country. This suggests that fear, in some form or another, is a primary motivator for much of life.

The squad leader shouts at everyone in the barracks to wake up at three in the morning. The squad leader is as new as anyone else but he's loud and he loves his new power. O'Brien hates him. A large recruit named Harry shouts back at the squad leader and threatens him, so the squad leader sets about bullying the smaller, younger boys, including a helpless kid named Kline. Everyone sets to getting dressed and scrubbing down the barracks. At four thirty, they march out into the cold Washington rain. Someone shoves Kline into place as he "practices coming to attention." Sergeant Blyton arrives. O'Brien knows that, as drill sergeant, he must play a hated role and be severe, but O'Brien and Erik think he is evil, an embodiment of the army itself. Sergeant Blyton bullies Kline.

The squad leader seems to fear Harry and so chooses to bully Kline instead, who seems a weaker and easier target. Sergeant Blyton picks on Kline as well. Both instances suggest that the army encourages men to form a hierarchy among themselves and belittle the people below them, perhaps to feel a sense of power. However, whatever power the squad leader or Sergeant Blyton feel from harassing Kline is plainly just bullying, suggesting that the army creates an petulant, even childish, environment in which each person tries to prove themselves more powerful than the people around them.

All morning, the recruits march and sing different army songs, mostly about women, sex, or "Charlie Cong." One of the songs states, "If I die in a combat zone / Box me up and ship me home." O'Brien thinks about his girlfriend, who just told him in a letter that she's going to Europe. The recruits practice crawling beneath barbed wire, shooting, and stabbing with bayonets. By the songs and Sergeant Blyton's reckoning, "there is no thing named love in the world. Women are villains," the enemy. The company lines up while the battalion commander does his inspection.

Sergeant Blyton's belief that women are the enemy suggests that the army firmly opposes feelings like romance, love, or tenderness, since they seem to contradict the manly bravado and need to show one's own strength that the army fosters. This again portrays the military's culture as childish in its attempt to stamp out any form of sensitivity or individualism from its men.

At ten o'clock at night, all the recruits return to the barracks, clean the place again for an hour, and fall asleep. O'Brien sits on the stairs outside in the middle of the night, on "fire watch." He smokes and wonders how Socrates faced his own death, and where he and all the literary heroes found their bravery.

O'Brien uses Plato's description of Socrates facing his own execution to contemplate the meaning of courage and bravery. His question of where people find their bravery implies that he wonders if he will ever find his own.

One day, Sergeant Blyton finds O'Brien and Erik sitting behind the barracks, talking alone during their off-hours. He yells and calls them "pussies" several times, accuses them of being homosexuals, and declares that they'll be on guard duty for the night. O'Brien and Erik report to Blyton in the evening and spend the first half of their night walking rounds around the fort. They don't mind—it's a good chance to be alone and talk. With the seclusion of the night, they feel almost "free" for the first time in weeks.

Sergeant Blyton's crude outburst depicts him as a foul, even childish figure, while his anger that O'Brien and Erik spend their free time alone suggests that the army despises individualism and wants all of its men to work, think, and rest as a group, presumably to make them more compliant and less likely to question the group's actions.

After several hours of walking, O'Brien and Erik find a recruit making an "unauthorized phone call." Erik and O'Brien briefly debate whether they should report the kid. They figure if they do, Sergeant Blyton will be ordered to relieve them and they can go to sleep. They decide to report the recruit, and he takes over O'Brien and Erik's patrol for the rest of the night. They have a good laugh, feeling smart, and go to sleep. Looking back, O'Brien figures that Sergeant Blyton "won a big victory that night."

Blyton's "big victory" suggests that, when Erik and O'Brien report the other recruit, they submit to the military hierarchy to personally benefit themselves, thus making them closer to compliant soldiers than individualistic, conscientious objectors.

At the end of basic training, Erik and O'Brien walk to the processing station. Erik volunteered to serve extra time to avoid infantry assignment, so the army places him in a transportation unit. O'Brien gambled, imagining that they'd assign him to be a typist or clerk. Instead, the army assigns him to be a "grunt," a foot soldier. He walks Erik to the bus and sees him off.

O'Brien's assignment as a foot soldier means he will be in the most dangerous role in the Vietnam War. His belief that the army would naturally place him in some role other than a simple soldier suggests that he still maintains a level of egotism and hubris, believing that he is too intelligent and skilled to be a simple soldier.

CHAPTER 6: ESCAPE

O'Brien moves to "advanced infantry training." On their first day, their new drill sergeant makes sure they understand that every person there is going to combat in Vietnam in eight weeks. Until then, they'll learn to use claymore mines, machine guns, grenade launchers, and pistols. After their introductions and getting moved into new barracks, the new infantrymen are allowed to go on leave.

When O'Brien chose not to dodge the draft and run to Canada, he still had the possibility of being assigned a desk job in Vietnam, away from combat. However, his placement in advanced infantry training leaves no possibility open that he will not have to go to combat.

O'Brien goes to the library in Tacoma and starts researching army deserters, finding interviews and articles about them in old newspapers. He learns that Sweden harbors American deserters and allows them to live openly. Many also live in France, but under false identities. O'Brien calls a bus station and asks about fares into Canada, disguising his voice in case the army can somehow hear him. He calls the airport in Seattle and asks about fares for flights to various European cities, noting them down. O'Brien returns to his corner in the library and does the math on how much money he'll need. He writes a letter to his parents asking for his passport and immunization records. His plan could work: bus to Canada, flight to Ireland, boat to Sweden. He'll just need $500.

O'Brien's renewed desire to escape stems from the confirmation that he will definitely be in combat in Vietnam. The fact that there is so much material available on American deserters, as well as the fact that many allied countries appear to harbor them, suggests that by 1969, international sentiment opposes America's presence in Vietnam enough that desertion is becoming common. Countries like Sweden and Canada even harbor people who refuse to fight, suggesting that they view deserting America as a better alternative to helping it carry out its unethical war.

Fort Lewis is miserable in winter. O'Brien watches the days go by, feeling "alone and sad and scared and desperate." O'Brien's passport arrives and he arranges to speak with the battalion commander, though first he must go through the chaplain, who "weeds out the pussies from the men with real problems." The chaplain is a man named Edwards, congenial and easy to like. O'Brien thinks he is perfectly suited to convincing kids to go to war. Edwards listens attentively as O'Brien lays out his moral objections to the war and asks the chaplain if one doesn't prove himself a man by sticking to his convictions and "reasoned judgments."

O'Brien's decision to discuss his objections with his battalion commander before deserting suggests that he would rather refuse to participate through legal, official means if they are available. This further suggests that O'Brien does not want to turn his back on America—he simply does not want to participate in the Vietnam War. The chaplain's perfect suitability to convincing soldiers to fight suggests that the military coerces soldiers to contradict their consciences.

Edwards responds that O'Brien simply has to have "faith" that the army is right. O'Brien presses him on this, and Edwards explodes with anger, accusing O'Brien of being "disturbed" and reading the wrong books. He states that America is a "good country" and any war it fights is therefore a good war, a war they must win; having faith is the good Christian way to live, the thing that motivated the crusaders to fight and die. They argue about history and ethics. Edwards implies that Vietnam is a righteous crusade, but he backtracks when O'Brien challenges him on it. O'Brien doesn't believe that a communist Vietnam would be necessarily worse than what it is now.

Edward's anger that O'Brien would challenge American virtues, along with his belief that any war America fights is naturally a moral war, suggest that he sees America as a superior country to all others. This implies that America's vision for Vietnam is inherently better than North Vietnam's vision for their own country. This belief in America's superiority carries an undertone of racial prejudice, since Edwards believes that the U.S. (a predominantly white country) knows better than the Vietnamese people.

Edwards accuses O'Brien of "betraying" America by saying such things. He says that despite O'Brien's intellect, there's no place for "guts and bravery" or "God and the unknown" in his view of the world. Edwards has been to Vietnam himself and he exclaims that "this is a fine, heroic moment for American soldiers." O'Brien asks what happens to his soul if he defies his conscience and kills people for a cause he doesn't believe him. Edwards ends the conversation and arranges O'Brien a meeting with the battalion commander. As they walk out of the office, Edwards apologizes and shakes O'Brien's hand. He says he's just tired of how many kids don't want to fight these days. Edwards wishes O'Brien well and invites O'Brien to visit him when he gets back from Vietnam.

Edwards belief in "guts and bravery" and heroism suggests that he cares more about living out these ideals than about whether the Vietnam War is actually an ethically justifiable campaign. For Edwards, the actual cause matters less than soldiers acting bravely. The connection between being brave and having "guts" appears several times throughout the story, ultimately becoming a connection that O'Brien criticizes as foolish and antithetical to true courage.

The battalion commander tells O'Brien his thoughts about the Vietnam War, how it's not so different from the Korean War besides the guerrilla warfare element. O'Brien tries to explain his ethical objections to fighting, but the commander speaks over him and says that he knows O'Brien's afraid, but once he starts fighting he'll find it so exciting that he won't be scared anymore. The commander thanks O'Brien for coming in and dismisses him.

The commander completely dismisses O'Brien's concerns, suggesting that within the military's hierarchy, nobody cares about a low-ranking individual's opinion on ethics. The commander's assumption that O'Brien is merely afraid suggests that he does not recognize why someone would ethically oppose America's actions.

O'Brien spends his off-hours planning his desertion and writing letters to family and friends, explaining his position. He finds them difficult to write. Two weeks before Christmas, he has enough money scraped together to make his journey. He gets himself a weekend pass and takes a bus into Seattle. Boarding the bus, O'Brien feels scared and ill. He sits next to a lieutenant who is about to go to Vietnam, and who says that he's eager to prove that he's "better than those dinks." In the Seattle bus station, O'Brien goes into a bathroom and changes into civilian clothes. He finds a cheap hotel to wait for one night and think everything through a final time.

"Dinks" is an antiquated racial slur against Vietnamese people, often used during the Vietnam War. The lieutenant's belief that he is better than the Vietnamese and his use of a racial slur suggests that he believes in his own racial superiority. "Dinks" is frequently used by most soldiers throughout the story, suggesting that racial prejudice against Vietnamese people is pervasive throughout the United States Army.

That evening, O'Brien goes out, buys some dinner by the docks, and tries to find a date at a nearby sorority house. O'Brien chats with a girl for a bit, but she claims she's too busy to go out, so he leaves. He wanders through downtown Seattle and he returns to the hotel, feeling ill. O'Brien goes to his room, vomits, and sleeps fitfully for a few hours. Everything is ready to go, but he isn't. He realizes he can't run away from the life that he's known. He burns the letters to family and friends and all his plans, and he spends the rest of the weekend feeling "restless and hopeless." On Sunday, O'Brien returns to Fort Lewis.

As before, O'Brien feels unable to shake his sense of duty to friends, family, and community, suggesting that one's sense of duty plays a powerful role in guiding their decisions. However, O'Brien's willingness to fight in Vietnam is entirely based upon his desire not to shame his community, rather than any belief that the war is necessary or right. This suggests that one's sense of duty can lead them to participate in something to which they are ethically opposed.

CHAPTER 7: ARRIVAL

O'Brien flies to Vietnam and lands in Chu Lai, arriving at a place called the Combat Center that serves as the central headquarters for American battalions. He thinks that arriving in Vietnam feels like arriving at basic training—everything feels new, intimidating, and evil. O'Brien spends a week at the Combat Center, already counting down the days until his time in Vietnam is over. New arrivals train with hand grenades and minesweepers. O'Brien wonders what it feels like to die and what his internal organs look like. After the week, a truck takes O'Brien and other new arrivals to LZ (Landing Zone) Gator, their new home.

O'Brien's sense that everything in Vietnam feels evil does not suggest that the country itself is evil, but that his presence as a new combatant feels evil. His contemplation of what dying feels like indicates that beneath his ethical objections to the war, he is also understandably afraid to die, especially for a cause that he doesn't believe in.

A sergeant explains that the new arrivals will all be assigned to rifle companies and sent out to the jungle to fight. An officer tells the men they can "re-up": commit to three extra years of military service in exchange for reassignment away from combat, working as mechanics or clerks. No one takes him up on the offer. O'Brien thinks LZ Gator feels safe enough. He receives an assignment to Alpha Company, and a mail clerk takes him to meet the first sergeant, who is drinking beer and sitting in his underwear in front of a fan. The sergeant tells O'Brien that Alpha Company is coming in from the field soon, so O'Brien can just wait and meet them at LZ Gator.

The new arrivals' refusal to "re-up" and commit to three more years in exchange for safety suggests that they are resigned to their fates as infantrymen. O'Brien finds the first sergeant sitting in his underwear and drinking beer, which appears decidedly frivolous and undisciplined, suggesting that the reality of army life in Vietnam is much different than the image of decorum that the drill sergeants at basic training conveys.

O'Brien receives his combat gear and spends two days waiting for Alpha Company to arrive. When they do, most of them ignore O'Brien and set about immediately getting drunk and high. In the middle of the night, O'Brien hears explosions and a first sergeant shouts that they're being attacked. O'Brien grabs his helmet and runs outside, but no one else does. Eventually, a few Alpha Company soldiers amble out in their underwear, sit on sandbags and laugh as mortars hit the rice paddies below the hill. O'Brien hides behind a beer shed. Some men shoot a machine gun out toward where the mortars are firing from. The Viet Cong see the flash of machine gun fire in the base and start aiming toward it. A mortar round lands 20 feet from O'Brien's beer shed and sprays it with shrapnel.

Again, Alpha Company's general lack of discipline subverts O'Brien's expectations and suggests that life as an infantryman is disorganized and haphazard. The returning soldiers' lack of reaction to the mortar attacks suggests that after a certain amount of time in combat, being attacked becomes so familiar as to feel rote. Physical danger becomes commonplace, even mundane. The odd demeanors and disorderly attitudes of the other soldiers foreshadows the lifestyle and behavior that O'Brien himself will adapt himself to.

A lieutenant finally orders the men down to the perimeter to fight, and most of them oblige. They spray machine gun fire toward the mortars and shoot off flares. A few men just mess around. By morning, they find two dead Americans, though they don't belong to Alpha Company, and eight dead Viet Cong. Some men load corpses into the truck. Two soldiers named the Kid and Wolf tell O'Brien that this little fight was nothing. They joke around while they refill sand bags and call O'Brien "F.N.G.," though he doesn't know what this means. O'Brien asks the Kid how many casualties Alpha Company has taken and if he's ever been wounded. The Kid good-naturedly blows O'Brien off and tells him not to worry.

Again, Alpha Company's general disregard for the fighting or the dead soldiers suggests that danger and death become commonplace, even mundane, during wartime. The Kid's refusal to tell O'Brien any specifics about life in combat implies that the soldiers try not to think about their daily life or what they are doing too much. This further suggests that soldiers cope with combat and grim environments by repressing or ignoring their actual feelings, minimizing everything that happens to them.

CHAPTER 8: ALPHA COMPANY

O'Brien's first month in Alpha Company seems strange, like a "vacation." They wander up and down the beaches around Chu Lai, never seeing Viet Cong or facing combat. Vietnamese women and children follow them, offering to clean weapons or give back rubs to soldiers in exchange for rations. O'Brien learns that Alpha Company doesn't care about the war or the reasons for it—they only think about killing when they need to and not getting killed themselves. O'Brien learns Alpha Company's language: F.N.G means "fucking new guy," R.E.M.F. means "rear echelon motherfucker," and "wasting" someone means killing them. Everyone has a nickname, and when one of them dies, using the nickname instead of their real name makes it hurt a little less.

Alpha Company's disregard for the actual reasons behind the war suggests that none of the soldiers believe the war is morally righteous or justified, or even that they need to win—their only concern is how not to die. "Rear echelon" refers to every soldier in Vietnam that works in headquarters or support bases but does not fight in combat with the infantry. Alpha Company's use of nicknames to minimize the pain of losing comrades again suggests that they cope with the horrors of war by choosing not to directly acknowledge what happens, instead distancing themselves from the suffering and death all around them.

Mad Mark, a Green Beret, leads O'Brien's platoon. Mad Mark isn't insane as his name might suggest, but rather strangely calm at all times. He carries a shotgun as his primary weapon—this is against regulation but it marks him as an excellent fighter, since he has to get very close to his enemy to use the gun. Mad Mark is neither obsessed with battle nor frightened by it. He treats fighting like any other profession and does it well, without taking it too far or putting his men at unnecessary risk. He smokes with the men and flirts with the Vietnamese girls like the rest of the soldiers.

The Green Berets are a division of special forces fighters with advanced training. Mad Mark embodies a neutral stance to war, neither opposed to it as O'Brien is nor passionately eager for it as Sergeant Blyton or Chaplain Edwards are. Like Johansen, Mad Mark demonstrates an easy rapport with his men, suggesting that the distance between officers and enlisted men is becomes insignificant during combat.

O'Brien states that the war isn't "bad" until a patrol enters a village called Tri Binh 4 one night. Mad Mark leads five other men into the village, and within an hour the rest of the platoon hears gunfire and sees flashes in the village. The patrol returns, reporting that they killed some Viet Cong soldiers standing by a well. The Kid excitedly recounts the story and shows off an ear that Mad Mark cut off one of the dead. Everyone marvels at the ear and passes it around, holding it in their hands. The night patrol found some money on the Viet Cong too, which they divide among themselves. Mad Mark calls an airstrike on the village, which appears empty. In the morning, they burn what's left to the ground.

Mad Mark's taking an ear off a dead body and the Kid's excited recounting of killing other soldiers demonstrates that in the Vietnam War, American soldiers do things that are at least as morally dubious as anything that the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army do. Such behavior contradicts the chaplain's ardent belief that America is a morally superior country and is always in the right, since the conduct of its soldiers is questionable at best. Mad Mark's seemingly unnecessary order to burn the village down reiterates this.

CHAPTER 9: AMBUSH

Mad Mark announces that they'll be setting up an ambush tonight. He explains the details to his squad leaders and everyone makes preparations. Often, when headquarters orders ambushes, Alpha Company simply lies and reports that they did as ordered without actually going anywhere—but tonight, Mad Mark wants to try to take out some Viet Cong. At midnight, squad leaders gather their men, hang grenades on belts and ready ammo. Twenty soldiers make their way down a road that encircles a village. O'Brien can hear civilians whispering frantically in the huts as the American soldiers, the "intruders," make their way past. They make one circle around the village and leave it alone.

Alpha Company's frequent disobedience of orders to ambush again suggests that they do not care about completing the military's objectives in the war—mostly, the men of Alpha Company just want to survive. O'Brien's feeling that the American soldiers are "intruders" echoes his observation that the territory his hometown sits on was stolen from Native Americans by European intruders. This suggests that America has a long history of invading other people's lands.

Marching in the dark, O'Brien thinks the most frightening prospect is getting separated from his unit and lost in a foreign, hostile jungle. The soldiers march single file, and each one focuses on the man in front of him, desperately trying not to lose him. "The man to the front is civilization," O'Brien reflects. "He is the United States of America and every friend you have ever known." As they march, O'Brien thinks of a dream he had as a 14-year-old in which he was held captive as a slave and worked beneath a big mountain. In the dream, O'Brien escaped and ran away through the forest, pursued by gunfire and explosions. He met a woman who pointed him to freedom but then he saw her with her arms around one his former captors. Together, the man and woman recaptured O'Brien and took him back to slavery.

O'Brien's fear of getting lost and sense that the person marching in front of him represents "civilization" suggests that American soldiers feel vulnerable in a foreign, hostile environment. This sheds light on why those same soldiers agree to fight with their unit and go along with plans they might feel are useless or wrong. Since everyone feels vulnerable in a strange territory, they need to be loyal to their group and agree with whatever it chooses to do, good or bad. O'Brien's dream of being a slave reflects his reality of being drafted and stuck in the army as a combatant against his will.

Mad Mark arranges the soldiers along two trails that intersect in an L-shape. He gives O'Brien a claymore mine and tells him to set it up down the road. Carrying the mine, O'Brien feels both "brave and silly." He sets the mine up in the dirt, aimed toward the road and wired to a remote detonator in his hand. All the soldiers are paired off. O'Brien is partnered with a squad leader named Reno, and they take turns sleeping and holding the detonator while watching the road. O'Brien feels jittery and wonders if the mine will actually work and if his M-16 rifle in his lap will fire when he needs it to. He wonders if the Viet Cong will not actually ambush them and he thinks it stupid that all of the American soldiers are facing the same direction, as if the enemy can only approach from that side.

O'Brien feels both "brave and silly" while carrying a lethal weapon, suggesting that such weapons inherently give soldiers a feeling of power, but also make them realize how ill-equipped they are for combat. O'Brien's realization that they are assuming the Viet Cong can only come from one direction highlights the absurdity of military tactics as well as the disadvantage that the Americans have while fighting a war in their enemy's home environment.

O'Brien wakes Reno and takes his turn to sleep. He notices that Reno lights a cigarette, which is stupid since they're easy to spot at night, but O'Brien decides not to say anything. Reno wakes O'Brien again an hour later (10 minutes too early) and they trade places again. In the darkness, O'Brien thinks about his girlfriend but he has a hard time picturing her face anymore. He thinks about what he'll do after the war, that he'll become a writer and expose all of the war's evils and the evil people who carry it out. He thinks about Hemingway reporting on the brutality of war while also nodding toward the "rightness" of it, and wonders what one is supposed to write when their war is "dead wrong."

Reno's decision to smoke at night is careless, as the light emitted by the lit end endangers the people around him by making them easier to spot. Reno's negligence again depicts the infantrymen in Alpha Company as disorganized and undisciplined. Meanwhile, O'Brien's inability to picture his girlfriend's face anymore indicates that his life back home is drifting away from him as he settles into his new reality as a grunt soldier in Vietnam.

O'Brien fantasizes about buying an old sailboat and sailing to Austria to rent a cottage and settle down for awhile. Thinking about Europe reminds him of the summer he spends studying Prague in 1967. A Czech friend of O'Brien's introduced him to his roommate, a young North Vietnamese man named Li. O'Brien and Li talked about the war for three hours, and Li patiently explained that from the Vietnamese perspective, America was the "aggressor," a foreign invader, and that all North Vietnam wanted was a unified country. Li stated that he himself did not think Americans were necessarily evil but that many of his countrymen though otherwise, especially since they often saw American bombers kill civilians. When Li and O'Brien parted, Li explained that he was an officer in the North Vietnamese Army and he hoped they'd never meet again.

Li's argument plays a critical role in developing O'Brien's perception of the Vietnam War as not simply wrong, but evil. Li's perspective that America appears as the invading aggressor to his people, especially as American planes bomb civilians, suggests that from other countries' points of view, America's crusade against communism and invasion of Vietnam may not seem morally righteous, but rather evil. The fact that American planes and soldiers so often kill civilians reiterates the possibility that America's actions in Vietnam may be doing more harm than good.

After another hour, Mad Mark calls off the ambush, and they pack everything up and leave. Although this ambush led to nothing, some are far more effective. In May, Captain Johansen leads three platoons in ambushing a village where a Viet Cong meeting is being held. The platoons stretch themselves out around the village. O'Brien carries Captain Johansen's radio, ready to relay firing coordinates to a nearby artillery base. In the dark of night, two of the platoons shoot at Viet Cong soldiers as they see them leaving the village. Captain Johansen calls out artillery coordinates, telling the big guns where to hit. He seems happy to be having his "revenge"—the Forty-eighth Viet Cong Battalion killed many of his men in the past.

This scene establishes Captain Johansen as a capable soldier and leader, reflecting O'Brien's overall high view of the man. However, Captain Johansen's happiness to be taking his "revenge" on the Viet Cong suggests that his personal feelings complicate his duty as an officer: the ambush does not merely achieve a military objective—it also vindicates his anger at losing many soldiers. Captain Johansen's mixed motivations suggests that many military actions may be similarly motivated, complicating their moral rightness.

An officer standing next to Johansen and O'Brien points out three Viet Cong soldiers sneaking out of a building. The three Americans take aim with their rifles and fire. O'Brien realizes that he does not hate the man in his rifle sights, nor does he want him dead; he just fears him. Two of the three Viet Cong escape, but one goes down. O'Brien wonders what the other two feel—if they are angry or sad that they're comrade died. He wonders if the three were family, and hopes that the dead man is not Li. Despite the two Viet Cong that escape, Captain Johansen is proud of his men, having executed "Alpha Company's most successful ambush." While the officers are listing kills, Tom, a squad leader, and Chip touch a mine and are blown apart while searching the village.

Unlike Captain Johansen, who appears personally motivated to kill Viet Cong by his desire for revenge, O'Brien's lack of hatred or desire to kill suggests that he feels guilty rather than justified in his actions. His sense that he kills out of fear echoes Erik's belief that they are going to war simply out of fear of society's rejection. This suggests that fear is a powerful motivator during war, pushing soldiers to defy their consciences and participate in violence, even when they don't hate their enemy or believe they're in the right.

CHAPTER 10: THE MAN AT THE WELL

Alpha Company meets an old Vietnamese farmer who gives them water from his well. He is over 70 and blind, but good-natured, and the soldiers decide to spend the day in his village, waiting for rations to be delivered by helicopter. The spend the day with the old man and the village children, eating a drinking beer. The old man helps the soldiers shower, drawing buckets of water out of his well and sloshing it over the soldiers' backs and shoulders. Without reason, a "blustery and stupid [American] soldier" grabs a carton of milk and throws it at the old man's head, striking him in the face, nearly knocking him off his feet. It cuts his lips and milk splatters across his face and body like "perfect gore." The old man regains his balance and composure, then smiles and continues helping the American soldiers shower.

This chapter depicts an American soldier committing a senseless violent act against a gracious Vietnamese civilian. This portrayal further suggests that America is not morally superior in any way, since its soldiers inflict needless suffering and humiliation on Vietnamese citizens. While other American soldiers are not necessarily so heartless or crude, O'Brien's inclusion of the episode suggests that such random cruelty is not unusual. The soldier's violence is entirely unprovoked, indicating that it perhaps stems from racial animosity toward Vietnamese people.

CHAPTER 11: ASSAULT

Erik writes a letter to O'Brien in April, which O'Brien receives on April 16. Alpha Company spends most of April, an unbearably hot month in Vietnam, camped out at LZ Minuteman, occasionally marching to nearby villages to dodge the midday heat on the hilltop base. They don't bother looking for Viet Cong. The rest of the day they lay around, build shade, or play chess. On April 16, rumor spreads that they will soon embark on a Combat Assault in Pinkville, all the men fear. Captain Johansen gives no hints one way or the other.

Alpha Company's tenure at LZ Minuteman suggests that their combat service in Vietnam is punctuated by long periods of boredom. Once again, their decision not to even look for Viet Cong to fight suggests that most of the men in Alpha Company don't care about winning or achieving the war's objectives—they simply want to survive.

In the afternoon, resupply helicopters arrive carrying Erik's letter, among other things. In the letter, Erik quotes a poem which reads, "April is the cruelest month." The days at LZ Minuteman blur together. Colonel Daud commands Alpha Company to send ambush patrols out each night, but often Captain Johansen and his officers just fake them, calling in on a radio with fake coordinates and ordering artillery strikes on empty patches of jungle. The men in Alpha Company appreciate their officers for this. The officers think Colonel Daud is inexperienced and "too damn gung-ho." Rumors about Pinkville persist, predicting a long campaign near My Lai.

Erik's letter is a reference to T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, *which tackles themes of societal decay and disillusionment in the wake of World War I. This suggests that Erik perceives the Vietnam War in a similar light: a senseless conflict that breeds nothing but suffering. Meanwhile, Captain Johansen's decision to disobey direct orders rather than put his men at unnecessary risk suggests that he cares more for his men's wellbeing than his own military career. If his disobedience were discovered, Johansen would probably be severely punished. Despite that possibility, Johansen chooses to mitigate unnecessary risks to his men's safety as best he can, demonstrating that he possesses both compassion and good judgment.*

Alpha Company gets three days of rest in Chu Lai in the end of April. Colonel Daud meets them there and announces that they'll be going to Pinkville. He gives Alpha Company a pep talk and says if they're sloppy, they'll die—but if they're sharp, Pinkville is as safe as New York City. When Colonel Daud leaves, an officer calls him a "pompous asshole." O'Brien writes a letter to Erik and goes to a floor show to see a Korean stripper, trying not to think about Pinkville.

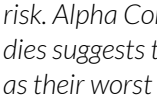
Colonel Daud is depicted as most upper-level officers are in the memoir: militaristic and bold, but also utterly unrealistic. His reassurance that Pinkville will be no more danger than New York City is obviously a gross underestimation of the dangers the soldiers will face there. Daud thus seems like the opposite of men like Johansen, risking soldiers' lives for the sake of objectives without concern for their wellbeing.

On the morning of April 29, Alpha Company waits for the helicopters on the landing pad before sunrise. Most of them are hungover, which makes it difficult to be a soldier. Colonel Daud arrives in his helicopter just as the sun rises, announcing that the other helicopters will be there in minutes to pick them up. Reconnaissance claims that Pinkville is quiet this morning. The helicopters pick up Alpha Company and fly them to My Khe. The journey feels "hopelessly short." The men are quiet, though they wish they had a joke to tell, something to break the tension.

Alpha Company's descent into Pinkville marks the beginning of O'Brien's worst experiences in Vietnam, demonstrating the true extent of the war's horrors as well as the lengths some men will go when driven by hatred, rage, and fear. Alpha Company's men's struggle to be soldiers while hungover suggests that beneath the gear and weapons, they are still just regular people trying to cope with terrible circumstances.

O'Brien thinks the worst part of a Combat Assault is how exposed they are when they land. The tactic is effectively a "blitzkrieg": helicopters deploy platoons of soldiers in minutes, who start shooting before they even touch the ground. As the helicopters reach their landing zone, they spray bullets into the surrounding jungle: suppressive fire. Soldiers leap out of the helicopters, clear the landing zone, and take cover. The helicopters leave. There is no gunfire, no Viet Cong there to meet them. Bates is still terrified, but most of the soldiers are "happy to be alive" and feel "brave." They charge through My Khe, killing two Viet Cong and losing one of their own soldiers. Over the next weeks, Colonel Daud sends the soldiers on so many Combat Assaults that they grow to hate him and they celebrate when they hear he died in an ambush.

Combat Assaults represent a dramatic, but incredibly risky way to put soldiers into a combat zone, since enemy soldiers are likely to be waiting in the jungle to shoot down helicopters as they land. Colonel Daud's decision to send Alpha Company on numerous Combat Assaults into different parts of Pinkville suggests that he does not value Alpha Company's lives, since he repeatedly puts them at great risk. Alpha Company's hatred for Daud and celebration when he dies suggests that they come to see him, rather than the Viet Cong, as their worst enemy, since he causes them more consistent suffering.



CHAPTER 12: MORI

Several soldiers crowd around a young Vietnamese woman who is shot through the groin, bleeding out. They remark that she's "pretty for a gook" and the soldier who shot her laments what he's done—he didn't know she was a woman or that she was beautiful. The soldiers can see that she'll bleed out but they try to give her shade and fan the flies off her. The woman wears a North Vietnamese Army uniform. They call a helicopter to take her to a field hospital, but by the time the helicopter arrives, she's no longer moving. She dies on the flight.

"Gook" is an offensive racial slur for Vietnamese people. The soldier's sadness and regret at shooting a pretty woman, even though she wears an enemy uniform, suggests that they find it easier to empathize with someone they are attracted to than an old man or a child. Even so, the soldiers' sadness at seeing her bleed to death suggests that some part of them still regrets the fact that they must kill people.

CHAPTER 13: MY LAI IN MAY

O'Brien thinks the name "Pinkville" sounds "county-fairish" for such a dangerous, heavily-occupied region covered in mines, though its named for its pink color on a military map marking it as a "built-up area." The My Lai villages are scattered throughout the area, mostly ruined and empty, though hostile villagers still live in some areas. Alpha Company had also been in Pinkville in January, a month before O'Brien arrived and less than a year after the My Lai Massacre in My Lai 4. Alpha Company took heavy losses then and developed a strong hatred toward any "Oriental" person by the end of that mission.

The My Lai Massacre was an infamous war crime where American soldiers executed over 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians. When American press learned of it a year after it happened, it triggered a major international outrage. Alpha Company's developed hatred toward "Oriental" people, hostile or civilian, suggests that pain and frustration at losing men causes racial animosity toward Vietnamese people.

When Alpha Company returns to My Khe in May, they immediately walk into a Viet Cong ambush. The villagers give no warning or hint. Gunfire sprays out of the bushes and a grenade kills the man next to O'Brien. O'Brien screams and takes cover until it ends. Afterward, Alpha Company moves north toward the My Lai villages. They question villagers about the Viet Cong as they go, but the villagers never say anything and let Alpha Company walk into ambush after ambush. At one point, the whole company has to sprint across a 75-meter rope bridge, one at a time, as unseen snipers take potshots at them.

The villagers' failure to warm American soldiers of ambushes suggests that the Vietnamese in Pinkville harbor significant resentment toward Americans, especially after American soldiers killed so many civilians previously. This demonstrates the danger of racial prejudice and soldierly misconduct, since even the current soldiers in Alpha Company did not murder civilians, past American soldiers did, endangering Alpha Company by making the villagers hate them.

At night, Viet Cong shoot mortars, and Alpha Company spends the whole night crawling on its knees through rice paddies to avoid the explosions. Alpha Company grows so frustrated at never being able to find the "phantom Forty-Eight Viet Cong Battalion," but constantly being attacked by them, that they start setting fire to villages. The fire feels vindicating, an expression of their own hatred. O'Brien recalls that when the mine blew Chip and Tom to pieces, American soldiers started beating the nearest Vietnamese people at hand: two terrified women.

Just like American soldiers before them, Alpha Company begins committing horrific violence against civilians. O'Brien's admission that the violence vindicates their own hatred and frustration suggests that fighting an enemy they usually cannot see causes the soldiers to lose sight of who their true enemy is and simply take out their anger on whoever happens to be nearby—which is, tragically, civilians.

O'Brien recalls that the soldiers collected Chip and Tom's strewn body parts into bags while officers called an airstrike on the village. They all knew that women and children were in there as they watched it burn to the ground, but after losing their friends, the Americans no longer cared. Presently, in Pinkville, Mad Mark perches a sniper rifle on a rock and shoots a farmer—but he tells O'Brien to report that they've hit a Viet Cong soldier. O'Brien swallows and follows orders. A mine obliterates an American's leg the next day, and two more men are hit by grenades the day after.

Again, the Americans' suffering and loss of men causes them to forgo any empathy toward civilians, indicating that they lose sight of who their true enemy is. Although O'Brien seems bothered by Mad Mark shooting down a farmer, O'Brien follows orders to cover it up, suggesting that he goes along with something he finds immoral rather than contradict his peers.

Alpha Company marches onward, bedraggled and falling apart. The officers decide to head toward the ocean and rest. Some men swim while others set up a perimeter. O'Brien receives mail telling him that his girlfriend has a new European boyfriend, his parents are worried for him, and his siblings are fine. Viet Cong soldiers shoot at the Americans from the surrounding bushes. Three more men are hit and removed by helicopter. Alpha Company heads to another village.

Alpha Company comes under attack even when they move to the ocean to rest, suggesting that there is no safety for them in Vietnam. While this does not justify the soldiers' acts of violence toward civilians, their inability to find safety and recover reveals the amount of stress they experience as they lose more men each day, which ultimately leads them to hatred and violence.

CHAPTER 14: STEP LIGHTLY

O'Brien states that the Bouncing Betty is the most feared variety of mine. Someone buries it in the ground with its tiny trigger prongs exposed. If someone disturbs the triggers, a small explosion launches the mine into the air so that it explodes at stomach-height. Booby-trapped artillery rounds are just as destructive, however. Chip triggered one in a hedge, which blew him apart, and another man sat on one during a break. Walking in a world covered in mines, soldiers start to hallucinate or become so afraid of taking steps that they can hardly move. One man simply snaps after he has to pick up the pieces of one his friends, sitting catatonic in a deep hole until Captain Johansen decides to reassign him away from combat.

Such heavy use of mines in Vietnam means that many American deaths occur even when the Viet Cong are not present. This further abstracts the traditional concept of an enemy, since the force that kills American soldiers is unseen, often not even present. O'Brien's description of paralyzing fear over the mines suggests that these weapons make every inch of Vietnam feel potentially fatal, creating an extremely high-stress environment that easily leads to psychological breakdown or outburst.

The soldiers rarely discuss their fear of mines and the anxiety they cause. O'Brien details various varieties of mines that the Viet Cong use: anti-personnel mines that blow off feet and legs, anti-tank mines that can "shred[]" a person, directional mines like the claymores Americans use, hand grenades with makeshift timers deposited in vehicle gas tanks. In three days, three more mines go off, costing "seven more legs, one more arm." All the deaths make O'Brien want to burn his catalogued list of mines, but that is how the soldiers speak about them—as something simple and "absurd."

The soldiers' decision to almost never discuss their fear of mines echoes their choice to never speak frankly about death or use each other's real names. This suggests that they cope with the ever-present danger of mines by trying to minimize them, recognizing that they exist but downplaying the constant threat they represent and the strain they cause on each person's psyche.

Everything is absurd. Alpha Company stalks through mine-riddled territory, trying and failing to find Viet Cong and fighting a war that will never be won. The Vietnamese hate the Americans now, and no matter how many Viet Cong the soldiers kill, there always seems to be more. The American soldiers begin laughing at the war, treating it as a joke. When they are old men, O'Brien says, they will be "bitter." For any "patriots" who will claim that the war was necessary and that the old veterans should not be bitter, O'Brien will advise that they vacation in Pinkville, since there will certainly be some mines left over for them to find.

O'Brien's depiction of the war reinforces his belief that the Vietnam War is evil: he sees it as a pointless exercise that causes horrific suffering and enflames racial animosity between Americans and Vietnamese people. The soldiers treating the war as a joke again suggests that they minimize everything that happens to them as a way to keep their emotional pain at bay.

CHAPTER 15: CENTURION

While Alpha Company rests at a village, one of the American soldiers finds a North Vietnamese Rifle hidden beneath a bush. Captain Johansen orders his men to search the village, and they tear it apart until sundown as the frightened villagers watch on. The soldiers don't find anything but they decide to take three old men in the village and tie them to trees in the middle of their encampment—the enemy won't attack the Americans if their own fathers are held hostage among them.

The soldiers use the old men as human shields, which has long been internationally regarded as a war crime. Alpha Company's conduct gets progressively worse, suggesting that the more tired and desperate soldiers become, the more likely they are to do despicable things. Tragically, though the Americans are fighting the Viet Cong, it is the Vietnamese civilians who suffer most.

O'Brien sits awake at night, manning the radio. Bates sits with him and says that keeping hostages like this is "appalling." O'Brien thinks they look "like the men at **Golgotha**." He gives one of them a drink from his canteen. In the morning, an officer beats and interrogates the old men. The old men remain silent, however, so the Americans release them and move on.

"The men at Golgotha" is a reference to the prisoners who were crucified alongside Jesus Christ, which suggests that these old men are casualties amid a greater injustice. Bates and O'Brien both think the situation is wrong but they do not set the old men free, suggesting that their fear and hesitance to go against their comrades stops them from following their consciences.

CHAPTER 16: WISE ENDURANCE

Captain Johansen watches his men drink beer, toasting the end of another day. They've had a week without the enemy, without any injuries, and they are happy. In one week, Johansen will be reassigned to a good desk-job in the rear echelon. He tells O'Brien, sitting next to him, that he'd "rather be brave than almost anything" and states that he wishes he'd acted "more bravely" at My Lai a year ago. O'Brien thinks it strange that Captain Johansen wants to be braver—he once saw Johansen single-handedly charge across a rice paddy and kill an enemy soldier at close distance. A kid named Arizona tried the same thing on the same day and was shot dead, but people always remember those who "charge" as brave, regardless of the outcome.

Captain Johansen's wish that he had been braver at My Lai refers to the period before O'Brien arrived, during which Alpha Company took heavy losses and direct their hatred toward civilians as well as the Viet Cong. Although O'Brien idolizes Johansen as a good and courageous man, Johansen has been present for all of the atrocities against civilians thus far described. This suggests that in the Vietnam War, amid the pain and fear and stress, even the best men find themselves committing reprehensible actions. Nobody makes it through the war with their conscience clean.

O'Brien fought a bully once—"the enemy"—in grade school, but that doesn't seem brave to him. O'Brien wasn't with Alpha Company during the My Lai Massacre, but he is now. He fetches a beer for Captain Johansen, and Johansen tells O'Brien that he doesn't need to carry the radio anymore if he doesn't want to—marching close to an officer puts O'Brien at risk. O'Brien responds that he'll carry on as he always has, and Johansen leaves.

O'Brien's recollection that he thought of the schoolyard bully as "the enemy" suggests that people naturally look at the world through a lens of allies and enemies, even though the enemy may simply be someone they disagree with. Meanwhile, O'Brien's decision to keep carrying the radio, even though it is a dangerous role, suggests that he possesses some measure of bravery.

O'Brien reflects that real courage is "wise courage," just as Plato argued that courage is "endurance of the soul," but only when tempered with wisdom. O'Brien thinks about how he endured basic training and months of war, and wonders if that endurance was wise or foolhardy. The Vietnam War does not feel morally imperative like World War II—it feels needless. O'Brien wonders if his endurance, carrying him into a foolish war, was "merely a well-disguised cowardice."

O'Brien's reflection that he endured basic training—which brought him into the war—but did so against his own wisdom suggests that his presence in the war is not courageous as Plato defined it. O'Brien's sense that that endurance may have been cowardice implies that the brave thing to do, in his mind, would have been to refuse to participate in the war.

O'Brien thinks back on a day when American soldiers shoot at some boys herding cows, since the animals are in a "free-fire zone" and are thus "legal targets." O'Brien doesn't shoot but neither does he try to stop the others from shooting. Near My Lais, many men die from their own endurance, which presses them to walk until they step on a mine. O'Brien thinks again about Plato, who argued for endurance tempered by wisdom. If someone is wise, then he knows he is doing the right thing. Most men are not courageous: either they know what is right but can't do it, or they endure their way through something they only think is right. "Courage is more than the charge," but O'Brien thinks that most soldiers don't actually think about courage, especially not in Alpha Company.

American soldiers shoot at civilians because they are "legal targets" even though they obviously pose no threat, again suggesting that in the midst of war the Americans struggle to maintain a clear idea of who their enemy actually is. O'Brien's belief that enduring hardship for a wrong cause is not brave contradicts many characters' belief that courage is about having "guts" and acting under pressure. By O'Brien's reckoning, the soldiers who endure the war even though it is wrong are not courageous at all, but rather misguided.

When Alpha Company marches through Pinkville, they don't talk about death or even name it directly since it feels like bad luck. Thus, there is no courage among them. O'Brien once met a doctor who ran through rifle fire to help a dying soldier. The doctor described it not as bravery, just his reaction to someone crying for help. All of O'Brien's pre-war heroes were fictional men on TV or in books: they all possessed wisdom, all consciously thought about being brave and courageous. But in Vietnam, Captain Johansen seems to be the only man who ever considers what courage truly is. No one else. Johansen is the only real-life hero that O'Brien can think of.

Alpha Company's decision to cope with death by minimizing it, ignoring it, or making light of it disqualifies them from being courageous, since they never confront the reality of their actions or environment. They endure, but without any wisdom. O'Brien considers Johansen a hero, even though Johansen committed many of the same acts of violence as the rest of Alpha Company. However, Johansen seems the only one to honestly reflect on what he has done, suggesting that his honesty and self-criticism distinguish him as truly courageous.

O'Brien looks at Captain Johansen as he sleeps in his poncho. The captain is tall and blond, possesses medals of commendation, and seems the only true hero in Vietnam. All of Alpha Company's subsequent commanders don't measure up. Losing Johansen hurts Alpha Company, like when the Trojan army loses Hector. Johansen helps to minimize the futility of their war, to keep the worst of it away from his men. Sadly, O'Brien knows that he is not, nor will he ever be, such a hero. Most men in Alpha Company are not heroes but neither are they cowards—regardless of whether they commit a cowardly act now and then. The best they can do is try to be braver the next time than they were the last: "that by itself is a kind of courage," O'Brien reflects.

O'Brien's appreciation of Johansen's efforts to minimize the nihilism of the Vietnam War suggests that this makes Johansen a courageous hero—he endures hardship not only to protect himself, but to do what is right for his men. Although O'Brien doesn't consider himself or any of his fellow soldiers to be heroes, he recognizes that most of them try to become a bit braver and wiser as they go.

CHAPTER 17: JULY

Captain Johansen leaves Alpha Company at the end of June, replaced by a short, fat Tennessean named Captain Smith. Smith gives his new soldiers a "pep talk" but no one in Alpha Company trusts him—he is obviously inexperienced. The Company heads back to My Lai, accompanied by a unit of transport tracks—big tank-like machines but without any weaponry attached. As they travel, Smith calls O'Brien "Timmy boy" and confides that his "daddy" wanted him to join the army. The tracks and foot soldiers move slowly through the villages, taking a group of women and children along with them so that the Viet Cong will be less inclined to shoot at them. Captain Smith is proud of himself for using civilians as shields.

Captain Smith is the exact opposite of Captain Johansen: incapable, inexperienced, and selfish. Captain Smith's pride in using women and children as human shields suggests that he sees no value in Vietnamese civilians' lives. This immediately bars Captain Smith from being courageous by O'Brien's estimation, since he happily endangers others to protect himself and thus he does not possess any wisdom or good judgment.

The next day, the tracks and infantrymen keep searching villages for Viet Cong. Smith orders his men to clear out a bunker. They throw grenades in, and an old woman stumbles out, bleeding from her chest and nearly dead. When the mission is over, Alpha Company's soldiers climb on the tracks and begin the journey back. Rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) launch out of the jungle and strike the tracks. Men jump off but they land half-sunken into the mud. The tracks reverse course, fleeing the attack and crushing several American soldiers: one man loses a foot, another has his leg shattered, and a third man is crushed to death.

Both the old woman's death and the American soldiers crushed by their own vehicles reflect the horrific chaos of the Vietnam War, impacting both civilians and soldiers. Likewise, the sudden RPG attacks out of the jungle typify the Viet Cong's guerrilla warfare tactics, which allow them to wage war on an enemy that is better equipped than themselves. Such guerrilla fighting make traveling in Vietnam extremely dangerous and unpredictable.

Captain Smith calls for an airstrike, and jets cover the village in napalm and burn it to the ground. Helicopters come to retrieve the wounded, and the soldiers fan out to search the mud for the man who was crushed to death. Captain Smith hangs back. Someone finds the dead body and wraps him in a poncho, preparing him to be loaded onto a helicopter. Smith refuses to help but he asks O'Brien what he thinks of everything. O'Brien advises they turn back, but Smith thinks they need to follow orders. The track commander convinces Smith to move his men into a nearby hamlet with dry ground. On the way, someone steps on a mine that kills several soldiers.

Napalm was a highly flammable chemical frequently used in airstrikes during the Vietnam War—it often coated civilians' skin and burned them alive. The UN banned the use of napalm against civilian targets in 1980 as a result of its horrific effects in Vietnam. Captain Smith's unwillingness to help search for their dead soldier in the mud, as well as his unwillingness to listen to a more experienced soldiers' advice, depicts him as a selfish and foolhardy commander—the opposite of Captain Johansen.

Barney shows O'Brien a two-inch hole that the mine's shrapnel punched in his canteen. Captain Smith shows O'Brien a miniscule hole in his shirt and claims that he'll get a Purple Heart now, though all these dead men won't be good for his career. Helicopters come again to retrieve the wounded and the dead. Within half an hour, Alpha Company lost 17 men. Smith and the track commander elect to retreat.

Smith's concern for his career versus his lack of concern for all the men he's gotten killed again suggests that he is a terrible, selfish leader. Alpha Company's suddenly high death toll directly correlates with Captain Smith's arrival, demonstrating how dangerous an inexperienced commander can be to his soldiers.

When the track commander tells Smith to have his men walk in front of the tracks to check for mines, Smith complains but complies. He tries to convince his platoon leaders to march their men in front, but they laugh in his face and refuse outright. The track commander eventually relents, and the soldiers ride the tracks back out of the area. Captain Smith becomes universally despised among Alpha Company. Some soldiers even talk about possibly killing him by throwing a grenade in his foxhole while he sleeps. Everyone else is careful not to sleep too close to Captain Smith. He has no sense of direction and often gets Alpha Company lost.

The track commander's order that Alpha Company should walk in front of his machines suggests that he's willing to let Alpha Company's men die if it protects his own men. The platoon leaders' outright refusal to comply suggests that Smith should have recognized how wrong such an order was and held his ground. The soldiers' thoughts of killing Captain Smith suggest that, like Colonel Daud, they see Smith as the greatest threat to their safety, and thus as much an enemy as the Viet Cong.

In mid-July, Alpha Company performs another Combat Assault into the middle of an ongoing firefight. First Platoon takes immediate casualties. The battalion commander, a colonel, flies in his helicopter overhead. The First Platoon's radio operator calls him to request that he pick up their wounded. The colonel refuses, saying they should just ask for a regular medical helicopter from headquarters. When the radio man tells the colonel that their wounded will die if he doesn't come get them, the colonel berates him for not relaying requests through his commanding officer.

The battalion commander's unwillingness to pick up the wounded soldiers suggests that he does not want to risk his own safety to save his inferiors' lives. Additionally, his anger at the radio operator for not relaying requests through an officer suggests that the commander cares more about military hierarchy than he does about saving lives or being of practical help. Both observations suggest that high-ranking officers are often callous leaders who don't care about lower-ranking soldiers.

The radio operator tells the colonel that his commanding officer is bleeding and unconscious, but the colonel still doesn't come to retrieve the wounded—now the dead—until the battle is over. The soldiers move into the empty village and wait out the night. Mortars hit them during the night, wounding two more. Captain Smith thinks he sees a Viet Cong soldier and shoots at them, but he discovers that it's just a pig. The next day, a man dies when a piece of shrapnel slices off his nose, drowning him in his own blood. Captain Smith sends a small patrol out. They hit a landmine, killing several men. The battalion commander picks them up in his helicopter and he earns a medal for bravery.

Once again, the constant death and severe injuries demonstrate the horror of serving as an infantryman during the Vietnam War. Although O'Brien describes Alpha Company committing several atrocities toward civilians, it's worth remembering that such soldiers find themselves in a hellish environment in a foreign country, governed by superior officers who either don't care about their lives or, like Smith, are dangerously inexperienced.

In late July, Alpha Company is deployed to the top of a mountain, setting up in a Buddhist monastery. Captain Smith's superiors tell him to expect a fight. The soldiers meet a monk who cares for a group of orphans in the monastery and they give him some of their rations. The monk lets them dig foxholes in the yard. They stay for a night, see nothing, and leave the next morning. In early August, Captain Smith is removed from command.

Captain Smith's exit marks the end of O'Brien's most difficult period in the Vietnam War. The soldiers giving the orphans some of theirs rations demonstrates that, although they felt particular hatred for the Vietnamese in Pinkville, their racial animosity is not a constant, but rather driven by the Americans' own suffering and fear.

CHAPTER 18: THE LAGOON

Alpha Company is deployed to protect a small village that sits in a **lagoon** on the Batangan Peninsula. O'Brien imagines that the lagoon must have once been an idyllic place, a romantic fishing village, a "port for travel and adventure." Perhaps the lagoon even housed its own sea monster. O'Brien imagines that the villagers would burn fires on the beach at night to keep ships from wrecking against the coral; they'd burn incense to honor Buddha and boys would become men by bringing fish in from the sea. In reality, however, the village is now a "refugee camp" of 2,000 people surrounded by razor wire and minefields, with huts built out of army tin. The beaches are filled with mines. At night, looking over the ocean, the lagoon is still tranquil.

The lagoon and the village that sits there symbolizes Vietnam as a whole. O'Brien imagines that the lagoon was once an idyllic, romantic place, reflecting how Vietnam was also a beautiful country before foreign countries began meddling there. However, after decades of war and foreign occupation, the once-beautiful lagoon is little more than a haphazard refugee camp, riddled with mines. More broadly, this reflects how America's war in Vietnam has ravaged the country, transforming it from a peaceful paradise to a war-torn wasteland.

The villagers fish at night, laying out their catch to dry in the morning. Men run up to O'Brien and tell him to call in a helicopter—a mine blew someone's leg off during a patrol. The helicopter arrives, but the man bleeds to death during the trip. The next day, Bates and O'Brien cook crayfish with margarine and they make a feast for everyone. O'Brien calls in another helicopter—a soldier tried fishing with hand grenades from a boat, and one of them blew his stomach out.

The constant presence of death, even in a small seaside village, again reiterates how every inch of Vietnam represents danger and possible death, both for Americans and for the Vietnamese civilians who live there. The fishing soldier's death is the result of a stupid accident, reinforcing how many soldiers die in non-heroic, senseless ways.

LZ Minuteman, an artillery base, sits half a mile from the lagoon. Each night the gunners calibrate their guns by taking practice shots into the ocean and measuring where they strike. One night, one of the gunnery commanders miscommunicates their firing coordinates: what should have been practice shots into the ocean instead hit the **lagoon**, wounding 33 and killing 13 civilians, including many children. A month later, after investigations conclude, the U.S. government pays a very small fee to each of the families who lost spouses or children. O'Brien thinks they've wrought worse "terror[]" on the villagers than any lagoon monster ever could.

The American artillery's accidental slaughter of civilians typifies how horrific the effects of wartime errors can be, having a much worse effect on the civilian population than on the soldiers. The American government's paltry payout to the families of the dead suggests that there is little accountability for the U.S.—they barely have to pay for their mistakes. Such needless suffering and O'Brien's feeling that America is worse than any monster depicts the war in Vietnam as undeniably evil.

CHAPTER 19: DULCE ET DECORUM

In a letter, Erik admits that he feels guilty for being in the Vietnam War yet suffering through none of the misery or combat that O'Brien experiences. He tries to find some sort of meaning to all the pain but he can't find any. In August, another new captain takes command of Alpha Company and he marches them into a minefield within the hour, losing two more men. However, O'Brien is on leave in Chu Lai at the time, looking for a new assignment—anything to get him out of combat. After his three days of leave are up, he has not found a new position, so he rejoins Alpha Company.

Erik's perception of the war as meaningless reiterates that the conflict is a needless pursuit which causes horrific suffering and death. Although Alpha Company's new captain is not named—indicating that he is less important to the story than Smith or Johansen—his immediate loss of two more men suggests that he is just as inexperienced as Smith.

Escaping combat by receiving an assignment in the rear becomes every foot soldier's singular obsession. Although many try different strategies for landing such coveted positions, O'Brien states that the only reliable way is to "burrow your nose gently up an officer's ass." For black soldiers, this is nearly impossible. Most officers are white and the general infantry is "disproportionately black." Because of old prejudices, white officers tend to favor white soldiers for the best assignments. The black soldiers, in response, grow sullen, they act out, or become obstinate. The white officers then use this as evidence that the black soldiers are undisciplined and unreliable, and they continue to favor white soldiers.

O'Brien's observations about black infantrymen and white officers suggests that racial animosity not only exists between the Americans and Vietnamese, but even within the American military itself. For black soldiers, being unable to get safer assignments in the rear echelon not only means that they have to do worse work, but that their lives are in greater danger because of their race: they are more than likely to be stuck in combat while white soldiers take the safer jobs in the rear. Thus, racial prejudice toward black soldiers creates a greater likelihood that they'll will be killed.

The racial tensions in Alpha Company eventually reach a breaking point. The black soldiers hate their white first sergeant and resolve to do something about it. One day, as the company is hiking, something explodes beneath the white first sergeant's feet, "disintegrate[ing]" his legs. The company calls a helicopter to take take what is left of him, but "no one felt any particular loss." That night, a black soldier confides in O'Brien that they "took care of the first sergeant"—one of them shot a grenade launcher at his legs. Two weeks later, headquarters assigns a black first sergeant to Alpha Company.

The black soldiers' killing of a white lieutenant suggests that, after months or years of racial prejudice and mistreatment, they view certain white officers as their enemy just as much as Viet Cong fighters. Once again, O'Brien's depiction of who the soldiers consider to be their enemy suggests that the enemy is anyone who causes them to suffer—whether it be Vietnamese civilians, Viet Cong, or American officers.

Everyone in Alpha Company longs for a "rear job." They aren't cowardly, they just don't care about winning the war. A new commander takes charge of Alpha Company, and O'Brien joins the others in hoping the commander will grant him a non-combat assignment. O'Brien reflects that soldiers in Vietnam aren't like soldiers in World War II—there's no talk of "valor" or heroism. They are all just trying not to die, and the only courage they summon is the courage one gathers to endure a bad day. They spend most of August on a flat hilltop, doing patrols during the day. Every night at ten o'clock, mortars strike their position for about 20 seconds. No one dies; only a few are seriously injured all month.

O'Brien's observation that the soldiers in the Vietnam War don't care about winning again paints the war as a fruitless campaign that even the people fighting and dying don't care about. O'Brien's sense that there is no valor or honor for soldiers in Vietnam suggests that this war marks a transition for America, when war ceases to be seen as a noble conquest and instead appears to be a nihilistic, evil waste of lives and resources.

Helicopters bring hot meals each day. Life seems good and "morale [is] high." One day, soldiers chase two Viet Cong soldiers into a bunker and throw grenades in after them. One stumbles out to surrender, but quickly bleeds out. Alpha Company's Vietnamese scout finds papers in the man's pockets that identify him as a Viet Cong district chief—an important figure. The men celebrate and congratulate themselves on being "lethal" warriors, but eventually they settle down and realize it was purely luck. That night, they are mortared again. At the end of August, Alpha Company moves to another hill to supervise construction of a refugee camp. O'Brien receives notice that headquarters reassigned him to be a typist in their support base. Barney sees him off.

Alpha Company's pride in killing a Viet Cong district chief contradicts their normal ambivalence about fighting. Even though they quickly realize it was only luck, their brief excitement and pride suggests that, despite its horrors, there is something thrilling about war and being a soldier. However, this thrill is short-lived, since they still get hit by mortar strikes, reinforcing the banality and ever-present suffering of war which overpowers any excitement. Meanwhile, O'Brien's fortunate reassignment marks the end of his combat experience.

CHAPTER 20: ANOTHER WAR

O'Brien feels that working in LZ Gator, away from the fighting, allows him to "rejoin[s] the real United States Army." He works as a typist in an office, a standard bureaucracy, writing up commendations and handling requests. His office writes the same Purple Hearts for everything from a minor scratch to death. It awards Bronze Stars to "officers who know how to lobby." Life is "dull" but peaceful. O'Brien celebrates Thanksgiving there, then Christmas Eve. He drinks with the officers and then at midnight he watches soldiers fire off artillery, flares, and grenades as celebration. Christmas day is filled with more drinking.

O'Brien's sense that, behind a desk, he enters into the "real United States Army" suggests that this is the military service all of the high-ranking officers know: mostly comfortable and far from combat. This implies that the people keeping the Vietnam War running do not experience any of its horrors or pains because they live insulated lives within safe bases, with only minor threats to their safety. As a result, such people are less motivated to end the war or return the soldiers home.

Every once in awhile, LZ Gator hosts floor shows with strippers flown in from other countries. The drinking and strippers become exhausting after a time, and O'Brien and Bates ultimately swear off the floor shows for the remainder of their tour. LZ Gator is also an artillery base, and at night O'Brien can hear the guns firing across the hill: it disrupts Obrien's sleep and sometimes it nearly irritates him until he remembers what a support that artillery is during combat. Viet Cong fighters attack LZ Gator once while O'Brien is there, slipping through the perimeter and killing one man. The Americans find and kill the intruders by morning and throw their bodies into the square of a nearby village.

O'Brien's irritation at the artillery guns, even though they are providing support to other soldiers in the field, suggests O'Brien has forgotten the realities of life in the field now that he is removed from the daily horror of combat. The American soldiers' decision to throw the Viet Cong bodies in a nearby village square suggests that the Americans want to make an example of the dead Vietnamese, warning other villagers not to oppose them. This depicts America as an aggressive, dictatorial force rather than a moral defender of democracy.

O'Brien goes on leave in Sydney, Australia. An old woman at the hotel arranges a girl for O'Brien to meet, though he realizes he's forgotten how to talk to women. He spends most of his time on his own, looking for libraries, going to bars in the evening, and swimming in the ocean. On the last night of leave, he visits the old woman and arranges another date and then he returns to Vietnam feeling spent and tired.

O'Brien depicts both his life on LZ Gator and his leave in Australia as lifeless and exhausting despite being peaceful, suggesting that his time as a soldier has worn out his spirit. He has little energy left to commit to anything, especially after the horror and chaos he witnessed.

O'Brien starts writing letters to Erik again. Erik's military service is nearly finished and he reflects on his participation in the war. Erik recounts watching an officer kick a Vietnamese woman and standing by, feeling like the centurion that idly watched **Christ** go to Golgotha. He thinks the war changed nothing except that Christ is now a "yellow-skinned harlot." The whole war seems evil.

Although O'Brien likened himself to Christ in the beginning of the novel, being sacrificed on behalf of his country, Erik's feeling that the Vietnamese woman is actually Christ implies that the Vietnamese civilians are the ones truly sacrificed for the sake of America's needless and evil war.

CHAPTER 21: HEARTS AND MINDS

The "Chieu Hoi," a Vietnamese scout for Charlie Company, enters a captain's office and asks for a pass to go home; his wife fears their sick child may die. The captain refuses, saying that the army needs him out there helping him fight, and his child will be fine. The Chieu Hoi persists, restating that his child will die, but the captain is unmoved—he claims that America is fighting the Vietnamese's war for them, so the Vietnamese must help. The captain says that the Chieu Hoi can help save American soldiers, but he won't "save the baby." The Chieu Hoi says that because he used to be a Viet Cong, the men in Charlie Company don't even like him. Within a day, he deserts.

The Chieu Hoi Program is an initiative by the South Vietnamese government to encourage its people to defect from the Viet Cong and support the American effort against North Vietnam. The captain's total disregard for Chieu Hoi's personal request suggests that he does not care about Vietnamese people whatsoever, only protecting American lives and achieving American goals.

CHAPTER 22: COURAGE IS A CERTAIN KIND OF PRESERVING

Major Callicles becomes the executive officer over LZ Gator and battalion headquarters. He is the "last but defiant champion of single-minded, hard-boiled militarism." He hates mustaches, marijuana, long hair, and prostitution—all of which exist in LZ Gator. For the first few months, Major Callicles sets about trying to rid the base of everything he hates and preaching that "the army needs guts." However, when American journalists finally get wind of the My Lai Massacre that occurred a year and a half before, Major Callicles's new priority becomes defending the army's honor and trying to justify the act.

Major Callicles is the story's purest representation of the unbridled military spirit, and his ridiculous conduct thus far offers the memoir's greatest criticism of that spirit. His belief that no on in the army has "guts" anymore implies that he will embody what O'Brien sees as the wrong kind of courage: bull-headed recklessness without wisdom to judge what is right from what is wrong. Major Callicles's attempt to justify the My Lai Massacre confirms this.

First, Major Callicles insists that the My Lai Massacre was fabricated by the "liberal" press to sell newspapers. When journalists fly into Vietnam to investigate for themselves, Major Callicles gathers them in a room and screams at them, telling them that civilians always die in war and this instance was no different. A journalist points out that former soldiers reported that they lined civilians up in ditches and executed them, but Major Callicles holds his ground. The next day he flies the journalists over where My Lai 4 once was. The sight itself is unremarkable: just a burned out hamlet.

Callicles's rage at the journalists' charge that the military did anything wrong suggests that, like Edwards the chaplain, Callicles firmly believes in America's moral superiority; if American soldiers committed an action, then it must somehow be justifiable. Major Callicles's attitude thus demonstrates how the American military can commit such heinous actions and sweep them under the rug, maintaining its belief in its own rightness.

When the journalists leave, Major Callicles is tasked with securing My Lai 4 and removing the mines around the area so the military can conduct a proper investigation. Callicles does his work thoroughly and receives a commendation, but he feels as if he's betraying his values and belief in the righteousness of the American military. He starts drinking heavily and frequently. Some evenings, Callicles argues with O'Brien about the morality of killing civilians. In Major Callicles's eyes, every Vietnamese civilian is probably Viet Cong, so killing civilians shouldn't be a problem. When O'Brien presses Major Callicles, Callicles grows irate and says they have to win the war at all costs.

Major Callicles's assignment forces him to recognize that America committed an unpardonable wrong at My Lai, which causes an inner conflict with his conviction that America is morally superior. Callicles's argument that most Vietnamese civilians are probably Viet Cong, and thus worth killing, belies a deep racial animosity toward Vietnamese people. In addition, his conviction that America must win pushes him to justify war crimes, which contradicts any notions of America's exceptionalism or superiority.

With the investigation over, Major Callicles continues obsessing over marijuana and prostitution. O'Brien thinks Callicles is trying to resurrect the "old order," the way the army used to be. Major Callicles spends hours in the rain, searching incoming jeeps for marijuana. When a medic named Tully shoots himself in the foot the night before returning to combat—Tully claims it was an accident, but O'Brien doubts it—Major Callicles screams in his face about cowardice and having "guts." After leaving Tully, quite drunk, Callicles tells O'Brien that people like himself need to prove to the world that some men still have courage; all the young soldiers don't want to fight, but courage means "going out" and "making things happen right," though O'Brien notes that this depends upon what "right" is.

Major Callicles's desire to return the army back to the way it used to be suggests that he struggles with the loss of the World War II-era, when good and evil felt clear-cut, soldiers were obviously heroes, and war felt like a valiant endeavor. Major Callicles thus shares O'Brien's sense that the Vietnam War changes the American idea of war from something valorous to something unnecessary and possibly evil. However, whereas O'Brien simply gives up the idea of noble warfare, Major Callicles panics and tries to resurrect the idea himself, whether or not that is the right thing to do.

Major Callicles takes his helmet and goes to the officers' club. O'Brien is there, talking with Bates and a man named Porter until midnight, when Callicles enters the room and tells O'Brien to get his gear: they're going out to set an ambush. Callicles wants to "get some kills." O'Brien tries to talk Major Callicles out of his plan, but the major insists. They pick up a Vietnamese scout, then they drive down into a village and meet a squad leader from Delta Company. The squad leader points to an area the Viet Cong frequent, next to another village, though he advises Major Callicles not to go. "But Callicles [is] spinning in booze and courage," O'Brien reflects.

Major Callicles's previous tirade about courage and having "guts" and his current desire to "get some kills" suggest that he views bravery and violence as one and the same. Rather than courage being endurance tempered by wisdom, as O'Brien sees it, Major Callicles clearly views courage as little more than manly bravado. Callicles's absurd conduct firmly condemns this view of courage.

Callicles leads O'Brien and the scout into the jungle to set up their ambush. He criticizes O'Brien for the way he sets up a claymore mine but he clearly doesn't know how to do it himself. Callicles talks so loudly that any Viet Cong nearby would easily hear them in the darkness, but it's raining, so O'Brien figures the Viet Cong won't be travelling tonight. Callicles lays down to hide, then passes out. They let him sleep until he suddenly rises an hour later, looks into the village, and decides it's empty. They return back to base. A few days later, Major Callicles burns down a "whorehouse" on LZ Gator. The next day, he's stripped of his command and banned from the base.

Again, Callicles's reckless behavior and shameful end condemn his view of courage as little more than bravado and senseless violence. Compared with Captain Johansen, who is fearless but also exercises wise judgment, Callicles possesses no wisdom whatsoever. His ultimate loss of command and banishment from his own base suggests that there is no place for Callicles's concept of courage, nor his hope for a return of the military's glory days.

CHAPTER 23: DON'T I KNOW YOU?

O'Brien boards the plane to fly back to America. He thinks that leaving Vietnam feels underwhelming, lacking any drama or real emotion. The lack of feeling seems wrong, somehow. A stewardess with a plastic smile walks through the cabin spraying disinfectant, keeping mosquitoes and "Asian evils" away from America. O'Brien reflects on the war, how he lost some friends and gained some and learned things about death, fear, and survival. He learned that the veterans of old wars found some reason to survive, some part of their life at home that they valued enough to live. The plane flies to Japan, then to Seattle.

The stewardess's disinfectant spray keeps the "Asian evils" away from America, symbolizing the way that Americans do not want to hear about the realities of the Vietnam War or the horrors their country has perpetrated. Although America's sense of duty and patriotism drove O'Brien to defy his conscience and participate in an evil war, Americans hypocritically do not want to face the consequences of that dutiful patriotism.

O'Brien eats a military-issue steak dinner, signs a lot of paperwork, says the pledge of allegiance, and takes a taxi to catch a flight to Minnesota. During the flight, he goes to the bathroom, changes into civilian clothes, and realizes that he's beginning to feel happy again. O'Brien doesn't have civilian shoes but he thinks no one will know the difference anyway. "It's impossible to go home barefoot."

Although O'Brien changes out of military uniform and into civilian clothes, symbolizing his changing identity from soldier back to civilian, his military shoes signify that he will never entirely be a civilian ever again. His statement that one cannot "go home barefoot" implies that it is impossible to return home from the Vietnam War unchanged.

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