

BYRON CALHOUN

Tobias Wolff's Search for Heroism

Tobias Wolff decided to become a writer at the age of sixteen, and he always felt that to be a good writer, he needed a profound life experience, such as military service (*In Pharaoh's Army* 44). At the age of eighteen, after losing his job and wearing out his welcome at his mother's apartment, the time suddenly seemed right to join the Army.¹ Wolff's desire to write was part of the reason for his enlistment, but that fact should not overshadow his other motivation: a genuine search for honor. In his Vietnam memoir, *In Pharaoh's Army* (IPA), Wolff explains that he did not want to be like his father, who was in prison at the time:

I wanted to be a man of honor. Honor. The very word had a martial ring. My father had never served, though he sometimes claimed he had, and this incompleteness in his history somehow made his fate intelligible and offered a means to escape it myself. This was the way, the indisputable certificate of citizenship and probity. (IPA 46)

In his memoir, Wolff imagines himself a hero in both military and literary terms (IPA 44), and his challenges in the Army in fact closely parallel Joseph Campbell's well-known structure of the hero journey: "three stages (separation, initiation, and return), with threshold crossings and guardians, helpers, trials, and ordeals, all leading to a transformation of the consciousness of the hero" (Smith xv). But should we accept Campbell as the authority on heroes? How about Aristotle? Thomas Carlyle? Or simply Merriam Webster? In this essay I'll use a synthesis of several ideas, broadly defining a hero as one who demonstrates courage, skill, and

achievement in service to his or her society. Within this framework, I'll investigate Tobias Wolff's pursuit of military and literary heroism through the lens of his memoir *In Pharaoh's Army*.

Wolff's military career begins auspiciously, as he discovers that he is "hardy and capable" and that he possesses "command presence," which he ironically describes as "arrogance, an erect posture, a loud, barky voice" (IPA 47, 50). His "trim and stringy" body is just right for basic training: "guys who would have pulverized [him] on the football field were still on their third pushup when [he'd] finished his tenth" (IPA 48). His success leads to Airborne School, Special Forces training, and eventually a commission as an officer. He demonstrates courage, skill, and achievement throughout his training, and for a time the idea of military heroism seems plausible; but this goal loses some of its luster before he even gets to Vietnam. For one thing, Wolff begins to doubt himself. He ceases to "inhabit his pose...and in that widening distance between the performance and the observation of the performance, there [grows], subtly at first, then intrusively, disbelief and corrosive irony" (IPA 54). Interestingly, that very sense of self-awareness, that ability to step outside oneself, is essential to good writing. But not always to good officership. The limitations of Wolff's "command presence" are achingly revealed on his final stateside mission, when he overrides the pilot and jumpmaster and orders his men to jump into what he thinks is the target. It turns out to be a garbage dump miles from the drop zone.

As Wolff is gradually losing confidence, he finds out that his best friend Hugh Pierce has been killed in action. Hugh had been a much better officer than Wolff, with an abundance of strength, ability, energy, and confidence. His death alerts Wolff to the fact that war's fury is indiscriminate. As the historian Victor Davis Hanson writes,

Battle is a great leveler of human aspiration when it most surely should not be. Stray bullets kill brave men and miss cowards. They tear open great doctors-to-be and yet merely nick soldiers who have a criminal past, pulverizing flesh when there is nothing to be gained and passing harmlessly by when the fate of whole nations is at stake. And that confusion, inexplicability, and deadliness have a tendency to rob us of the talented, inflate the mediocre, and ruin or improve the survivors—but always at least making young men who survive not forget what they have been through. (qtd. in *Armagost* 226-27)

This idea gains currency throughout *In Pharaoh's Army*, reaching its apex when Wolff realizes that not only is his skill not keeping him alive, but that his greatest asset is actually his *lack* of skill. "I was alive," he admits, "because [the Viet Cong] didn't consider me worth killing" (IPA 87).

If skill is of uncertain or even negative value in Vietnam, what about courage? Courage, as it does in many wars, often leads to death. This is true for Hugh Pierce, and it's true for two other lieutenants Wolff meets along the way. These men are committed to their missions in a way that Wolff is not, and their shared fate gives him pause. Not only do these men die, but they don't die as heroes. They are killed "for places that didn't even have names, just elevation numbers or terms of utility—Firebase Zulu, Landing Zone Oscar—and which were usually evacuated a few days after the battle, when the cameras had gone back to Saigon" (IPA 6). There was no Iwo Jima in Vietnam, no D-Day. We were saving the world from communism, but the day-to-day battles seemed removed from this lofty ideal. Wolff views an attempt to create a tangible objective as a ploy of the TV stations. How could a hero emerge out of a conflict with such plastic motives? How could a hero emerge out of a so-called "limited war"? Conflicted feelings about the validity of the mission in Vietnam may explain why the only public "heroes" to emerge were the prisoners of war. The POWs survived with courage and skill, but going back to our definition of heroism, they "achieved" little other than their own survival. At least that is true on the battlefield; no doubt their refusal to divulge information while being tortured was genuinely heroic and did help protect the nation. Nonetheless, the POWs' elevation in our national consciousness revealed that the United States ultimately felt that little *could* be achieved in Vietnam. While America regarded the POWs as victims, and therefore worthy of our sympathy and gratitude, the typical Vietnam veteran was often perceived as a cruel agent of an overextended American empire. The vets were hardly free to challenge this notion, and to ensure their silence we built a striking memorial that reflected not their deeds but simply their deaths. No wonder these men had trouble reassimilating back into society.²

With notions of courage, skill, and achievement so problematized in Vietnam, it's not surprising that Tobias Wolff fails to become heroic on all counts. He can't be described as courageous: in fact, he considers himself "a man in hiding" (IPA 187). When given the opportunity to finally see some action in the North, he demurs, admitting that he just wants to get home. Throughout his tour he's obsessed with safety and risk management. While driving the battalion's jeep, he constantly imagines land mines on the road ahead, and when marching in the field

he imagines himself the way a sniper might: “a perfect target...a long white face quartered by crosshairs” (IPA 77).

Lieutenant Wolff can't be considered skilled, either. He's technically an adviser to a South Vietnamese battalion, “but [he doesn't] know exactly what advice [he is] supposed to be giving, or to whom” (IPA 14). When the Tet Offensive begins and Wolff sees the opportunity to become useful, the battalion commander offers a clear assessment of Wolff's skills by refusing to even let him into the headquarters building. He spends the initial hours of Tet in his room, cleaning his weapon and listening to the radio. Even once he is admitted into headquarters, he finds that his advice is “not in demand. An American who couldn't get choppers or jets had no vote” (IPA 137).

Finally, Wolff's list of achievements in Vietnam is dubious: stealing a color television, rescuing a puppy, contributing to the destruction of a refugee camp. At his farewell dinner, his Vietnamese hosts offer long-winded and farcical toasts praising his “implacable enmity toward the communist insurgents, [his] skill as a leader of men, [his] reckless courage under fire” (IPA 186). The irony of the toasts forces Wolff to confront the unpleasant truth that during his year-long tour, he “had succeeded only in staying alive” (IPA 187).

It's worth noting that critics, from Aristotle and Rousseau to the present, have suggested that courage and heroism are fraught concepts. A hero should be rational, they argue, and sometimes it's rational to be afraid, to not charge forth blindly. Perhaps irrational courage is not courage at all, but insanity, and true courage must contain an element of rational fear (Cook 88). In fact, a foil to Lt Wolff appears in the character of Capt Kale, who is built like a superhero and is “bullish on the killer spirit” (IPA 172). But Captain Kale fails even more miserably than Lt Wolff, offending the Vietnamese, accidentally destroying their hooches, and poisoning hearts and minds everywhere.³ If positive achievements are nearly impossible in this setting, at least Wolff does no harm. This complicates our picture of heroism, but it does little to dispel the image of a cynical Wolff whose only mission is getting out alive—not exactly the traditional hero. Even Wolff's title, *In Pharaoh's Army*, is a nod to his own antiheroism: Moses is the hero of that story. Since military heroism has proven impossible, Wolff separates from the Army and turns to his other goal: literary heroism.

Wolff begins his first novel before seeing combat, and it seems promising while he is still stationed in the U.S.; after his scathing experience in Vietnam, however, the novel begins to appear “romantic and untrue” (IPA 85). With experience, warfare becomes demythologized, and Wolff's Romantic notions inevitably give

way to postmodern ones. Eventually he burns his manuscript (IPA 86). Wolff starts his second novel after Vietnam, and the results are better. For one, he demonstrates courage in facing his demons through his writing. He has returned from Vietnam with a litany of mental and physical symptoms, what we would these days diagnose as “post-traumatic stress disorder.” But his writing helps him to recover: “it takes stamina and self-mastery and faith...It toughens you and clears your head. I could feel it happening. I was saving my life with every word I wrote, and I knew it” (IPA 213). As a budding writer, he feels a sense of order and purpose, while in the rest of his life, chaos rules. But courage and toughness and stamina are not enough: skill, too, is required. Wolff is perceptive enough to know that his second novel isn’t very good, but also he understands that he needs to keep writing if he ever wants to improve.⁴ He finally realizes that he needs an education—after all, he’s a high-school dropout. Somehow managing to get into Oxford, Wolff dedicates himself to literature. He snuffs out “the pompous locutions with which [he] tried to conceal [his] ignorance and uncertainty” and begins to “build [his] house upon a rock, whatever that meant” (IPA 215, 217). Wolff finally writes with courage and skill, and he achieves literary renown.⁵ But is that literary heroism?

In ancient times, literary heroism would have been considered an oxymoron. Performing military exploits was essentially the only path to heroism, while the artist depicting the hero remained virtually anonymous. Critic R.P. Blackmur locates the rise of the “artist as hero” in the Romantic period, when society began to place a special importance on free expression while viewing traditional heroes with increasing skepticism (234-35). The lineage of hero-artists is long, containing such names as Byron, Goethe, Proust, and Joyce (Blackmur 234; Jordan 544-45). But here we must differentiate between the “hero” as mere protagonist and the “hero” as embodiment of heroic qualities. The literary hero must exhibit courage, skill, and achievement, but perhaps even more is required. Expanding on our earlier definition, let’s assume heroes must “attack and resolve crucial social problems” and must protect their social order “by proper behavior and instruction” (Wright and Pletsch 31). The military hero *a priori* fights for the benefit of his nation and his society: perhaps that was part of the problem with Vietnam, when many Americans didn’t consider the soldiers’ sacrifices to be of real benefit to the nation. If the literary hero must likewise benefit society, how does Wolff accomplish this?

He tells a true war story. And what is that? “True war stories,” according to Tim O’Brien, “do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis...To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true” (78-81). True war stories are grounded in the specific, in

the personal.⁶ In *Pharaoh's Army* is a war memoir, but there are almost no scenes of battle. The narrative is an individual story of disillusionment and redemption, and it provides a unique perspective on the conflict it describes. Why is that perspective valuable? It's not because the memoir conveys a preordained message: Wolff doesn't have an "agenda," as an agenda would obscure the truth and undercut the author's credibility. Wolff's perspective is valuable because of its brutal candor and its nuanced depiction of ethical and psychological gray areas. Tim O'Brien insists that "a true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior" (68). I agree with O'Brien, to an extent. Explicitly, a true war story does none of these things, but implicitly, a true war story never strays far from moral questions.⁷ In considering Wolff's experience we naturally consider many questions that are relevant today: the reasons for going to war, the qualities of effective leadership, the difficulty and importance of cultural competency, and—most clearly—the burden that national policy places on the individual soldier. In telling a story that had been publicly repressed, and in raising questions that are apropos today and will be apropos a hundred years from now—but never moralizing—Tobias Wolff benefits our society, and secures literary heroism.

Perhaps Wolff didn't intend to become a literary hero. In part, he wrote *In Pharaoh's Army* for therapeutic reasons. And in part, he wrote his memoir to honor those, like Hugh Pierce, who died in Vietnam. Wolff was spared while other men died, and the discriminating factor wasn't competence but rather luck. It's no surprise, then, that Wolff would acutely feel a sense of "survivor's guilt," which he beautifully describes as "the unending doubt that you have a right to your own life...the corruption suffered by everyone who lives on, that henceforth they must wonder at the reason, and probe its justice" (IPA 96-97). Wolff's guilt extends to his feelings of selfishness at using Hugh by making him a character in a book. But after lamenting Hugh's absence, Wolff pays homage to his old friend, concluding the memoir by simply remembering Hugh as he was. In this act of respect and humility, Wolff acknowledges that whatever sacrifices he has made to achieve his literary heroism pale in comparison to the sacrifices of his personal heroes, like Hugh Pierce.

Notes

1. Wolff's enlistment is actually remarkably similar to the experience of Philip, Wolff's protagonist in the 1984 novella *The Barracks Thief*. Philip, like Wolff, is caught in a dead-end job and feels a compulsion to pull away from his family. There is an element of desperation in both cases:

The next morning Philip got up early and took a bus downtown. The Marine recruiting office was closed. He wandered around, and when it still hadn't opened two hours later he walked up the street and enlisted in the Army. (22)

2. Wolff's own homecoming was characterized by alienation, anger, and a sense of bewilderment. Wolff initially refuses to return home to his family and fiancée because

I thought of my friends and family as a circle, and this was exactly the picture that stopped me cold and kept me where I was. It didn't seem possible to stand in the center of that circle. I did not feel equal to it. I felt morally embarrassed. Why this was so I couldn't have said, but a sense of deficiency, even blight, had taken hold of me. In Vietnam I'd barely noticed it, but here, among people who did not take corruption and brutality for granted, I came to understand that I did, and that this set me apart. (IPA 195)

3. Captain Kale's frustration was not uncommon: the veteran Pat C. Hoy II writes that he, like Wolff, could not talk about his experiences because "There was no honor in them, no sense that we had been out doing work essential to our well-being or that nation's. We had simply done our duty and found it tainted" (457).

4. This second novel was actually published in England in 1975 under the title *Ugly Rumours*. Now Wolff looks back on that work with embarrassment, even refusing to divulge the novel's title in an interview: "It does not represent my mature work and I don't want anybody to read it...Most people's juvenilia doesn't get published, but mine did" (Wolff and Basbanes 46).

5. Several reviewers have noted that Wolff's Vietnam memoir is quite consciously literary. Jay Rogoff, in *Shenandoah*, praises the way Wolff transcends genre:

The splendor of *In Pharaoh's Army* emanates from the way the chapters of this memoir behave collectively like a cycle of fully realized short stories, each sculpted and shaped, with its own logic, its own climax and satisfactions...The craft of this memoir should not surprise us, coming as it does from one of our best short story writers, and the effects are consistently marvelous. (100)

6. In an interview on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, Wolff explained his idea of the difference between literary and historical representations of war. Literary war stories, he claimed, reveal "the inner life of the person who undergoes [war], and not only the person who undergoes it, but those who are touched in this infinite ripple effect outwards" ("Analysis"). *In Pharaoh's Army* certainly fits this definition, as it virtually ignores the battlefield while focusing almost exclusively on the inner life of Wolff, his friends, and his family.

7. Many veterans have written about the pressure that Vietnam placed upon their morals, and Wolff himself undergoes a profound transformation during his year at war. He becomes inured to civilian hardships, no longer thinking of the Vietnamese as people, but rather as peasants (IPA 4). The "delicate sentiments" that cause him to save a puppy from death gradually erode, and the night before his tour ends, he eats that puppy with his Vietnamese hosts (IPA 82, 189). But Wolff's morality doesn't die in Vietnam, it merely changes. Wolff stated in an interview that in his memoir he was constantly striving to convey a "certain quality of moral intention" that is "characteristic and definitive" (Wolff and Basbanes 46).

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